

MERLIN'S BLADE

Book 1 of the Merlin Spiral

By Robert Treskillard



PART ONE—Guile's Dust

Swift as the moon the white stag running
Fleet as the owl the hunter hunting
Sharp as the claw the swift spear striking
Red as the sun the fresh life flowing
Leaved in green, there all Britain dies

CHAPTER ONE

Seventy years later, in the year of our Lord, 477
Spring, the forest outside the village of Bosventor

The horses reared up in terror, and Merlin pulled the reins back and forth, hoping to calm them down. He squinted, but try as he might, the scars on his eyes prevented him from seeing what frightened them. The wagon full of charcoal jerked backward, and the goat bleated next to him.

Distant voices called from the woods.

The horses reared up again.

"Garth!" Merlin shouted—but only the scent of roasting meat wafting from the trees answered him. Where'd that boy go? Surely the abbey feeds him enough that he needn't scrounge from strangers.

Merlin pushed his black hair to the side and strained to spot a snake near the horses, but he could only see smudges and shadows.

At eighteen winters, he was embarrassed to need guidance from Garth—an orphan of twelve who'd recently moved to their village.

Someone shouted from the bushes and startled Merlin.

Two bounds and Garth sat in the wagon again, bumping his bagpipe that lay between them. The boy grabbed at the reins with shaking hands. "Give 'em!" he yelled, disentangling the leather straps from Merlin's fingers.

Garth snapped the reins down as hard as he could and the wagon shot forward. "D-did you see what scared the horses?"

Merlin had just met Garth that morning, and had he already forgotten? "You think someone healed my eyes while you went sniffing around the woods? How would I know?" The boy was *supposed* to help Merlin bring the charcoal to his father's smithy.

They hit a bump and the wagon rocked sideways.

"What scared the horses?" Garth asked again.

Merlin clutched the side of the wagon. "Might've been a snake. What frightened *you*?"

"Nothing!"

"Then why're we going so fast? Slow down!"

"Because the horses are scared."

But Merlin heard the reins snap every few seconds. "I'm surprised you didn't come back munching a leg of lamb. Just eat the roasted eggs you brought."

"I-I'm saving those for a tuck-snack later." They picked up speed as the road bent downhill. Even then Garth kept at the reins. "Who were those ... those men I s-saw?"

"You tell me. The old stone circle's back in the woods—but they couldn't have been druids. It's been ten years since they've been around these parts. How many?"

"Lots an' lots and they ... they ..." Garth paused, and for a moment forgot to snap the reins.

Merlin elbowed him. "What?"

"I ... I don't know."

They careened down the hillside with Garth slowing only enough to take the switchback corners. Merlin saw the ruddy blur of Garth's head steal a glance behind them.

"Someone chasing us?" Merlin asked.

Garth scanned the hillside again. "Y-Yes ... *No!*"

The hollow thump of the Fowavoon Bridge sounded under the wheels as the wagon burst across. Climbing up the gentle hill, Garth

cracked the reins faster and faster. Mud splattered Merlin in the face. "Slow down, I said! This isn't our wagon and horses, remember?"

"Yeah ... that's right, but that man taking care of the horses g-gave me permission."

"You told me it had been *Natalenya!* Have you been telling the truth?"

"You're always thinking about h-her, aren't you?"

Merlin's face felt suddenly hot. "Don't change the subject. You better not have stolen this wagon, you hear? My father and I caught a thief two days ago and sent him to Natalenya's father, the Magister, for judgment. This wagon is owned by him, you know."

Garth hesitated. "Sure ... sure! I promise!"

As they approached the top of the hill, one of the abbey buildings appeared and Garth worked the horses into a lather of frenzied speed.

"Slow down!" Merlin shouted. "We need to drop the goat off at the abbey!"

The wagon picked up speed yet again.

Merlin reached out, found Garth's jerking arms, and pulled on the reins. "Why don't you want to stop? You live at the abbey, right? Slow down!"

Confused, the horses careened left—off the uphill road.

The wagon slammed over a bump and Merlin bit his tongue.

The two jolted side to side as the horses raced them past an abbey roundhouse. Merlin heard the sound of hammering in the distance.

Garth yanked the reins free from Merlin. "We're headed toward the shelter they're building over the spring—"

The wagon tilted on the hillside and Merlin rammed into Garth.

"Look out!" Garth screamed.

"What—?"

The shadow of a building loomed up on their left. People shouted and dove away from the thundering horses, who turned aside just in time to avoid hitting the structure.

