

# Rotten Roots: Vortigern

Vortigern closed the front door and sighed. The morning sun warmed him gently. Butterflies fluttered their way across his garden. The day could not have started better. He walked out his gate and down the lane, to the centre of the village. As he passed villagers, he gave them a little wave and a smile.

The villagers nodded in return, their expressions neutral.

Vortigern got to his workshop and felt a weight settle onto his shoulders. His summer sun smile faded as he opened the door and strode inside.

Ena Caswell was sitting at her desk, on the far end of an empty waiting room. She muttered a hello as he entered.

"Hello, Ena," Vortigern said. "Any patients?"

"None, Doctor and none for tomorrow either," Ena said. "Doctor, I haven't been paid in a month now. I wondered if you'd be able to give me something for food today?"

Vortigern shook his head. "Soon, Ena, I've got a plan. Once I manage to..."

"I know," Ena cut him off. "Cure the blight. The blight isn't curable, Doctor. We need to concentrate on the harvest injuries. Granny Mildren in Yuther is taking all of our customers."

Vortigern shook his head again. "Trust me, Ena. I can do this."

He walked through to his study and closed the door. The room was large, with a flat table in the middle, two beds on one wall and a desk at the far end. Vortigern had set it up exactly as he wanted it. Behind the desk, a bookshelf of ancient books stood, conveying wisdom and knowledge.

Vortigern walked to his desk and sat, pulling his notebook towards him. He had filled the book with drawings and descriptions of the blight plaguing the county. It killed seemingly at random; victims fell ill one day and died by the evening. It seemed so strange, that many blamed dark magic.

That suspicion had led Vortigern to a small bookshop in Biggeri, a full week's journey away, on the other coast. He unlocked and opened the bottom drawer in his desk and pulled out the book - 'Light Magic: How to perform miracles and wow your friends!' It looked ancient - bound in leather, with metal studs in the cover. The bookseller had assured him it was the best book for a novice. Vortigern opened it on page 200 and began to read.

An hour later, he paused, closing the book on his finger. Following the instructions, he reached down inside himself, searching for the pool of energy that the book described. He pictured it in his head and pinched off a small handful, wrenching it free and channelling it up into his mind.

He felt weak and hungry, but his brain sparkled - aglow. All of a sudden, it all made sense. He grabbed his notes and ran for the door. He knew how to stop the blight.



Months later, Vortigern sat at the same desk, rubbing his forehead. He felt so tired.

Ena stuck her head in the door. "Another four patients just turned up, Doctor. Can you see them? They've travelled from Yuther."

"Of course," Vortigern said. "Show the first one in."

Strange growths protruded from the man's elbows.

Vortigern channelled a little energy to his mind, and then checked the man's mouth, finding a fungus on his tongue. Prescribing a blend of meltroot and witherleaf, Vortigern sent him on his way.

The next man took a little more energy, and the next a little more. When the last man left, Vortigern felt tired and famished.

He'd gained a large belly in the months since he'd cured the blight, but that was the least of his concerns. Vortigern walked to his new mirror, framed in gold filigree and imported from Biggeri. He stared at his face, noting the greying temples, the wrinkles around the eyes and lines on the forehead. At twenty-eight, he already looked fifty. He couldn't keep going, or he'd die before he could enjoy any of his new found wealth.

Vortigern nodded. He would stop using magic to figure out cases. He might lose some business, but so be it. He didn't want to drop dead at twenty-nine.



He was at his desk, at the end of a long day a week later, when he heard a ruckus in the waiting room. The door to his study flew open and Hamon Eastland came in, carrying his son, Calvin.

"Please, Doctor, you have to help him," Hamon said, setting the boy down on the operating table.

Vortigern got to his feet and rushed over. He could see at once that there was no hope for the boy. Calvin's ribs were crushed, and his breath came in sharp, pointed gasps.

"What happened?" Vortigern asked.

"A horse panicked and ran him down," Hamon said. "Please, is he going to be okay? He's all I've got left since my wife died."

"Wait outside," Vortigern said. "Go."

Hamon fretted for a moment, and then left, closing the door behind him.

