

PAX MORGANA

Bill Coffin

Pax Morgana

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DEDICATIONS

I have many to thank for this book. Karen Arbasetti, Derrick Eisenhardt, Morgan O'Rourke, Laura Sullivan and Richard Thomassen all offered vital thoughts on this book during its many different stages, and all have left their imprint on it.

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Edwin Craun introduced me to medieval literature and to a new side of the Arthurian mythos I never knew existed. His scholarship and tutelage made me think about the Once and Future King in ways that ultimately became this story.

Dabney Stuart has offered me a great deal of encouragement and mentorship over the years, for which I am eternally grateful. His words of wisdom guide me on every page I write.

Most of all, my family has been my inspiration in times when frustration and weariness bring projects like these into doubt. If there is love in this story, it is from my daughter Fiona. If there is courage, it is from my son Connor. And if there is strength, then it is from my wife Allison-my best friend, my fairest maiden and my greatest hero.

From the ruin of the Age of Heroes came the last among them, the Briton known as Pendragon, who cast the foes of his people into the sea, restored the greatness of his land and spread his righteousness to the far corners of Europa. Such was the glory of Arthur, the Once and Future King, and golden was his reign.

But no king rules forever...

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CHAPTER 1

LORDS OF CAMELOT

Bors rode through the smoking battleground of Camlann, surveying the fallen. The blood-soaked ground left a heavy brine smell that drove the carrion birds mad with anticipation as they wheeled in the sky. Most of the dead were thralls of the Enemy, subjects once loyal to Arthur but had joined his witch-sister Morgana and hoisted the black banner of Mordred, her unholy son.

Almost hidden among the dead, half-pounded into the mud, Bors found the fallen knights of Camelot, whose colorfully enameled armor ordinarily made them easy to spot. Most of the knights' colors were distinctive enough that Bors could tell by looking at them who had not survived the battle. The roster was disheartening: Lamorak of Gales. The twins Balin and Balan. Gaheris. Uriens. Tristram. It was a scattered patchwork of color spread out over a field of black wreckage. It was the Round Table's last stand.

Bors' own blue and green field plate was nearly covered in mud from his long trip south. He had made best speed, but it was not enough to arrive in time to join his lost fellows. Bors could not decide if this was an entirely bad thing. If Camelot still stood, then there was still hope, despite all he had heard. If Camelot still stood.

Bors wondered once more if he was just fooling himself. Arthur was nowhere to be found here, which was a good sign. But then again, neither was Gawain or Lancelot, and Bors knew only too well why not. There was a separate field of corpses somewhere in France to explain their absence.

Local villagers picked through the bodies, waving off the vultures and crows. They took pieces of armor, weapons, coin purses

and other trophies. Most of the thralls had little to offer, as their gear was already pitting and disintegrating, as if it could not bear the light of the sun. It was the bodies of Camelot the looters sought, and in more than one place, people drew knives on each other to enforce their claim while others scrambled for something better to fight with. It was like seeing a pack of dogs growling over a kill that stretched for miles in every direction.

Bors ground his teeth. How little it took for the flower of chivalry to die! How could the people of Britannia turn so savage, so quickly? And how could they so easily disgrace the legacy of their king, who united them, protected them, and gave them thirty years of richness and glory?

Bors reflection was cut short by the sight of three looters wrestling the yellow-and-black armor from a headless corpse. Those were Percival's colors.

His body lay at the foot of a massive oak tree, the only thing standing tall on the entire field. As Bors rode closer to it, he looked at the massive, naked branches. Dozens of crows sat along them, silhouetted against the blank sky, their yellow eyes shining as they watched the knight approach. The greatest among them cawed loudly. He was joined by another. Then another, and another. Soon the entire tree was bursting with murderous glee as the crows all flapped their wings and screamed.

Bors dismounted from his charger Sandalin, a mighty and beautiful warhorse that seemed apart from all of the muck and mayhem of the scene. Somehow, its mane had kept untangled, its barding still glimmering and bright. The horse snorted and shook its head as Bors landed on the soft ground. It stamped once with its hoof and looked up at the tree, and in that instant, the crows fell silent.

The looters noticed Bors coming towards them. Two of them drew swords and pointed them at the knight. The third fell back a bit, wanting no trouble at all.

"The price for scavenging the king's soldiers is death," Bors said.

The looters tried to keep their position, but the shaking in their legs made it difficult. One of them pointed his sword at Bors.

"Don't come any further!"

"Threatening a knight of Camelot. That too, merits death," Bors said as he kept walking. He was close to the looters now, inside their weapons' reach.

"The king is dead," said the first looter. "His laws are no longer ours."

Bors stopped in front of the two of them. He looked the first in the eyes, then the second. They were scarcely more than boys, thick in the arms as well as the head.

Bors raised his faceplate. He was middle-aged, with pale blue eyes and a thick salt-and-pepper beard. A long, thin scar ran over his right eye, though whatever had caused the wound had left Bors unblinded. A similar scar crossed the bridge of his nose.

"You know who I am?" Bors said.

They both nodded.

"Then you know what I can do."

The first two looters dropped their weapons and ran. The third one, the unarmed one, knelt in the mud before Bors. "Sire, I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"Get up, boy. This is no time for groveling." Bors took looter by the arm and helped him to his feet. "At least you had the sand not to flee. Can't say the same for your friends," Bors said, pointing to the retreating pair of looters, who were making best speed across the field.

"They're not my friends," the looter said. "We were just looking for some salvage. The black army took everything we have, and our fields have been trampled into nothing. What else could we do?"

Bors pointed to Percival. "You can help me get him up. I'm bringing him home."

The two struggled to free Percival's body from the mud, but first they needed to move the thralls that were lying in the way. Bors flipped one of them over, and as he did, the soldier's helmet fell away, revealing an alabaster face streaked with thin, almost pink blood. The eyes were all white and the teeth had grown sharp like a dog's. The ears were long, thin and pointed.

"Most of them are like this," the boy said. "Some, more than others."

Bors nodded. "Take a good look, boy. This is what Morgana's treachery will yield you. You cannot serve a monster without becoming one."

Together, they pitched the thrall to the side and dug Percival's legs free from the mud. They then lifted him from the earth, wiped down his armor as best they could, and laid him across Sandalin's back.

"We never found his head," said the looter.

"Vicious bastards probably took it," Bors said. "You saw this battle happen?"

"I did."

"How many from Camelot were here?"

"No more than thirty, I think."

In the old days half that number would have wrought this kind of havoc upon the enemy, and they would have returned home to tell of it, Bors thought. Was this what the strength of Arthur had come to?

"Then I am right to assume that whoever survived retreated to Camelot," Bors said.

"You are, sire. There were precious few, though. Lord Arthur was among them."

Bors grunted. "And Morgana?"

"She was unseen, but they say she was everywhere during the battle, flying among the men, cursing those who stood against her, stealing their breath."

"No doubt. And what of her son?"

"Most of your friends here, he's the one that killed them," the looter said, nodding toward Percival's body. "This one gave a good fight, though. He stood with his back to the tree for an hour, all by himself. He killed a hundred warriors before lord Mordred distanced his head from his shoulders."

Bors finished tying Percival's body to Sandalin. He put a hand on the looter's chin and looked him straight in the eyes. "Mordred is nobody's lord. Not yours, and not mine. Remember that..."

"Ghyslain, sire."

"Remember that, Ghyslain." Bors let him go. "Now go back to your home and remember what you saw this day. Camelot may fall, but you are a son of Britannia. The land has never needed you more than it does now."

Ghyslain wiped the mud off his chin. "Then let me come with you. I can fight. I can be your squire."

"Go home, boy," Bors said over his shoulder as he led his horse away. "There is no mercy waiting at Camelot. Only more of what you see here."

Ghyslain watched Bors walk his horse through the field and into the mist. As he left, the crows began their screaming once more. One by one, they raised their cry until the whole tree was alive with their clamor, drowning out the rest of the world. Left behind, Ghyslain clapped his hands over his ears but still could not keep out the noise.

The trip to Camelot took the better part of a day, mostly because the roads had been torn up, stone by stone, by Morgana's advancing army. Against such malice, it seemed a small wonder that such simple folk like Ghyslain abandoned their king, Bors thought. Few had the heart of a crusader, the ability to fight for something to the death. It's just too much to ask of them.

Bors walked Sandalin over the last ridge before Camelot, and as he did, he tried to imagine the worst. Even that proved insufficient.

In Arthur's better days, people called Camelot the silver city, owing to stories that when he took the throne, Arthur built for himself a castle of pure silver, adorned with gold. Such fiction always made Bors laugh, but even having lived in the place, Camelot was a vision. No city stood taller or prouder in all of Britannia. No walls were thicker, no towers were taller, no streets were broader. Its main gate seemed like a doorway to another world, and even the smallest hovel crammed within the outer streets had a humble pride to it, for what greater honor could there be than to live within Arthur's greatest domain?

Many times, Bors had ridden through Camelot's magnificent plazas and avenues, noting that nowhere else would one find such civility. This was the home of the Round Table, and the knights who served it never needed to cross steel within these walls. The people knew that they were safe, that they were bound to prosper, and that their lords would keep the peace. Without scarcity, there could be no greed, no poverty, no desperation. There was only the ever-abundant proof that life was good and that any honest work would be rewarded. Against such encouragement, even the lowliest villain had to look elsewhere to stir trouble, for there would be none here.

Bors closed his eyes as he reached the top of the ridge. In the distance, he could hear the same screaming cry of scavenger birds that had echoed across the battlefield of Camlann. But there was other noise, too, the murmur of legions, the clatter of armor, the grinding of steel. The cracking of whips. The screams of the tormented. The laughter of the wicked.

Morgana had come to Camelot, and she would not rest until she saw it destroyed. Bors opened his eyes and beheld her fury.

The outer walls were cracked in a dozen places, smashed by massive war machines that could hurl a boulder a mile away or thrust an armored ram through solid stone. Where the walls had been breached, rubble from within had been piled up in despera-

tion, the gaps held only by the valor of those who defended the city's interior.

Within the city, many buildings, despite their stone walls and slate roofs, were aflame. Already the homes and markets and businesses just inside the city wall were blackened shells. Deeper within the city, some districts had yet to feel the touch of arrows that burned white, or globes of liquid fire, or whatever other deviltry had been flung over the walls and rendered Camelot's stout stone into something as easily burned as kindling.

The central citadel still stood tall and proud, but horrible scars crossed the stone, as if had been raked by the talons of something monstrous. Elsewhere, huge blackened marks showed where lightning of no mortal kind had struck the place. Bors had seen all of these things everywhere else Morgana's army had triumphed, but never such awful fury directed at one target. How could anything withstand such an onslaught? Yet Camelot did. And it would stand until the bitter end. Bors smiled.

Outside of the city camped the thralls in a loose formation of concentric phalanxes. Bors stopped counting the rings of soldiers after he got to the tenth. Even under the best of circumstances, there could be no more than a fraction of this number still within Camelot. Nearly all of these invaders were once proud to call Arthur their king. Now it was as if the entire nation had turned on itself and marched to the place of its greatest glory, just to share in its destruction.

Bors tugged on Sandalin's reins and descended the ridge toward the city's main gate.

The thralls sensed him coming well before he ever reached their first ring. In silence, they parted before him as he passed. They stood together, moving as one, their heads slowly tracking Bors as he moved toward the city. In the outermost ring of soldiers, the thralls looked like simple men-at-arms wearing the signature black armor worn by Morgana's minions. But with each successive ring, the soldiers more resembled the thrall he had examined back at Camlann. Their skin paler, their teeth whiter and sharper, their hair finer, their ears longer. Even their armor became more ornate and strange, reflecting an artistic quality that could only be appreciated by those who had little respect for mortal sensibilities.

By the time Bors neared the gates of Camelot, the thralls' eyes burned with a fierce autumn glow. The soldiers in the back were Morgana's hired help, and those in the middle were losing their

humanity. But these front lines were another breed entirely. They were what the others would someday change into: slave stock from the hidden realm where Morgana drew her power, where the spirits of old still lurked, and where the doom of Camelot had been devised.

Arcadia.

As Bors reached the final line of soldiers, there stood before him a massive, ebony-skinned warhorse whose eyes also shone with Arcadian fire. Sitting atop the dark beast was a knight clad in black plate mail forged and engraved by the same alien hands that outfitted the rest of the Arcadian brood. Against his hip he held a tall lance adorned with a long, fluttering banner bearing Morgana's sigil—a double-headed serpent entwined about a sword-embroidered in silver thread on black cloth. His helmet had been cast in the likeness of dragon's head, whose open mouth framed a moveable faceplate within.

Around the knight, Bors could see the faintest aura of power, as if it were something he had glanced from the corner of his eye. It was just barely visible, yet impossible to focus on. His was a dark and hideous strength, something to make the meek tremble, to make the strong regret their courage and to make the wicked cheer.

The dark knight lifted his faceplate, revealing a beautiful face trapped somewhere in the transformation from humanity to Arcadian monstrosity. His eyes shone a bright, human blue, though there was a pinpoint of orange fire buried deep within them. His skin was a pale white, smooth and flawless. His cheeks and chin strong and sculpted, a perfect model of the heroic ideal.

"Welcome home, Bors," said the knight. His voice was deep and rich, a noble baritone that rang out in the still air, like the hammering of steel.

"I wish I could say it was good to see you again, Mordred," Bors said. "I have come to give Percival a decent burial."

Mordred smiled. "I suppose he has earned it. And what of you, Bors? What kind of burial will you deserve when all of this is gone?" Mordred asked, nodding to the walls of Camelot behind him.

"I'll not trifle with the likes of you. Are you going to let me pass, or am I to join my headless friend?"

Mordred waved his hand, and the final rank of thralls parted, giving Bors a wide lane to the city gates. "See, Bors? We are not entirely without honor."

"What would you know if it?" Bors said, tugging on Sandalin's reins. The horse was staring down Mordred's charger, and needed to be pulled hard to break off.

As Bors passed Mordred, the dark knight leaned over and whispered, "Tomorrow dawns a new age in Britannia. My mother has need of strength such as yours. Arthur is dead already, he just does not know it. Stay here with us; I'll see that Percival is given the rest he deserves."

Bors spat on the ground. "Camelot will burn before it ever gives liege to you. Or your mother."

All around him, the thralls moved in together, pointing their spears inward, ready to pinion Bors from a hundred different directions. "I'll tell her you said that," Mordred said. He flipped his faceplate down. "See you tomorrow."

The thralls lifted their ring of spears and the way to Camelot was once again open. Bors rode Sandalin through, leaving the enemy's encampment behind him. There was a wide clearing between Mordred's ring of soldiers and the moat surrounding Camelot. A few thralls lay dead in the field, pierced by arrows or ballista spears. One or two were crushed beneath large stones catapulted from behind the city walls.

Bors slowly crossed the field, looking upon the cracked walls of Camelot. Along the battlements, dozens of soldiers peeked out, watching him approach. Nowhere did Bors see the colors of any knights he knew. There was only the muddy look of citizens wearing whatever armor they could find.

As he neared the gate, a horn sounded from within the city, and the massive, iron portcullis gates creaked upwards. They locked into place with a deep boom and the drawbridge extended across the moat. It was a single slab of veined stone, cranked out by mighty gears hidden from view, turning within the walls. The outer edge of the moat was ringed with a low wall broken through in a dozen places, but the outer gate, where the drawbridge would lock into place once fully extended, was still intact.

Bors looked back to see if Mordred's troops would dash across the clearing and try storming the gate, but they stood still, watching him with those orange eyes, pinpoints from this distance, but still bright enough to be seen under the twilight sun. Above them sat Mordred, watching him, not moving, showing a predator's patience.

The drawbridge connected to the outer gate with a deep click. Bors nudged Sandalin, who stepped onto the bridge. The gate

wardens began withdrawing the bridge a moment later, so Bors and Sandalin simply held still and rode across the moat. Bors counted the bodies floating face-down in the black water. He stopped when he hit fifty. A few were human; most were thralls. All of their blood fouled the water, which reeked of both a sewer and a slaughterhouse. Bors cared not to think of what decaying horrors lay on the bottom.

As the bridge reached the other side, Bors and Sandalin walked off, through the massive gate welcoming all to the house of Pendragon. The gleaming marble of the walls was chipped and stained with blood in places, scored by fire or lightning elsewhere. Bors still smiled as he entered. Regardless of the forces assembled outside, it was good to be home.

As he entered the city proper, the cobblestoned plaza was full of dead and dying soldiers laid out in rows. The area was strewn with wreckage-tumbled and shattered stone blocks, ruined siege engines, discarded pieces of battered armor. Dozens of soldiers lined the wall, but all of them were either young boys who had picked up a sword for the first time or old men who had laid it down years ago.

"It's going to be a slaughter," said a friendly voice as Bors surveyed the forces. Bors turned and saw Kay standing before him, wearing white armor with a gold sigil of the Pendragon crest engraved in the chest plate.

"Nothing but cheer from you, eh, Kay?" Bors said.

"You should have seen the attack we repelled today," Kay said, motioning to the casualties in the plaza. "We were lucky there aren't three times as many bodies laid out here."

"I just rode through Mordred's army, and it doesn't look like its hurting," Bors said.

"It's not. They just hit us with a skirmish like today to see how we'd fight," Kay said. "Tomorrow, we'll see the real push."

Bors gestured to the body strapped to Sandalin. "I found Percival at Camlann, but they took his head."

Kay put his hand on Percival's armored shoulder. "You do him credit, Bors." Kay motioned to a few squires in the plaza, who rushed to the horse and began untying Percival. They lifted him off and carried him through the ranks of the dead to a place near where one of the plaza streets had been blocked off by fallen chunks of wall stone. They laid him down in a field of empty helmets placed atop naked swords. To the pommel of each weapon hung a thin strip of colored cloth, identifying a missing knight of

the Round Table.

Kay and Bors watched the squires place Percival on the ground. "When we ran, Percival stayed behind so we might escape," Kay said quietly. "Now I know I was right to grieve when he never returned."

"How many are left, Kay?"

"Some three hundred, I think. There was ten times that before the fighting began. Most of them are here. The rest are deeper within the city, running supplies or manning the siege engines."

"No. I meant of us."

Kay looked down and shook his head. "You join myself and Bedevere. Gawain still lives, but..."

"Say no more of him. What of Arthur?"

"He remains within the citadel. He has not spoken nor slept since Camlann," Kay said, pausing. "That was three days ago."

Bors looked over his shoulder, through the gate, to the black mass of soldiers on the far side of the moat. "We will need his strength when they come next," he said.

"We will need a miracle," Kay said. "What of the Lords of Orkney? Why have they not come with you?"

"We'll get no help from them. They would not even grant me an audience, let alone agree to help us. We have only ourselves to depend upon."

"Then it is hopeless," Kay said. "Camlann was our last chance. What you see here is a funeral that has not yet happened."

Bors glared at Kay. "Arthur yet lives. Do not speak of your brother as if he has already left us."

"But he has. Go see for yourself."

Bors rode Sandalin through Camelot's quiet streets. Once he navigated through the wreckage of the outer walls, things looked a bit more like they usually did. The buildings still had their clean, bright faces, the streets were missing no cobbles, and even the public fountains still ran on every corner. Yet an air of doom hung over the place. The normally crowded walks, plazas and markets were now empty. Everywhere he looked, curtains were drawn and shutters were closed, only the occasional face spying out from behind them. Even here the dream was over; the only ones who had not deserted Britannia's capital were the

ones who could not leave. Camelot was a ghost of its former self, and as Bors listened to Sandalin's hooves echo through the streets, he surveyed the deserted city in search of something worth fighting for.

In the central district stood the citadel, the tallest and proudest spot in the city. There were only a pair of young guardsmen standing outside, and both were too cowed by Bors' presence to address him, let alone ask his business. Bors rode through the citadel gate and dismounted. There were no valets to take Sandalin, so he tethered the horse, patted him on the neck and entered the building alone. Inside, the walls were white marble, and smokeless oil lanterns burned in recessed alcoves, casting soft light. Fine tapestries hung along the hallways and foyers, depicting scenes of Britannia in all of her glory: rolling green fields, deep forests, white cliffs, blue shores. Others chronicled the glories of Arthur, who rose from the chaos of old to claim Excalibur, united the native lords and expelled the foreign tyrants who had carved British soil into so many fiefdoms. He had chased those same tyrants across Europa, bringing his rule of law and chivalry to lands that had never known it before. He challenged the greatness of Rome, defeated its armies and slew its wicked Emperor Validus, earning the empire's fealty.

Bors remembered that day atop the Palatine, when Arthur and Validus met in single combat. In that brief flicker of time, both armies held their breath, knowing that in the next stroke of steel, one of these great nations would reign triumphant, and that neither would evermore be the same. When Validus fell, the courage of Rome died with him, and in the rout that followed, none of the defeated escaped the battlefield with their lives.

There were those after the slaughter who murmured that perhaps Arthur's brutality would return to haunt him. This was the first great battle the king had waged without the counsel of Merlin, whose disappearance shortly before had never been explained, and whose absence cast a grim shadow of doubt upon the whole campaign. Bors had worried that thus unguided they would find defeat and humiliation. Instead, he found something worse, an act of tyranny more murderous than any ever inflicted upon Britannia. Arthur had begun the mayhem, and his knights were only too happy to help him finish it.

Bors walked along the main hallway leading to Arthur's throne room, where more recent tapestries glorified the days after Validus' defeat. They showed nothing of the wrath that led to the Ro-

man slaughter. Nor the pride that made him demand such a tribute of the fallen Empire that its people could do nothing but resent their new masters and long for a day when they might take their revenge. Nothing depicted the gluttony that made Arthur crave to master all of Europa even when no more enemies faced Britannia. The lust that made him so unfaithful to his wife, Guenevere, for whose honor he would one day break the very fellowship that made him king.

The fellowship, Bors thought. The fellowship.

As he rounded the final corner before the throne room, Bors entered one last, great hallway, lined with life-sized statues of the heroes of Camelot. Here, the mightiest warriors of the Round Table stood in stony silence, keeping an eternal vigil on those who would approach the king. Bors looked upon the white marble faces as he walked, seeing in his mind's eye the flesh-and-blood appearance of those he had served alongside for so many years. So many faces, all of them gone.

At the end of the hall stood a final quartet of statues, the highest examples of what it meant to be a knight of Arthur. There was Percival, the courtliest of knights and the living flower of chivalry. There was Lancelot, whose love for the king was triumphed only by his love for the queen. There was Gawain, who demanded that Lancelot be brought to justice for his dalliance with Guenevere. He got that, and more.

And then there was Bors himself, last among them all.

Bors looked at his stone counterpart, whose unscarred face was frozen in youth. It was the ideal of Bors; an image to endure long after the flesh would fail. And Bors hated every particle of it. Nothing he had done deserved such worship, no matter what the others believed. The villains he had slain, the beasts he had driven back into the darkness, the honors he brought upon the king and all who served him...all were dust before his single great failure, his last quest which came to nothing. For it was after that when the realm began to falter, Bors knew. It was when the Lady denied him the Sangreal, when she smiled and whispered that he was more than worthy of the Cup, but she still could not give it to him, that Bors realized that from that point on, there would be no further greatness for Arthur. That every day after would be one step closer to the kingdom's ruin. And every day, he saw ever more proof of just how right he was.

Bors could hear footsteps echoing towards him. He turned from his statue and walked into the king's antechamber, a vast, circular

hall of more white marble, with the banners of every kingdom that answered to Arthur hanging from the walls, draping from the ceiling. Filling the center of the chamber was a vast table of polished, thousand-year oak with the sigil of Pendragon engraved on its surface, filled with gold. The Round Table.

There were thirteen places at the table, the king's throne at the head and twelve for his closest lieutenants. There was a seat for Bors directly across the table from where the king sat.

"I never understood why you objected to sitting there," said the voice to which the footsteps belonged. Bors could not yet see him, but he knew Bedevere was in the room. "It is a place of honor not all who serve the king are lucky enough to receive."

"Nice to hear you again, Bedevere," Bors said.

Bedevere emerged from behind one of the banners hanging against the wall. "The king's bodyguard is better heard than seen, don't you agree?"

"Better the king need no bodyguard at all."

"Were these kinder times, I'd agree with you," Bedevere said with a smile. "But then again, I was never invited to sit at the table, nor was I honored with a statue, so I'll take what little glories Lord Arthur sees fit to throw me."

"I have come to see him," Bors said. "Will he accept me?"

Bedevere's smile disappeared. "He is unwell. Camlann was a disaster, and now only the final few of us are left. He fears all is lost."

"Aye. Kay told me."

"Did he tell you that Mordred's soldiers couldn't be killed?"

Bors blinked. "You jest. Camlann was piled high with the dead."

"Only those who abandoned the king and took up with his sister. They died easily enough," Bedevere said. "I'm talking about the other ones. The ones with the eyes."

"They vexed you, then?" Bors said.

Bedevere laughed. "Vexed? They slaughtered us, Bors. They turned aside our every blade. Our lances shattered against their armor like waves on the shore. Only Excalibur could harm them, but the king was just one man, and we were set upon by the thousands. We could do nothing but die until he gave the order to flee for our lives, and that is exactly what we did. Twenty of us made the run for home. Only three of us made it all the way."

"I heard Percival made a decent stand of it."

"That he did. When the invincible ones could not hurt him, they called for Mordred, who made short work of it. As dangerous as

his lieutenants are, he is a hundred times more so. We cannot defeat him. Arthur cannot defeat him. We are lost."

Bors looked at Bedevere through narrowed eyes. "Words like that are why you were never given a space at this table," the knight growled. "The lion of Britannia will never reward weakness of spirit."

Bedevere drew his sword and walked quickly towards Bors. "You question me?"

Bors did not move an inch. "I don't need to."

Bedevere clenched his teeth and hissed, "Then let's see about it."

"That's enough, Bedevere," rang another voice in the hall. It was loud and rich, and its echo filled Bors heart with gladness. Arthur.

Bedevere swung towards the head of the table, looking at the closed door beyond it. After a second the tension left his body, and he let his arms hang slack. He sheathed his sword and slowly stepped back so Bors could pass before him. Unable to take his eyes off the floor, Bedevere said, "He will see you now."

Bors walked around the table towards the head of it. As he passed Bedevere, he clasped him by the shoulders. "Forgive me, brother. My words were untrue."

"Who am I to forgive the likes of you?" Bedevere whispered, still looking down.

Bors would not let him go and finally, Bedevere raised his head and met his eyes. "You have been chosen to protect the king," Bors said. "You are the guardian of the dream. You are the greatest of us all."

Bedevere's old smile returned. "You never cease to surprise me, old friend." Bedevere glanced toward the door. "He waits for you."

Bors returned the smile. "I shall see you again afterwards."

As Bors approached the great door, it opened by itself, swinging slowly inward. Inside was Arthur's throne room. The white walls were hung with the king's many trophies. Bors eyes first went to the crossed swords of Validus, hung behind the shield of Ostover, the last of the renegade kings of Nordheim. Flanking that prize were many other relics from the battlefield: broken helmets, torn capes, captured banners and a hundred other artifacts from those who were foolish enough to stand before the king, and who paid the price for it.

At the base of the wall lay the heaps of treasure paid to Arthur-

from across Europa and beyond-as tribute over the years. Tapestries spun with gold and silver thread. Jewel-encrusted suits of armor. Life-sized ivory statues of gods and kings. Obsidian daggers from Atlantis. Jade masks from the nameless empires. It all could have been cashed in to buy back the loyalty Arthur had lost to Mordred. He could have hired the finest mercenaries from Germania. He could have bribed the castaway lords of Gaul to come to his aid. He could have returned a slice of pride to Rome and had their legions arrive in the nick of time. Yet these treasures stayed here, gathering dust, surrounding the king with reminders of former glories. Bors looked upon the trove and shook his head. He had never seen such riches before, and he could not imagine why it would lie in heaps, hidden from view. Such was the way of kings, perhaps. He would not pretend to know different.

One quarter of the room's walls were covered by huge, heavy drapes which had been drawn back to reveal a series of ornate windows. Each window opened like a set of double doors onto a separate terrace, and it was on the central terrace, the largest one, where the king stood against the railing, surveying his world below.