But not entirely. The back left wheel caught a post. The wagon slammed to a stop, and the horses fell in a strangled heap.

The post broke away from the roof.

The whole structure trembled, tipped—and fell. It smashed into the back corner of the wagon and flipped it on its side. Merlin tumbled to the ground, rolling over Garth. The goat jumped past them both.

Charcoal flew everywhere, heaping up in a big dusty mound. When the soot settled, the workers and monks investigated. Brother

Prontwon, the abbot, found the two and pulled them from the wreckage.

Merlin stood, blinking and catching his breath, and he could hear Garth cracking the shell of a roasted egg—and eating it.

Merlin's hand paused on the latch of the Magister's front door.

"Open it," his father said. "You've got to face up to what's happened."

Merlin swallowed, and pushed the door open. As it swung inward, his fingers brushed against a carved image. "What's this?" he asked his father, Jowain. Merlin's voice echoed more loudly than he intended into the room beyond. Normally he would feel the carving to detect its shape—but not here. Not with having to stand trial before Tregeagle because Garth had actually *stolen* the wagon and then lied about it.

How could Garth have done that?

Merlin probably wouldn't have believed the tale if he'd known Garth better.

His father tapped on the heavy wood. "It's the ensign of a Roman legion ... an *Aquila* ... The Magister is descended from soldiers on the coast. Let's hope the punishment you get isn't like Rome used to hand down when *they* ruled Britain."

Merlin's father led him into the great hall. Pine logs blazed on the open hearth, scenting the air. Despite the warmth of the room, Merlin shivered—and it wasn't from the lingering chill of their late evening walk. Judgment waited for him in the other room.

He wondered if Natalenya was home.

Earlier in the day he had tricked Garth to go by this very house with their wheelbarrow, hoping to speak with her. He had been a fool, because everything had gone wrong. First Natalenya's brothers had picked a fight with them—and then Garth had stolen the Magister's wagon to get them away.

Sure, and Merlin had been gullible to trust Garth's lies. Hah ... ! As if Natalenya would have given permission! As if Natalenya would ever want to talk to him ... the only young man in the village with his face full of scars.

And now he and Garth had to stand trial before her father.

Merlin felt his own father's thick hand pat him on the back. "You'll get to tell your story first since Abbot Prontwon hasn't brought that

troublemaker yet.”

“Garth is my friend.”

“You only met him this morning.”

A servant woman arrived, spoke with them, and then went to see Tregagle.

Merlin followed his father over to the fire. If his chance to talk with Natalenya that morning had been remote, tonight it felt hopeless.

Down one of the hallways, the servant knocked on a door, and Tregagle’s gruff voice answered. The servant returned to them, and each of her footfalls across the stone floor sounded to Merlin like a drum announcing his doom.

“The master is ready to see you.”

Merlin tucked his hands under his legs and felt the hard edge of the seat. Never had he been interrogated like this.

If only Tregagle’s words were as pleasant as the smell of coriander and honey wafting from his breath. “You’re lying. My sons tell a different tale.”

Merlin’s father coughed nearby, and his presence brought a small measure of comfort to Merlin. “Because, sir—”

“Because you stole my property?” Tregagle rapped his knuckles on the wooden table between them. “Because you marred the fine coats of my horses?”

“Because sir, if—”

“Because you knocked my son down and kicked him?” Tregagle paced, his tunic a white blur wrapped with a shining golden belt.

Actually, Tregagle’s son had knocked Merlin down first, but Tregagle didn’t want to hear that. Maybe if Merlin apologized for the wagon. “I’m sorry for—”

“So you admit it!”

“Be fair, Tregagle,” Merlin’s father spoke up, his deep voice echoing in the room. “He said nothing of the kind.”

Tregagle raised his hand. “If you insist on speaking, Jowain, tell me why your filthy charcoal filled the wool-lined seats of my painted coach? Was this *your* clever idea?”

“Our horse is lame and my char-pile low at the smithy,” Merlin’s father said. “So the abbey sent Garth over to help guide Merlin, and the boys went for charcoal with my wheelbarrow—”

“For the record, what is this new boy’s proper name?” Tregagle

slid a parchment onto the table and scratched ink across it with his quill.

Merlin knew it, and raised his hand. "His name is Garthwisyk, sir—"

"Which would that be in Latin, Garthius or Garthwisykus?"