Vortigern reached down and stroked Calvin's hair. The boy was thirteen, barely old enough to start work in the fields. Thirteen seemed just so young to die.

Vortigern searched inside himself and grabbed another handful of energy from the dwindling pool, sending it up to his mind. His mind buzzed, but staring down at the boy, he still couldn't think of anything. There might be nothing he could do.

Vortigern kept stroking the boy's head, and then put his hand on Calvin's forehead. Reaching inside the boy, he found a massive pool of energy there, buzzing and jolting, blue and vivid. Vortigern grabbed as much as he could carry. He sent it channelling through his own hands, up to his mind.

The world became clear around Vortigern. He realised the reason for everything. He knew why the sky was blue. He knew why the sun rose and fell. He knew why the wind blew, and why the snows came. Most importantly, though, he knew how to save Calvin's life.

Vortigern grabbed a knife from a nearby bench and ripped Calvin's shirt open.



Hours later, Calvin lay in bed, his breathing easier, passive in sleep. Hamon's face looked like it would crack in half, he was smiling so hard. "Thank you, Doctor. I didn't think... I've never seen anything like it. You have to be the greatest doctor in the world."

Vortigern shook his head, flattered. "No, I just did what I could. Your son is a strong boy."

Hamon took Vortigern's hand and gripped it. "I won't forget this, Doctor. Anything you ever

want, it's yours. Just let me know."

Vortigern looked down at Calvin, thinking about the two armfuls of life-force he'd taken from the boy. Calvin would probably live another fifty years now. Long years with a wife and a family. Vortigern smiled. "I'm just happy to help."



Winter dragged coldly into spring, and without energy to draw on, Vortigern's business began to slow. Word spread of the miracle of Calvin's healing, but the word grew old and withered, leaving the failures to cure colds and fevers in its wake.

Vortigern opened the door and looked out at the empty waiting room. A single young man was sitting there. Vortigern waved him into the study.

The man's face was flushed with fever. It seemed like the whole village was coming down with it, and Vortigern had no ideas for a cure.

Vortigern put his hand on the man's forehead. The fever was raging. Vortigern worried for a moment that the fever would claim its first victim. Reaching inside the young man, he pinched off just a little energy; just enough to find a solution.

"Aha," Vortigern said. "We need some ameria bark for this."

He fixed up a mixture and gave it to the man.

"Take this with boiling water," Vortigern said. "Come back in the morning."

When the man left, Vortigern smiled. He knew the young man would be alright. At the same time, he'd spared the whole village the aches and pains of fever, and it had only cost the man a week of his life.



Spring blossomed into summer, and then shrivelled into autumn again. The business began to boom, as word spread from village to village of the healer with the knowledge to cure any illness, to fix any broken limb or ailment.

Vortigern was in the study late one night, writing in his notebook, trying to record the cures of the day. As the energy faded, so did his memory. He tried his best to cling to the knowledge, but it sifted through his fingers and left him.

A knock at the door startled him. Ena had left hours before.

"Come in," Vortigern called.

An elderly man from the village, Austyn Kimber, poked his head around the door. "Sorry to disturb you, Doctor, but I couldn't sleep."

Vortigern waved Austyn inside the study. "Come in, Austyn. What seems to be the problem?"

Austyn wheezed and spluttered, moving to lower himself into a chair. "It's this cough, Doctor. I can't sleep, I can't work. No matter how much water I drink, my throat still feels dry. Is there anything you can do?"

Vortigern walked over to Austyn and reached inside, finding the pool of energy and drawing it out. He barely paid attention to the process, his mind on the words in the notebook. His hands felt empty, though, and his mind didn't energise as usual.

Austyn gasped and slumped in his chair, his eyes open and glazed.

"Austyn, are you alright?" Vortigern asked. He put his fingers on Austyn's wrist, but the pulse wasn't there.

Austyn was dead.

Vortigern backed away from Austyn, horrified at what he'd done. The man was dead. He couldn't help thinking that he'd taken the last of Austyn's life-force from him. Vortigern hit the wall and stopped, staring at Austyn. He didn't move from that spot for an hour.

