

# *Song of the Sparrow*



*I am Elaine  
daughter of Barnard of Ascolat.  
Motherless.*

*Sisterless.*

*I sing these words to you now,  
because the point of light grows smaller,  
ever smaller now,  
ever more distant now.*

*And with this song, I pray I may  
push back the tides of war and death.*

*So, I sing these words  
that this light, this tiny  
ray of light and hope may live on.*

*I dare not hope that I  
may live on too.*



# I

Motherless.

Sisterless.

I am both.

But I have brothers,

dozens

nay, hundreds

of brothers.

Only two real ones:

brash Lavain

and my biggest brother, thoughtful Tirry.

The others are not brothers by blood.

There are so many of them;

I call a few my friends:

Lancelot, Arthur's second,

but handsomer, still.

Arthur himself, who is a captain in

his uncle Ambrosius Aurelius's army.



The men here follow Arthur, but ultimate  
fealty is to Aurelius, dux bellorum.

There is Gawain, a sweet bear of a man,  
and Tristan, who is all mystery  
and mischief and glee.

We live here, in this army encampment,  
where drums beat and beat  
in my dreams and over breakfast,  
at sunrise and sundown.

The here and home I speak of  
is no more than the collection of dirty,  
foul-smelling tents.

I live here, in this army encampment,  
among men,

because my mother is dead,  
delivered into the earth

nine years ago now,  
and there is no one else.

My father brought me here  
when I was eight years old.

Once I heard Lavain whisper



to Tirry that it was a good  
thing our mother lived to  
see me through eight years  
of life.

Till I was old enough to learn  
to use a thread and needle  
and old enough to grow  
skilled at mending clothes.

At least there is  
someone  
left to mend their clothes,  
Lavain said.

But I am just one girl,  
without nearly enough hands  
to sew the tears  
in every man's clothing.

There are too many of them.

For, in these days,  
dark battles rage on.

From all sides Britain's enemies  
press in on us,



the painted Picts from the north,  
marauding Scots from the west,  
and the barbarian Saxons from the south  
and east.

Britain bleeds  
and bleeds  
as men like my father and  
brothers

    even Lavain  
bleed and bleed.  
We move as the fighting moves,  
as the wind moves.  
So there might be peace.





# II

Before a battle begins,  
the men swarm about camp  
as bees in a hive, making ready.  
Mount Breguoin is the eleventh fight  
Arthur will lead in the war against  
our Saxon enemy.  
As they prepare for war, the men  
ready their weapons,  
sharpening blades and strengthening  
shields and chain mail.  
I do my part, too, tearing bandages  
and brewing poultices  
of healing leaves and flowers  
for Cai, Arthur's steward, to carry  
to the battleground.  
I wander through the camp,



from the stables, which lie just near  
the banks of the River Usk, toward  
the center, where dirty, greyish  
tents radiate out from  
the great fire pit that is  
the Round Table.  
All the time I am  
tallying in my mind the numbers  
of bandages and vials of powders and balm.  
The tents wind in ever-narrowing circles,  
like the curves of a snail's shell.  
Men huddle in groups outside  
their tents, chortling with laughter at  
jokes made at the enemy's expense,  
rowdily singing tunes of victory.  
I know them all and wave  
or nod to many.  
Then I spot Arthur  
near the Round Table, surrounded  
by a small company of men, his nearest  
friends. Arthur's stance is graceful



and straight, his eyes dark as pools  
in a deep wood.

There is an air of melancholy  
entwined in his celebrated courage  
and strength.

*The men that we fight, Arthur told  
me once, they are just men. Like us.*

*Well, like me, he said,*  
a crimson blush coloring his cheeks,  
as those black eyes crinkled  
at the corners with a smile.

*And we fight, and ever they  
come at us, like the tide  
of the sea. I do not understand it.*

*This fighting and killing  
and urge to conquer. His  
gaze turned downward then.*

I touched his arm, and he glanced  
at me, all the sorrow on this earth  
filling his eyes then.

*I will never understand it.*



*But I will fight and kill as  
I must, to protect our  
world and all that is  
good and just in it.*

And I remember asking  
myself how there could  
be men like Arthur and men  
like our bloodthirsty enemies,  
built of the same flesh, yet so  
terribly unlike.

As I approach the four men, they turn  
and welcome me, grins breaking  
over their faces.

*Elaine!* Lancelot, Arthur's  
dearest friend and his fiercest  
warrior calls, his emerald-green  
eyes glowing.

He smiles warmly and waves me  
over to join their circle.

The sight of him makes my heart  
leap joyfully, and

I cannot help  
but grin back at him.  
Gawain is on Arthur's other side,  
his friendly face shining with good cheer.  
He is large and his shadow looms  
over the other men, though he  
is the gentlest giant I have ever seen.  
Our fourth companion is  
Tristan, who is not much older than I.  
His golden eyes penetrate like a  
wolf's, ever alert,  
ever watching, but they are filled  
with a mischief that never fails to  
snatch a giggle from my throat.  
*Hello, I greet my friends.*  
*Elaine, we were just discussing*  
*strategies for tomorrow's battle,*  
Tristan informs me,  
a crooked grin on his lips.  
*I think we should eat breakfast*  
*before going to meet the Saxons.*



*We shall have to climb a mountain, after all.*

*We will need our strength.*

*But Lancelot, here, wishes to  
fast in the morning, saving  
himself for a celebratory lunch.*

*What think you?* His smile widens.

I fold my hands and put my  
fingers to my lips, as though I  
am deep in thought.

*I see I have interrupted a very serious  
conversation, I reply wryly.*

*Yes, yes, Gawain jokes, most serious!*

*Truly, Elaine, Tristan continues  
with the charade, your knowledge is deep.*

*We will do only as you command.*

*Ha, I crow, if I believed that, you would  
have taken up sewing a long time ago.*

The four men break into gales of  
deep, rumbling laughter.

*I believe our Elaine has bested you,*

*Tristan!* Lancelot says, winking at me.

*Come, friends, the hour grows late.*

*Let us to bed, for we are off at dawn,*

Arthur suggests. The other three  
nod their heads and we bid each other  
good night.

*Sleep well, and fight hard tomorrow, I tell them.*

*And do not forget to eat your breakfast.*

I throw a smile at Lancelot as I turn to go,  
their laughter following me as I make my  
way back to my tent.