"Either, I guess, but he answers to Garth, and he got impatient and thought—"

Tregeagle coughed. "He *thought*? Obviously there has been precious little of that from him or you. Three wheels broken, the sides damaged, and one of the axles bent. Is this friend of yours incompetent?"

Far from it, Merlin thought. Garth seemed good at most things. He could play his bagpipe—which he'd brought on their trip. Apparently he could fish, as had been his father's trade before Garth was orphaned. And Merlin knew he could drive horses well enough—at least when he wanted to.

Tregeagle stood, shoving his chair into the wall with a bang, and leaned over the table. "Do you have a tongue, or do I need to call my *licitor* in to cut it from your mouth?"

"No, sir ... Garth knows how to drive a wagon."

"Then why did the fool crash it at the abbey? Tell me!"

Merlin fidgeted in his seat. "Sir, something scared him. We were bringing the coal back from the hills beyond the Abbey, when we smelled roasting meat. Garth was hungry—well, he was hungry all day—and he ran off into the woods and left me holding the reins."

Tregeagle sat down again, his chair creaking loudly. "So who roasted the meat in the woods? Some vagrant?"

"No, sir ... too much smoke for that. We were near the old stone circle—"

Tregeagle clicked his teeth together. "The stone circle? It's been a long time since any of the"—and here his tone turned to a sneer—" *druids* dared show their faces around Kernow. So you held the reins. Did *you* try to drive the horses?"

Merlin clenched his fists under the table. "I'm half-blind, but not half-stupid. Garth ran back all spooked, and he drove the horses hard till we neared the abbey."

A knife flashed before Merlin, and Tregeagle's deft hands played with it. "Scared, you say? Tell me what happened at the Abbey. Any monks involved? Did anyone damage the wagon *on purpose*?"

Merlin swallowed. "Nothing ... nothing of the kind."

The knife gleamed in the evening light that slanted through the shutters.

"I thought we would crash, and so I tried to get Garth to *stop* the horses. Only we left the road and—"

"How did the *dear* Abbot react?" Tregeagle sharpened the knife, sliding and scraping it against a rock.

"Prontwon was irate, and Dybris calmed him down—"

Tregeagle slammed the rock on the table. "And who is this Dybris who ignores my loss? His name is not on the tax register."

"He's only been at the abbey a few weeks. He brought Garth along with him."

Tregeagle sat for a while, his thoughts huffing. "If what you say is true, *which I doubt*, then only one question remains unanswered."

Tregeagle bit off some cake and leaned forward, honey on his breath. "Tell me. *What scared Garth?*"

"I don't know, sir."

"You mean you won't tell me." He raised his hand and brought it near to strike.

Merlin flinched as the shadow drew close.

His father stood. "Leave my son alone. He's told you what he knows. Get your answers from Garth."

Tregeagle pulled his hand away, leaned back, and snickered. "Since you both are of no further use, I plan to do exactly that. Send the urchin in, and expect my judgment soon."

Merlin sighed while his father guided him down the hallway to the great room. If the judgment went against him, Natalenya would *never* want to talk with him.

The voice of Abbot Prontwon echoed from the room ahead. "When it's our turn—Garth, are you listening?—what will you say?"

Garth mumbled, but Merlin couldn't make it out.

"Are you ready to confess what you have done—?"

"Must we put him through this again?" Dybris interrupted.

"Yes we must. The falsehoods shall stop."

A harp sounded from some other room and both monks quieted.

Merlin stopped walking, his heart beating. Didn't Natalenya play the harp?

"That," Prontwon said, "is the sound of heaven, which I want Garth to hear one day in our Father's feasting hall."

Dybris tapped Prontwon's shoulder. "He has told the truth. What more can we ask?"

"We love and forgive. But in *that* room is the Magister."

Merlin's father prompted him forward once more, and Merlin entered just as Prontwon, as stout as ever, slipped out of his chair and fell on his knees before Garth.

The boy didn't speak.

"Garth, hear me!" Prontwon's voice almost broke. "We will uphold you but you must love the truth no matter the cost!"

Merlin's father coughed loudly—and at the same time the harp music faded. Merlin turned his head, trying to discover from where it had come.

Prontwon and Dybris stood. "How did it go?" the Abbot asked.

Merlin grasped each of their hands in turn and gave a quick kiss to the back.

Prontwon patted Merlin on the shoulder. "We're all sorry for the difficulty this has caused."

"Tregeagle's in a foul mood," Merlin's father grumbled.