Everywhere he could see, the landscape was dying. The grass was yellow, the water was dark and foul. The trees, gray and leafless. And nowhere did he see it more than around Mordred's encampment, which blighted all it touched. Arthur shook his head slowly as he surveyed the landscape, pursing his lips, narrowing his eyes.

"A grim sight, my lord," Bors said as he neared the terrace. He gripped his sword instinctively; perhaps some black-clad archer would be unable to resist such a fine opportunity.

"I wish I could say that I've seen worse," Arthur said before turning away from the sight of it all and returning to his throne room. Normally there might be a dozen others in the room-knights standing guard, courtiers and friends from distant places. Now it was only Bors, his king and the reminders of better days.

Arthur was wearing the same massive suit of plate armor he always did when entering battle. His crown rested on his coppery hair, and as always, Excalibur hung at his side, the sword of kings. Over it all, Arthur wore his tunic with the Pendragon sigil stitched on with gold and silver thread. But the lot of it had seen some hard days. The armor was in rough shape; more than a few places bore the dents and rends of close calls and narrow misses. The tunic was spattered with dark, dried blood and

holed through in places. And though Excalibur was by Arthur's side, the king listed ever so slightly in favor of it, such a burden had it become.

Arthur slumped into his throne, removed his crown and ran his fingers through his hair. He sighed before looking up at Bors and managing a thin smile. "Good to see you again, my friend. What news from the north?"

Bors went down to one knee and could not bring his eyes to meet Arthur's. "The Lords of Orkney are not coming. They would not even grant me an audience."

Arthur sat back and nodded to himself. "They know a lost cause when they see one. I cannot say I blame them, considering all things."

"My lord, I have failed you yet again," Bors said.

"You cannot do the impossible, Bors. I sent you north in the hopes that some help might yet remain for us there. There was not. What were you to do, conjure allies from thin air?"

"Of course not, my lord..."

"Then stop moping like a little boy. Our time together grows short. Those jackals on my lawn will see to that. At least let my final days be among friends, and not simpering lackeys trying to apologize for things they were never responsible for."

Bors stood before his king, not knowing what to say.

Arthur smiled once more. "Take a seat, Bors, and tell me a story. Something to ease my troubles."

Bors pulled one of the heavy oaken chairs on which a courtier might have reclined away from the wall and dragged it across the floor until it was close enough to the throne. Bors took off his sword and stood it against one of the armrests before sitting down himself.

"When I was a young man, before you became king, I knew a knight named Sir Mellican, who had served my father for many years. Even as an old man, he donned his armor every day and patrolled his warden, looking for trouble. My friends and I thought he was a bit ridiculous. He could barely lift his sword, much less stop anybody, but still he rode. One day, a brigand entered the warden and made trouble with one of the local girls. He hurt her terribly. Took her virtue."

Arthur cleared his throat. "I thought this was supposed to raise my spirits," he said, arching an eyebrow.

"It will," Bors said. "I was in the castle when the news came in of the attack. Sir Mellican was dining with my father, hunched over

a bowl of stew. The moment the news hit his ears, he straightened, asked my father's leave and left the chamber. Within half an hour, I saw him in full plate, riding forth from the castle to bring justice back to the warden.

"Outside the castle gates, a crowd of townsfolk had gathered. Many of them had known Mellican for years, and they begged him not to go. They said he was too old to fight, that he had done enough for his lord and that there were a hundred other knights who could accomplish this task for him. He heard them all out, and when they were done, he closed his faceplate and rode forth.

"The brigand never stayed free for long. Mellican somehow knew just where to look for him, and he cut the knave down for his crimes, burning the body on the spot and burying the remains. From that day forth, he remained suited up, riding the border of the warden without food, drink or sleep, watching for signs of the brigand's friends. In the waning hours of the third day, they came, twenty or more of them.

"I had tagged along, spying on Mellican to see what he could do in his condition. By the time the brigands arrived, it was nearly twilight, and all I could see were their silhouettes against the setting sun as they called out Mellican and surrounded him. The old knight left his horse behind and walked into the thick of them. With each footstep, it was as if he grew another foot taller. That was when I knew it was not Sir Mellican who was outmatched, but the brigands he intended to punish.

"Their black forms rushed into each other, and as I watched the battle, I saw the brigands fall in short order, their bodies flying apart from the force of Mellican's blows. When their leader was killed, the few who remained threw down their swords and begged for mercy. Mellican gave it to them provided they each took a part of their fallen leader's body and carried them back to wherever they had come from and showed the parts to their fellows so they would know what fate awaited the lawless in Mellican's domain.

"As the brigands fled, I approached Mellican. He was not even breathing hard. He was just watching his vanquished foes escape with their lives. I looked up at this great knight and asked him why he had not stayed back at the castle.

"Mellican looked at me and said, 'My friends gave me some excellent advice. Perhaps when I get to be an old man, I'll begin listening to them.'"

Arthur stroked his copper-colored beard. "And what is the

moral of this story, of your Mellican?"

"It's not a morality tale, sire," Bors said. "It is the story of the day I decided to become a knight." Bors smiled to himself, the first time in quite a while. "That was the best day of my life."

Arthur nodded. "And what became of Mellican? Did he die with his armor on, fighting to the end of his days?"

"No. He left the knighthood when he turned eighty and founded a hermitage somewhere in Germania. A place where warriors could find some tranquility. A place to reflect, I suppose."

"Ah, the knight's dream. When there are no foes left to slaughter, no more glories to find, one retires to a quiet place and ponders the weight of it all," Arthur said, looking at the ceiling. "Is that what you want, Bors?"

"I don't look that far ahead, sire. You?"

"I am Britannia, and her enemies are legion. There can be no rest for the likes of me."

"Then I neither shall I have any."

"That's why your statue stands where it does, you know," Arthur said. "Percival was nobler than you. Gawain was stronger. And Lancelot was better than us all. But you, Bors, were always the purest."

"The purest...what?"

"Just that. The purest."

"The Lady didn't think so," Bors said. "Else she would have given me the Sangreal."

"Nobody can say why she kept it from you. But she deigned to refuse you in person when she could just as easily have stayed hidden. She does not make conversation lightly."

Bors turned to look out the window again. Darkness was falling, and the fires from Mordred's camp would soon stipple the plains with an orange glow. "We were to find the Sangreal. We came back with nothing, or not at all. I knew when she denied me that our days were coming to an end, but I never knew why. I still do not. But I do know that I had something to do with it."

"Again, the mewling," Arthur grumbled. "Do you know why I never punished you for your failure, Bors?"

"No, sire."

"Because you punish yourself worse than I ever could, and for reasons not even I understand. I am not half the knight you are, but still you whip yourself for not being more. Were there just ten of you, there would be no more darkness left in the world."

"My lord jests with me."

"Look into my eyes, Bors." He did. "What makes you think I can jest about anything anymore? I left the last of my kind on the fields of Camlann, where I ran like a rabbit. There was once a day when I could have won the day on my own. Now I cannot even stand before the fury of my bastard son, nor resist his mother's wicked charms. Camelot will fall because its king already has. There is no future left for me or my servants. Yet you carry on."

"There is still hope."

"The dream of a better day runs through you like blood, Bors. No knight in Camelot or any court has ever known such purpose."

"I am not sure I agree with you, sire."

"Of course you don't," Arthur said. "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong."

Bors looked to the terrace, and to the twilight sky. "Night approaches," he said. "The people must be hungry. No one eats well during a siege."

"I will tell Kay to empty the larders tonight. Every soldier on the watch will have triple rations. The rest goes to every man, woman and child within the city. Tonight, Camelot feasts."

"And in the morning?" Bors asked.

Arthur rested his hand on the pommel of Excalibur. "We meet our destinies. Every single one of us."

"Perhaps I should be on watch, my lord."

Arthur shook his head. "You have proven yourself enough, I think. Get some rest. I will see you in the morning."

Bors grasped his sword and slid it back into his belt loop. "Let us hope so, my lord. Good night." And with that, he bowed and left the throne room, leaving behind his king. Arthur stood alone, looking out into the growing darkness, where the fate of Camelot gathered and waited for the coming dawn. As would he.

Bors retrieved his traveling bags from the back of Sandalin before retiring to his chamber within the citadel. The room offered the kinds of comfort Bors had been denied while away from the city. A large bed with a down mattress. A fire in the hearth. A tray of fruit, bread and cheese waiting on the table next to a flagon of wine. And a large cistern of warm water for bathing.

Bors dropped his bag of gear by the door and set his sword against the foot of the bed. He warmed his hands over the fire

and fixed himself a small meal. Before he ate, he undid his armor and carefully set its many pieces on the floor. He drew a canister of polish and some cleaning brushes from his bag and scrubbed the filth from the plates. He couldn't do anything where the blue and green enamel had cracked or broken off, but there wasn't too much of that yet. Just the wear and tear of a long trip overland, and the occasional skirmish along the way.

Two hours later, the armor looked as good as it was going to get, and Bors finally turned to his food. The bath water was cold, but it would do. Another hour later, he had fed and cleaned himself and had run out of rituals to perform before going to bed. He tested the soft, pliant mattress and frowned. The ground was hard, but it was what he had grown used to, and he was not about to spend his last night coddling his body. He pulled a gray, woolen blanket from his bag and lay on the stone floor next to the fire. The hearth was warm. The stone was cool. Somewhere in the middle, he would find comfort enough to sleep, maybe even

to dream.

To dream...

...dream...

...dream of a dark and endless forest full of dying, leafless trees. Of thickets of spiked brambles that cut the flesh of any creature that passed through. Bors' battered armor fell off him piece by piece with each step he took through the brush. He swung his sword at the thorny vines around him, hacking his trail through the evil woodland. When he looked back, the trail he had cut thus far had already closed behind him.

His arms burned from fatigue, but he refused to stop, knowing that if he did, the vines would grow around him and entomb his body. Blisters formed on his palms, and eventually those burst and the raw skin beneath began to bleed. As the last part of armor fell away, nothing stood between him and the thorns cutting into him. A distant voice in his head kept begging him to stop, but he shut it out and kept swinging. After having come so far, fought so hard and suffered so much, he would see this through to the end. He would bring home that which his king had sent him to retrieve. He would win the prize that would make Camelot's glory complete and make immortal the reign of Arthur.

He would do this. He would not be stopped. Not for fear, pain nor death. He would be like the ocean against the shore. He would prevail.

The vines around him had thickened into thin branches, their

thorns the size of arrowheads. He clenched his teeth as his body slickened with blood. The voice in his head came back, louder. Just stop!

After you, Bors thought back.

The vines snaked around his feet, fixing them in place. When he swung his sword into a particularly thick vine, the blade sunk into the flesh of it and stayed there as if fixed in stone. Bors lacked the strength to pull it out, and soon the vines wrapped around his entire arm, mummifying it, too. They crept up his back, across his chest, around his neck. They encircled his head, biting into his scalp and covering his face. The last thing he saw was a mass of vines upon vines shutting him away from the world of the living.

Darkness.

Bors came to lying on a floor of soft moss, his skin clean and unscarred, covered in healing salve. He stood up as if he were weightless and saw before him a large, round stone table. Hovering over it was a shining chalice. Bors reached for it, but his fingers passed through the cup, closing on nothing.

The Lady approached him from the edges of his vision, as white and glowing as the chalice itself. She smiled at Bors, her eyes shining, her hair slowly swaying in the direction of an unseen, ever-changing wind. She wore the thin robes of a goddess, her curved body elegant and strong. Bors could only glance at her before his eyes burned, so bright was her beauty.

She came close to him, and he could smell her hair, her skin. Bors felt her fingers, delicate enough to knit with spider webs yet strong enough to rend stone, lift his chin and turn his face to meet hers. She whispered something in a language he had never heard, but he knew what she was telling him anyway: You are more deserving than anyone of the cup, dearest Bors, and that is why I cannot give it to you. She held him close, telling him that he alone deserved this precious thing she held away from the world, and perhaps one day he might understand why he could not possess it, but for now, he had to return to the world empty-handed.

So far, Bors' dream mirrored his memory of that strange day when he met the Lady, that day she denied him the Sangreal. When he felt her fingers interlock behind his head, he knew he was no longer in the realm of the past. And when she breathed into his ear that he would not go back unrewarded, he knew that something was wrong. And then, when she kissed him and pressed her body against his, he knew enough to tell that whatever his body felt, he was under attack.

Bors tried to get away from her, but she pulled him in more tightly. As her tongue probed his mouth, Bors felt his lungs burning. She was stealing his breath. And deep in his mind, her sweet voice laughed cruelly. What had sounded like a whisper of spring-time moments before was now a howl of winter.

Move your arms, he thought, but he could not. Find your strength, Bors, or die.

He closed his eyes because that was all he could do, all the while listening to that awful voice in his head, telling him to stop. Succumb. Give in.

He was dying, and in that moment, it came to him, a final spark, one last chance. He pushed her back, peeling her body away from his. And just then, she vanished like smoke, and Bors found himself still in those constricting vines. They squeezed, but the weedy coils could not hold him. He burst out of the vines and climbed out of their mass.

He reached up, ascending a column of thorny walls until he reached into the sky and stood on top of a world covered in spiked undergrowth above which she flew, her white eyes blazing, her red mouth agape with laughter, her black hair whipping in every direction. She was naked except for a heavy bronze girdle about her waist, and thin wisps of cloth covering her legs.

"Morgana!" Bors grimaced and clenched his fists. How dare the whore of Arcadia masquerade as the Lady!

"I dare because the Lady's day is done. And mine is just beginning," she said.

It won't last long, Bors thought.

"You are a fool," she said. "You could have had me, and yet you chose him. You chose death."

Bors clenched his fists. You're damn right I did, he thought.

"So be it," she said. And she bid him to open his eyes.

Bors awoke, his naked body lying on the cold stone. The fire had died and dim sunlight streamed into the room. He could hear the pounding of war drums slow and distant, and the cheer of ten thousand thralls.

Stupid to sleep without your armor, Bors thought to himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid. What if Mordred had attacked during the night? What defense would the soldiers on the wall be, with their

bellies full of the last food Camelot had to offer, their heads dizzy with whatever liquid courage Kay could find for them?

Bors pulled on his shirt and leggings, looking at his fine armor on the ground. It took only fifteen minutes to take off. It would require an hour to put back on. By himself, he had no hope of suiting up by the time the thralls launched their attack. So much for having any decent protection during the...

There was a knock at the door. "Come," Bors said.

Ghyslain entered, wearing a suit of studded leather. "Lord Arthur told me you needed a squire."

Bors looked in disbelief at the young boy. "I thought I told you to stay away from here."

"Lord Arthur said you would say that."

"And did he tell you that I have little patience for insubordinate striplings too eager to die?"

"No. He told me that anybody with nerve enough to sneak through Mordred's army to serve you ought to be given a chance."

Bors exhaled loudly. "Very well. Help me suit up."

Ghyslain nodded and hefted Bors' chest plate.

"No, we'll start with the chain mail, then the leggings, then the greaves. The chest goes on near the end."

"Right," Ghyslain said, setting the chest section down and reaching for Bors' chain shirt.

As he fitted each piece of metal to Bors' muscular frame, Ghyslain shifted under the weight of his own leather jerkin.

"Uncomfortable?" Bors asked.

"I just haven't gotten used to the weight of it yet," Ghyslain answered.

"You never do," Bors said. "But it looks right on you, all the same. Has Kay given you a weapon?"

Ghyslain shook his head. "By the time I'll need a sword, there will be plenty lying about. Until then, I've got my sling," he said, nodding toward a leather pouch hanging at his side.

"Are you any good with that thing?"

Ghyslain finished clasping together Bors' right shoulder assembly. "Doesn't matter. Mordred's soldiers are packed together so tightly out there, I could shoot the other way and still hit something."

Bors smiled at his squire. "Ghyslain, we're going to get along just fine."

When they finished assembling the armor, Ghyslain handed Bors his helmet. Bors took it in his hands and slowly put it on.

"It look like it might be too tight," Ghyslain said.

"If it hurts to put on, then it is the right size," Bors said. "A loose helmet rattles the brains when it takes a knocking." Ignoring the dull, painful thrumming along the top of his skull, Bors flipped his faceplate up and clicked it into place.

Ghyslain held Bors' sword before him in both hands. The boy balanced the sheathed weapon on his open palms, looking upon it like it was a national treasure.

"Does it have a name?" Ghyslain asked as Bors took the weapon and slid it into his belt loop.

"Only one sword in Britannia deserves a name, and our king wields it." Bors drew his sword and examined the blade. "Everything else is mere cutlery."

Ghyslain couldn't take his eyes off the steel, which shone in the morning light, especially along the finely honed edges, and on the inner lip of the blood groove that ran down the middle of the blade. "It's magnificent."

Bors looked for chips and notches along the blade but found none. "It will do," he said, motioning toward the door. "They need us at the wall."

Ghyslain opened the door for Bors and followed him through the castle and to the stables, where Sandalin stood untethered. The horse whinnied and shook his head in Ghyslain's direction.

"He likes you," Bors told Ghyslain. "That's a rare endorsement."

Ghyslain patted Sandalin on his flank. "If we make it to dinner, I'll fetch you some sugar lumps," he said. "How'd that be?"

Sandalin nodded in approval.

The three left the stable and crossed into the nearly deserted city. Ghyslain looked about, taking it all in. "It was dark when I first came through. I never thought to see this place so empty."

"You and me both," Bors said as they passed by a row of homes with nobody in them. "In days past, these doors would have spilled forth with citizen soldiers, armed and ready for war. Now who is left to serve the king?"

"I am," came a reply from within one of the houses. In the last doorway, a lithe young girl appeared, wearing a shirt of mail. On one arm she carried a shield nearly as tall as she was. In the other she carried a heavy spear. Judging by the size of her, it didn't seem like she would have the strength for either, but she hefted them as if they were made from paper. She stepped out of the doorway and into the sunlight. Ghyslain could not help but gaze upon her.

Fair skin, chestnut hair and green eyes. She shot a glance at Ghyslain and he quickly looked away. No time for this.

From the doorway, the girl's mother reached out in vain to stop her. "Boudicea, no!" she cried. The girl walked away from the house without a backward glance and approached Bors and Ghyslain.

"You have a squire but no shield maiden," she said. "I ask you for the honor."

Bors looked at the girl. She could not have been more than eighteen. Then again, neither was Ghyslain. "Regular children's crusade, this," he said under his breath. "The honor is mine, young warrior. We are headed for the wall."

Boudicea fell in by Ghyslain. Back in the doorway, Boudicea's mother watched her daughter go, and tears streamed from her wrinkled eyes.

"Where is your father?" Bors asked.

"Camlann," she said.

"Then he died a hero's death," Ghyslain said.

Boudicea glanced at him with a look on her face like she had swallowed something unpleasant. "That's one way of looking at it."

A few minutes later, the trio passed through the last of the city's deserted districts and arrived at the plaza before the wall. The bodies laid out in formation the day before were now gone, moved by Kay's men to someplace else. Maybe to the tombs below the city, Bors thought, so they might have a decent burial. Or maybe they were thrown in a heap and burned. There was hardly time for formalities.

Hundreds of men-at-arms lined the walls, bustled in the plaza with weapons and supplies, and manned the siege engines both on the towers and in the plaza itself. Light catapults and ballistas took up most of the space on the battlement landings and tower tops, and in the plaza stood two giant hedgehogs, javelin throwers that could fire a hundred missiles at a time. These were for when the gate was breached, to give the first invaders a proper welcome to the city.

Bors surveyed the scene with a little gladness. There seemed to be many more soldiers out and about today than yesterday. And these devilish siege engines would exact a heavy toll on the enemy, no doubt. Still, there were none of the colorfully armored knights of the Round Table to be seen, and that was the grim tid-ing that tempered any hope. The men gathered for Camelot's last

defense would fight bravely, but they would be no match for Mordred's horde, and they knew it. As Bors watched soldiers pass by, he could see in their eyes that they had accepted their fate. Some resolved to take as many thralls with them as they could. Others looked like they were waiting for something inevitable to happen. Something awful.

Kay crossed the plaza and waved at Bors. "I see you've recruited two more for the cause," he said with a grin. He gestured at the plaza and its soldiers. "What do you think?"

Bors nodded to himself. "I think it will show Mordred the price of treachery. Your warriors will do us credit, Kay."

The battered steward of Camelot's eyes wrinkled as he smiled. "Thank you Bors. But I meant what you thought of our chances."

"Oh, that." Bors looked at the defenders, then out over the wall, where the enemies beyond the gate had raised an unholy clamor of gruesome chanting, war drums and the occasional blast from a high-pitched set of pipes. Slowly, the noise was coming forward as the army strolled across the green, knowing that there was little the defenders of Camelot could do to stop them just yet.

"I think we'll be fine, Kay."

"And victory?"

"It won't be easily earned, you know," Bors said. "But it is our to take."

"I needed to hear that, Bors. That even now, you had not given up."

"No, friend. I'm too thick to know how."

Kay laughed. "You and I both. Where is Arthur?"

"He will come when he is needed. But until then, let us do what we can to make his presence unnecessary, eh?"

Over the wall, the noise of Mordred's front line raised their war cry, and a group of screaming pipes blared through the noise. The chaos of it all made a few of the soldiers on the wall shift nervously on their feet. A few more looked amongst themselves, muttering. Bors could tell what they were saying without hearing it. What are our chances? We're all dead! What is your escape route?

This would not do. This would not do at all.

"Any advice, sire?" Ghyslain said as he climbed on a nearby tower section that had fallen into the plaza from earlier fighting. He could just barely see over the wall, and the sight of the Enemy made his eyes go wide.

"Fight hard. Don't run. Don't die," Boudicea said, not looking at him.

"Listen to her," Bors said thumbing toward Boudicea.

The advancing army grew even louder. Some of the defenders clapped their heads to their hands, as if they could somehow muffle their ears through their helmets. Bors could feel the lower registers of the clamor vibrating his bones. If Mordred kept this up long enough, Camelot's walls would crash down on their own.

The enemy was still a quarter-mile from the gate, but their fury filled the air. Bors frowned and spurred Sandalin to the gate where he raised his sword and shouted with all his might. His cry spread out from him, pushing back the enemy's noise as long as he could keep it going. One by one, the city's defenders heard him and joined in his battle call. If Camelot was to die, it would die screaming glorious thunder in the face of its destroyers, and it would be good.

Soon the shrieks of the enemy were replaced by a blazing hymn of courage, the cry of Britannia's own and the pride of Camelot. The sickly grass beyond the wall began to ripple and wave as if in a wind. Mordred's front line faltered and held in place, with the rear lines stumbling into the ones before them. Taskmasters raised their whips against their sections trying to restore order, and the sight of it only made Bors shout even louder. He could feel his blood pounding in his head, pulsing through his neck, filling his muscles with strength. He could feel his spirit radiating out and piercing the enemy like spears, and he could feel his comrades doing the same.

Another voice joined them from above, a pure thing, one with more purity and power in the slightest whisper than the entire plaza had risen with their rage. Bors held up his hand to cease the call, but it was not needed. That single cry in the midst of it all was enough for every voice in Camelot to fall silent. Arthur had spoken.

Bors turned to see him riding through the plaza on a white charger with a golden mane. He was in his armor with his crown on his head and his shield on his arm. Excalibur hung by his side, and the king rested his hand on its pommel.

Arthur rode to the gatemaster. "Open it," he said.

"Let me come with you!" Bors said.

"No. You stay here," said the king without a backward glance as he crossed the extending drawbridge and onto the lawn before the city.

Arthur rode slowly across the lawn while the roiling formation of Mordred's army tried to compose itself. Finally, Arthur closed

half the distance between the wall and Mordred's front line and halted. He drew Excalibur and held it before him, pointing it at the enemy. The morning sun shone off its blade.

"Who are you to challenge the authority of Camelot?" Arthur said, his voice ringing out to everybody within eyeshot of the scene. To Bors, it felt like the king had said it directly into his skull. "Who are you to presume its fall?"

The king moved his horse a step forward, and Mordred's forces took a step back.

"What are you, but thieves and murderers who have slain my people and driven them from their homes?" he said, his voice growing in volume with every word. He was a gathering storm preparing to burst, and all would scatter before it.

Bors could scarcely contain himself. This was the Arthur for whom he had fought, not that sad, broken man from the day before. Where was this at Camlann?

"You have all raised arms against your king for the whore of Arcadia." Arthur rode ahead a length, causing no small disruption among the thralls before him. "So let's have it, you dogs! Now, before your courage flees! Stand before the Lion of Britannia and see what fate awaits you!"

The thralls turned to run, but another voice, one dark and malevolent, rang across the field and broke Arthur's spell. "You talk too much, father," Mordred said, somewhere within the ranks.

"Show yourself!" Arthur commanded.

Faster than flight, an arrow pierced Arthur's neck where it joined his right shoulder. It went right through Arthur's armor and sunk into his flesh halfway up to the black feathers tipping its end. Another arrow flew into the heart of Arthur's horse, felling the great beast and throwing Arthur's body to the earth.

And like that, all hell broke loose.

The thralls broke into a frenzied run, all wanting to be the first to put a knife into the fallen king. Sandalin needed no spurring. He bolted across the drawbridge with Bors holding on tight, sword in hand. The horse raced faster than it ever had, its hooves pounding the earth and leaving divots as it flew. The ground blurred as Sandalin rode straight for the king, beating the Enemy to him by three seconds. Bors leapt from his saddle as Sandalin skidded to a stop by Arthur. With a single motion, Bors grabbed his king by the hard neckline of his breastplate and heaved him over the horse's back. In a flash, Sandalin was on his way back to the wall. Black arrows slashed through the air in pursuit, but Sandalin cut

left and right as he went, sidestepping the wicked darts that sank into the earth.

Bors hewed into the crowd of thralls around him. They scrambled to kill the knight of Arthur among them, but Bors was faster, stronger. Each stroke of his sword cut through the ranks, and within moments, a pile of dead had begun to build up around him.

From the crowd, one of the whip-bearing taskmasters emerged, carrying a curved axe in his other hand. He was a beast of a man, half again as tall and broad as Bors, his body a mass of deeply cut muscles. Grinning a riot of crooked teeth, the taskmaster pushed some thralls aside and kicked a few bodies out of his way so he could square off against Bors.

Bors watched him approach, never stopping his slaughter of the grunts around him. Swinging behind him without looking, he parried the blow of one swordsman, deflecting the blade and driving it into the heart of another. He moved backward half a step for an enemy spear thrust to pass before his chest by an inch and into the face of a comrade. Bors beheaded the spearman with a single, arcing swing. By the time the headless body hit the dirt, the taskmaster stood before Bors, casting a shadow over him.

The taskmaster lashed his whip around Bors' neck, straining to pull him in close, to finish him off. Bors charged the taskmaster with two big steps, creating some slack on the whip. The taskmaster brought his axe down, but Bors was already too close to for the strike to connect, and the haft broke against Bors' armored shoulder. Bors drove his sword into the chest of the taskmaster, who squeaked a little when the blade first entered. Bors slammed the pommel with his free hand, and what breath the taskmaster had left exited in a high-pitched wheeze as Bors sunk his sword into him up to the hilt.

The taskmaster fell to his knees, and as he did, Bors pulled his sword out with enough speed to kill another thrall on the backswing. Dumbstruck for a moment by the spectacle of their lieutenant's slaughter, none of surrounding thralls were ready for the fury Bors visited upon them, and moments later, another half-dozen of them met similar ends, dropping to the earth in pieces.

Without thinking, he put up his right hand and caught a black arrow that had been directed at his head. Time slowed, and Bors looked over the heads of the thousands of thralls he had yet to kill. Far in the back, apart from the fighting, rode Mordred on his charger, an ebony bow in hand. Bors drove the arrow he held into

the throat of an oncoming thrall before he shook his head at the son of Morgana: you won't get me that easily.

Sandalin returned to the fray, bowling through thralls like they were dolls. Bors took a second to finish off a pair of soldiers before he stepped on the growing pile of bodies around him and jumped back into his saddle. He slashed another arrow from Mordred out of the air with a backhanded stroke and turned his focus back toward Camelot as Sandalin took to speed.

Mordred's speed with the bow was at least equal to Bors' with the sword, and a volley of arrows chased Bors and Sandalin all the way across the gate. As they re-entered Camelot, Mordred's arrows cracked whatever stone they hit against, sinking into them like they were wood.