Austyn straightened up in his chair and focused on Vortigern.

"Austyn, oh, thank Fredtod. I though..." Vortigern said.

Austyn got to his feet and shambled towards Vortigern, his arms outstretched.

"Eh, Austyn, what's the matter?" Vortigern slipped sideways, away from the clasp of Austyn. He could see something was wrong, but not what. "Austyn, say something."

Austyn lunged for Vortigern.

Vortigern jumped backwards and ran for the door to the study. "Austyn, I understand if you're angry."

Austyn still didn't say anything.

Vortigern knew he was dead. Something in the magic had made this monstrosity stumbling towards him. Vortigern turned and ran from the building, leaving the front door wide and dashing into the night. He sprinted for home and locked the door, no ideas left in his tired mind.



He woke on the floor the next morning, hearing screams coming from the road. Vortigern ran outside and saw people hurrying for the Eastland farm. Vortigern stumbled after them, dread filling his stomach.

Hamon had Calvin pinned against the wall of his barn with a broom. Calvin was grey and lifeless, thrashing around, trying to get to his father.

"Doctor, help, please," Hamon pleaded. "There's something wrong with Calvin. I woke and found Austyn Kimber in his room. The man attacked me, and I had to kill him with an axe. Calvin wouldn't move, but then he got up and walked. He won't answer me. He just keeps coming, keeps trying to grab me."

Vortigern looked at the Calvin's grey face and lifeless eyes. "This is the work of magic. There's nothing I can do. You need to fetch your axe again."

Vortigern turned and strode away, leaving the frantic Hamon.

He walked to his house and closed the door, sinking back, to lie on the floor. He swore off magic. He would burn his book and never think of it again.



He kept to his oath through winter and spring, until summer arrived and the flowers blossomed.

Vortigern had sold his mirror, but he could feel his wrinkles with his fingertips. He was still ageing, but he didn't know why. The magic seemed to be eating him from the inside, without energy to feed on.

The guilt from Calvin's death ate at him for a while, but he realised that without his magic, the

boy would have died a year earlier anyway. The thoughts of all of the people still alive thanks to Vortigern helped soothe his guilt, but he never forgot his oath.

Vortigern worked on his notebook, jotting down half-remembered facts and potions. On a mid-summer day, he was there, without patients to see, when his study door burst open.

Huxley Washburne staggered in, his daughter Merrilee in his arms, and his wife Dottie behind him. Merrilee was a little girl of six. Huxley carried her limp form easily to the table and set her down. "Doctor, she fell into the well."

Vortigern walked over and saw the blood running from Merrilee's head and a trickle from her ears. He knew she would die. He remembered that much from before.

"Please save her, Doctor," Dottie said. "She's my little angel. She can't die."

Vortigern stood torn for a moment, before putting his hands on the small girl's cheeks. He reached down inside her and took large armfuls of energy from her. He would need all the power he could get to save her.

"Step back," Vortigern commanded, fetching his knives.

He worked for an hour, and then felt his energy begin to slip. It left faster than ever before, so he reached inside Merrilee and took more. She remained alive, but only barely. He struggled to keep her from dying, her parents fretting by the door.

Vortigern kept working, but his energy kept fading. Again and again, he reached inside Merrilee and took more, struggling to save her.

After ten hours, Merrilee breathed out and lay still.

"I'm sorry," Vortigern said. "I couldn't save her."

Huxley and Dottie staggered to the table and fell over the body of their little girl, sobs wracking them.

Vortigern went to the water pump and cleaned the blood off his hands and face. His white frock coat was ruined. He stripped it off and threw it into the corner.

A scream behind him made him wheel around. Merrilee sat half up, her head still open and dripping, but her hands on her mother's throat. Merrilee's colour returned, as her mother's drained.

Vortigern circled the table to the door.

"Doctor, what's happening?" Huxley shouted.

Vortigern turned and ran from the building. He ran down the road and out of the village. He ran out across the field of budding corn. The farmers sitting on a fence nearby waved and smiled at him, but he didn't wave in response. He just kept running.