"I guessed as much. Garth ... it is time."

Dybris pulled the boy's arm until he reluctantly stood. Garth's feet scraped down the hall following the two monks.

CHAPTER TWO

Merlin's father led him to the open hearth in the center of the room. "Sit here. I'm stepping outside for some fresh air. Call me when Tregagle's ready to give his judgment."

His father's footsteps echoed across the tile of the room. The door opened and shut, and Merlin stood alone with the fire sparking its pine aroma into the air. He closed his eyes and prayed that Christ would uphold Garth.

The harp tune echoed through the hall again.

Merlin straightened up.

Where was the music coming from? Could it be Natalenya?

He listened carefully, turning his head. The beautiful notes originated to his right—from some other room. He stood and tapped his staff quietly across the floor.

He found a wall and followed it with his hand. Sensing light and a draft of pleasant air, he halted before he stepped in front of the open doorway. He hoped he couldn't be seen. The music lifted his spirits, and he wondered if his own mother had ever played an instrument.

The harpist sang ... with Natalenya's voice, high and sweet like a bird after a rain-shower as it fluttered about the bushes near the smithy.

The wind did take my love away
Over the seas and far away
He's blown to south and blown to north
He's blown so far from my own hearth

Come home my love, come home today
Over the seas and hills to stay
Ne'er blown to east nor blown to west
Ne'er blown to make my love a jest

In deepest winter I am numb
In spring I wait for him to come
The summer dove doth always wait
For autumn rains to come so late

The wind did take my love away
Over the seas and far away
He's blown from me and blown so far
He's gone an' died in Gaulish war

Natalenya ceased her song. "Dyslan, stop listening—go away!"
Merlin froze. Did she mean him? Or was Natalenya's younger
brother nearby?

He heard shuffling, the sound of echoing wood ... and footsteps.

Merlin put his back to the cold wall.

The footsteps grew louder.

He wanted to hide but could not, considering his poor eyesight.

Natalenya walked around the corner. Her dark hair smelled of
roses, and her green dress was a beautiful blur.

"Oh ... Merlin!"

"I ..."

"Are you here to talk with father about the accident?" she asked.

"Yes, I ..."

"Your foot stuck out into the doorway. Come in and sit down." She
guided him into the room and to a chair, where he sat stiffly.

"I practice here in my father's library. Do you like harp music?"

"Yes, I ..." He couldn't believe they were talking.

"My Grandmother taught me that song. Grandfather died in Gaul
fighting with Constantine's army. It makes me think of him."

Swallowing hard, Merlin asked, "Would you play more?"

"Any song in particular?"

"Aah ... anything."

She picked up her harp and it fit easily on her lap. "Maybe
something brighter." Her fingers struck the bronze strings, and they

hummed to life.

Merlin's breathing rose and fell with the melody, but she stopped in mid-song.

"Have you ever played before?" she asked.

"No, I can't say that I ..."

She slid her chair next to his.

Merlin's throat closed up.

She placed the harp on his lap as he dropped his staff to the floor. He held the smooth wood of the harp, amazed at how little it weighed.

"This is how you play." Her warm hand touched his and angled it toward the strings.

Merlin plucked them roughly. "It's not as pretty as your playing."

"You don't have my fingernails either." The sound of her laughter filled him like a refreshing drink from the spring after working in the heat of the blacksmith shop.

He ran his fingertips across the strings and experimented with the notes. The whole harp vibrated lightly into his chest. It would take a lot of work to play a real song.

"You've got natural talent."

"I do?"

She turned her head to listen. "Sure. What song is that?"

"I'm trying to remember ... I heard it many years ago."

"Let me give you my practice harp. It only has ten strings, but you could learn on it."

Learn the harp? He'd never thought about music. What if he damaged it? "I'd better not. I'm already in trouble with your father—"

"I saw what happened ..."

"The wagon's really broken, isn't it?"

"I don't mean that. I witnessed what my brother Rhondrok did to you. I had come to the doorway when I heard shouting. Father won't listen to me ... and ... I've learned not to cross him."

"We say in the blacksmith shop, once burned, always careful. I have a few scars to show it." He held up his right forearm—but she touched the scars on his face instead.

He tightened his lips and tried not to pull away.

Her soft fingertips traced the long gouges that disfigured his eyelids and ran across his cheeks, right temple, and forehead. "I see you in chapel, but I've never asked what happened to your eyes. People talk, of course, but you never know who to believe."