The scene in the plaza was a grim one. Kay and his soldiers met Bors with looks of blank confusion. Arthur had been grievously wounded and never even crossed swords with the enemy. How were they to prevail now?

Bors looked around, seeing only Kay, maybe a hundred soldiers-the others must have fled when they saw their king fall-and his own two, Ghyslain and Boudicea. Hell with this, he thought. I'm winning this damn thing.

Bors wheeled Sandalin about and shouted at the remaining troops. "What's wrong, lads? There's only a million of them!" A dim chuckle rippled across the crowd, and then a laugh.

Another arrow came through the air, piercing through the back of Bors' sword hand and going through the other side. Bors dropped his sword, cursing. He looked back over his shoulder and through the gate, where the thralls' front line was running full tilt for the wall, trampling underfoot the scores of comrades Bors had slain. Mordred was among them, holding high his bow, looking straight at Bors.

Out of nowhere, a stone struck Mordred in the head, shattering his helmet and blinding his left eye. The black knight fell backwards, off his horse and into the very heart of his horde. In a second, he was on his feet once more, his ruined eye gouting orange sparks, the fire of Arcadia.

Bors looked to his side, and Ghyslain was fitting another stone bullet into his sling. "Mind your hand," Ghyslain said.

Bors winced as he pulled the arrow out and threw it aside. "It's just a small hole."

"Too bad Mordred can't say the same about his, eh?"

The boy had an energy crackling across his arm that Bors

had never seen before. He figured Ghyslain had never felt it before, either.

Mordred put his hand over his eye and roared in pain. He screamed something in an alien language to his thralls and they resumed their run to Camelot as he mounted his horse and retreated to the back ranks.

The gateman began retracting the bridge but Bors stopped him. "Let them come," he said.

Ghyslain fired off bullets as fast as he could sling them, killing a thrall with every throw. The stone shot would shatter whatever armor it touched, exploding into the soft bodies underneath. As he fired, he picked up small pieces of rubble to use as ammunition. Given the state of the plaza, he could sling all day long.

The bowmen on the walls followed suit, emptying their quivers into the advancing soldiers. It was nearly impossible to miss, the enemy was so thickly arrayed against them. As the archers fired, their young fletchers ran to and from the wall, bringing fresh batches of arrows and spare bowstrings. Bors marveled at how well most of these farmers were handling themselves. Most had run, sure, but there would always be those in any crowd with the strength to stand and fight, come what may. Perhaps it was best this way; the ones who ran would never have lasted.

Boudicea appeared by Bors' side, spear at the ready. "Let's hold the gate," she said, but Bors put a hand on her shoulder to restrain her.

"Not yet."

"But..."

"But nothing, Boudicea. Trust me."

Bors ordered the archers from the walls once they had run out of arrows and had the hedgehogs rolled into position within the gates. The siege engineers cranked up the machines as tightly as they would go, double-checking to see that each of the firing grooves had been loaded. Then they sat behind their weapons, nervously waiting for Bors to give them the order to fire.

For as much carnage Bors and the defenders had visited upon Mordred's thralls, the Enemy still came on in a huge black wave. Would nothing stop them?

"Hold," Bors said to the engineers, who were asking for permission to let fly. "Hold..."

The thralls were at the bridge...

"Hold."

...crossing it...

"Hold!"

...entering the gate...

"NOW!"

The engineers depressed their triggers and the hedgehogs let fly their deadly hail. The machines' massive bowstrings, each layered on top of each other, fired dozens of arrows in turn, sending volley after volley into the thralls, who were too close and too tightly packed to do anything other than to get hit. By the time the first hedgehog was empty, dead thralls covered the ground of the gatehouse and the bridge. Their bodies bobbed in the moat, reddening the water. Those who had been spared the barrage had only a second or two to appreciate it before the second hedgehog rolled into view.

"NOW!"

They never stood a chance. Dying by the drove, they panicked and broke rank as they fled, only to earn arrows in the back. Firing away, the hedgehog slaughtered the traitors of Britannia, repaying them in kind for the treachery they showed at Camlann, and for worshipping the villain who shot the king.

The last arrows flew and the hedgehog went still. For a second, there was silence within the courtyard, and then a victory cry went up among the defenders. Those looking over the wall or through the gate saw the remaining thralls pulling back from the city in a rout. Far across the field stood Mordred's reserves as well as Mordred himself. They would come, Bors thought, but not quite yet.

"Boudicea, you stay here with Ghyslain," Bors said. "I must attend to the king."

"I will not fail you," Boudicea said. "Your squire is handy with the sling," she added, looking at Ghyslain.

"He's got his uses," Bors said. "Help Kay reload those hedgehogs. We'll have more use for them before the day is through."

Across the plaza, Kay commanded the city's siege engines. Behind the outer wall, catapults pitched huge chunks of stone that crushed a dozen or more of the retreating thralls with each shot. A mighty trebuchet near the center of town hurled a ten-ton stone that drove thirty thralls into the ground as that great rock tumbled across the field, chasing the enemy.

Bors rode to Kay. "Where's Arthur?" he shouted. Kay pointed to a huge fountain in the plaza that was no longer spouting water, but had been rotated off its base, revealing a large staircase leading down below the street and into the catacombs that ran underneath the city.

"Bedevere took him to the tomb," Kay said. He sounded like something inside of him had died.

So it's that bad, Bors thought, and dashed down the stairs into the wide, stone hallway underneath. The air was damp and cool, and Bors' metallic footsteps echoed sharply as he ran.

He ignored the many turnoffs left and right, heading down the correct forks each time he needed to, and finally doubling back at a tricky junction designed to confound casual intruders. Bors hit the dead end and kicked the stone in the lower left corner of the wall with his toe. It depressed easily and the wall rotated ninety degrees, allowing him passage on either side of it.

Past the wall, the corridor changed. This was part of the old city that was here for eons before Camelot, where the keepers of the old ways, and the ways before that, once worked their weird magic. Here they nursed Britannia through its infancy, and prepared it for the wild years that would follow.

The walls and ceiling were lined with tens of thousands of skulls, paying grim testament both to the warlike legacies of the ancients as well as the sheer weight of history they left behind. It must have taken millennia to gather bones in such numbers, Bors thought, and wherever he looked, he wondered what such a tribute was honoring. Perhaps best not to ask.

Through the passage of skulls, Bors came to the grand tomb, a room not unlike the chamber of the Round Table, except this formed a huge dome lined with a matrix of slots each built to accept a single coffin. Half of the spots in this hive of the dead had already been filled. Most others were empty, though there were small sections that had collapsed and could not be used.

In the center of the chamber, Bedevere cradled the Arthur in his arms, sobbing while the fallen king lay still, breathing quick, shallow breaths.

Bors approached both of them. "Bedevere, how is he?" Bedevere kept weeping. Bors grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "Answer me, man!" Bedevere still said nothing, so Bors let go of him, making a grunting sound in his throat.

"Bors," Arthur whispered. Bedevere stopped sobbing and froze, watching the king, hanging on what he would say next.

Bors knelt by the king and leaned his head close to Arthur's mouth so he might better hear him. Arthur gently grasped Bors' hand and forced the handle of Excalibur into it.

"Take the south passage and return this to the Lady," Arthur said slowly. "Throw it into the water."

Bors held Excalibur before him and the blade quivered as he moved it. He knew he was worthy of wielding such a blade. He could take this fine weapon to the gate of the city and drive back Mordred and his legions. He could rout them all and give Arthur's era one more morning in the sun...

Bors put the sword back in Arthur's hand just as gently as it had been placed in his own. "Sire, you will wield it again this day."

"Bors, listen to me..."

"Sire, Kay needs me at the gate, but I will return," He whispered before gritting his teeth and regaining what composure he could. "I will return."

Bors turned to leave the chamber and stared daggers into Bedevere. "Take care of him," he said.

By the time he reached the plaza entrance, Bors could hear the fighting at the gate, and it sounded like things were going poorly. The blast of Mordred's war pipes rang too closely, the vibrations of the drums pounded through the stone, even down here. The enemy had breached the gate.

Bors leapt from the crypt, striking out on either side of him as he did, cleaving two thralls into halves. The plaza was thick with black-clad soldiers, overwhelming the few remaining defenders. The thralls seemed to not notice him among them, until he put his sword to work once more, and then he was all they could pay attention to.

In a single, circular stroke, Bors flattened three soldiers, their bodies tossed backwards by the force of his blow. Thralls came in from every angle, but in a flash of steel, Bors knocked them all aside. Spears, swords, flails and axes; none were a match for him, and in that second after their attacks faltered, he struck. Their blood sprayed on his armor, slicking off its enameled surface. Their dying screams faded to silence as Bors cast them out of his mind. His senses sharpened beyond the clamor of the scene and hunted for the details that mattered most to him. Through the press, he could hear Ghyslain rallying some troops in a desperate attempt to keep any more thralls from crossing the bridge. Against a far wall, Kay hacked his way across the plaza, wreaking

as much damage among the enemy as Bors himself. Seeing Arthur shot like a dog would require a proper response of valor and courage, and by the furies, Kay was going to give it to them.

Both hedgehogs were out of action. One was aflame, its chief engineer still trapped in the firing chair. The other was overrun with thralls, who had killed the crew and were smashing the machine to bits.

But it was in the center of the plaza where Bors' attention was drawn, where Boudicea stood alone, surrounded by slain defenders, and surrounded even more by the ring of thralls who had isolated her and were moving in for the kill.

Boudicea noticed nothing around her except the angles of her opponents' attacks, the postures of their bodies, the hundred different speeds at which everything was moving. Just as Bors had deflected so many weapons, Boudicea did it with greater grace and speed. Every weapon she turned aside, she directed into the body of a foe. Every thrust she dodged she exploited to keep her attackers off-balance. And every strike she delivered led into another one, her spear-blade whipping through armor, flesh and bone, the steel shaft arcing into bodies and smashing them aside.

Bors drove his sword under the chin of the final thrall facing Boudicea and thrust up through the traitor's skull. He withdrew his blade, letting the body slump to the ground just as Boudicea stopped herself from attacking Bors by mistake. She was breathing hard, and her mail was covered in blood and the marks of a dozen light contacts, but she was fine. Bors smiled at her and she returned the gesture. She was more than fine. She was meant for this.

Boudicea looked around at the nearly empty plaza. "Is that all?" she asked.

"For now," Bors said as he watched Kay drive his sword into a wounded thrall on the ground. Close by, Ghyslain cornered three thralls who dropped their weapons and begged for mercy, but the slinger would grant them none. He drove a pike into the heart of the first, and put the others to their swords just as easily.

Boudicea saw the killing and started to dash over, to punish them for their ruthlessness, but Bors put his arm before her. "Not today."

She looked at him, a little sad. "If not today, then when?"

Bors thought for a second as Kay and Ghyslain finished their slaughter. He had no answer for her.

Ghyslain stepped over the thralls and defenders littering the

plaza. Where there was space enough to walk, blood ran along the edges of the cobbles, puddling here and there. The entire place had a salty, heavy smell to it. Ghyslain made it to the gatehouse and pulled the gatekeeper off the bridge controls. He had died at his post, his head bashed in.

Ghyslain worked the crank, withdrawing the bridge at last, watching the bodies stacked upon it slowly sliding off into the moat, which was itself nearly full with the carcasses of Mordred's own. In the distance, there still stood a final line of soldiers, their eyes ablaze with orange fire. True Arcadians.

"Something wicked falls upon us," Bors said to Boudicea.

"Let them come!" the shield maiden shouted. "The knights of Camelot are ready for them!"

She raised her spear and cried out to the sky, and across the plaza, Kay and Ghyslain and the handful of surviving defenders watched with awe as the youngest of them displayed the same kind of righteous fury Arthur had used to cast Mordred's entire army into disarray.

She has the courage of a thousand lions, Bors thought, and was every bit as deserving of a seat at the Round Table as that idiot Bedevere. Not since Lancelot had there...

Bors cast that half-formed notion from his mind. He could not think of fallen heroes and past glories. Lancelot was gone, as was every other hero of the old days, but now was the time to see what their work had sown in the hearts and arms of Britannia. The valiant few like Boudicea and Ghyslain who would fight this day proved that Camelot might fall, but its spirit would never fail.

A young page pulled at Bors' belt. The knight looked down at the boy, who was himself covered in blood from the melee and held a notched sword. The lad pointed to the passage leading to the hall of skulls. Bedevere had been calling for him, and he had to go once more.

Bors dashed along the skulls with such speed he could see rows of bony faces blend into each other. When he arrived by Arthur's side, the king's face was ashen and his eyes had rolled upward. Weakly, he was holding Excalibur an inch off his chest, whispering "B-Bors..."

"I am here," he said gently as he took Arthur's head in his hands.

"The sword," Arthur whispered. "The Lady calls for it."

Bors looked at Arthur. He shook his head, no.

"Please," Arthur gasped. "The south passage."

Bors could say nothing. He nodded, took Excalibur and headed for the door.

"What should I do?" said Bedevere.

"They are coming," Bors said without looking back. "And they will pour into this place. When they do, make the king remember why he put his life in your hands."

The south passage ran under the entirety of Camelot, alongside an underground river that fed the city with its seemingly endless supply of cool, fresh water. The ledges on either side of the waterway were worn smooth by thousands of years of use, by the soldiers and workers of Camelot, by the ancients before them, and by the spirits of Britannia before them. The passage was carved from the very bones of the world, and Bors could feel its solemn, immortal power coursing underneath his feet.

Under the center of the city, directly beneath Arthur's throne room, the river widened into a circular lake. The air was chillier here, and the water dark as night. Bors looked upon the still water and then upward to the roof of the cavern, where beyond, on the surface, he would find in Arthur's chamber the stone from which he had first drawn Excalibur. The stories all had Arthur's father, Uther, as the one who drove the blade into the rock when his enemies set upon him so many years ago. But Bors knew different, for he was there when Merlin and Arthur both told him that none but the Lady knew where the sword came from or how it came to stand embedded in the ancient stone. They only knew that the sword was the Lady's alone to give, and that her gift of it to Arthur signaled the greatness of things to come.

But all such gifts must one day be returned, and as Arthur's strength failed, so did his connection with the Lady's blade. Bors knew only too well that the Lady took back what was hers one way or the other, and far better to return such treasures before she came calling for them. Such was the way of ancient spirits, vanishing, though they were, from the world of men.

Bors walked to the lake's edge, and his boot broke the surface of the water, sending slow ripples across its glassy face. He could hear the sounds of the lapping shore echo softly against the cavern walls. He could feel his heart beating. And then he saw it.

In the center of the lake, a slender arm, clad in mail finer than silk, extended from the water. The Lady's fingers parted slightly, as if the sword were already resting in her hand.

Bors brought his arm back to throw Excalibur, and tears ran from his eyes. So this was how it was all supposed to end?

He sheathed the sword and bowed toward the Lady. "He needs it still," he whispered, unable to bring his eyes upward. He could not bear to look upon her while denying the wishes of both her and his king. He expected Excalibur to jump from his hands or to scorch his palms, but it did neither. It grew not one ounce in weight. It did not twist from his grasp. It...agreed.

Look up, he heard her sweet, sweet voice say to him. He did.

Her fingers flexed slightly, almost as if she was thinking something over, then her arm disappeared beneath the water, leaving not even a ripple behind.

Go to him, she said in his mind.

Bors grasped Excalibur in his off hand, holding it in the middle of the scabbard, careful not to grasp it by the hilt. He ran back through the south passage, along its stone edges, where the sounds of slaughter were already echoing through the ancient tunnel before him.

Around the far bend, he saw Boudicea running toward him with Arthur slung over her shoulder, her spear still in hand. "Go back!" Boudicea shouted. "Go back!"

"What of the others!"

Boudicea reached Bors after another few footsteps. Hauling the king on her little frame was taking its toll, but she wasn't about to let his body drop. Arthur was not moving much, but he did cough a little, and dark blood dripped from his mouth and nose. He lived still.

"All dead," she said. "Bedevere killed himself back in the place with the skulls. Kay led a charge out of the gate and disappeared amongst the enemy. I didn't see what became of Ghyslain and the others..."

That was when Bors noticed she was shaking.

"Let me carry him," Bors said. Boudicea answered him with a steely look, and her hand gripped her spear even tighter.

"There were just a handful of us," she said, "but we were holding the gate and plaza."

"Then what?"

"Then he came."

"Mordred?" Bors asked.

Boudicea nodded as she failed to find the right words. He could not be stopped.

Bors could hear the sound of thralls entering the underground passage, their voices and rattling of armor and weapons echoing across the long stone tunnels. They would be here in minutes.

"What power has Morgana wrought upon us?" Bors asked quietly, more to himself than to his young counterpart.

"The darkness of the world," Boudicea answered.

Excalibur vibrated just a little in Bors' hand. He looked at Arthur, who was listening as he passed in and out of consciousness. "Set me down," he said. Boudicea obeyed and gently laid the king on the cool, damp stone of the tunnel.

Arthur coughed blood before drawing a long, slow breath. "Bors, the Enemy is upon us. Your king commands you to return Excalibur to the Lady. It must go back to her," Arthur said. "Why do you hesitate, my friend?" He rolled his head to look at Bors, and his eyes focused on him, showing one last moment of clarity before they would fog over forever.

Bors could feel the power of Excalibur glowing into his hand. He felt the warmth of it, the glory of that sovereign steel, the majesty of everything this instrument could represent. The rise of light from darkness. The creation of law from chaos. The triumph of good over evil.

It was all of these things, but it was also the same dark razor that clove Lancelot's head from his shoulders, that led the unjust slaughter of Rome, and committed so many other crimes by Arthur, his father, and every other ruler who wielded the sword before them.

Arthur's final words echoed in Bors' head. Who was he to defy the will of his king, of the Lady and of the sword of swords?

Time to find out, Bors thought, and he slung the sword across his back before drawing his own to do battle one final time on behalf of king and country.

Boudicea put her head to Arthur's chest. "His breath is failing."

Bors knelt by his fallen friend and ran his fingers over Arthur's eyes, closing them. He kissed him on the forehead and tears of his own splashed on the king's face. "I will see you yet again, my lord. May Avalon be kind to you."

The first of the thralls came into sight far down the tunnel. Even at a distance, their orange eyes glowed brightly in the dimly lit tunnel.

Boudicea glared at Bors. "That sword isn't for you to keep."

"I'm not taking it for myself."

She looked at Bors, the sword and Arthur. She nodded to herself, at last understanding. "Make haste," she said. "I will hold them for as long as I can."

Bors handed her his own bloodied weapon. "You don't have

to," he said. "You could come with me."

She shook her head. "I can't leave him like this."

Bors placed his hand on her shoulder. "You honor Arthur with your courage."

She shook his hand off. "You're wasting time. This will all be for nothing if Mordred gets Excalibur. Now go!"

Bors backed away from Boudicea as she turned and faced the thralls racing down the tunnel. They were running along either side of the river. Like insects, they scuttled along the tunnel's smooth walls and ceiling. They swarmed towards her, leaping over the coursing water, screaming in alien tongues.

She hurled her spear at the mass of them, and it flew like lightning. It pierced the first among the thralls, blasting through its chest, leaving behind a gaping hole from which spewed a fury of orange sparks. But the spear continued on, pinning together another two of Mordred's soldiers.

Bors wanted to stay with her and fight, but remembering her words, he turned and ran. Behind him, he heard Boudicea raise her call once more amid the clash of steel and the howl of dying thralls.

Bors made it to the lake and looked around. There was no other exit from the passage, but the center of the water began to ripple, then swirl. Bors took a running start and leapt over the pool. Time slowed as he hurtled through the air towards the center of the water, where the rippling had turned into a whirlpool. He passed into the center of the vortex, not even touching the watery side of it, falling down and away from the cavern, into the darkness.

The thralls burst into the cavern by the dozens, screaming in frustration as they saw the water spinning into a dark blur, and all of it leading to the vast hole in its center. One of the thrall taskmasters made to leap into the vortex and follow Bors, but the moment his toe touched the water's edge, the spinning stopped as if it had never even begun, and in an instant, the whole lake froze into black ice, as did the river that ran out of it.

The taskmaster roared and raised his axe against the lake that had defied him. He brought the blade down, and its steel shattered against the hard water. Knocked back from the impact of the strike, the taskmaster stared at the broken haft of his weapon in disbelief.

Mordred strode into the cavern, his thralls parting around him to grant him a wide berth. The dark knight's head was wrapped in a swath of cloth to cover his ruined eye. As he reached the wa-

ter, the taskmaster turned to his lord, holding forth his mangled axe. "The water, my lord. It is unbreakable."

Mordred scowled and in a single move, drew his sword and clove the taskmaster's head from his shoulders. The other thralls recoiled from the sight of it, and Mordred whirled in rage. He raised his sword to kill whoever was next to him, but stayed his hand. Instead, he turned back to the lake and hurled his sword at it. The black weapon spun through the air and sunk into the heart of the ice, quivering in place.

Mordred left the lake behind him and returned to where Arthur lay on the stone. Thralls surrounded the body and Boudicea, who stood over it, sword at the ready. She was bloody, battered and barely able to stand. Blood flowed from wounds all across her, but still, she held her ground.

Mordred passed through the crowd and approached Boudicea. He placed his fingers on her forehead and gently pushed her over. She fell back to the stone, sword clattering from her grasp and sliding into the riverbank, where the water had also frozen. Bors' sword slowly spun across the icy surface.

The thralls laughed as Boudicea fell, but as Mordred stood over Arthur, they went quiet. "Bring it to me," he said, and a taskmaster crossed the river to retrieve the weapon. The hooded thrall placed it in Mordred's hand, then backed away.

A thousand orange eyes watched the Prince of Arcadia and the fallen king.

"See you in hell, father," Mordred said, holding Bors' sword high. Then he drove it into Arthur's chest, cracking through his armor, cleaving his heart, and driving into the stone beneath.

A cry went up from the dark army as Arthur's body arched a little, pinioned as it was against the tunnel floor, before it went slack. The sound was like a hundred thunderclaps, like the wrath of time. Amid the clamor, Mordred held up a hand, and the crowd went silent.

Mordred knelt and gently grasped Boudicea's chin, turning her face toward his. "Tell my mother we are victorious," he said to nobody in particular, knowing the whole army would compete for the task.

"My lord," said a taskmaster, gesturing to Boudicea. "What of her?"

Mordred eyed Boudicea's unconscious form. "Bring her with us," he said. "I am Britannia's king now. And I shall make her my queen."

CHAPTER 2

A THOUSAND DAYS

Boudicea opened her eyes, squinting against the sunlight that streamed into her cell. There was only a single, barred window, near the ceiling, but it directly faced the wall where she had been chained for the many long days since her capture.

She did not know much about the place Mordred had taken her. She remembered falling unconscious beneath Camelot, a long time of darkness, and hideous dreams of violation.

She remembered being thrown into this cold, stone room where the only light was a single, dusty beam. There was no cell door, just an open entrance that mocked her with the false promise of freedom, if only she could shake loose her chains. Through the doorway, she could see that she was not alone; there were many other women kept in cells like hers, lining the wall of a vast dungeon chamber. And like her, they spent most of their time clapped in irons with enough chain to move about their cell but not to go through the door. Boudicea tested the chains more than once, but when she noticed the razor-thin runes carved into the wrought-iron, she gave up trying. No sense in trying to match brute strength against enchantment.

On her first night in chains, Mordred paid Boudicea a visit. He was drunk and still in his armor. Leering, he approached her, telling her that she was his special prize. For she had stood before him in battle and did not deserve death. No, he slurred, to defy the Elf King as she did deserved a slower and more gratuitous punishment.

He tore her clothes from her in a mix of lust and fury, shedding his armor as he did. He pressed his cold flesh into hers, telling her that her power would now be his, that he would do

with her as he pleased, and he pleased to do much.

Boudicea's loins burned for hours after he left, and for just as long, she sobbed at how he'd stolen her maidenhood in that grim cell. She could not cast from her head a need to bathe, to scrub away the stain of his evil from her skin. The next few days were fearful ones, as she expected him to return at any time to repeat his crime. Boudicea shivered every time she heard the creaky doors to the prison area open, but it was always somebody else he chose, sometimes torturing them first, sometimes getting right to the ravishing. Sometimes he was drunk and talkative, other times not. Most of her fellow prisoners cried. A few screamed once he left. And a few remained quiet for reasons Boudicea could only guess.

After her initial horror subsided, Boudicea's thoughts turned toward the fear that she was now carrying Mordred's child. The timing was not perfect, but still close enough. But when she bled a month later, she wept with relief.

Another month passed, during which time Boudicea's thoughts turned back to a repeat visit from her captor. Somehow, she could face Mordred's legions without shirking, but the thought of him touching her, of abusing her and then tempering it with sick tenderness made Boudicea shudder. She would rather burn in hot oil than endure it again. But unless a spirit turned her chains into mist, she knew he would come back, and she would have to endure the inevitable.

I will be quiet, she told herself. I will be like the stone of these walls. When he comes for me, I will neither fight nor cower; I will be as a statue while he steals my body, for my spirit he cannot touch. She told herself this every day, when she heard the doors open, and every day the waiting became worse. One hundred days exactly after she awoke in chains, he came back for her.

It was no easier the second time. But she made not a sound. Not a single whimper. It was much to his disappointment, he told her before leaving. Perhaps next time, he said, she would provide him with a bit more sport.

A hundred days later, she would give him that, and more.

He had her turned around to face the wall, as before, her chains drawn in so she could hardly move. As he pressed against her back, whispering vicious things into her ear, she threw her head back, smashing his face. His charmed flesh was like iron, but he still yelped in pain and staggered back from the blow. A bit more sport, indeed. He made her pay for that, though, and she hurt

for days afterward from Mordred's deviant pleasures. They were things she swore she would never speak of. It helped to think of them as things that happened to somebody else.

In the time between visits, she listened to the others as they would all go through what they had to. A few would kick and scream, which was precisely what he wanted. A few others would curse him and yell in defiance, which also was what he wanted. What he didn't want was them to talk to each other, which was made plain enough when a new girl shouted out of the open cells to her neighbors wanting some news. That was when Boudicea knew what she had always suspected, that there were guards unseen here, listening for signs of rebellion. Within the hour, taskmasters came to the new girl's cell and gave her a thousand lashes. Having tasted the whip herself, Boudicea knew the girl must have died within a hundred strokes; the other nine hundred would have flayed the skin from her bones. "Pick up the pieces, we'll give them to the dogs," was the last thing Boudicea heard one of the taskmasters say when the whipping stopped. Everyone else in the cells must have heard or seen it, too, for there was no talking after that.

Mordred's visits to her grew ever more vicious. He expected her to strike out at him, and when she would not, he would call her a coward and punish her anyway. She would close her eyes and try to distance herself from her body, to go to a place where he could not reach. It worked as best as it could, and Mordred knew it. "Say something," he would hiss in her ear. "Say something!"

Five hundred days in, somebody else made the mistake of talking by shouting out a code that could be used to tap messages through the cell walls. Whoever gave that gift paid for it with her life, but Boudicea vowed it would not go unused. She learned to listen most carefully to the sounds of the dungeon, and she could tell when a taskmaster was creeping about and when they were not. At her first opportunity, she tapped a message to the cell on her left: "I am Boudicea. You?" And she waited.

Three days later, her neighbor found the courage to respond. "Kate."

Boudicea and Kate passed messages daily. She was a shepherdess from the Kingdom of Brittany, which was the first land across the Channel to fall to Mordred after Camelot. Kate said that she was captured during the first day of fighting and never learned what happened to the rest of her country. She only knew that she was not the only one taken in irons. The thralls were kill-

ing the soldiers but anybody without a weapon was enslaved and shipped back across the water. Only a few maidens were brought to the dungeon. What happened to the rest of the men, women and children Kate could not say.

Boudicea told Kate everything she knew from the Battle of Camelot: that the thralls were vulnerable to mortal steel, but that the true Arcadians they answered to did not. They were what the thralls seemed to be turning into. She told of the hideous slaughter, of Arthur's death and of her capture. She said nothing of Bors or of Excalibur. That, she trusted to no one but herself.

Mordred's next visit was not as bad as before. It still was not easy, but his wrath seemed a little spent on her. Perhaps he thinks my spirit broken, she thought. The notion of that gave her the strength to make sure that was not the case. But she also had to be honest with herself. She did not know how much longer she could go on like this.