"It happened seven years ago ... it's a painful memory ..."

"They're faded now."

"No ... I'll always remember." He turned away slightly, hoping the subject would change.

"I ... I meant the scars have faded. And your long hair covers many of them." She ran her fingers through his black curls. "And you have an honest face, with a handsome nose. When we moved to the village a few years ago your scars still looked red, but they aren't anymore. It must have hurt."

He wanted to walk out. He didn't want to talk with her about this.

Her voice trembled. "How could Rhondrok be so cruel as to push you over? Let me look at your scalp." She walked behind him and gently leaned his head forward, probing the back where he'd hit a rock.

"Just because I'm mostly blind doesn't mean I can't take care of myself."

"It's a mess—all crusted over. You should get it washed."

He turned his head away from her. "Is your brother all right? I hope I didn't hurt him."

"I saw him pull the knife on you, so he deserved that thumping from your staff." Natalenya walked across the room. "And your little monk friend was funny!"

"You mean Garth?"

"I laughed when he dumped my younger brother in the hay trough."

Merlin suppressed his own laugh. "I didn't know whether to believe him. Garth lied and told me he had permission to borrow the wagon."

But Merlin couldn't bring himself to tell her Garth had said that *she* had given permission. And Merlin had believed it! What a daft, slow-wit he was. "I should have gone back to verify Garth's story. I really should've."

Stepping around, she removed the harp from Merlin's lap and laid in his hands what seemed to be a lightweight, flat piece of wood. "Here's my practice harp. I don't use it anymore so please take it."

He felt two carved posts bending out from the top of the sound box. Shaped like a lyre, it had bronze strings stretched over an angled bridge. It was much smaller than Natalenya's lap harp. "I can't ... your father ...".

"I bought it with my own silviquii. It's not up to him."

"I just can't. I'm sorry." He held it out to her but she didn't take it.

A loud voice bellowed from the corridor.
"That's Father," Natalenya said. "He's angry."
"I need to go." Merlin found his staff on the floor, stood up and gently placed the practice harp on the chair.
Natalenya began to say something, but stopped.
"What?" Merlin asked.
"Never mind." She walked with him toward the door. "I'm sorry for all this. I'll be praying for you."

Tregeagle's voice called out, "*Lictor Erbyn!*"

The familiar and rough hand of Merlin's father guided him to a chair.

"Where'd you go?" his father whispered.

"Talking ... with Natalenya ..."

"It must have gone poorly for Garth."

Merlin took hold of his father's arm. "What am I seeing?"

"Tregeagle's at a table, and there are three soldiers with him from the fortress. Erbyn just entered. He's kind o' short, but strong with black hair and beard. Got a leather jerkin ... and a long whip."

Tregeagle pounded the table. "Hear my verdict."

Everyone went silent.

"I find Merlin guilty of lying and of assaulting my sons ...

However, Merlin is found not-guilty of stealing the horses and wagon due to the clear confession of Garthwisykus—and the meddling of monks."

Tregeagle scratched a stylus on a parchment as he recorded the decision.

"I find Garthwisykus guilty of lying and of assaulting my sons. I also find him guilty of having stolen and damaged my property."

Tregeagle wrote more onto the parchment. "And now for restitution. I charge you, Jowain, as the blacksmith of the village with fixing the wagon. The bent axle will need straightening and much of the wood replaced. You will procure other craftsmen for their services as required."

Merlin's father stood up, and the edge in his voice showed anger. "Magister, who pays? My son is not responsible."

Tregeagle stopped scribing. "I said nothing about Merlin's innocence regarding *damaging* the wagon. Did not your son ride in it—and interfere with the reins prior to the crash? Your son holds partial

responsibility and it is clear why I put you in charge.”

“What of payment? My work is free but I cannot pay others.”

Tregeagle sat quietly for a time before he spoke. “The monks must compensate you for some costs. Is there anything Garthwisykus owns?”

Prontwon spoke up. “He owns nothing, Magister, except an old bagpipe passed down from his father.”

“Then it is forfeit.”

“No-o-o!” Garth sobbed.

Merlin reached across and found Garth’s hand. It was sweaty and his fingers gripped Merlin’s firmly.

“The abbey is required to sell it and give the money to Jowain.”

“You can’t do that! You can’t sell me pipes!”

Tregeagle ignored the outburst. “Costs beyond that, the abbey must find a way to pay.”

Garth let go of Merlin’s hand and lunged at Tregeagle. Merlin’s father and Dybris grabbed his arms and pulled him back to his chair.

“Now his punishment for stealing the wagon ...”

Prontwon stood. “Is it not *enough* for him to be parted from his only inheritance and the memory of his dead father?”

“No it is not!” Tregeagle clapped and the thunder echoed in the great hall. “Repair doesn’t pay for thievery. Erbyn ... what judgment had I decided for Connek, the accused thief?”

Erbyn paused. “You know, Magister, that your judgment does not vary for thievery.”

“For the sake of our guests—what is my unwavering judgment?”

“Flogging,” Erbyn said smugly.

The hall fell silent, and Merlin remembered Erbyn carried a whip.

“In this case, *Lictor* Erbyn, I no longer consider the testimony true regarding *Connek’s* attempted theft.”

Merlin stood.

This was too much. That foul-smelling thief had tried to steal silver coins from one of the older villagers, but Merlin and his father had caught him. “Connek *is* a thief! Everyone in town—”

Tregeagle raised his voice. “Silence!”

Merlin sat down, his lips burning to say more.

“The nerve of you two to tie Connek up and send him here for my judgment ... I now deem that Connek has done no wrong. He is to be released.”

Erbyn stepped forward. “I shouldn’t flog him?”

“No, but I need you to whip the young monk.”

Merlin gasped. This was all *his* fault. He should never have cajoled Garth to come up the hill past Tregeagle’s house. It had only frustrated the boy by prolonging their task of getting the coal. If Merlin hadn’t done that, then Garth wouldn’t have to be whipped.

Garth blubbered. Prontwon bent over and put his arm around him.

Tregeagle continued. “Not the full nineteen lashes. Nine should teach a lesson. Guard, go and free the prisoner.”

“Yes, sir.” The guard left the room.

Merlin could hardly believe Connek would be set free.

Prontwon bowed before Tregeagle. “Is there some other punishment you would accept?”

“Gold. It has been the life-blood of the empire, and I will accept it instead of the blood of this boy. Nine gold denarius I ask—one per lash and I halt the judgment.”

Prontwon sputtered. “Magister! We—”

Tregeagle waved his hands and hissed his words. “Gold I said! Surely you monks have gold squirreled away. Gold!”

“We are a poor abbey. We have not even one!”

“Then my judgment stands.”

“I beg you—allow me to take this punishment on his behalf.”

Tregeagle pulled Prontwon up, laughing in his face. “You fool! You think I will have it known that I flogged the Abbot of Bosvenna! An absurd request, Prontus!”

“Mercy, Magister—”

“Mercy?” Tregeagle shouted. “The only one whom I would allow to take his place would be *him!*” And turning, he motioned toward the group, but Merlin couldn’t tell what he’d done.

Merlin’s father leaned over and whispered through his teeth, “He’s pointing at you ...”

The room spun. Merlin gripped his father’s hand. The thick metal armband his father always wore reflected dizzily before Merlin’s eyes.

Walking forward, Tregeagle mocked, “Have mercy, Merlin! Have mercy on the thief!”

“Sir, I—”

“Yes, have mercy! You who dare hurt *my* son!” Tregeagle slipped his knife from its sheath and waved it in front of Merlin’s eyes. “Take his place and then we shall see mercy!”

Silence filled the room, and only Tregeagle’s clacking heels could be heard as he walked back to the front.

"I ... I accept." Merlin said.

Garth caught his breath and stopped crying.

Tregeagle turned. "You *what?*"

"I accept!" Merlin's voice echoed through the room.

Tregeagle rapped his table. "So be it. You shall—"

A stifled sob went up from somewhere behind Merlin. A girl's voice.

Tregeagle hesitated.

Merlin turned his head, but could see nothing at that distance.

His father hissed in his ear "You cannot! Are you a fool? Garth's done nothing but make trouble for you."

"I can't let him be whipped."

"Yes you can! Wash your hands of this rascal!"

Merlin tightened his shoulders. "I'm responsible, too, and I won't abandon him."

"You'll be scarred for life! Everyone who sees your back will think you're a criminal or a run-away slave. It will take weeks to heal."

Turning to his father, Merlin tilted his head until the reflected light from the window fell upon his face ..."I'm already scarred. It doesn't matter anymore."

His father moaned.

"*Lictor* Erbyn, we have a change." Tregeagle's voice had no emotion. "Merlin is to be flogged in the boy's place. Guards, take Merlin outside to the post."

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