Kate was the same. After he visited Boudicea, he went to Kate the next night, and during that time, he mentioned that she might do him the honor of one day bearing him a son. That immediately turned Kate towards talk of suicide, and she vowed that the moment she felt he had left her with child, she would end both lives, somehow.

The thought of Mordred making her a mother chilled Boudicea, but at the same time, it seemed impossible. He had come to her enough times-and at the right times, too-to have left her with child by now. Could it have been coincidence? She had to know, so she tapped a message to Kate to ask the next cell over if she had been made pregnant yet, and to pass it on. The dungeon's cells were arranged in a huge circle, so Boudicea hoped that somehow the message would eventually come back to her with the sum of what the others all knew. Ninety-nine days later, it did.

The girl on the right side of her cell never gave her name; she was too busy tapping through what she knew between the task-masters' routine checks. Word was Kate was not the only one he'd whispered notions of fatherhood to. Perhaps he sought an heir, some thought. Perhaps he was developing feelings for his stable of slaves. Perhaps he felt the calling that all men did to leave something behind that was beyond his own self.

Whatever that bastard wanted, Boudicea thought, the time had come to use that against him.

It was his seventh visit, and he came to her without saying anything. No beating, no talking. Just the regular business of chaining

her face-first to the wall and preparing her for what she had become all too familiar with. Just as he touched her, she leaned her head back and whispered. "Kiss me."

He paused, unsure.

"Kiss me," she said again.

He loosened her chains and let her face him. His skin had grown whiter, his ears longer, more pointed. His right eye glowed orange; his other was patched over by a plate of silver bolted directly into his skull. His teeth were a row of gleaming points.

So this was why he was so desperate for a son! He was becoming one of...them. And if the rumors passed around the cells were true, they were a spent race, no longer able to make children of their own. Their ancient strength had failed them, and their only hope was to steal the lifeblood of this world to replenish that of their own. Now Mordred was sharing their fate, and had precious little time left to ensure that his own humanity would endure.

Mordred traced the outline of Boudicea's face with his long, thin fingers. She distanced herself from her body once more; it was the only way she could keep from shivering as she opened her mouth to him and encouraged him to take his pleasure rather than to steal it. He stayed with her for more than an hour, sampling her body as never before. This was the worst time, Boudicea thought. There might not be any coming back after this.

Another ninety-nine days passed, and this time, Mordred sent taskmasters to Boudicea's cell with clean water, soap and perfumes. They also brought her fresh clothes and told her to prepare for his visit that night. As she scrubbed the hard filth from her skin and hair, she smiled. Maybe not this time and maybe not the next, but soon he would grow careless, and when he did, she would make sure that he would pay for it. By the Lady, he would pay.

When he came to her, he wore neither armor nor a sword but the purple dress of a courtly noble, though one whose Arcadian fashions sported an outer decadence to match its wearers corruption. She was waiting for him, her skin fair once more, hair soft and combed, spilling about her shoulders. Mordred looked at her for a long time before smiling thinly and sitting on a stool in the far corner of the cell. He waved a finger at her chains, and they unlocked by themselves and fell away. Boudicea rubbed her chafed wrists; even though she had been given an assortment of salves to heal their raw skin, nothing could undo two and a half years of captivity in a day. Still, Boudicea met Mordred's approval, for he

kept taking her in with his eyes as he began to speak.

"When I was a boy, my mother brought me to Arcadia, where I grew to manhood," he said. "But no pleasure of Arcadia, no Elfin maiden or boy could match your splendor." His voice was low and even, somehow reverberating in her skull more than in her ears.

"My lord flatters me," Boudicea said, her eyes darting to the floor.

"The Elf King flatters no one," he said.

She looked at him and traced her collarbone lightly with her fingers. "Touch me."

He took hold of her shoulders and smelled her hair, her cheek, her neck. He felt cold, Boudicea thought, as if drained of blood, though full of strength. Even when he kissed her throat, it felt cool and dry, as if he were not alive at all, but a mockery of the thing he so badly wanted union with.

He kissed her ear. "You will bear me sons," he whispered. "And they will reign immortal over Arcadia and Britannia long after we both have passed."

Boudicea ran her fingers through Mordred's hair. It was like silk, but somehow it was swaying a little, never hanging still. She looked into his orange eye and saw the fires of Arcadia dancing within. She saw the glimmer of an ancient evil that would not relent or be denied. But she also saw something else, a dying spark, an ember of the humanity he'd lost when abandoned to Arcadia so long ago. That fleeting glimmer of Pendragon nobility-grim were the stories that Arthur had been tricked into laying with his sister, and grimmer still when they proved to be true-he had betrayed him and opened his heart before her. He was lonely and he was afraid, and he did not want to abandon his legacy to the unmaking of the world just yet. He had not yet loved, but maybe he had found it here, in this cell, with this vision of British glory before him, yielding in his arms, kissing him deeply and holding him close. Yes, perhaps she was the one he had been looking for all this time.

Boudicea clenched her fingers tight in his hair and in a sharp, savage twist, she wrenched Mordred's head around on the base of his neck. There was the loud cracking of bone, but Boudicea knew better than to be satisfied with that. While his body seized up, she rammed his head into the stone wall, bashing it until Mordred went limp and she let him go. His large frame crumpled into the corner. There was no blood.

Boudicea wasted no time. She took her position by the door and waited those long seconds between when Mordred's anguished cry would echo off the dungeon's stone walls and when the taskmasters would arrive.

The first barreled into the room, shouting, "My lord! What is..." Boudicea caught him with a right cross hard enough for him to twist on his feet before going down.

Boudicea felt that old fire returning to her, something she had not felt since the long day in Camelot. Plenty more of Mordred's kind would join the one she had already disposed of, she thought. There would be no doubt about that.

She looked in Kate's cell and saw a scrawny, filthy girl chained to the wall. She could have been no older than sixteen. Boudicea approached her, and Kate flinched.

"It's okay, Kate. I'm Boudicea. We're getting out of here."

Kate shook her head. "No! Mordred will find us! He will punish us!"

"Mordred's dead."

"You don't understand," Kate said. "He will come back. And when he does, we will all suffer for what you did."

Across the dungeon block, some of the other prisoners were shrieking in mad delight that one of their own had dealt their captors such a terrible blow. Others were silent, watching Boudicea with looks of desperate admiration on their faces. But like Kate, many of them cried for her to go back to her cell, await more guards and beg for mercy for what she had done.

Boudicea backed away from Kate, out of her cell. "I'm sorry," she said before running to the head of the dungeon block and its only door. She pulled the heavy door open, but it was so heavy it took both hands and all of her weight just for it to creak ajar slowly.

When she let go of the pull ring, she saw a pair of Arcadian knights standing in the archway. Their heavy, black armor seemed to absorb what little light there was in the room.

Boudicea kicked the first knight in the chest, throwing him back against his fellow, and both collapsed on the stairs. Boudicea looked at her foe for a second; that kick would have caved in the chestplate of any normal armor, but instead, it nearly broke her shin and ankle. She clenched her fist for a follow-up shot on the leader, but held off. Save your strength, she told herself, and get clear of this place. You can have your revenge later.

Dashing up the stairs, Boudicea could hear her fallen oppo-

nents scrambling to their feet to give chase. If they were as fast as they were strong, this was going to be a tough run.

The top of the staircase opened to a torture chamber at least as large as the dungeon below. Here there stood stretching racks, iron maidens, pressing boards filled the room, along with a few sinister-looking devices Boudicea guessed had to be of Arcadian make. Every machine was occupied by men, women and children, all in some stage of torment. Most of them were bleeding. A few had broken arms or legs held at unnatural angles. Some were missing patches of skin. One woman had a black hole where one of her eyes should have been. A small boy, no more than eight or nine, was having his tongue cut out by a pair of taskmasters; one held the tongs, the other worked the knife.

As Boudicea's mind grappled with the horror of the scene, the sounds of anguish and the smell of the room spurred her to action. She grabbed a pair of long, thin knives from a nearby table and threw them at the taskmasters just as they heard her enter the room. One took a hit in the neck. The other in the left eye. They both sunk to the floor with a groan, thin streams of orange light spilling out of their wounds.

Boudicea neared the boy's torture rack and saw what the taskmasters' bodies had hidden from view. They had cut him in half at the waist and somehow healed the wound so he might live long enough to provide further sport.

"Kill us," she heard the eyeless woman say. An old man whose arms and legs were all broken echoed the request. "Kill us, please."

"Before more come," said a woman Boudicea's age who had been strapped to a table and had Mordred's name carved out of her flesh in a dozen different places.

Boudicea wept silently as she did what was asked of her, hoping that someday she might forget this awful moment, but knowing that she never would.

She stepped onto the tower top and watched as pale, violet clouds traced across a sallow sky. The tower stone itself was black and seamless, as if it had been carved from a single column of stone. As she walked to the tower's balcony, she looked at the dark city that spread out into the distance all around her. For miles in every direction, alien buildings covered the ground, spiking the air with long, thin spires. A massive dome lay in the middle of the city, though she could hardly tell how far away it was or big it might be, so confused was her sense of perspective. Her mind told her all of Camelot could have fit inside that single structure, and

that the strange coliseums, plazas, arches and temples throughout the landscape could all have done as much.

Far below, a shimmering doorway opened in one of the vast plazas, and through it, Boudicea could see the familiar sight of home, of green grass, oak trees, and a town of stone in the distance. An army of Elves-or were they human thralls? Or did it even matter any longer?-walked through the portal into the city, bringing with them a line of prisoners chained together. The procession went on for a quarter of an hour as the townsfolk were herded through the portal and led deep into the city, where they disappeared into one of the many side streets that wound between the tall buildings. That was when Boudicea realized that almost all of the slaves were children, with a few women among them. Boudicea's eyes filled with tears.

"You will never see anything more beautiful than this," Mordred said, behind her.

Boudicea spun to see the Elf King standing there, adjusting his head with his hands. He twisted his head back into place with a final adjustment, to the sound of cracking knuckles. How did he get here? How was he still alive?

"I trusted you," he said. "Yet still you run from me."

Boudicea backed against the balcony, but she knew she was outdone.

Mordred nodded to the scene of mass slavery below. "All things come at a cost, this place more than any other. They will be our sons and daughters. They will love me as their father."

Boudicea breathed in through her nose to try to calm herself. "And what of Britannia?"

"You never left it." Mordred said to her, the orange glow in his eye brightening. "This is Camelot."

She looked at the city again, as if for the first time, wondering how such a place could have been built in so short a time, how the skies of her home had been stained to an Arcadian hue, how...

She slumped to the floor of the tower top and closed her eyes. She wanted to vomit. She wanted to die. She felt her strength drain away from her.

Mordred lifted her back to her feet with surprising tenderness. But his grip was firm, too, and she knew there would be no breaking it. Not now. And soon enough, she would feel him burning inside her, taking his vengeance. She would live to see the morning, and she would wish she had not.

"Now, my dear," he said as he walked her back down the stairs, "we have unfinished business, you and I."

Somewhere in the sweet green evening, in the Garden of Souls, the Lady slept amid white arches and between pools of endless water. Her watchful eyes closed upon her domain, and the troubles of men became as dreams to her, distant figments of a dark and troubled imagination. Her hair danced in the breeze no more, her breath hardly enough to maintain the plants around her.

So she had been since Bors stole what was rightfully hers. When she realized he meant not to give it back, she thought to punish the renegade and reclaim the sword of swords herself. But there was a simple purity to him, the same glimmer she had seen when he came for the Blood Cup some time before. Then, she had thought to grant him a kindness and tell him he could not have the Sangreal, rather than simply letting him search in vain. As Camelot fell, she granted him the chance to carry out his fool's errand with the sword. Maybe, just maybe, Bors had it in him to sustain the hope that Morgana and her spawn might yet be turned back from the earth by the courage of men and the steel of the immortal. If Bors could not do that, then nobody else could.

That had been almost a thousand days ago, and without the sword, she fell to sleeping, knowing she would need her strength. She had foreseen all that happened until Bors refused to return Excalibur; after that, her visions yielded no secrets, and for the first time, she was as blind to the future as the mortals she watched over. Bors had changed everything with one simple act, and it had less to do with the sword than it did with a quiet moment inside his head, when he stood on the edge of an era, between what his king told him to do and what he knew he had to do. In a thousand other times, in a thousand other worlds, he might have obeyed his king. But that day, he served the ideal that Arthur had forgotten, and he never lost hope.

Even sleeping, the Lady managed a certain warmth in her heart. Bors had given her that.

Now, she slipped ever deeper into the green oblivion as the majesty of her garden slowly drew in around her, fading at the edges and dissolving into the darkness of the void. The souls who

remembered her were few; those that lent their strength to her even fewer and declining by the day. Such had it been in the final days of Camelot, but Morgana's reign over Britannia sped the process. Now there were no longer any believers in Britannia at all. They had either died, given up the faith, or had been stolen away to Arcadia, beyond her reach.

So it would be, she thought. Even the immortal have their death days, and so hers would come before too much longer...

...what's this?

Her eyes slowly opened and took in the pure light of the garden. She sat up just as slowly, pulling herself from the warm marble on which she laid.

A glimmer, a twinge. A quiet voice calling to her through the haze of the sweet green evening.

Help me, it said.

She shivered; how long had it been since she received the call?

Please help me, it said again. Please, please help me.

With each moment, her old strength returned, and a blaze of color returned to the Garden as plants bloomed once more and spread their broad leaves.

She stood from her resting bed, covered in the dead leaves of the fall, and a fresh breeze rolled in, sweeping them away, past the edges of the Garden. She walked through her greenery, soft grass springing to new life beneath her every footstep.

She came to a stone pool and waved her hand over it, clearing the mist that hovered over the water. On the surface, the image of her speaker shimmered into vision.

Through the pool, she saw her lone follower, the girl Boudicea, lying on the stone floor of her cell, naked and defiled. Her fair skin was covered with fresh wounds-bruises, scratches, bite marks. The girl shuddered as she sobbed once, twice, then stopped and sat up against one of the cold, damp walls. She breathed deeply, finding some source of strength that her torment had not yet exhausted.

I will do whatever you ask of me, she said into the air, her voice ringing through the veil between this world and the Garden, and singing in the Lady's ears.

The Lady parted her lips and whispered something Boudicea could never have heard with her ears, but felt in her head just the same. "Take heart, my child, for I have not forsaken you."

Through the pool, she could see Boudicea's eyes widen as she realized what she had just heard. The wretched prisoner she was

a moment before vanished; a defeated warrior, still proud, now held her place.

The Lady studied Boudicea's fine features, her rare blend of grace and power. In a different age, she might have been the warrior queen of all Britannia and mother of its valor. But now she would have a different role to play, surely. One with strength such as hers could not go unused. But for what purpose?

The Lady slowly, softly, ran her fingers along the surface of the water, tracing them along Boudicea's frame. Through the vision, Boudicea shivered as if chilled. Her cheeks reddened, and when she gasped in surprise, a small puff of breath escaped her mouth.

She is fertile, the Lady thought. Yet she carries his unsown seed within her.

She gently placed her fingers within the image of Boudicea's abdomen. Boudicea gasped again and placed her hands on her stomach instinctively. She was not in pain, but held still by the experience nonetheless.

He is barren, else she'd have borne him an heir by now. The Lady withdrew her hand, her fingers curled as if holding something small and invisible between them. So small and tiny a thing, she thought, looking at the emptiness in her hand. Yet so powerful.

"Can you help me?" Boudicea said.

"Yes, but it will come at no small cost. Can you afford the favors of the Lady? Will you accept her generosity?"

Boudicea broke into a wide, open smile, and tears ran down her cheeks. "I will."

"Then carry his child," the Lady answered.

Boudicea looked surprised. "But, he cannot...I mean, it is not possible for him..."

"Arcadia has tainted him," the Lady said, "As it does to all who live there. It is poisoned earth, but the Elves are too proud to admit to themselves that they have ruined their home."

"I do not understand," Boudicea said.

"You do not need to. Just know that Mordred can never make you carry his child, no matter how many times he ravages you." She paused to look at Boudicea's naked body. "He hurts you."

"Terribly."

"He will kill you before long, yes?"

"He said as much. I fear that when he comes to me tonight, it will be for the last time."

"Then you must choose quickly. If I am to help you, you must

accept the seed he has planted within you. Give it the love that he cannot. See that his hatred does not go unused."

Boudicea ran her hands over her stomach again, more slowly this time.

"I don't know if I can."

"Then take your chances with the Elves. The Lady does not bargain."

"But why?"

"Nor does she offer explanations."

Boudicea exhaled and closed her eyes. "Then tell me what to do."

"There are no others like you in all of Britannia, though there once was an age when your kind ruled that land. Your sisters gave me the power to cast aside the sea and to draw down the sky. Now, only you carries the ancient Gaian blood that makes you stronger than Mordred or his Arcadian host. Find that power within you and do as I ask. When your deed is done, I will quit you from this place."

The Lady drew away from the pool, raising her hand away from its surface, and feeling the warmth and heartbeat of Boudicea fade into the distance.

The last the Lady saw of Boudicea was of her sitting in her cell, holding her abdomen in silence, considering the offer before her. The Lady could see no other way to reverse the damage done from Arthur's fall and Bors' thievery. But would this girl? This single heir to an ancient nobility that was all but gone?

The Lady turned away from the pool and smelled the sweet fragrance of her Garden. Time would tell soon enough.

In her cell, Boudicea ran her fingers along the cool, damp surface of the floor, feeling the indentations where the stones came together. She watched a trio of beetles scuttle before her and disappear into a crack in the corner, one, two, three. How great it would be, to disappear into the darkness, content with hiding forever.

She shifted her weight, and the chains that held her clinked quietly. Which could be worse, to end this torment or make it so much greater by carrying the proof of his crimes within her? Why did the Lady put so cruel a choice before her?

It was a test. Yes, that was it. A test of her faith. Anyone will pledge themselves to the Immortal when faced with doom. But who truly means it?

"The Lady never trifles, and the Lady never lies," Boudicea

said to herself, repeating something her mother had said to her so many times before. "She is the bearer of gifts, and the guest of dreams. And she is the bearer of tidings right and heavy, for she alone knows the way of the world and all the things that tread upon it."

Tidings right and heavy. The way of the world.

Boudicea heard Mordred's heavy footsteps coming across the dungeon hall. She could hear other footsteps as well. Taskmasters, no doubt. They would have some horrible end in mind for her while Mordred watched, took part or both.

The Elf King strode into the cell, already armored up and wearing his weapons. The two whip-bearing torturers that accompanied him leered at her.

"Tonight, we play upstairs," Mordred said, sneering. "And this time, you will scream. I...why are you smiling?"

"Because, my lord," Boudicea said, her eyes filling with tears. "I am carrying your son."

The Lady smiled. Boudicea had not disappointed her. And now, she would return the favor. She went to a nook on the far side of her garden that that previously had been covered by the edge wall of mist. The Lady sat on a courtier's bench of white marble on a small patio of rough-hewn stones. She looked at the wall of green leaves before her, a dense net of branches, shrubbery and undergrowth. She arched an eyebrow, and the lot of it parted, revealing a large hollow where her greatest treasures laid. On pedestals of ancient wood sat her artifacts, gathered, bartered and made across ages. Some were to be given away, others to be prized in secret forever. In her greatest glory, there had been a dozen items here. Now there were only three.

The first was a silver anvil, blackened with age, on which the Dwarves of Albion forged Excalibur. When they left the world for their homes far below, they gave their friend and patron the tool on which they had made so many of Her gifts. Swords, armor, rings. For each of these things the Lady repaid the Lords most generously, and they were only too happy to give her this as a final gesture. So moved was the Lady that she swore that it never would leave her possession. As long as she persisted, she would honor her friends' generosity so that when they returned-as she

always swore they would-she would have their anvil waiting for them to bring back to the world the metalcraft of ancient days.

The second was a small, black egg, as if chiseled from obsidian. A single, thin crack ran over the top of it, where one day, the mystery within would hatch and come forth into the world. Not even the Lady knew what the egg contained, but she knew enough never to crack its shell, for whatever emerged could never be returned. This, the Lady won from Baba Yaga, who threatened to shatter the egg against the trunk of Yggdrasil, the world-tree. When the Lady prevailed and cast the witch back into her enchanted prison-house, the steward of Asgard thanked her for such rare service, and asked what she would do, now that the egg was hers. She told him it would stay within the Garden of Souls, hidden from those who would see it opened, perhaps to be lost between the folds of time. The steward laughed at such bravery, So that her work would not go unrewarded, he gave her what now was the third and final item in the Treasury.

It was a helmet, made of a green metal and crafted in the image of a man's face peering out through a bed of retreating leaves. It was the helm of the Green Man, whose services would now and forever more be the province of the Lady. She held the helm before her, looking into the dark spaces behind its open eyes. Who would wear such a thing now? Bors? That boy, Ghyslain? Boudicca? There were so few now who could contain the power and fury this device bestowed.

She put the helmet back. It was not the time for the Green Man to make his return to Britannia, much though it needed him. Should he fail and the helmet fall into Mordred's hands... She stopped thinking of it. The very notion of it evoked images of the darkest kind of horror. Better for Mordred to find Excalibur than to bend the sweet green evening to his will.

Pursing her lips, she held her fingers before her, looking upon her Treasury. With a wave, she bid the plants to close over again, hiding her treasures from view. Too precious, these things. Something else would have to suffice.

She cast her eyes about the Garden, looking, wondering. In the center of the Garden was a large pool, in which stood several large stones, each breaking the water's surface. She looked at the rocks and felt a twinge in her heart. There is always...him.

No, she thought. He betrayed me. He would have become everything he was supposed to help destroy. He...

She closed her eyes. He is the only hope left to save her.

She lifted herself through the air and lighted upon the largest stone in the pool. She moved her hand over the water and swirled it into a vortex, opening a tunnel down to the bottom of the pool, where appeared a shimmering door back to Arthur's world.

You are safe here, she told herself. Go there, and your life hangs by a thread. Mordred would only be too glad to cut it for you.

"I know," she said aloud. "I know."

And with that, she dove into the vortex and through the door.

On the other side, she plunged upwards through cold and dark water. She kicked to the surface and looked around her. She was in a small, dark lake, deeper by far than one might think from the shore. It was surrounded by a dense wall of mighty, ancient trees that had entwined their branches when she herself was young. They looked as they did since her last visit here, which made her smile.

This place remains hidden, she thought. Then so does he. She dove back into the deep green water, sensing her way through the darkness. She headed back to the bottom and swam to the far side of the lake, where along the rocky bottom she found a cave. The mouth had been sealed by a boulder three times as tall as she was, but with a flick of her fingers, it rolled aside, and a cascade of bubbles poured out of the cave and shimmered their way to the surface.

She entered the mouth, following the cave's long, twisting passage deep into the earth. After a fair distance, the passage reversed itself and began heading upward again, ending in a large underground chamber that had a small beach and dry ground.

On the beach sat a tomb covered by a thick coat of moss and lichens. She approached the tomb, and again with a wave of her hand, the lid removed itself. The sound of scraping stone echoed in the chamber.

Inside laid a graying man, trapped in time somewhere before his mortal twilight. Thin and sinewy, his skin had an aged, leathery look to it from years of toughening hardship. He wore a wild, gray tangle of a beard, and his mane of long hair was equally untamed. He had a huge, hooked nose and deeply set eyes. His hands, too, seemed unnaturally large, as did his feet. In fact, most of his proportions were off, a long, thin body, with even longer, thinner arms and legs, all holding together overly big extremities. He was just as she had remembered him, and as far as she was concerned, he was still the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

She leaned over and kissed him softly on the lips, stroking his

face. "Wake up."

His eyes snapped open and he grabbed her hand. "You!" he croaked.

She backed away a step from the sarcophagus. "You were expecting another?" she said, smiling.

"I had always dreamed you would return for me," he said, sitting up, rubbing his stiff joints. "I just never thought my dreams were true."

"You must have known I would never abandon you, Merlin," She said.

"Hah!" Merlin hooked one spindly leg over the side of the sarcophagus and lowered himself out of it. "You've got a fine notion of abandonment, then. I've been in that damned box for a long time."

"You were meant to stay here a century, but I have need of you now."

"You're joking," Merlin said, sitting back against the stone coffin and crossing his arms.

"When have I ever?"

"Go to hell."

She sighed. "Always the malcontent."

"Look at me! I've been starving for a quarter of a century! It's going to take at least a year to regain my strength."

"We don't have that kind of time. Besides, it was your defiance that landed you here. You knew my rules, and you broke them."

"I was trying to help that kid you gave the sword to before he made a huge mistake."

"You tried to steal Excalibur from him," the Lady said. "That Excalibur did not let you take it, and that Arthur never knew of it does not lessen your crime."

"That sword was filling his head with bad ideas. What did butchering Rome have to do with protecting Britannia?"

"Everything. Were you a king, you would understand that."

"So for that, you locked me in here, and the kid went and made his mistakes anyway. I can only assume that he's the reason why you're here."

"In a manner of speaking."

"Arthur didn't lose the sword, did he?"

"Arthur is dead. The sword is missing. And Camelot is fallen."

Merlin turned ashen. "What...?"

"Morgana seduced him and bore him a son, Mordred, who spent the better part of his life in Arcadia."

"Arcadia? Why...?"

"Morgana gifted him to the Faerie Queene. In turn, the Queene gave over this world to her, and Mordred would act as her regent in it."

"And this Mordred, he rules Britannia now?"

"He is its overlord. But Morgana gives him his orders."

"So...the sword. You said it was lost?"

"Arthur meant to give it back to me, and tasked one of his knights to do so. He chose to keep the sword instead."

"How can that be?"

"Excalibur has a will of its own, Merlin. Until now, it has always coincided with mine. Now, we have diverged. I know not what the sword wants or intends. But surely it has a plan, but I am not privy to it."

"At least Morgana doesn't have it."

"For now. It is only a matter of time before it falls into her hands. The knight who took the sword cannot run from her forever."

Merlin groaned and ran his fingers through his unruly hair.

"Now you are beginning to see the depths of our problem," she said. "When Mordred came back from Arcadia, he brought an army of Elves with him. By then, Arthur's strength had been spent looking for the Sangreal."

"Did you give it to him?"

"If I had, you would still in that stone box."

Merlin waved one of his big hands at her. "Forget all that. Point is, if Arthur's dead and your plans are ruined, then I'm out of a job. Find somebody else to watch over Britannia for you."

"This goes beyond Britannia, Merlin." Morgana rules the isle now. And she has brought all of Arcadia with her. Every day, thousands of people are led to Camelot and enslaved. Every day, Britannia is corrupted a little more and the veil that separates our world from the Elves' grows ever more threadbare."

"You should have thought of that before you almost killed me."

She looked at him in silence for a moment. "Look at the water," she said. He did.

On its surface appeared an image of a dark city made of jagged spires and barbed walls. Long tendrils of black stone stretched out from it in all directions, like the roots of an evil tree. At the tip of every root was a simple expanse of wall that gradually widened into two walls, then with a street between them, then with one building on a side and then with one on the other. It was a strip of alien cityscape growing over the earth, blighting it as it went.

"This is what has been built on the ruins of Camelot. It stretches all the way to the sea," She said.

Merlin clenched his teeth. "Not my problem."

She arched an eyebrow and changed the image on the water to show Boudicea in her cell. Standing above her were the taskmasters, whipping her in turns as Mordred watched.

"She stood over Arthur and defended him when every other knight had either died or fled. And for her courage, Mordred imprisoned her in the highest tower of his fortress. He has stolen her maidenhood and forced himself on her more times than I care to count. But still, her courage will not fail, and she has come to me for help."

"Aha! And what have you asked of her in return?"

"To bear him a son," the Lady said, pointing to Mordred.

"What? Are you insane? For what purpose?"

"My vision exceeds yours, Merlin. Their child may yet undo all of the damage that has already been done."

"Oh, don't give me that promised child nonsense again. I've fallen for it before, and it was nearly the end of me."

"I will need your help to save her, Merlin. My strength in this world is almost gone. You still might have enough to deliver her from bondage."

"What a laugh that is. Have you heard nothing I've said? I've..."

"Silence!" she yelled. The force of her voice splashed the water, dispelling its image. "What is done is done. I am asking you to consider things beyond us. If you are still too selfish to see that, then at least look once more upon the water."

She calmed the pool and brought forth another image. It was a young man, lean and muscular, preparing for battle in the middle of a forest. He was fastening the last buckles of his armor, the centerpiece of which was a hardened leather cuirass with the Pendragon sigil raised on its surface. His long, lank hair and smudged face spoke of a man hardened by the wilderness. As he finished donning his armor, he wound a long, green scarf about the lower half of his face. He slung a sword on his belt and a shield across his back, along with a bow and quiver of arrows. He took a spear in one of his free hands and paused to kneel in the dappled sunlight, whispering something to himself that neither the Lady nor Merlin chose to hear.

"He was also one of Camelot's last defenders," She said to Merlin. "He ran at the end, but only because he thought everyone else was dead. And unlike certain others who fled, he did so not to

preserve his life, but so he might fight on in the future.

"What's with the scarf?"

"He has taken in with the thieves of Sherwood, who are some of the last enemies of Morgana to be found on Britannia. Anyone else with a mind to fight has fled for the Hundred Kingdoms."

"The what?"

"The remains of Arthur's domain. The fragments of old Europa, which Morgana is devouring piece by piece. Brittany has already fallen to the Enemy, as has much of Gaul. The Low Countries are next. Germania is not safe either, but only because it is has become without law of any sort."

"So this lad has turned rebel, eh? I like him already."

"He fought alongside Boudicea, and met her the day he lost her. Yet she has never been far from his thoughts. Three days ago, he learned she remained captive within Mordred's dark tower, and he means to rescue her."

"Good luck to him, then."

"Is that all you can say? Look at him. His is strong and sure, yes, but you know as well as I do that he will be killed if he steps within eyeshot of the castle."

"Like I said, not my..."

"Then look closer at him and tell me what you see."

Merlin sighed in exasperation then leaned over the water and squinted. He grumbled a few words under his breath but stopped suddenly. He pointed at the image.

"Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?" he said, still looking at the water.

She nodded. "He has the spark."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I have seen it. During the Battle of Camelot, he struck out Mordred's eye. Both he and the girl have special gifts that must not be squandered. She will give the land a hero. And he will be the one to teach him what you know."

Merlin looked at the Lady. "If I deliver that girl from Mordred's prison, then I expect something in return."

"And what is that?"

"I want you to forget that I ever loved you."

Her eyes filled with tears. "So it has come to this?"

"It has."

"All right then," the Lady said softly.

Merlin cleared his throat. "Then, you have made me an offer I can't refuse. Sherwood, you say?"

She nodded.

"Then I'll be off," Merlin said as he placed one of his feet in the frigid cave water. He paused and spoke over his shoulder. "The child can't live in the Garden, though. You must know that."

"I know," she said. "Just bring him someplace safe."

"I will."

"Merlin," the Lady said softly, drawing close to him.

He kept still, with his head turned to the side. He closed his eyes. "Yes?"

She placed her hands on his shoulders and gently turned him around. "I'm sorry," she said, and kissed him.

"We both should be," he said. "Better luck in another life, eh?" He fell backwards, transforming into a trout as he went. He splashed into the water and wriggled through the cave's shallows, into the deep water of the passage. After a few seconds, he was gone, leaving the Lady behind in their secret grotto, crying without sound.

Coursing through the water, Merlin shook off the fatigue and drowsiness that had dogged him ever since the Lady popped the lid of his tomb. The long years of starvation still left his strength at almost nothing. But for today, for one last blast of glory, it just might be enough, he thought. The icy water slid over his scales and through his gills as he moved through the tunnel's final turns and exited into the open water of the lake. He reached out with his senses in search of Mordred's tower, only to withdraw them as if stung. The fortress of the Elf King could hardly be missed, so powerful was the wicked magic that held it together. Very quickly, Merlin realized that getting into this place would not be his challenge. It would be getting out of it. The fortress was made of pure Arcadian orichulum, black as stone yet harder than steel, ever hungry for the energy of life itself. Small wonder, then, that it bleached the green out of the world and dried the very earth it stood on. When this place was done sucking Britannia dry, it would sink its tendrils into the oceans and cross to Gaul and do the same there. And where else from there? North to Nordheim? South to Rome? Or east, to the Russian principies, to Byzantium, to Babylon and beyond?

Merlin reached the lake's far shore and in a burst of speed, he

skipped out of the water and into the air, shedding his scales for feathers and taking flight as an eagle.

He soared high over the treetops, taking in its glorious green mystery for as far as his eye would see. The forest still stood in its entirety, but not far beyond it the blight of Camelot was already draining the fields and woodlands of their color. Entire copses of dead trees stood where there ought to have been huge boughs of gently swaying leaves, rustling in the summer breeze.

Here and there, Merlin spied the countryside in search for signs of the Enemy. Six miles east of the city's main gate, he saw an Elven hunting party heading out to scour the landscape in search of those who had managed to avoid enslavement. The warriors wore the heavy black plate Merlin had remembered from his earlier adventures in the faerie realm, and even from this distance, he could see the orange pinpoints of light glowing through their helmets' eyeholes. There had to be three dozen of them, followed by another six or seven taskmasters, their huge girth shaking as they plodded ahead with thunderous footsteps. They each carried one of their wicked lashers, coiled in their hands, ready to bite into the flesh of the innocent. Bringing up the rear was the wagon train, four caged carts that were empty but probably would not remain that way for very long. Minding them were teams of thralls who wore only humble jerkins of studded jack and whose transformation away from humanity had only just begun. Merlin swallowed the bile in his throat as he looked upon these accomplices of Morgana.

The sons of Arcadia. Despoilers of worlds. Elves.

Looking down at them, Merlin could see that a few of the warriors were pointing his way and nocking arrows into their bows. As their black-feathered arrows rose to meet him, he dove out of their way. The sky blurred into a blue rush as Merlin reached his top speed. Hurling downward like a thunderbolt, he raced over the heads of the slave train and flew out of bowshot in a matter of seconds. As the world rushed past underneath him, Merlin felt the joy of flight, the power of his wings slicing the wind. He raced through the sky and his thoughts of Camelot began to fade, as did his fleeting hatred for the slavers he had just evaded. All that mattered was finding a nice juicy rabbit to sink his talons into...

Merlin shook himself out of it and switched to a raven in mid-flight, extending his wings as he did and braking to a more modest speed. That was too close, you old fool, he thought. Last time you forgot yourself while wearing an animal's skin, you stayed as

a bear for six summers.

Changing shapes was the key, as was not giving in to any of their inner drives. Always be the master, he told himself over and over again. It is easy to be a beast, so much harder to bear the burden of humanity. Always be the master.

Merlin closed in on the Camelot and noticed the sky blend from blue to yellow, the clouds from white to violet. The very sky had a strange smell to it, like lavender and smoke.

He joined in with a few other blackbirds in the skies over the Elven city and flew among them, a little nervous. Would they see him for what he was? Would they report him to Mordred? And would Boudicea be slain when they realized he was coming for her?

Merlin wheeled in the sky and dove into a window of a tower adjacent to Camelot's central spire. Once inside, he zoomed past an Arcadian scribe who was chained to his desk, writing in a massive book bound with pages of human skin, dipping his pen fashioned from a fingerbone into an inkpot of blood. The scribe cursed at the bird, rattling his chains as he shook his fist at the creature.

Merlin passed through the room and flapped down the spiral staircase of the tower for a short distance before landing on the stone steps, transforming into a giant black mastiff as he did.

After giving himself deep orange eyes for effect, he turned and walked down the rest of the stairs, passing a few other scriberies on the way. Each was filled with Elven scribes writing in their sinister volumes. None of them could be bothered by the sight of a massive dog outside of their workshops. So much the better.

At the base of the stairs, Merlin met a pair of Arcadian watchdogs, each the size and shape of a large shepherd, with jet black fur and smoldering orange coals for eyes. They bristled and growled at Merlin upon seeing him, but he only had to lock eyes with each creature to make them whimper before him. One of the dogs urinated as Merlin passed by. The other stood on trembling legs.

Merlin crossed the passage connecting the scribery tower to the central spire. He cowed a few more dogs along the way, and on more than one occasion, slunk into the shadows and feigned sleep as patrols of Elven knights marched past.

At the base of the spire, Merlin found the central stairwell, leading both to the tower top and deep into the dungeons below. He extended his senses to find his way. Above him, the evil of Mordred lay waiting, pulsing like a dark beacon. Below him, a bead of light, like a pearl. Boudicea.

Padding quietly down the spire stairs, Merlin passed dozens of chambers along the way: armories, treasuries, trophy rooms and torture chambers. Nowhere did he see any of the usual trappings of a lord's hall. No banquet chambers. No court for visitors. Not even a throne room. The whole place felt more like a giant beehive than a palace. There was no community, just a strict hierarchy of minions all serving a common cause and a single lord. It was as much a prison for its servants as it was for their captives.

The stairs emptied out into the grand torture chamber, and Merlin immediately sensed the magical field on the room to muffle any sound in it. There was only one taskmaster here, and he was half-awake, sitting near the door. In racks along the walls hung more than a dozen victims, all of them young women. Most were somewhere in the process of being whipped to death. A few had already expired, by the look and smell of it.

In the center of the room were stretching racks, cutting tables and bleeding blocks. A few more bodies were on these, either pulled to the breaking point, or cut open and left to fester.

Merlin slunk through the room, hugging the wall and going around the taskmaster, who was too fuzzy in the head to notice the dog passing by. Merlin concentrated at the door for three seconds, unlocking it and causing it to slowly swing open. He nosed himself through and trotted down the final staircase, to the prisoner's dungeon.

The cell chamber was heavy with the scent of blood, much like the torture chamber above, only here it was mixed with a half-dozen other foul odors. No wonder why there were no guard dogs down here, he thought as he resumed his misshapen human form. He homed in on Boudicea's presence, but finding her didn't require that. Of the two dozen cells in the chamber, only hers was occupied. The girls upstairs must have been her cellmates. Until she took in his child, he reckoned. After that, Mordred wouldn't need them anymore.

Boudicea was sleeping in her cell, though she did not look good. Lash marks covered her arms, legs and back. And beneath those were the scars from previous torments. Her hair was a matted mass of tangles and filth, and her whole frame was lean on the way to gauntness.

Merlin waved his hand over the cell door and it popped open and swung outward with a long, slow creak. Boudicea stirred on the ground.

"Come for another go at it, have you?" she said slowly, not

looking up. She has little strength left, Merlin thought. Must act quickly.

"The Lady has sent me to bring you from this place," Merlin said. He focused on her chains, and they all popped open.

Boudicea stirred and pulled herself to her feet, rubbing her wrists and ankles where the manacles had chafed them raw. She ran her fingers through her grimy hair, drew it back and tied it in a knot. That was when Merlin noticed for the first time the various scars on her face. Most of them looked like badly healed gashes, the kind earned during a harsh beating.

Boudicea saw him studying her. "How bad are they?" she said. "I haven't seen myself in three years."

"Pretty bad," he said.

She nodded silently. "I thought as much."

"I can take them away for you, if you want," he said.

She glared at him. "Don't even think about it."

Merlin smiled. Girl after his own heart. He cracked his knuckles and looked out of the cell door. "We have to hurry. I can sense Mordred coming down here. He have something special planned for you tonight?"

"He has something special planned for me every night."

"Then let's be sure to disappoint him," he said, smiling, as he closed his eyes, put his hands together, and slowly thrust them through the air. A few inches away from his chest, his hands ran into an invisible resistance. He grimaced and doubled his efforts, bracing his feet on the floor, and putting his entire body weight against whatever he was pushing against.

Finally, his quivering fingers moved forward, creating a thin tear of light that hung in mid-air. Merlin's hands continued through, and he grasped either side of the rip and pulled outwards. The sound of it reminded Boudicea both of thunder and tearing paper. As Merlin widened the hole, Boudicea could see the scene of a blighted meadow edging a dead forest in it.

"Out you go," Merlin grunted as he struggled to hold the portal open.

Boudicea tested the portal, gingerly placing her hand against the space between the cell chamber and the forest scene. She half expected the distant wood to ripple like water when she touched it, but instead, her hand passed through the hole most easily. She could feel a gentle wind on her flesh on the other side. The scent of ancient forest came through.

"Come on!"

Boudicea ducked under Merlin's outstretched arms and wriggled through the hole. She fell through at last, dumping a foot or more onto the soft, green grass.

She stood and looked around her. On one side, the forest. On the other, the grassy fields continued off into the distance, where on the horizon, the black spires of Camelot stood like the roof of a cavern upended, slowly dripping upward. The sight of the place made her shudder, for only then did she realize that she was finally free of that awful place. Now she would have to contend with the only thing worse than having been imprisoned there: going back.

Through the hole, Merlin spoke to Boudicea. "Stay here a minute. You've got a ride coming."

"But what of you?"

"I can't hold the portal open and go through it at the same time. But don't worry. I'll catch up with you soon enough."

"Wait!" Boudicea said. "Don't go! How am I..."

"See you," Merlin said shortly, and then let go of the hole, which snapped shut and disappeared with a shimmer. Boudicea knew it was gone, but she still had to place her hand in the air where a moment before hovered a doorway to somewhere else.

Standing in the field, Boudicea felt exposed, naked. She looked back toward Camelot, certain to see an army of knights thunder out of the gate, led by Mordred sounding a fell trumpet, calling to arms a pack of huntsmen meant to run her down.

Don't be stupid, she told herself. He doesn't even know you're gone.

Behind her, a horse whinnied, and she jumped around to face it, arms outstretched. "No!" she screamed without thinking.

The rider was obscured by the sun shining behind him, and all Boudicea could see was his spear and the outline of his armor. She tried to breathe but could not. Her limbs froze. Her heart beat like a slow drum in her chest, in her head.

"Boudicea?" Ghyslain said. He moved his horse closer to her, and free from the sun, his appearance immediately became plain to her. Three years had made quite a difference on the boy she knew that fateful day in Camelot. The softness in his face was gone, replaced by a strong chin and chiseled features. His eyes were twice as dark as she remembered them, and she was sure they saw right through her but noticing nothing so much as her scars and unhealed wounds.

He dismounted and ran to her. As he came close, her knees fi-

nally gave out, and she collapsed into his arms.

"I thought you were dead," he whispered, holding her close, stroking the back of her head.

"I was," she said.

He pulled his head away from hers and looked into her eyes. "You came to me in a dream three nights ago. I saw you in chains, in a dark tower. I came as fast as I..."

She shook her head. "Just take me away from here."

Ghyslain rode his horse straight into the heart of the forest and took slender paths through the trees that Boudicea could not even see until they were upon them. They rode without making a sound. Boudicea slept hard much of the way, somehow hanging on to Ghyslain as she did. Wherever her arms touched him, Ghyslain could feel it, through armor or cloak.

High above, they could both hear the screeching of birds in massive flocks, spies doubtlessly sent by Mordred to find his lost prize. In the distance, sounding horns blew as hunting parties communicated with each other across the miles. They were using a simple code Ghyslain had deciphered some time ago, and there was much to learn from it: We think she's gone to the south! No sign of her from here to the sea! What news from the thralltowns?

Ghyslain smiled with each message he heard, for the hunters were getting nervous. Every day that passed without success would only further infuriate Mordred. For close to a week, he and Boudicea eased through the wood, listening to the far-off sounds of the Enemy, which grew ever more distant.

On the eighth day, as they rested for a noontime meal of bread, fruit and hard cheese. Ghyslain looked up to the leafless branches high overhead. "You hear that?" he asked Boudicea.

She concentrated. "I don't hear anything."

Ghyslain smiled. "Exactly."

Later that afternoon, they reached the edge of the forest and looked out over the wide fields of the middle country. "It's a day's ride to Sherwood," Ghyslain said, patting the steed's neck.

"We'll never make it," Boudicea said. "Mordred must have spies everywhere. We'll be seen."

"Good point," Ghyslain said, continuing to stroke the horse's head. "What do you think, Sandalin? Can we make it in less time?"

Boudicea looked at the horse, realizing only then that it was Bors' old steed. "Where did you find him?"

"We found each other after the battle," Ghyslain said.

Sandalin whinnied and shook his mane, stamping one hoof into the soft forest earth.

"Hang on," Ghyslain said. Boudicea did, just as the charger sprang from the woodland's edge and out into the open country. He galloped fast enough to blur the ground below them, then the clouds above, then the very air surrounding them. The middle country passed by as if in a dream. Boudicea counted the seconds in her head, and just short of an hour later, they arrived at another forest, huge and ancient and alive. Sherwood.

Sandalin skirted the edge of the wood and slowed down enough to jog hard and enter the treeline. As the charger went, the trees parted around it. Boudicea looked behind her and watched the forest close the door through which Sandalin had entered. As they passed through the forest, Boudicea could sense the trees watching her, the breathing of the moss, the massive harmony of life that was this place.

Ghyslain looked about the forest as they rode. "We're here," he said as Sandalin walked through a screen of trees and entered a large clearing completely enclosed overhead by the forest canopy. Here, a small stone village stood, its buildings covered in moss and ivy, their rough edges worn smooth by time.

The village was a busy place, with numerous folk going about the daily kind of business Boudicea remembered from her hometown, before the family moved to Camelot. There was the sound of dogs barking and chickens clucking, of children playing. The ring of a blacksmith's hammer, the grumble of a stonemith's wheel and the bellows of a baker's oven. The distant sound of a small band playing their tunes.

As they reached the center of the village, a beautiful older woman maybe twice Boudicea's age approached them. She wore a cloak of varying shades of green, made to look like a wild pattern of leaves. As she threw her hood back, she revealed a mass of dense red curls and brilliant green eyes. Even at her age, her skin was smooth and porcelain, her lips full and red. She was outfitted much as Ghyslain had been; leather armor, sword at the ready, bow and across her back.

"Is that..." Boudicea began to ask in awe.

"It is," Ghyslain said fondly. "Guenevere."

Ghyslain and Boudicea dismounted from Sandalin and faced

their host.

"Good to be back, my lady," Ghyslain said as he dismounted.

Guenevere flashed a smile that men would have gone to war over. "Everybody said you weren't going to return. That you were a fool for even thinking of storming the Tower. Now I can tell them how wrong they were."

Ghyslain helped Boudicea off Sandalin's back. "In truth, I never even reached the Tower," he said. "I found her some miles outside of it."

"Then Merlin was right," Guenevere murmured.

Boudicea's head was swimming. Merlin? Guenevere? What was this place?

"Welcome to Sherwood, Boudicea," Guenevere said. "We have been expecting you."

As if hearing Boudicea's questions in her own head, Guenevere took her by the hand and led her through the village. "I know how you have suffered, Boudicea," she said. "And I know you have accepted the Lady's offer. Everyone here is her servant in some form or another. She has come to us all in dreams to tell us of this day, Ghyslain more than anyone. Merlin arrived here shortly before you did, but I must warn you, he is fading quickly from us."

Boudicea gasped. "He is dying? But how?"

"I do not know," Guenevere said sadly. "He is like a candle that has run its course. We have him resting over there," she said, pointing to one of the village's low stone buildings. A strange and ancient sigil was carved over the door, a cross and a circle, each intertwined. It was the sign of Gaia, the crest of the Lady.

"What can we do for him?" Boudicea asked.

"I am afraid there is little we can do more than offer him shelter. He won't take any food or water, and he has asked for nothing."

"I suppose I have him to thank for sparing me the effort of visiting the Tower, then," Ghyslain said. He could not take his eyes off of Merlin's resting house.

"You do," Guenevere said. "But do not be disheartened. You went not expecting any help or even to live, but still you went. You honor the Lady by listening to your vision, and you honor us all with your bravery."

Her words hung in the air like music. As Arthur's voice could part the sea, so could Guenevere's convince every fish to leap out of it. Small wonder she and Arthur conquered the world so handily.

Ghyslain noticed Boudicea was looking at him. His heart quickened.

"Why did you come for me?" Boudicea asked.

He couldn't find the words to answer, and the pause soon became awkward until Guenevere rescued him.

"Here is where you will stay," Guenevere said, gesturing to a stone house before them. Carved over the door was an ancient glyph of motherhood, of a hollow woman with a small person inside her belly.

"Go on and get settled," Guenevere said. "The Lady has brought you here to have the child you carry. While you are here, let me know whatever you need, and I will see it done for you."

Guenevere turned to leave, but Boudicea stopped her. "My lady?" she asked.

"Yes, child?" Guenevere answered.

"I...Mordred is the father." Boudicea glanced at Ghyslain, expecting him to look startled, perhaps even disgusted. He did not. He looked as if he knew all along.

"Of course he is. That is what makes you the greatest of us all." Guenevere turned to face Boudicea once more, and took her hands into her own. "You carry our hope."

Guenevere gently stroked Boudicea's face before turning once more to leave. "See that she gets everything she needs," she said to Ghyslain as she left.

Boudicea and Ghyslain stood at the entrance of her house, neither saying anything.

"Thank you," Boudicea said, suddenly feeling as vulnerable here in this sanctuary as she did on the field outside of Camelot.

"I didn't do anything, really," Ghyslain said. "Merlin did the hard work."

Boudicea shook her head. "Not for that. For not forgetting about me."

Ghyslain smiled, his voice quiet. "What else could I do? I love you."

Sensing he'd said too much, he backed away a step and meant to leave the house. She had come from the Tower and unspeakable torture, all for this? For some fumbling courtship from a boy she hardly even knew? He was an idiot. A fool. A...

She reached out and took his arm, stopping him and drawing him back to her. She kissed him softly, and met his eyes. She ran her fingers through his hair and kissed him again. And again. And again, and again.

Eight months later, Boudicea's memories of her time in Mordred's dark castle had finally begun to make room for the happier times she had spent in Sherwood with Ghyslain.

They lay together in bed, she on her side and he curled next to her, hugging her back and resting his hands on her swollen belly. News of Mordred's search for her had reached the village on a number of occasions, and through it troubled them both, neither dared speak of it for fear of worrying the other.

With every day that Boudicea's delivery drew closer, Ghyslain wondered if Mordred would somehow know where to find them once his son reached the world. He ran his fingers over Boudicea's belly. He listened to her breathe.

For a short time, Boudicea had been afraid Ghyslain would consider her tainted. Then, when she finally caught a look of herself, her fine appearance coarsened by years of abuse in Camelot, she thought herself too hideous for anyone to bear. She tried to explain to him, early on, what had happened in Camelot, but he never let her finish. He could imagine it well enough; Mordred's lust had become infamous, and the scars on Boudicea's body testified to how the Elf King liked to take his pleasure. It was only when Guenevere pulled him aside and explained that her talking about these things was for her benefit and not his that he finally started to listen.

That was before she grew heavy with child, a boy the entire village knew was coming but no one dared to speak of. It was the open secret that dominated life in Sherwood village, like a silent, invisible presence.

He would love the boy as if it were his own, Ghyslain had always told Boudicea. He had told it to himself even more, as much to assert his feelings as to dispel any lingering concerns he had over Mordred as the wisps of idiocy that they were.

She never loved him, Ghyslain thought as he drifted to sleep. She never wanted him. And even now, with his child ready to come out, she does not miss him.

He closed his eyes.

Not even a...little...bit...

He awoke to a world shaded in gray. Ghyslain looked around, thinking the lanterns had gone out, but they burned still in the house, as well as outside. Only their light was a pure white, bleaching out the details of wherever it burned brightest. Ghyslain tried to rouse Boudicea, but she lay in bed, like a statue. The sheets had likewise frozen, unable to bend or move. The banner

on the wall. The curtains on the windows. It was all locked in time, drained of color and motion and life.

"Come, Ghyslain," he heard in his head. It was an old, gravelly voice, full of weariness.

He looked back once more at Boudicea before leaving the house. Outside, the forest was just as gray as everything else. The treetops and their cover of leaves, which so often swayed in the ceaseless breeze of Sherwood, held still in the air, some branches curving before an unblowing wind. Ghyslain ran his fingers along one of their trunks and it was cold as stone. Everything was. His clothing, the water, even the fire in the torches.

"Ghyslain," said the voice. "Stop gawking about and get over here."

He knew who must have been speaking to him, even though he had never shared a word with the old man. He had been lying in the village, stock still, since he and Boudicea arrived. Sleeping, Guenevere had said, but with a tone that suggested the sleep was more than just that, but not quite the death it appeared to be, either.

Ghyslain approached the resting house, and its Gaian sigil burned with a soft green flame, the only color in this world. So rich was its hue Ghyslain could not suppress the urge to touch it, to drink it in.

"Don't," the voice said, causing Ghyslain to withdraw his hand. "That's the only thing that really will hurt you here. Come inside."

He went in, and on the resting table lay Merlin, who, like the sigil, had retained any color in this world of gray. He was wrapped in his brown and green cloaks, his flesh more pink and colorful than Ghyslain had ever seen it. Even his hair had a subtle blondeness to it, normally impossible to notice, but here, it might as well have been plucked from a canary.

Ghyslain leaned over the body. "Merlin?" He thought.

"No, Mordred. Of course me. Who else would have called for you?"

Ghyslain shook his head. Speaking without talking was making it hard to concentrate. "What do you want with me?" he said aloud.

"You know why I've been sleeping here for close to a year, boy?" said Merlin's voice. "Because magic costs, that's why. People think magic gives you something for nothing, but it always takes something back. It always squares accounts."

"Why are you telling me this?" Ghyslain said.

"The Lady came to me three centuries ago with promises of love and immortality. She gave me both, and for a long time, that was enough. Then, some time back, I made some pretty stupid decisions, and was made to pay for them."

"What do you mean by stupid decisions?"

"I mean I was the one who was supposed to keep Arthur out of trouble. Here was this man, not too terribly different than you, with Excalibur in his hand and a mandate to unite Britannia. He was only twenty when he fulfilled that mission."

"But he did not stop there."

"Nor did the Lady want him to. Arthur was doing things nobody had ever dared possible. I knew that he was going to butcher Rome, but after that, he would unite all lands from here to Babylon. There would be peace, you see? Lasting, honest peace. And in the years that followed, those who were born to such a world would have their king to thank for it. But more than that, they would give their devotion to the Lady who made it all possible. Surely such a thing would be worth the lives of some Roman soldiers, eh?"

Ghyslain thought of the knights who perished defending Camelot. "I cannot agree."

"Me either," Merlin said. "Excalibur fed on Arthur's wrath and ambition. It told him that he could rule the world if only he destroyed those who opposed him. That's when Arthur began to stray, and I had not even realized it. By the time he declared war on Rome, he was past helping. He had become one of the tyrants he was meant to oppose."

"What did you do about it?"

"Before Arthur warred with Rome, I tried to take Excalibur by magic, but the sword would have none of it. It called out to the Lady, and she took her vengeance upon me. For five and twenty years I wasted away in a cold and lonely place, ever hungry and racked with pain. She brought me out to rescue Boudicea, in part to bring her here and in part to keep you from getting killed in some damned fool rescue attempt of your own."

"I didn't know that. Boudicea never told me how she escaped, and I never pressed her."

"It was no small thing, you know. That day cost me dearly, and I came here to sleep and regain my strength for one last deed before I pass on into eternity."

"What are you saying? You are Merlin. You cannot..."

"Die? Why else do you think I brought you here? Of course I can die. And it's about two centuries overdue."

"But what will Britannia do without Merlin?"

Merlin sat up from the table and grasped Ghyslain's head with both of his big, bony hands.

"Let us hope we never have to answer that question," Merlin said.

Ghyslain felt Merlin's fingers send the thoughts and deeds of a thousand lifetimes poured into his mind, like a river of time. The images of it all flashed before Ghyslain's vision in a torrent of sight. He could see no single thing as they rushed before him, yet he knew exactly what all of it was. It was the libraries of ancient civilizations. The wisdom of a dozen godheads. It was the vision between worlds. It was Gaian energy that filled Ghyslain like a chalice, burning his every fiber of being as it entered.

Merlin's grasp tightened. "Get ready for this next part," he said. "This is going to hurt."

Merlin's hands grew hot like glowing steel, and Ghyslain felt his flesh charring under them. He tried to pull Merlin's hands away, but the sorcerer was too strong. Even as his fingers flexed and shifted, they remained as like stone to Ghyslain, unmovable.

As he struggled with Merlin's hands, he felt his head where it was burning, and the skin there was unharmed. It still felt like he was being branded, but no mark was being made.

Ghyslain felt calm after that, and the tension left his body. The searing heat from Merlin turned into a sustaining warmth, like sitting near a fire after coming in from the cold.

Ghyslain closed his eyes and felt the arcane language of magic feed into him from a thousand different sources. But he also felt that same energy he'd felt during the Battle of Camelot rise within him. Before, it had given him the strength and fury to take Mordred's eye and slaughter his thralls. Now it would take every one of these streams of arcane lore and tie them into one, and drive them deep into his mind, where they would become part of him forever.

He would know how to change shape. He would know how to draw down the sky and raise the earth. He would be able to see into futures yet to happen and into pasts that never did. He would know that, and more.

Merlin released Ghyslain, and they both fell back. Merlin collapsed on the table once more, taking deep, ragged breaths. Ghyslain could hardly keep his balance, in part because of wooziness,

in part because many different voices chattered in his head, telling him things he suddenly knew yet had never heard before.

The color drained from Merlin's body and as it did, it raised in Ghyslain. Now he was the only thing aside from the house sigil that bore any hue in this gray place.

"Merlin," he said, taking the sorcerer by the shoulders. His body was now limp. "Merlin!"

"Don't shout, boy. I can still hear you just fine," came his voice in Ghyslain's head.

"What have you done to me?"

"Same thing that was done to me, and to my mentor before him, and on down the line back into the time before time."

Ghyslain looked at his hands. He still felt like he glowed, like he could send the searing energy within him out across the room to destroy whatever it touched. The thought of it terrified him. His simple life as a shepherd suddenly felt like a dozen destinies ago.

"I wouldn't have given you this responsibility if you couldn't have handled it," Merlin said. "Truth is, anybody else would have..."

"...burned up had I tried it with them," Ghyslain said, finishing the thought, realizing only then that there was no longer any division between where his thoughts ended and Merlin's began. He had a hundred questions for Merlin but he knew that somewhere in his crowded mind, he had the answers to them all.

"There is too much in my head," Ghyslain said, holding his head and crouching against the house wall.

"What I gave to you comes from the Lady. There is no spurning it," said Merlin. "I am dying, Ghyslain, and I have debts yet to be paid. Those debts cannot die with me, and so I found the one person in all of Britannia who could carry on in my place."

"I didn't ask for this!" Ghyslain shouted.

"You wouldn't have asked to get struck by a bolt of lightning, either, but it happens."

"I should not have to square whatever dealings you have with the Lady. I owe her nothing."

"You breathe her air. You walk on her earth. And you are sleeping with her servant, for whom she risked her very own life to rescue. You owe whatever she says you owe her."

Ghyslain exhaled, and his urge to fight left with his breath. "What must I do?"

"The list is long and mysterious," Merlin said, "and she may change it at any time. But mostly, you have two tasks before you.

The first is to see the son of Mordred and Boudicea to safety. You will know where to take him. There will be somebody there to receive him for you."

"What else?"

"When the boy grows to manhood, watch over him and be a better mentor to him than I was to Arthur. In the broad strokes, try to figure out how not to repeat my mistakes," he said. "Good luck with that, by the way."

"And what of Boudicea?"

Merlin shook his head slowly. "Where you must go, she cannot follow."

Boudicea stirred from her dreams and sat up in her bed. She reached for Ghyslain, only to find a cold and empty spot on the mattress. But she knew she was not alone.

"He is taking counsel with Merlin," Guenevere said. Cloaked and hooded, she sat in a corner chair, barely visible in the pre-dawn light.

Guenevere looked out the door as she had spoken, looking to the sorcerer's house, her lips pressed into a thin line. Boudicea slid off the mattress and looked for herself. Across the village center, Merlin's house glowed as if dawn was breaking behind its door and shuttered windows.

"What is happening to Ghyslain?" Boudicea asked, cradling her belly with her hands.

"Something irreversible."

"Mmm," Boudicea said. "When will I see him?"

"Sooner than you will like."

"Then I will wait," Boudicea said, sitting back on her bed.

Guenevere crossed her legs and gently removed her hood. Her green eyes glittered in the darkness. "You've never asked me about Lancelot," she said. "Why not?"

Boudicea shrugged. "Same reason why you never asked me about Mordred, maybe."

"One has nothing to do with the other."

The two sat together in the darkness as the light in Merlin's house danced from color to color.

"You know, I loved Lancelot the moment I saw him," Guenevere said. "It did not matter that I loved Arthur, or that I was mar-

ried to him. And I did not care what the consequences would be. I needed to be with Lancelot as much as I needed to breathe. I would have endured any hardship, broken any law."

"You love him still."

"Of course I do. As well as Arthur. That's what so few have ever understood about us. I never left one for the other. I loved them both, even though doing so would destroy us. It could never last, and yet the three of us tried to manage it anyway."

Boudicea shifted on the bed. "Arthur, my lady?"

Guenevere nodded. "He always knew. I was his wife, and Lancelot his best friend. The king was many things, but not a fool. He chose to share me with his friend, and..." Her voice trailed off.

"Why did Arthur punish him, then?"

"Gawain found us out and made Arthur choose between being a husband and being a king. That proved to be a far easier choice for him than I thought it would be."

"Had I known that," Boudicea said, "I might not have been so eager to fight for him."

"No, you did the right thing, Boudicea," Guenevere said. "Besides, I cannot complain too loudly. Banishment trumps execution."

"But if he showed you mercy, why didn't he show the same to Lancelot?"

Guenevere closed her eyes and raised her eyebrows. "He asked Lancelot to go into exile too, but he would not. Gawain tried to arrest him, but Lancelot escaped. Arthur and Gawain gave chase, but by the time they all met again in Brittany, it was too late for kindness. One of them had to die."

"What happened?"

"Lancelot died, that much I knew. I could feel it in my heart when his stopped beating. As for who killed him, I cannot say. Gawain never came home again, so I never learned his fate. As for Arthur, he never spoke of it afterwards, as far as I could tell. Of course by then I was in exile myself. Alone in Sherwood, I turned to the Lady, and it was her who kept my grief from destroying me. She gave me a purpose beyond Arthur, beyond being the Queen of Camelot."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I loved Arthur, and I loved Lancelot. But I didn't love either one enough to let them go. That's what ruined it," Guenevere said, and paused. "When Ghyslain leaves that house, he will no longer be who you remember. He will be Merlin, and Merlin will

be him, and the Lady will have tasked him with bringing your child far from here so he can grow into the champion that my husband never was."

Boudicea's calm expression did not change. "I know," she said, breathing carefully. "The Lady told me in my dreams. But what if I don't give him over?"

"The Lady could not force you to bear Mordred's child, and she cannot force you to give it up, either. Merlin's instructions are clear. He is to stay here until you give him your baby, and then both will be gone from you forever. The Lady suspects that Morgana already knows you are here. And what she knows, Mordred knows. He has already scoured the land looking for you, destroying entire villages so he might recapture the one woman who defied him."

"Does he know about..." her voice trailed off, but her hand unconsciously laid itself on her belly.

"No," Guenevere said. "At least, the Lady does not think so. Else, Sherwood would have come under siege."

"And why doesn't it?"

"This is the Lady's place. Morgana has little to gain and much to lose by destroying it, for that battle will cost her dearly, and she knows it. Besides, she can conquer the rest of Britannia without conquering Sherwood. So she lets this place be so long as we who live here do not force things otherwise."

"Arthur," she whispered.

"Would force things otherwise."

Tears came to Boudicea's eyes. "Perhaps I could go with him, then. To wherever Ghyslain would take him."

Guenevere shook her head. "You already shine out to Morgana like a beacon. That boy will, too. In Sherwood, you are both invisible to her. But that will not be so once you leave this forest. Out there, Ghyslain might be able to conceal one of you from Morgana, but not both."

"But he will have Merlin's power. He can cast a spell..."

"Boudicea, if you go together, Arthur will almost certainly fall into Mordred's hands," Guenevere said softly. "Your choice is much like mine. You can either keep both and lose everything, or you can let them go and..."

"And what?" Boudicea asked angrily. "Save the world?"

"I don't know," Guenevere said. "But you know more than anyone what Mordred is capable of."

The light in Merlin's house finally died away. Both Guenevere

and Boudicea watched Ghyslain open the door and emerge. Behind him, the old body of Merlin lay on the table, one arm hanging off the side.

"What would you do?" Boudicea asked.

Guenevere stood and drew her cloak around her.

"I never knew the gift of motherhood. It is my only regret," she said. "Were that baby mine, I would not give it up for anything."

"But you said..."

"I know what I said. I also know what I would do. But this is not my decision, Boudicea. It is yours, and whatever it may be, I will know it was the right thing to do."

She exited the house and would not look at Ghyslain as he approached.

Boudicea felt the baby kick hard, and a twinge of pain, long and deep. They had begun during her talk with Guenevere. It was time.

He entered the house. Boudicea looked in his eyes and knew he was different. Still Ghyslain, but something more than that. Something ancient and strange.

"Merlin is dead," he said, his voice both stronger and lower.

"And yet, here you are," Boudicea said, her voice cracking. "I will never see you again. Either of you."

He nodded sadly. "Only if you will it."

She brought him in close and held him. "I can't imagine going on without you."

He touched his head to hers and shared the memories of time to come, visions of the three of them making Guenevere's village their home, of growing old together.

She pulled her head away from him. "Don't," she sniffed. "Please, just go, Ghyslain. Go and never come back."

He placed his hand, which seemed larger now, on her stomach. Wherever his skin touched hers, she tingled.

"Close your eyes," he said softly. She did and softly fell into a dream she knew she would not remember.

Sometime later, Boudicea stirred from her sleep and sat up in bed. She reached for Ghyslain, only to find a cold and empty spot on the mattress. She turned down her covers and ran her hands across her flat belly, and over her smooth face that no longer bore any scars. She leapt to the door and looked at Merlin's house. The old sorcerer lay there, his hand hanging off the table.

She looked to the east and saw shafts of morning sunlight streaming through the forest canopy. Ghyslain had left. And her son, Arthur, was gone.

CHAPTER 3

FAR COUNTRY

Ghyslain held Arthur close to him as he neared the edge of Sherwood. The closer he came to open country, the wilder the wood became, more tangled, less inclined to let him pass. Fighting through the brambles, Ghyslain crossed the threshold between the forest and meadow.

Standing on wild grass, Ghyslain suddenly felt naked before Morgana's ever-watching eyes, and he knew he had to move quickly before she discovered him. He wondered if Mordred even knew he had son, but he soon cast that thought from his head. Ghyslain looked at Arthur, asleep in his arms, so tiny and helpless. The Elf King may have sired the boy, Ghyslain thought. But he will never be his father. That will fall to somebody else.

But who? Ghyslain knew it could not be him. The Lady's orders were specific: find a safe place for the boy and ensure his proper upbringing. His role was to stay away, returning only when the boy would need him. The thought of that pained Ghyslain, for as he thought of Boudicea, alone in Sherwood, he saw Arthur as his one link to her. He could never go back to her, and he would have to give up her son likewise. Ghyslain shook his head. There will be no family for the likes of you, he thought. There will not even be the dream of it.

Looking to the north, across the grassy hills, Ghyslain scanned the sky. A few soft clouds drifted through the blue, occasionally allowing sunbeams to break through them. A beautiful day, Ghyslain thought, expecting to see Morgana's eyes peering at him from behind the sky. Let's see how long it lasts.

Ghyslain closed eyes and called out to Sandalin, wherever he may be. He heard a distant whinny in his mind, and the staccato

thumping of hooves against the earth. He opened his eyes and saw the horse round a distant copse of trees, exiting Sherwood. Sandalin approached Ghyslain without a bit or bridle, but he stopped before him and whinnied once more.

Ghyslain stroked Sandalin's head and neck. "It is good to see you too, my friend. I have another favor to ask."

Sandalin shook his head and stamped one of his front hooves to the ground. No need to ask, it was telling him. I would take you to the heart of Arcadia.

Ghyslain smiled. "It may yet come to that."

Sandalin tossed his mane. Ha! There is no creature that can match me for speed in all of Britannia. There is none that can best me for endurance. And there is none that can stop me from running free wherever my heart may take me.

"Morgana herself will stand before us. There is nothing she will not do to prevent our passage."

I'd like to see her try.

Ghyslain mounted Sandalin in an easy leap, holding Arthur in one hand and steadying himself with his other hand on Sandalin's neck. "Me too, my friend. Me too."

Sandalin kicked off of the earth and began running through the open country at a steady, mortal gallop. He could run like this for a year without stopping, Ghyslain knew. Better to save his real speed for when they needed it.

That day, they rode without incident, passing through the south country. They stayed off the main roads, cutting across the hills and meadows instead, the ancient places where the memory of the Lady's strength was the greatest. They leapt over streams and brooks, and where a river crossed their path, Ghyslain enchanted the water so Sandalin might run across it as if it were sand.

It was on the second day that they saw dark birds circling distant columns of smoke. Ghyslain reached into Merlin's memories and summoned a map of the country. He could see on it his position and the name of every city, town and village on the great island. This was once the promised land for Lord Arthur's subjects, the sweet interior of Albion where they would be safe from invaders, pestilence and turmoil. Now those settlements were being put to the torch as Mordred's armies emptied them of people and drove them to Camelot for enslavement. Nothing of their former lives would be allowed to remain. The places they lived would be burned to the ground and scattered to the wind. The stones of their homes and roads would sink into the earth, overgrown and

forgotten. The monuments to past glories would be shattered and cast apart. The very existence of Arthur's realm would not just be destroyed. It would be unmade. And those who lived in it would one day forget that they had ever sworn allegiance to the Once and Future King.

Ghyslain wanted to pull Sandalin hard toward one of the burning villages, to blast the Arcadian thralls who were leading off Arthur's people in chains and to let them know that their king still lived. But then Boudicea's child stirred in his arms, crying a little before settling back into a deep and contented sleep. This is no time for stupid heroics, Ghyslain thought. This is about him. He will help them in ways you cannot. But only if you get him to safety. Only if you do that.

He checked the boy to make sure that the charm of sustenance he had placed on him that morning had not faded. When he saw that it hadn't, he breathed a sigh of relief. There was no telling how a spell like this would work on a subject so young, especially when the caster scarcely knew what he was doing. But for the coming days, young Arthur would have a full belly and heavy eyelids, so all Ghyslain would have to concern himself with was delivering the child into sanctuary.

But where? Ghyslain closed his eyes and drew forth the memories of Merlin and those that came before him. Again he summoned the map of Britannia and focused on Camelot. The great city showed like an amber stain on the page, one that was slowly spreading across the land, to cover all of the island and beyond. Already the map showed that tendrils of the Arcadian city had reached the southern shores and were extending through the Channel to the kingdoms of Brittany, Gaul, and the Broken Coast of a dozen other Gallic fiefdoms.

There was a special energy coming off Camelot, and Ghyslain drew it in, absorbing its taste, its feel. He projected that same energy back into the map and whispered, "Show me their faces."

Across Britannia, smaller amber stains blotted the landscape, as if the map had been set upon a tabletop splashed with honey wine that soaked through in a hundred different places. These were the thralltowns, the slave camps where Britannia's own had been marshaled until their final journey to Camelot and from there, to Arcadia.

Many of the amber areas faded at the edges, often overlapping with other thralltowns. The southern shires as well as the shale-strewn provinces of the west were entirely covered by Arcadian

presence with the exception of Sherwood, but its isolation had reduced it to nothing more than a place for its inhabitants to wait until Morgana's spell over the land was broken.

To the north, there were the great Roman walls that past emperors had built to divide the land. Beyond these, there appeared a few breaks in the landscape, but still, more land was under the Arcadian blight than not. And where things looked clear, Ghyslain knew it was only because there had been no people there to begin with.

Even in the northernmost reaches of the highlands, there stood no ready refuge for himself or the boy. Every town and village, every castle and stronghold, every holy place and sage's tower was either under Morgana's power or would fall to it very soon. In just four years, Morgana and the Elf King had enslaved the entire country.

Ghyslain looked toward Europa, where the foul arm of Camelot was reaching. But then he shook his head. Lord Arthur had no friends in the French kingdoms, not after what happened to Lancelot. Germania was becoming without any authority at all, and where Nova Roma and its sister kingdom of Byzantium held sway, the heroes of Britannia were foes of the realm. There were the Hundred Kingdoms, between Germania and the fiefdoms of Muscovy, but they had all turned to fighting once freed of Arthur's authority. Which among them would want to harbor a symbol of their uncomfortable past? There was always the Ninth Dynasty in the land of the pharaohs, as well as the Saracen Caliphates south of Iberia, but for their great distance, they might as well have been on the far side of eternity.

He turned back to Britannia proper and looked again at the map. All of Eire glowed amber. The division between this world and Arcadia had always been weak there, and Morgana's mischief had removed any separation that lingered. Fell energies were stirring there that were not Morgana's doing, but no doubt were awakened by her mischief. There had been told stories of things grimmer than men and more ancient than faeries that once ruled the isle of Eire. Their time had returned, it seemed.

The Isle of Man, the Kingdom of the Hebrides, and the little spits in the Channel all remained free, but that could not last much longer. They were surrounded by Arcadian territory and the only thing in their favor was that they did not have enough people to gain a slaver's notice. But that would change.

You must take the boy somewhere distant and safe, a voice in

Ghyslain's head told him. He looked over the map once more, beginning to despair. Wherever he went, there would be Mordred's agents in pursuit and Morgana's magic to contend with. Then he remembered that there were ancient places in Britannia where forces older than Morgana might dwell. Was there any power left to them?

No. The old tors and standing stones all had been countered. Drawn off by Morgana's fey lines or simply destroyed by Mordred's thralls. The great stone henge of the southern country, once the finest portal between Gaia and the living world, now lay in pieces, its majesty shattered, its power despoiled.

I cannot run forever, Ghyslain thought. Where can I... what's this?

His eyes fell to the northern edge of Britannia and beyond, to what the highlanders liked to call the far country. In the Caledonian Sea stood the Orkney, Shetland and Faroe islands, like markers beckoning the way for Nordheim outlanders and their dragon ships. Even now, Ghyslain imagined they were still sailing from their home ports above the Danelaw, skirting Britannia and heading west across the ocean, and to the wondrous new world beyond that only they seemed to believe was really there.

The Faroes were clean of Arcadian taint, but they were so far north that to get there would require a ship and a crew and a stopover at the Orkneys first. They were also largely free of that dreaded amber mark, but they stood close enough to Britannia that it would be a small matter for Mordred to cross the divide. For now, perhaps Mordred's soldiers only roamed and patrolled, and in another year, would finally lay claim to the islands.

He studied the Orkneys more closely. There, on the western shore of the western island shone a tiny place, like a signal light in the misty sea, guiding him to safety. It was so clear, so perfect, he scarcely believed he had not thought of it before or seen it until now. It was the last of the ancient places, bound to laws before nature or magic. And for the moment, it was immune to Morgana's charms, hidden from her prying eyes by powers far older and more mysterious than Arcadian magic. She could never besiege the place as long as she could not find it. It would be the perfect spot for Arthur to grow into manhood, to disappear so that his enemies might forget about him. For him to become the avenger Britannia so sorely needed.

"Skara Brae," Ghyslain whispered to Sandalin, half afraid Morgana might somehow overhear him. "That is where we must go."

Sandalin shook his head and stomped a hoof. After all, Ghyslain had asked the impossible of him.

"Fear not, my friend," Ghyslain said. "We will do this together."

Sandalin reared back and neighed loudly. If you insist, spellcaster.

The charger dug his hooves into the earth and exploded into motion, turning the ground into a green blur beneath him. He crossed miles of open country in minutes, all while Ghyslain scanned the sky for signs that Morgana was watching.

He did not have to look hard. They had scarcely finished crossing the south country when her presence appeared high above the clouds, behind the sky, seeing everything that happened in Britannia. To the common eye, there would seem to be nothing, but after Merlin's communion with him, Ghyslain could not look skyward and see anything else.

She focused on him and Sandalin, and a heavy weight developed in his mind. "Where are you going?" said a voice that matched Guenevere's for presence and charm. Only this was different. With every breathy syllable, it beckoned him to set aside this bothersome mission of his and give himself over to her for endless relief and the pleasures of the flesh.

Pay her no mind, Ghyslain thought, tightening his hold onto both Arthur and Sandalin. He concentrated on the boy. Draw a line around him, he thought to himself over and over.

"Your journey takes you too far," Morgana whispered into his deepest thoughts. "There is no need for you to run, Ghyslain. Except to me."

Her image began to emerge from the back of his mind, dominating everything he saw. He squeezed his eyes shut, but in the darkness, her naked flesh became the only thing he could see. Lithe and strong, she walked towards him, her white breasts and stomach filling his vision. Her long, raven hair danced around her head and shoulders, tossed by a silent breeze. About her neck she wore a heavy bronze torc inscribed with ancient sigils. A girdle of the same make wrapped low around her wide hips, and from it hung a skirt of gauzy material that swayed like mist off the sea. Her pale violet eyes were like northern ice, and he could not stop looking into them.

"Come to me," she whispered, touching his face with her fingertips.

Feeling his will eroding before her, Ghyslain thought of fire and directed it to his left arm, which was hanging onto Sandalin.

Let it burn you, he thought.

A small green flame sparked and sizzled on his forearm, causing him enough pain to dash the vision of Morgana from his mind and to focus on the real world around him. That was too close, he thought.

"Do not hold back," he shouted to Sandalin. "Morgana is upon us!"

Sandalin said nothing. He simply lowered his head and doubled his speed, his hooves hitting so hard as to ripple the ground. Then he doubled his speed again.

Foam flecked from his lips as he ran harder than he had ever done before. Britannia blurred into a dream before Ghyslain as he navigated by his memory of the map in his head. They had left the south country and threaded through the highlands, dodging the thralltowns as they went, dashing past Arcadian patrols when they had to. They were going so fast that they were out of bowshot by the time any of their hunters even knew they had a target to fire at.

Sandalin could not go like this forever, Ghyslain knew. It was just as well, because he still had no idea what to do when they reached the ocean. As they crossed the highlands, Ghyslain steered Sandalin to one of the long lochs in their path. The shorter ones Sandalin could simply leap over or go around. But Ghyslain had to see if what he had in mind would work.

They approached the long, dark shoreline, Ghyslain enchanted water as far as his magic's sense would let him. Without missing a step, Sandalin blasted along the loch's surface, kicking up beads of solid water which hung in the air afterwards like pearls suspended in time.

As they crossed the loch, Ghyslain drew up his enchantment behind them, and the lake water dropped to the surface, splashing into little rings. Ghyslain both withdrew the enchantment behind them and extended it before them, fashioning a path of walking water that followed Sandalin and nothing else.

"Do not be a fool, Ghyslain. You cannot prevail." Morgana said inside his mind. "Behold the peace I have made for Britannia. Look into our future and see the darkness that will never end, and you will know the folly of your struggle."

Unbidden, the images of the transformed Camelot rushed into Ghyslain's head. It was everything Merlin had seen when he rescued Boudicea, but it was so much more. It was the end of Britannia, the victory of Arcadia. The Pax Morgana. And for

a thousand lifetimes would it endure.

Ghyslain lost his concentration for a moment, and one of Sandalin's hooves nearly fell through a thin spot in Ghyslain's enchantment. The horse bellowed. Get your head straight, Ghyslain.

He cast out Morgana's images of an endless city of darkness, of the vast legions of the transformed, of the slow defeat of Europa. He kept only the transforming water below Sandalin's hooves in mind. After a few seconds more, they hit the hard earth, and he let his enchantment go. He fell forward, against Sandalin's neck, breathing hard and feeling sweat rolling down his face. That jaunt over the water was not even a mile, he thought to himself. We will never make it to Skara Brae.

They approached the windswept northern coast, beyond which the roiling sea stood between them and the Isles of Orkney. Sandalin did not slow down at all, despite his hard breathing.

"I cannot turn the water as I did before!" Ghyslain said. "I do not have the strength."

Making water so unlike itself is hard, Sandalin said. Why not try something more natural?

Ghyslain smiled. Of course!

They came to a rocky cliff, and Ghyslain guided Sandalin ride over its edge, into the air. He summoned forth a mighty wind that swirled beneath Sandalin's hooves and held them aloft as he ran.

Riding the sky? The horse thought. This hasn't been done since the ancient days.

A few leagues off the shore, the sky turned black. The wind beneath Sandalin's hooves became a howling gale, and the horse had difficulty keeping his stride. Suddenly, it felt like he was running into ditches and over steep hills both at once. Ghyslain marshaled all of his strength just to maintain his enchantment as well as his grip on the sleeping infant in his arms.

The storm clouds split open, and claps of thunder shook them from all sides, buffeting them like hammer blows. Sandalin endured the punishment, but he was slowing to a standstill, blown back by Morgana's storm winds.

Just as they were suspended in the sky, bolts of blue lightning cracked before them, dancing from cloud to cloud, ringing them with electricity. Behind it glared Morgana's deep vision. In the wind, Ghyslain could hear her speak. "Never have I seen one such as you so eager to die. Must you persist in fighting me? Surely you know I cannot allow you go any further."

"Then let there be a first time for everything," he said. He closed

his mind to her and reached out in his thoughts to the crackling energy that threatened to consume him. He drew it in close, tamed it, and made it his own.

The lightning hung in the air, still writhing and spitting sparks, and it coiled into a path on which Sandalin's hooves found solid ground. Whinnying in triumph, he rode the lightning through the storm, regaining his lost speed and flying over the Caledonian sea, towards Orkney.

The storm lasted all the way to the land, and Ghyslain guided Sandalin to the western shore of the archipelago's big central island, letting the lightning spin away as they did. Branches of it raked by him and Sandalin, but they bounced off an unseen barrier that ringed them both.

"Nicely played," Morgana said. "When you make your trip back home, you will find me waiting for you."

"I'll only be more ready for you then than I am now," Ghyslain said.

"No doubt," Morgana said. "Only the Merlin could have worked a spell like you did just now. That means the old hermit is gone, and his secrets are yours."

"They are."

"Then you must know what Merlin has seen, the scope of my great city of darkness. That is the only future Britannia has left, so why must you resist it? Why do you torture yourself with false hope?"

"Hope is something you wouldn't understand," Ghyslain said.

"Don't be so sure. Why else conquer Britannia as I have, if not to chase the dream of endless peace? Of an age where my magic can provide for all? There will be no hurt in my world, Ghyslain. No need for fear. No suspicion. Just endless plenty and an immortal peace that only I can provide. Think on that until we meet again."

What did she say? He thought. What did she mean?

Suddenly, the storm cleared, its fury spent. Sandalin descended through the sky and his hooves touched the earth of the big western island of Orkney. He landed with strength and grace, galloping a few times to dispel the momentum he had gained from his flight. At last, he stopped for the first time since he had begun his run from Sherwood. Ghyslain had lost track of how long a journey it had been, and for all he knew, Morgana had halted them in time as well as in distance during that terrible storm in the sky. But he knew it would have been impossible to prevail if not for

Sandalin's speed and strength. He stroked the charger's head in thankfulness, and Sandalin softly neighed in return.

He dismounted and felt his feet hit the ancient earth beneath him. There was an energy here that would protect them, as he had thought. Something older than Morgana, older than the Lady, and beholden to neither of them. This was unfamiliar territory, but it was still a free land, and that was enough.

Ghyslain felt Arthur stir a little in his arms, and remembered the words of Morgana, which still echoed in his memory. "Despair," she still said, whispering from a distance. And in his heart grew that seed of doubt he hoped would never take root. But not knowing the future troubled him. For the first time, Ghyslain questioned the purpose of his mission, and the evil of Morgana's dream. Would it be so bad to live without fear or hunger, once her terrible work was done? Would it be so bad, once the fighting ended, to live without the burden of hopelessness or impending death? Would it be so bad to surrender, and to finally know the peace that came with it?

Ghyslain looked upon Arthur. This boy could undo all of that. And Ghyslain, for a moment, could not be sure if that was what he wanted. He thought of dashing the boy against the rocks, of throwing his lifeless body to the sea, and of tearing his shirt open and screaming to the sky for Morgana to come and take him, to ease his pain. He thought of all of these things, and in some far-off place, he could sense Morgana's happiness. She loved him for what he contemplated, and even as he cast such thoughts from his head, he could feel her pleasure lingering, knowing that he would return to her eventually. He had no choice but to return.

Ghyslain held Arthur tight to him and tears came to his eyes. He thought of Boudicea and of the Lady and of Bors and Arthur. He thought of a Camelot that shined in the morning sun, of a Round Table that brought joy to the hearts of free men. He thought of a time in which hope reigned supreme.

And it was that which cast a small light back into his heart and dispelled his fears of Arcadian days to come. Hope is the one thing she fears, he thought. He looked upon Arthur's little face as he boy slept. This boy was hope itself. And that was worth fighting for.

Once Arthur's charm of sustenance wore off, the boy began crying as all babies do, for food, for mother, for want of fresh dressings. It was all a bit new for Ghyslain, who somehow knew the way to ride lightning but had no clue how to deal with the endless and changing demands of a newborn.

Reaching back into his trove of memories, he finally found the imprint of an ancient herbalist with thirteen children who had once taught Merlin the way to brew a potion of bickering bones. She hadn't taught Merlin anything on caring for children, but Merlin could not help but notice certain things as he stayed with her, like how and when the little ones wanted to be fed, what it took to calm them, how to keep the peace between them.

Ghyslain cleaned Arthur and put him in fresh swaddling he had brought from Sherwood. He also fed him a little mother's milk he'd conjured, but he had no idea what made mother's milk mother's milk, so he was unsure of how well Arthur would take to it. Stroking the child on the head, Ghyslain then whispered a Lemurian folk song sung to little boys since long before that land vanished from the earth. It worked enough for the child to go back to sleep, but Ghyslain knew the boy needed proper care, and soon.

Ghyslain and Sandalin walked north, across the rough country of the Orkney mainland, as they called it, through its scattered, thin scrublands and over its windy meadows. Everywhere the smell of salt and the crashing of waves reminded Ghyslain that the ocean was near. On an island this small, one might be forgiven for having difficulty telling if Orkney had recently risen up from the water, or if it was enjoying its last days before being reclaimed by it. But Ghyslain knew different. On every rock, on every tree, under every hill were the subtle but unmistakable signs that the island was one of those rare places crafted by an immortal arrangement between the earth, sea and wind: the earth would make this place displace the sea no further, and the sea would not smash it back into sand. And high overhead, the wind would see that both sides honored their arrangements.

Ghyslain crested a low hill and saw the western coast ahead of him by a mile or more. By the cliffs stood a town of ancient stone buildings arranged in a pattern of concentric circles-houses, shops and meeting places all in rings surrounding a single, massive courtyard. And in that was the ruined foundation of what once must have been a great stone tower. Most of the buildings were covered in moss or lichens, chipped along their edges, crack-

ing. The ancient burden of time wore heavily on the place, and one day soon it would prevail.

"Skara Brae," Ghyslain said to himself. The city built on the bones of the world.

As he approached the low, gated wall that surrounded the town, Ghyslain felt the weight of being watched. But as he looked about, he saw nobody.

His foot was about to pass through the gate when a voice emerged from the ground behind him. "Hold."

Ghyslain stopped and turned around. Behind him stood a dozen men and women, all wearing long, hooded cloaks, tunics and leggings woven from gray wool. They were the color of stone, and as far as Ghyslain could tell, they had risen from the surrounding rocks like shadows out of darkness. None of them carried any weapons. Ghyslain got the feeling that none of them really needed to.

"This place is closed to you," said an old man at the head of the group. His hair was a wild tangle of matted locks braided and closed off with small stone rings. His eyes were a milky white, as if blind.

"I have come here at the behest of the Lady," Ghyslain said, holding up Arthur. "I have been tasked with finding safe refuge for this child."

"Then look elsewhere," the elder said. "This place will take no more visitors."

"Perhaps you misheard me. I have been sent here by the Lady."

"We answer to an older power than the likes of her. We are the speakers of the stones, and on this island, it is our word that is law."

Ghyslain swallowed. "Do you know who I have in my arms?"

The elder looked at the bundle and approached Ghyslain. As he drew close to Arthur, Sandalin shifted his footing nervously. The elder looked at the charger, and whispered something in a language Ghyslain could not understand. Whatever it was, Sandalin was calmed by it.

"I am the Gatekeeper of this city, and these are my sentinels," the elder said as he pulled back the bundle cloth enough to expose Arthur's face. "We know all who mean to enter it." He lightly traced one of his rough fingers across the infant's forehead, and then drew back his hand as if it had been burned.

"He is not welcome here!" the Gatekeeper hissed. The tension in his frame and the hostility in his voice urged the other elders

with him to all close in before Ghyslain, forming a wall. Stone-bladed spears formed in their hands, pointing inwards at Ghyslain and the child in his arms.

"If you know who he is," Ghyslain said, "then you know why I brought him here."

"Skara Brae has already received too many who fled Britannia when the Pendragon fell. Dark tidings have come to your island, but your troubles are your own. We want no further part of them."

"This child is the only hope Britannia has left!" Ghyslain shouted. "He has nowhere else to go!"

"Indeed. But he will not bring Morgana's wrath here, sorcerer," the Gatekeeper said. He looked up and away a little, as if seeking answers from the sky. "Your predecessor would have understood that."

"You knew him?"

"We knew of him. This place held no promise for him, just as it holds no promise for you, so he never made the trip across the water."

"How could you tell that I have bonded with Merlin?"

The Gatekeeper grinned. "How could I not? The power shines off of you, boy. It would be like not seeing a fire at night."

"My lord, you must understand that Skara Brae is the only place left on these islands where Morgana's power will not reach. It is invisible to her and to the soldiers of her son. I am begging you to accept this boy into your ranks and keep him safe until I can come back for him."

The Gatekeeper shook his head. "Morgana cannot see us because we do not make ourselves visible. And though our magic is strong, what makes you think that she will not notice here the heir of her son? What makes you think he will not come here with ten thousand soldiers and kill every one of us? That he will not destroy our rings of stone, our tower of ages?"

"I will fight you if I must," Ghyslain said, remembering the fire that ran through him when he defended the walls of Camelot. It would not be so hard to do it again. To reach forth and punch a hole in this doddering old man before him...

"You will find us not so easy to kill, youngling," the Gatekeeper said. "The Lady trains her whelps poorly for them to think they can battle into Skara Brae. None may enter save those who are invited. Mordred's army might contest that, but you?" The old man laughed a dry, raspy sound through missing teeth. "You?" he laughed again.

The ring of spears inched inward.

"They cut more than flesh and bone," the Gatekeeper said, pointing a knobby finger at the spearheads as if he was counting them. These will cut the silver cord of your soul and set you adrift between worlds. You and the boy deserve better fates than that, I think."

The Gatekeeper nodded slightly, and the ring of spears retreated. "Now leave," he said.

The tension went out of Ghyslain's shoulders. He tenderly drew Arthur's wrappings close again and turned from the gate. Sandalin followed.

"Go back across the water and tell the Lady not to presume favors from the Far Country," the Gatekeeper said, his voice fading as he spoke. Ghyslain looked over his shoulder as the last words trailed off, and none of the elders were standing there anymore. It was then that Ghyslain realized that Skara Brae was a ghost town. There was not a single living person in or around its pitted, weathered buildings. There were no animals, no sounds of crafting, none of the business that made Sherwood such a lively place. The only sounds of Skara Brae were the crashing waves from beyond the cliff, the wind, and the lonely cry of a single sea-bird that circled overhead.

Ghyslain retreated from the bluff and went back into one of the scrubby forests he had passed through on his way out. He made camp, gathering only dead wood that had fallen from living trees and built a fire from it as night fell. The cold came in hard and fast, an ocean chill as the night wind picked up and drew off most of the flames' heat.

Ghyslain held Arthur close to him as the baby began crying. Then, after a time that felt far longer than it actually was, Arthur fell asleep once more, and Ghyslain sat in the darkness, watching the fire wane and its smoke curl upward into the clear night sky.

His mind reeled. His mission was clear, as was the only place where he could hope to accomplish it. Just as clear was the fact that Skara Brae was closed to him.

He watched the sky for hours, seeing it grow darker by degrees. He intended to stay there until morning and try to enter again in the hope that somehow, things would be different. Only he knew it could not. Skara Brae was closed to him, and no feat of might or magic would ever open it. Not for him, and not for Arthur. His mission had come to an end, one he had never planned for.

Ghyslain raged at the thought of failure. Surely the Lady knew

what she was asking when she gave him this task. But she also must have known the trouble he would face. Why did she set such an impossible task before him?

I need a sign, Ghyslain thought. Please, show me what I am supposed to do. I...what was that?

Ghyslain and Sandalin heard it at the same time, a rustle of moving branches as something made its way through the forest. Sandalin's muscles twitched with pent-up energy. Ghyslain held Arthur and strained to detect more clearly what was coming toward them. He did not feel the presence of Mordred or Morgana, but that didn't mean that whatever approached was friendly. After a tense minute or two of listening, the sound turned into slow, heavy footfalls, and Sandalin suddenly brightened and shook his mane as if he knew who was coming.

A knight entered the campsite, and in an instant, Ghyslain could see that he wore heavy armor in the styling of Camelot, though there was none of the colored enamel he had seen on Bors and Kay. Instead, every plate had been engraved with silver lines tracing the path of endless ivy vines and their leaves. The metal within each leaf had been made green somehow. The vines had been made brown. The rest of the armor was a light, flat gray. It was in bad shape, though, battered by a dozen battles and encrusted here and there with blackened blood. The helmet had an open face with long cheek guards and an equally long nosepiece in the front. The sides flared back to form small wings, and the crest was topped with a single graceful ridge that went all the way to the wearer's neck.

The knight had a thick face with an unruly, overgrown beard made up of coarse, coppery hair. His beard covered the lower half of his face, against which his eyes seemed entirely too small. It was as if his body had kept growing after it should have stopped, making him crowded against himself.

He wore a long sword on his belt, its handle carved from pure ivory, its pommel studded with a large, polished tooth from a great beast. The scabbard was a single piece of carved bronze-wood, though much of its lacquer had been lost. He wore his long, narrow shield on his arm, and on its surface stood the green and white checkers of his family's crest, which in the center held a green version of the great Pendragon, bounded by wreathes of ivy.

Ghyslain knew him on sight to be Gawain, but the recognition came from Merlin's memory, not his own. Still, it gladdened

him to see the old hero, if only for a moment before the old questions came back. Where had Gawain been? Why had he deserted Camelot when it needed him most? And why did he kill Lancelot? But even these paled before the most pressing question of all: what was he doing here?

Gawain neared the fire and gave Ghyslain a long look. At last, he removed his helmet, revealing a mop of copper hair that matched his beard. One of his ears had been deformed from what Ghyslain guessed was an old grappling injury. In fact, most of Gawain's face probably gained its lumpy look from a life of combat. He might have been a handsome man, once.

"You have the look of Merlin upon you," Gawain said in a deep and throaty voice. "Do you have a name?"

"Ghyslain."

"I reckon you know who I am, then?"

"You're Gawain."

"Mmm," Gawain said more to himself than to Ghyslain. He looked around the site and unslung a leather bag from his back. He opened it and began rummaging through, pulling forth a slab of salted jerky. "I've been living off this stuff for weeks. Any chance you've got something different?"

Ghyslain looked at him, silent. "I'm sorry, I don't."

"Damn," Gawain muttered. The knight took a big bite from the leathery strip and chewed for a minute, exhaling heavily through his nose and looking off into the trees, but at nothing at all. "Still, that beats no eating at all, eh? Eating's the third best part of life."

Ghyslain's mind was racing with a dozen different things to ask Camelot's last living hero. But none of them came to the surface, leaving him only with, "What are the other two?" which he regretted the moment it escaped his lips.

"Women. Fighting."

"You make it sound like they are the same thing," Ghyslain said.

"Always been that way for me," Gawain said with a shrug.

"Where have you been all of this time?" Ghyslain began.

"France," Gawain said.

A few quiet seconds passed between them as Gawain took another bite and Ghyslain searched for something to say.

"After the battle, Arthur left me behind," Gawain said. "Not that I was all that keen to return home."

The battle, Ghyslain thought. When Lancelot died.

"Is it true you caught Lancelot and Guenevere together?"

Gawain nodded. "You ask like you haven't heard."

"There were stories, but I never knew which were just talk."

"Chances are, they were all true, a little."

"Did you really do it? Did you kill Lancelot?"

Gawain nodded slowly. "Some say Arthur did," he said, looking into the fire. "In a way, I suppose that's true. But Lancelot's blood is on my hands."

"Why'd you do it?" Ghyslain blurted. "Did he really have to die?"

A gloomy look crossed Gawain's face. "I have asked myself that every day since I killed him."

"And have you found an answer yet?"

Gawain swallowed his food and then shook his head. "I'm hoping Skara Brae can help me with that."

"Good luck to you. They would not admit me."

"Of course not. You're not one of them."

"Them?"

"The Order of Stone. Elementalists. They keep to the old ways. None of this stuff of kings and courts. And definitely no magic. Least ways, what you'd consider spellcraft. Their ways are as old as the world, and they aim to keep it like that."

"So why should they allow you into their city?"

"My people and theirs, they go back a bit," Gawain said, tearing off another piece of jerky. "Plus, I helped them out a few times. Repelling pirates, mostly. Killed a dragon for them once."

"A...a dragon?"

Gawain nodded. "Just a small one."

Behind Ghyslain, Arthur stirred. Gawain immediately took notice and looked angrily at Ghyslain. "One that little has no business traveling way out here."

"Agreed. But I have to take him to Skara Brae. I have no choice."

"That your child, then?"

"No," Ghyslain said as he picked Arthur up and held him close. "It is Mordred's."

Gawain nearly choked on his food as he instinctively stood away from the fire and drew his sword. Its steel rang as it came free of its wooden scabbard.

"The boy is no threat to you, Gawain."

"Does Mordred know you have him? Where did you get him? How..."

"This is Arthur, son of Boudicea and Mordred, birthed in the freehold of Sherwood under the care of Guenevere." Gawain

flinched when he heard Guenevere's name. Some wounds, it seemed, still ran deep.

"Mordred is the father?" Gawain asked, apparently only hearing half of what Ghyslain was saying.

"After Camelot fell, Mordred took Boudicea prisoner and stole her maidenhood. She chose to grow heavy with child, knowing that the boy in her womb carried the blood of your cousin and of our late king. She did this at the request of the Lady, who sent Merlin to rescue her and deliver her to Sherwood. She stays there still."

"Strong woman, this Boudicea," Gawain said, sheathing his sword.

"There are none stronger," Ghyslain said. "She was Bors' shield maiden, and I fought by her side at the last battle of Camelot. I would have stayed with her to raise this boy afterwards, but I was tasked to do otherwise."

"Figure you were supposed to be the father, eh?" Gawain said, nodding to himself. "It's never easy when you can't have the one you want, is it?"

"What would you know of it?"

Gawain looked at the young sorcerer and shifted his jaw. "Enough." He motioned to the child. "You're taking him to Skara Brae, then?"

"I am."

"The Order won't suffer the likes of you knocking on their door. They will kill you both if you try their patience once more."

"The boy and I are dead if we do not gain sanctuary. Morgana already knows we are here. It is only a matter of time before Mordred's soldiers, if not the Elf King himself, come calling."

Gawain spat. "He's calling himself that, is he?"

Ghyslain nodded.

"Arrogant little bastard," Gawain said, snorting. "Never did like him much."

Ghyslain sat back a little as the fire cracked loudly. Gawain looked at Arthur through the glow of the flames. "Seems a waste," he said of the boy, and of Skara Brae. "Are you sure there is no other way?"

"I swore an oath to bring him there," Ghyslain said. "No small thing, that," Gawain murmured. The big knight looked at his steel gauntlets, heavy and dented through the trials of war. Their knuckles were tipped with flanges for tearing flesh. Their plates had felt the blood of a thousand men wash over them. Their fin-

gertips had grasped a dozen weapons of legend.

Gawain took off the metal gloves and let them hit the ground. "Give him to me," he said softly.

Gawain motioned to Ghyslain, who gave over the child. Gawain held the tiny boy in his huge, armored arms with a surprising sense of tenderness, Ghyslain noticed. He had thought Gawain incapable of holding a rock without crushing it.

"You don't have to do this, Gawain," Ghyslain said.

Gawain looked up, his eyes reddening. "Yes I do."

"I cannot thank you enough," Ghyslain said, feeling a ten-stone weight lift from his shoulder. "That boy is Britannia's final hope."

"No blood courses greater with the goodness of men than that of the Pendragon," Gawain said, sniffing. "But no blood can be so wicked, either. This boy may do both before his ghost haunts the world. Just like his forefathers. Just like his uncle."

It did not have to be that way, Ghyslain thought. Were they all really so doomed to repeat their failures and frailties?

"He must become more than a man, Gawain. And more than a king," Ghyslain said. "He cannot falter as we do."

Gawain nodded. "I know," he whispered.

"Swear to me, Gawain, that you will raise him to meet the task he was born to."

Gawain cleared his throat and looked Ghyslain in the eye. "On my blood and the blood of those before me, I swear it," he said quietly. "The house of Pendragon will rise again."

"The house of Pendragon is dead," Ghyslain said. "Only Britannia remains."

Gawain nodded and understood. "Then let him serve that."

Gawain carried Arthur as he and Ghyslain broke camp the next morning. Sandalin walked with them over the flat country leading to Skara Brae. As they crested the hill leading to the outer wall, Gawain looked beyond it and over the shoreline in the distance. "I have missed this place," he said.

When they approached the stone gate, the Gatekeeper and his circle of guards appeared before them, as if stepping out from behind an invisible screen. Ghyslain pondered such a cunning enchantment and wondered what secrets Skara Brae contained within the stone circles beyond.

"We told you to leave," the Gatekeeper said to Ghyslain. Once more, spears appeared in the guards' hands, and they all pointed at him and Gawain. Ghyslain instinctively moved back, but Gawain would have none of it. He strode forward and grabbed the spear nearest to him with his free hand. He jerked it away from its owner as if it had been held by nothing. The guard gaped as Gawain drove the spear into the ground, point-first.

"Subtle as ever," the Gatekeeper said. "To what do we owe the honor of your presence, Lord Gawain?"

"My friend tells me you made him feel unwelcome," Gawain said, walking closer to the Gatekeeper. The other guards followed Gawain with their spears, but the Gatekeeper waved them off. One by one, the guards watched Gawain approach their lord bearing nothing more than a child in his arms.

The Gatekeeper faced Gawain, looking at him through his milky, sightless eyes. "I do not forget how much we owe you. But your friend cannot ask of us what would spell our doom."

"Without me, your doom would have come to pass long ago, old man," Gawain said. "It might still come about anyway." As he spoke, he shifted his eyes towards the ring of guards, sizing them up. "If you're going to press the issue, it will cost you."

The Gatekeeper nodded. "All this way you have come, and still you speak of bloodshed. Is it not enough that you killed your lord's best friend? That you sparked the fall of his reign?"

Gawain blanched.

"And for what?" the Gatekeeper asked. "All because you could not have Gue..."

"That will do," Gawain said.

The Gatekeeper stood before him, silent, waiting.

"I spoke too harshly of you before," Gawain paused, as if he was trying to pronounce words from another language. "Forgive me."

"It was not so long ago that you would not have found the strength for that," the Gatekeeper said, grinning slightly.

"Everything changes," Gawain said. "Even those who know not how."

"Then come inside, Gawain. We have much to discuss." The Gatekeeper looked up at the sky disapprovingly. "Already, we have lingered outside too long."

"Thank you," Gawain said, bowing and holding Arthur with both hands. "But what of..."

"You may bring the boy and the sorcerer, but I cannot promise

that they will stay. Now come."

Gawain looked back at Ghyslain and motioned with his eyes to follow. Ghyslain walked with Sandalin and caught up to the knight. Together, they walked after the Gatekeeper, who hobbled to the entrance of Skara Brae and passed through it, vanishing as he went.

"Don't stop. Don't look back," Gawain said to Ghyslain as they reached the threshold. "You'll get lost between worlds, otherwise."

Ghyslain nudged Sandalin to go forward, but the charger would not.

"What's wrong?" Ghyslain asked.

I cannot go any farther, Sandalin responded. The magic of this place prevents me.

Ghyslain dismounted and patted Sandalin on the neck. "Then I will see you here when I return."

Go safely my friend, Sandalin whinnied to Ghyslain in a language only the young sorcerer would ever hear or understand. Go safely.

Gawain disappeared as he went through. Ghyslain followed, expecting to meet some kind of invisible force to hold him back, but instead, he moved forward without difficulty. As he did, what he saw changed before him, as if a mist cleared with each footstep, transforming the view of Skara Brae. Where stood an abandoned settlement of humble stone buildings now was a great city, tucked between the folds of the world, whose walls were uncracked by time and whose streets bustled with people.

The Gatekeeper himself no longer hunched over, and his crooked walking stick turned into a stout, stone rod he carried tucked under one of his arms. His drab woolen dress burst into a rich blend of reds and yellows, and the cut of his clothing drew in and expanded, becoming an outfit of noble dress unlike any style Ghyslain had ever seen in either his life or in the lives of all of the memories Merlin had placed in his head. It looked like the half-remembered efforts from a tailor's memory of Atlantis, Lemuria or Hyperborea. It held traces of all three places and of none of them.

The guards who came in behind them transformed in like manner, their spears turning into wondrous lances, their rough cloaks and tunics becoming magnificent suits of scale armor consisting of thin stone plates worked into a flexible coat. Whoever had cut them possessed a skill greater than any mason Ghyslain could imagine, for they had made stone behave like hammered metal,

like leather, like cloth. Truly, this was the stuff of ancient days, before the old ways were forgotten.

"Welcome to Skara Brae," the Gatekeeper said, turning to face his visitors. Instantly, he seemed to have gone back to the high days of his youth. His face was strong and lean once more, rid of its deep wrinkles. His missing teeth had filled back in; his hair was a lustrous black, his eyes a deep brown flecked with gold. His skin was pink and full of life. Such was the case with all who had accompanied Ghyslain and Gawain through the gate.

As Ghyslain surveyed the heart of the city, he saw many who looked much as the Gatekeeper did. But for every one of them, there were at least a dozen others who dressed as Ghyslain might have before he came to Camelot. Their frames not so robust, their skin not so ruddy. These were the lucky ones of Britannia, who knew of Skara Brae and had time enough to reach it before Morgana's reign fell on the land like an iron hammer.

"As you can see, you are not the first to run to us," the Gatekeeper said, his voice a strong and smooth bass. "But you are the first we wished had not. Come, let us retire to the Great Hall. There are others there who would share your company." He had said it to Gawain, but he looked at Ghyslain as he did so.

The Gatekeeper brought them to a huge stone hall standing near the heart of the city. It was one of the largest buildings in Skara Brae, though Ghyslain wondered if, like the rest of the city, the hall would in fact be much larger inside than it appeared from without.

It was. Past the front doors of thousand-year-old oak was a central meeting place twice as high as the building's outer roof, and four times again as long. It was like the forum of old Rome made many times over, with ample room for all of Skara Brae's people to fill the galleries and to discuss the matters of their common interest. Ghyslain expected there to be thousands of people here, but instead, there were only two others, standing at the hall's far side, dressed in similar fashion to the Gatekeeper.

"The Council waits for us," the Gatekeeper said. "Not all of them feel as I do."

When they reached the end of the hall, two elders came forth to greet Gawain enthusiastically. "We rejoice at your return!" said the first, who shook Gawain's hand and clasped him on an armored shoulder. He spoke in a mild voice, neither male nor female, strong or weak. The Elder looked as sexless as he sounded, with long ringlets of sandy hair tied back behind his

head, and a statuesque face that bore both masculine strength and feminine grace.

"It has been too long, Dreamer," Gawain said, smiling.

"The Gatekeeper tells me your friend has brought something unusual to our city," said the Dreamer, nodding toward Ghyslain.

"He is only half of it," Gawain said. "This boy needs your help."

The Gatekeeper leaned over and whispered to the Dreamer. The third Council elder, a beautiful woman with long blonde hair and pale green eyes, nodded as if she had heard the words with her own ears. She was the Builder.

"You presume much of us," the Dreamer said. "Yet you have done much for us as well. Were it not for your valor in days gone by, your countrymen outside would have had no sanctuary to come to." The Dreamer looked at Arthur in Gawain's arms. Sensing something neither seen nor spoken, his shoulders dipped a little, tired. "If we take him in, it will spell the end of Skara Brae as we know it."

"I would not ask it if there were another way," Gawain said.

"For a hundred generations we have lived as we do now. Our magic has held time at bay and spared us the ravages of the outer world," the Dreamer said. "And when that magic faltered, and intruders from the sea sought to pillage our people, when beasts of legend tried to breach our walls, there were those who argued that it would be better to endure that than to ask for the help of outsiders. Though ask we did, and you saved us, lord Gawain. From the reavers of Inverness. From the dire wyrm we dare not name. But nevermore would we remain so apart from the world, and bit by bit, the ruin of the world creeps through our gates. You have seen the state of our city beyond the gate. One day, those ruins will be all that remains."

"Our city is already changing," said the Builder, who drew a bit closer to the rest of the group. Ghyslain heard her voice as much in his head as in his ears. It was the same way he had ever heard Morgana speak to him. It was a voice of power, of ancient ways and mysterious strength. She was the greatest of them all. "The presence of your kind brings time and worse to our streets, and in another generation, we shall be gone from this place, one way or another."

"But you still retain your strength," Gawain said. "You are the Builder. Surely you of all ancients can keep the city from fading."

"With every day, we wane," the Builder said. "It has been all we could muster to shield ourselves from the natural way of the

world. We could not hide from Morgana as well and not exhaust ourselves."

Gawain grimaced. "Then Skara Brae will not always be invisible to her?"

"No," the Builder said, shaking her head. "We have twenty years, maybe less."

"Then time has prevailed at last," Gawain said.

The Lords of Stone stood before Gawain and Ghyslain. Gawain's words hung softly in the air.

"So you see, Gawain, to what end does it serve us to take in your child now?" said the Dreamer. "You do not see him as we do, but he burns brightly with the power of your bloodline and that of the Faerie Queene. He is a beacon to her and to Mordred. He is a light that cannot be hidden, and to have him here will bring about our demise that much faster."

"He has nowhere else to go," Ghyslain said suddenly and louder than he meant to. His words echoed off the sides of the hollow hall.

"You are welcome here only as the guest of our friend," said the Gatekeeper. "You have no right to speak to us." He said this in the secret language of stone, the language the Order must have spoken in before there were mortals to converse with, Ghyslain thought. Yet somehow he instinctively knew its meaning. He also knew the menace concealed in his words: speak once more, outlander, and suffer the consequences.

"But he is right," Gawain said. "The boy needs refuge. He must be given a chance to grow into manhood."

"For what purpose, Gawain?" said the Builder. "So he might take up arms against Morgana? So he can form another Round Table, where the champions of men might exalt themselves? So he might give those people in our streets false hope that their days are not truly over? Look at your lands, Gawain. Arthur's reign has ended, and you, our friend, are but a relic of its former glory. Live here as long as you like, but do not pretend to make Skara Brae a bastion against Morgana. It is folly, and we will not tolerate it."

Ghyslain thought to speak again, but the Gatekeeper looked at him with vicious intent, so he held his tongue as the other Elders smoothly transitioned into their ancient language. To Ghyslain's surprise, Gawain spoke their ancient tongue as well, switching to it without skipping a moment. But the Lords of Stone spoke around Gawain like a river rushing past a stone, slowly wearing him down.

There must be some way to get through to them, Ghyslain thought. They must be made to understand.

He gripped one of the stone handrails to the gallery, and suddenly, he felt a distant kinship with the stone itself, not unlike the strange connection he had made with Morgana's lightning. The lightning was merely the blood of the sky. The stone was the skeleton of the earth. Both were the same in all of the ways that mattered to him, he realized. And in that moment, Ghyslain understood just how deeply his connection to the world ran, and how much he could control it, if only he could understand how.

He grasped the stone more tightly and summoned forth the vision Morgana had assailed him with during his journey into the Far Country. He channeled it into the stone, which grew warm beneath his hand. A deep thrumming filled the room, rising in volume and drowning out the brewing argument between Gawain and the Stone Lords. Little Arthur awoke in Gawain's arms and began wailing, but even he was overpowered by the rising sound that Ghyslain made.

The Stone Lords and Gawain fell silent and looked to Ghyslain, and as they did, Ghyslain focused the thrumming energy into a sound wave that hung in the air, filling the meeting hall, but going unheard outside of it. The wave quivered and built in intensity, and just as Ghyslain thought it would burst, he withdrew it into himself and his eyes flew open.

"Behold," he said in a voice not his own, "and despair." It was the voice of the world, in the language of stone. It was deeper than the sea and stronger than the wind. It could shatter bones or touch a spider web without breaking it. It was the strength of ages, and it would not be ignored.

Like being jolted awake, their vision changed, and they suddenly were motionless, formless, floating over a world not yet made, somewhere between dream and reality. Below them was a transformed earth, its ground stripped of anything green and everything turned to dark, living stone. In the distance, the citadel of Camelot stretched into the sky, past the clouds, its central spire impaling the heavens. The city had spread out across the whole of lower Britannia. Its causeways bridged the Channel in a dozen different places, and its outermost extensions went all

the way to the north of the island, bridging the water from there to the Orkneys, and to the Shetlands. A fresh Arcadian spire stood on top of Skara Brae.

They rode through the air, not in control of their direction. They approached Camelot and circled it. Below, in grand plazas miles long on a side, stood formations of true Arcadian soldiers, endless phalanxes of them in full armor, bearing lances with banners of the serpentine crest of Morgana waving from them in a steady breeze. The sky shook with their war cry, and the ground trembled as they mobilized, marching by lines through the vast city and to the many great circles of standing stones within. As the soldiers entered the circles, there was a crack of orange electricity and an awful smell of burning as the soldiers shimmered from view and vanished. One by one, the legions of Morgana disappeared this way, but for every one that vanished from sight, yet another strode forth from the central spire, as if manufactured there by an unholy forge of iron and blood.

Alongside each formation of soldiers strode hundreds of monstrous swine the color of rust, whose tusks gleamed like sabers under the dull, amber glow of a tainted sun. Leading them was one much larger than the rest, whose back was covered with coarse spines capable of spearing a man, and whose hooves were wide and sharp enough to cleave a horse into pieces. Ahead of the procession the monster squealed, its hideous cry giving courage to those going to battle.

There were by giants by the dozen, standing so tall they were dwarfed only by the enormity of Camelot itself. They were grotesques of unique deformity. Some bore many arms with fingers tipped with talons. Others wore armored flesh, plated and scaled and cracked like old stone. Still others bore more than one head, speaking different languages, spitting acid, gnashing hideous fangs. There were those with stunted wings on their back, long tails waving stingers, or animal legs that covered half a league with every footstep.

And there were dragons. Creatures of such horrible majesty mortal eyes could hardly bear to behold them. They were the serpents of myth, coiling through the winding streets of Camelot, writhing with power. Their scales glinted like treasure, impervious to all but the greatest of weapons wielded by those of the purest heart. Their claws could tear passages in the sky that led to other worlds. Their vision could turn the living to stone, and their slightest whisper could cause that stone to shatter. Poison-

ous fumes rose from their nostrils, and the fires of unknown hells burned in their bellies. Their ambition rippled off them like shimmering heat, as did their desire to punish the living. But for all this, they obeyed Morgana alone. Such was her power. Such was her will.

Across the Channel, the Gallic shoreline had been covered by the same vile, black stone of Camelot. It was an endless cityscape of Arcadian design, filled with the Elves from beyond and those transformed into their likeness. The great gates of standing stones were here as well, and within them, the formations of Camelot's soldiers appeared in that same crack of orange light, marching beyond the stones without breaking step. They were cheered by those in the cities, from the truest Arcadian born, to the pitiful thrall only recently bound to slavery and transformation. The armies waved to their admirers and marched through the cities, which themselves crept across the ground like a glacier of stone, expanding fast enough for the eye to see. The armies stepped off the city's advancing edge and onto the dying earth of Europa, where the trees shed their leaves and withered. Where the rivers turned back on themselves and choked before dying. Where both beast and man quivered in fear for the approach of their inevitable doom.

In the lands beyond the Arcadian frontier, there assembled squabbling alliances of petty kingdoms and the militias of tyrants to oppose the righteousness of Morgana. On those desolate fields they made their stand an Arcadian host that acted and thought as one. Under the rapture of the Elf King and the watchful eye of his mother, the thralls fell upon their enemies and slaughtered them.

Those who surrendered were stripped of their weapons and armor and bound in chains for the long walk back to the nearest gate of standing stones. There, Arcadian magic whisked them to the bowels of Camelot to suffer the change that would rob them of their humanity and bind them to the will of Arcadia.

But the armies never stopped marching. Across Europa, Morgana's soldiers would announce the expansion of the City and destroy those who opposed it. In the wilds of Germania where no kingdom ruled, in the depravity of Nova Roma and Byzantium, and across the fractured loyalties of the Hundred Kingdoms that stretched from Nordheim to Muscovy to Babylon itself, all waited for the Faerie Queene to relieve them of the miserable freedom which had given them so little.

In every village and town and city along the way, it was always

the same. Despite differences in language and custom and pride, there was no difference to the squalor of men. All of them wallowed in the same low custom as had their primordial ancestors. All of them toiled endlessly amid hardship and cruelty and pain. They lived brief and nasty lives where they were never far from the want of food or adequate shelter, where the elements scorched them in the warm times and froze them in the cold. Where storms lashed their homes and dashed them into pieces. Where pestilence ruined their crops and brought famine. Where disease killed the young, old, strong and weak with equal impunity.

And where these things did not reign triumphant, there was endless war. Always did the kings of men covet power, stealing the wealth of their own land so they might visit ruin upon another. And always did those people who suffered the wrath of their neighbor design to do the same when there was pause enough in the fighting to gather their own strength and to repay their enemies in kind. There would be no end to it. And the people of the world would toil and suffer and die to keep things the way that they always would be. They would endure their wretched slavery so the petty fears of the greatest among them would ensure that all might die horribly.

But it did not have to be so. In the City, the blessed Arcadian expanse of stone and of energy, there was no squalor. There was no infighting. There was only victory, glory and the transformation into immortality. There was the strength of unity and of purity. There would be no want of food or of warmth or of safety, for the eternal fires of Arcadia burned brightly for all. And as the City grew, as more stone gates erected, as new fires were lit, the future of the world grew ever more clear. The pain of humanity drew weaker and paler and thinner, just as Morgana knew it would. For how could the folly of man stand before this single, perfect purpose? What boon was freedom when the greatest liberties it granted were the opportunity to starve, to work without reward, to live without hope? And what price did security bring that was not worth paying, when it would cleanse humanity of these ancient stains and made the world anew?

Across the lands of the unconquered kingdoms, those who fashioned themselves kings of men saw the folly of resistance and they bowed to Morgana long before her soldiers arrived. With their freedom in their hands, they chose to enforce the Faerie Queene's will. Here the armies of Arcadia marched unmolested, entering silent cities to plant the Queene's banner and remove the

standards of a broken and confused people.

In mills and shops too numerous to number, the sons and daughters of Arcadia worked as they never had before. Their tools sung with the glorious tune of construction, for as their City grew of its own arcane accord, they filled it with the testaments of living work. They worked with the endlessness of slaves but the joy of free men, for only in serving the furtherance of the City would they know their true purpose: to help build a better tomorrow for those who would inherit it.

Within the City's streets and courtyards, Morgana's subject would shed their humanity for a new Arcadian lineage. Their alabaster skin, pointed ears and orange eyes unified them. There were no humans to be seen anywhere, not even Lord Mordred, who stood from a balcony near the top of his spire in Camelot, surveying the city from beyond the Channel, smiling through sharp Elven teeth.

And this would only be the beginning.

Ghyslain tightened his grip on the stone and projected everything Merlin had ever seen of the City, everything he knew of it, everything he imagined it would become. In a single blast, it fled from him, rippling through the stone and into the earth, and in that moment, everyone else in the room was hit with it like a thunderclap. All at once, they saw what Ghyslain had seen. They witnessed the ruination of the world, the enslavement and transformation of humanity, the death of freedom as ever it had been known. They saw the destruction of Skara Brae and every other place worth naming. They saw the horrors of Mordred's triumph, and the majesty of Morgana's reign. But most of all, they saw the sinister lure of it. For how bad could it be to let go of the ancient ways in favor of Morgana's dark vision?

They had seen enough and wanted to avert their eyes, but Ghyslain would not let them. He made them witness everything, he made them see the capture and transformation of every last man, woman and child in Europa. He made them see the destruction of hope.

And then, at the end, he let them go. The vision vanished, and they all drew in deep gasps of air, including Gawain. Arthur was wailing.

"Now you see what I have seen," Ghyslain said, speaking in stone. "Now you know what I know."

The Stone Lords looked at him with a strange mixture of fear and anger in their eyes. Who was this creature to put forth such a vision into their heads? But then it finally came to them the greater point: what kind of creature was Morgana to create such a vision? What kind of monster was Mordred to make it so?

And then, at last: What kind of person could possibly stop such a thing?

Arthur stopped crying and let out a single, exhausted sigh. His eyes had never opened, and he seemed to slip back into a deep, contented slumber.

The Dreamer nodded to Ghyslain as if to say, Well done. "So the boy has a destiny worth meeting, after all," said the Builder to Ghyslain and Gawain. There was a long pause. "We will hide him here, but it is no mean thing we do. Keeping the city hidden with one such as the boy in it will require many times the effort."

"I understand," said Ghyslain.

"Do you?" she said, arching one of her eyebrows. "It means you must leave here and never return. The boy alone will be enough of a beacon to Arcadian eyes. You will more than double it. You must never again set foot in the city of stone, lest you bring Morgana's wrath upon it."

"I understand," said Ghyslain.

"Say goodbye to the child," the Gatekeeper said.

Ghyslain gently took Arthur from Gawain's arms. He kissed the boy on the forehead and held him close, feeling Arthur's little body rising and falling on each breath. With his forefinger, he drew a small Gaian sigil on Arthur's forehead, which glowed faintly for a moment before fading into the skin. "Remember me," he said softly into the boy's ear, "...not."

He gave Arthur back to Gawain, feeling like his knees were going to give out at any moment. "Watch over him," he said, his voice shaky. "Make him be the man he is meant to be."

Gawain smiled and put his hand on Ghyslain's shoulder. "I will be the father you would have been. And I call for you on the day when we will ride forth from this place and reclaim Britannia."

"We will teach him our ways as well as yours," said the Dreamer. "He will know the ways of stone, even if he may not understand them."

"Thank you," Ghyslain said to them all. He suddenly felt less than whole.

"The boy is with us, now. Your task is done," said the Gatekeeper. "Go back from whence you came and confuse us no further."

The walk to the city gate was a quiet one, with Ghyslain escorted silently by the Gatekeeper as they traveled across the busy city. On the cobblestones, children ran and played. Dogs barked and followed their masters. Criers sought customers to the stalls and shops filling the avenues. It was like a tiny whole of Britannia had escaped to this place, a single seed of the reign of Camelot, kept safe and distant from the horrors of Morgana, waiting for the time to come back home and set things right.

Perhaps this all could work, Ghyslain thought. Perhaps all is not lost.

They came to the gate. "It is as it was before," the Gatekeeper said, gesturing to the gate. "Do not stop. Do not look

back. But once you are out, wait there for our next visitor. She is expected."

"Who do you mean? I thought you were receiving no more people here."

The Gatekeeper smiled. "Farewell."

He gently pushed Ghyslain toward the gate. Scowling, Ghyslain turned and walked through of his own accord, thinking of Gawain and Arthur and of when he might see them again.

Once beyond the gate, he could feel the city change behind him. The wind blew a little harder, the sun shone less brightly. Had he turned, he would have seen nothing more than the same low, mossy ruins that greeted him on his first visit. But he did not turn back. He simply reunited with Sandalin and walked all of the way to the island's western shore, putting the city as far out of his mind as it would go, for only then did the pain in his heart become even a little bit bearable.

Facing the cold, dark water of the Caledonian Sea, Ghyslain looked to the horizon. Arthur was as safe as he could be, Ghyslain told himself, and Gawain would watch over him. Now came the hard part of his task: to wait out the long years until Arthur reached manhood, when he would learn of his origin and of his destiny. Ghyslain once again summoned the map of Britannia in his mind's eye and surveyed its lands. It was a pointless exercise, for he knew well enough what he was going to see. Aside from the Orkneys, there were precious few places in Britannia where he could stay safe from Morgana. His chances were better in Europa, perhaps someplace far off like Poland and the Shield Kingdoms that surrounded it. Maybe he would go all the way to Muscovy.

Once there, Morgana would lose sight of him, and he could live however he liked until Arthur's time arrived. But first, there was the trip back to Britannia, and from there to the Continent, and then into hiding.

He thought of Sherwood once more and of Boudicea there, still aching from the loss of her son. She had told him to leave, but now he had delivered Arthur into safety. The Lady had no further requests of him. Who was to say he could not go back to Sherwood and see Boudicea once more? Why could they not have children of their own? A home, and a life together? He was the sorcerer of Britannia, yes, but he loved Boudicea more than he loved anything else, and his heart was empty without her. Yes, he would go to Sherwood. He would...

...do nothing. The Lady decreed they stay apart, and he would obey. He would never forgive her for this, but he would not defy her, either. Someday, this debt would be squared.

As he walked Sandalin along the shore, he passed a series of standing stones interspersed with ancient statues of the old lords and ladies of Orkney, from the time between the Order of Stone's greatest days and the rise of Arthur.

Ghyslain looked out over the water and breathed in deeply, preparing himself for the journey ahead of him. Somewhere over the water, Morgana was waiting to strike. But then he thought of Boudicea and he knew that anything Morgana tormented him with would be worth seeing Boudicea just once more.

On the horizon, a small shape appeared in the distance. Slowly it grew as it approached, and Ghyslain could see that it was a sailboat just large enough to fit a single passenger. How it made it across the rough Caledonian waters was beyond him, as was how Morgana would have allowed the craft to pass. Surely she could have destroyed it without any trouble, just as surely as the person piloting the craft was heading to Skara Brae. Why else venture so far north?

The boat gently rode across the calm water until it ran aground on the stones leading up to the beach. Its single mast had broken in half, and its tattered sail hung over the side of the craft, trailing in the water. On one side was a large black scorch mark, the kind that lightning left behind.

As the craft came ashore, Ghyslain watched a young woman, climb out. She wore a suit of studded leather armor with a sword and shield across her back. With one hand, she pulled the small craft up on the shore as easily as she might carry a rucksack. With

the other, she carried a long spear. Once she was done hauling the boat, she reached inside of it, grabbed a tightly wound bundle of goods and slung it over her shoulder.

He knew who it was well before he saw her, for she shined to him from across the water. And even though he had stared at the boat's slow, silent approach for more than a half hour, he still did not know what to say or how to say it.

Boudicea walked up the beach, toward Ghyslain. "I thought I'd find you here," she said, squinting at him through the daylight.

"How...?"

"The Lady told me. I demanded it of her, actually."

Ghyslain blinked. "And she pointed you here?"

"She did."

"But the open country. The sea. Morgana..."

"The morning you left, I had communion with the Lady and told her I would take back my son no matter what she put before me. I told her I would renounce her unless she gave the means to find Arthur. She pledged to think on it. That night, as I slept, I received a vision of a strange doorway on the edge of the wood that would bring me to the northern sea. I woke and walked through the forest as if sleeping, but there was the door, and through it I went."

"The Lady summoned a door for you? That does not seem like her."

Boudicea shook her head. "She does as she pleases, and I think no one knows her full abilities."

"But what of the open water?"

"When I crossed the portal, I found myself on a distant shore, where this sailboat waited for me with full provisions and no pilot," Boudicea said, thumbing over her shoulder at her small craft on the beach. "A strong wind picked up behind me and I coursed across the sea to here."

"This cannot be," Ghyslain whispered to himself. "It is all too perfect. She could have taken her at any time..."

"Perfect?" Boudicea said. "An unholy storm began soon after I left the north shore. For the length of my trip I was pounded by the wind and waves and lightning. There was a shrieking on the wind that will haunt me until the end of my days."

"But you made it."

"Barely," she said. "It is a miracle the craft didn't break apart or go under one of the waves."

"Why would you do that, Boudicea? Didn't you know Morgana

sees all? That it was her who nearly killed you?"

"I want my son, Ghyslain," Boudicea said. "You had no right to take him from me. No one did. And no one ever will."

Ghyslain focused on Boudicea. He moved to hold her, but she backed away from him.

"I know what his destiny is," Boudicea said. "And I know he must be kept safe. But you were a fool to think you could do it without me."

"Boudicea..."

"What made you think I would not go past the end of time to find him?" she said, tears coming to her eyes. "What made you think I loved my son any less than you?"

Ghyslain could see an aura of energy around her that would have been invisible to mortal eyes. It was the same kind of energy that must have shimmered off her at the Battle of Camelot, had he the ability to have sensed it then. Only this felt warm, somehow. Soft.

Ghyslain pointed toward Skara Brae. "A short journey that way is a ruined city of stone. There is a gate guarded by a lone soldier. He waits for you. He says you are expected."

Boudicea wiped away her tears. "Expected?"

"I cannot pretend to know how any of this works. I just know that they are opening their gate for you and that beyond it, you will find your son and the man who has already agreed to help raise him."

"Who is he?"

"Gawain."

"I have heard stories about him. Not all of them good."

"As have I. But I have met him, and if the tales are true, then he has put his wayward days behind him. I think he seeks atonement."

"Then he has much work ahead of him, I've heard tell," Boudicea said. "And you entrusted my son to him?"

"Gawain is Arthur's brother. He was the only family he had," Ghyslain said. He thought for a moment before going on. "Gawain needed this. He needed to be part of something good, I suppose."

Boudicea drew close to Ghyslain. "I was part of something good once." She kissed Ghyslain softly, deeply. Then she let him go. "Goodbye."

She left him standing on the beach and passed into the trees behind him, along the path to Skara Brae.

Ghyslain felt empty and broken. But worse than that, he had failed Boudicea. He had forced her to brave the dangers of the far country, and of Morgana herself, when all he had to do was take her with him in the first place. How stupid had he been? Why did he think he could protect her, or keep a mother like her from a son like Arthur?

"I am in idiot," he said aloud to the ancient rocks standing on the shoreline near to him. "I am a fool."

"So we agree on something after all," one of the statues said back to him. It was the voice of Morgana.

Ghyslain turned to face the speaking stone, an ancient carving of a female hero from the island's earliest days. It had worn down so much over the eons that it lost nearly all of its former detail. But the statue remained still, cracked and badly chipped, covered with lichens. Only its mouth moved as it spoke, and even then, Ghyslain was not sure if he was seeing something real or an illusion. He resisted the urge to touch the stone, as there was an Arcadian glint in the statue's eyes.

Sandalin's muscles twitched with nervous energy. He shook his head.

Ghyslain looked at the old stone figure and listened to the distant voice that whispered through it. "I didn't think your power went this far," he said, realizing after it escaped his lips that he had only meant to think it.

The statue made a comfortable little laugh. "This far from home, speaking through statues is all I can muster. One day, I suspect, that will be different."

"So the great Faerie Queene has her limitations."

"Don't we all, Ghyslain?"

Ghyslain moved and stood directly before the statue. "Your words are too kind for someone who tried to kill me."

"That was before I saw you ride the lightning," Morgana said. "Had I known you were that gifted, I would have tried a much more civilized way to turn you back."

"I doubt it."

The statue sighed. "Ghyslain, I too possess the memories of my mentor. And in all of the time before me, there have only been two others capable of what you did, and both were ancient masters

who did it after years of failed attempts."

"Then you know what you contend with. Perhaps you might not be so eager to trouble me on my trip home."

"Indeed, I am not."

Ghyslain paused. That was the last answer he had expected.

"Why the silence, Ghyslain? Is it so impossible that you have impressed me?"

"No," he said, uncertain. Might as well be honest, he thought.

"It is just that I am new to my craft, where you are..."

"The whore of Arcadia," she said. "The defiler. The temptress."

"I wasn't going to say that," Ghyslain said. He breathed deeply, considering carefully what he might say next. "You are the greatest sorceress Britannia has ever known. Your powers come from Arcadia itself. And you have wrought such change to an island governed by powers more ancient than time. I don't understand how a trick of lightning would amaze you so."

The statue seemed to shine. "My strength here on Orkney fades, Ghyslain. But we have much to discuss. Touch this stone, so I might see you properly, and we might speak as equals."

He looked at the statue for many long minutes.

"Ghyslain, please..." came Morgana's voice, quiet and distant. Fading.

His fingers hovered over the pitted surface, trembling. Withdrawing, he balled his hand into a fist and held it close. Then he exhaled through his nose slowly, relaxing. He closed his eyes and reached out, tracing his fingers on the rough granite.

"Open your eyes," she whispered. He did.

Morgana stood before him on the beach, more beautiful than he had ever imagined. She was tall and voluptuous, as strong as Boudicea and as graceful as Guenevere. Her alabaster skin shone in the coastal sun, her raven hair danced behind her on the breeze, her emerald eyes glittered. Her bronze torc, belt and greaves bore the intricate engravings of a hundred Arcadian glyphs.

She took three steps toward him, and Ghyslain wanted to close his eyes, but that only made his vision of her clearer and more impossible to ignore. She was so beautiful...

No! She is trying to trick you, he thought. You do not want her. She is disguising her magic as hidden lust within your heart. Think of Boudicea, and know where your love truly lies. Think of Boudicea. Think of Boudicea...

Morgana looked at Ghyslain and smiled. "It is good to see you," she said.

"Are you..."

"Here? Oh, no," she said with a small laugh. "I am but a vision." She took his hand and placed it on her side as she snaked her other hand around the back of his head. "But I am real enough to you, am I not?"

Ghyslain gently pushed her away, though he burned to feel her touch for just one second more. "I do not trust you."

"Fair enough," she said. "I did try to hurl you into the sea," she said, withdrawing from him by half a step. "But that was before I realized that you and I are the same."

"We could not possibly be."

"Merlin gifted you with his sorcery because he knew you would be a greater student of it than he would ever be. And the Lady let him because she knew he was right. But what neither of them would ever tell you is that the magic you command runs through you like noble blood. You are a creature of it. It shines off you like the stars at night."

He looked past her body and saw auras upon auras surrounding her, interlocking, becoming one. Shining, as she said.

Like stars at night.

"I know your loneliness, even if you do not yet," she said, the tone of her voice changing. "Ours is a solitary path, unknown by most, appreciated by none."

She paused for a moment, looking away.

"At least, that is what our creators would have us believe," she said.

Ghyslain narrowed his eyes. "What are you suggesting? You can't possibly..."

"Be asking you to join me? No. My conquest of Britannia is my own, and I could never hope for you to aid me in that. Just as I could never hope for you to give up the boy you so bravely brought here. But we could comfort each other, in places far from both our homes. In the soft realms between worlds, where the laws of Gaia and Arcadia need not find us."

"Impossible."

She reached out and gently touched his face. "Ghyslain, you are the only person of your age for whom that word holds no meaning."

He touched her hand. "I...belong to another."

She looked him in the eyes. "Boudicea is gone, Ghyslain. You know that as much as I do."

"But I love her."

"And yet, you betrayed her."

He looked at Morgana. "I only did what the Lady commanded."

"It does not matter why you did it," Morgana said. "You took her son. She can never forgive you for that. No mother worthy of the title ever would."

Ghyslain looked back in the direction of Skara Brae. "It was not supposed to be like this."

"You possess the knowledge of ages and are much older than you know," Morgana said. "Boudicea does not fully understand the forces working against her. She does not see how she has been used as a pawn."

Ghyslain thought for a moment. "You brought her here, didn't you? The doorway. The boat. Those were your doing."

Morgana smiled, but not out of malice. "No. The Lady still listens to those who call to her. But it was I who let Boudicea cross the water.

"Why? Why her?"

Morgana sighed. "I know when I am beaten, Ghyslain. And I am also a mother. I understand why Boudicea took her chances crossing the water. And I respect her for it, even if one day I must kill her and my grandson."

"Then why did you let her live, out on the water?"

Morgana looked away for a second, lost in thoughts she kept to herself.

"She will be happy here, you know," Morgana said, breaking the brief silence. She will raise Arthur, and Gawain will win her affection."

"You cannot know that. The future is not so certain."

"Boudicea is a young woman with a broken heart and a strong will. Gawain is...Gawain. Even when he plays the fool, there is something irresistible about him. Those two cannot help but fall toward each other."

The waves slowly moved their way up the beach, and in the distance, the boat Boudicea dragged ashore lifted up on the water and drifted back out to sea.

"You lie," Ghyslain hissed. "You are trying to seduce me."

Morgana looked hurt. "No, Ghyslain. Boudicea left you just as you left her. I know that you and she cannot be, just as I know that without each other, we are doomed to a loneliness beyond description." She took his hand from his face and stood before him. "We work at cross purposes, true. But can't we share each other's company?"

"You stand to destroy the world, Morgana. Your son is the terror of Britannia and it is his armies...your armies...that have enslaved the British people and turned them into monsters."

"Am I so monstrous to you?"

He knew the answer even before she asked it. But it still took him a minute to find the strength to say it.

"No."

"I understand your hesitation, Ghyslain. I do. And I will force you do nothing. Just as I will never again try to hurt you. I am warmed by the mere thought that there is someone else in creation who is not so much unlike me," she said. "My offer stands forevermore, Sorcerer of Gaia. Even if you never come, I will wait for you without end, behind the mist and between the worlds that separate us."

From the sea a thick mist rolled in. Its wisping tendrils wrapped around Morgana as she slowly stepped backwards from Ghyslain, toward the water. With each step, she vanished more from view. When she was gone at last, Ghyslain kept looking for her, seeing the remains of her aura on the air.

He sat by the edge of the sea, listening to the soft rush of its waves as they came in across the shore, and the clatter of small stones moved each time by the receding water. He peered into the mist, its deep grayness, and the worlds between worlds that it would bring him to.

He thought of Arthur and of Gawain and of Boudicea.

He thought of Merlin and of the Lady.

He thought of Morgana.

Sandalin cocked his head. She is not what she seems, he said to Ghyslain.

"Who is, Sandalin?" Ghyslain felt tired. "You'd better stay here. No telling what's ahead of me."

And let you go it alone? Never. You will need me in there.

"Then let's get going," Ghyslain said. "Before we both change our minds."

He closed his eyes and cast from his mind the map of Britannia that had guided him from Sherwood to Skara Brae. He stood from the stones and placed his foot at the edge of the water. He put his hands together and then gently pushed them into the mist, parting it like a great curtain to reveal a shimmering surface standing behind it. He stood before its pearlescence, which lit the shallow water and reflected back on his own skin, warming it.

He reached out and traced his fingers along the shimmer, and

them put his hand through, and then his arm. He withdrew it and flexed his fingers, examining his hand for signs of damage. Finding none, he put his hand by his side, breathed slowly and walked through, letting the mist close up behind him.

And as he vanished, so did the gray fog and the quiet seas it brought. From far out in the water, a single rogue wave rolled to shore, growling and crashing as it came, scattering the stones of the beach like fragments of something broken long ago.

CHAPTER 4

SEVEN YEARS ON

The gray clouds come in from the sea, bringing coldness with them. As the rain begins, turning the soft, green fields of Brittany into mud, you think about how much you hate this place.

You hate these Gallic lands on the far side of the Channel. You hated coming here when Arthur wrested them from the dozen petty lords that defied his calls for tribute. And when the wars were finally over, you hated serving these people who seemed both too helpless to fend for themselves and too ungrateful to thank the heroes who delivered them from monsters and barbarity. You hated their language, their ways, their history. You hated their smug notion that somehow, they were special. Somehow, they had to do things their way, because the ways of the wider world somehow could not possibly serve them half so well as their own ingenuity.

But more than anything, you hated their champion. The man from the Lake, or so he titled himself. Though which lake exactly, he declined to mention. It was as if he presumed to be from all lake countries in the realm. That he was not the champion for a single region, but for a whole race of people. And they loved him for it. Oh, how they loved him for it. Especially when he went to Britannia and served her king as the greatest knight of the realm.

Lancelot.

You ignore the chilly water trickling through your armor and soaking the quilted jerkin beneath. You simply stare out over the formations of ten thousand horsemen and several times that in squires, pikemen and archers. You sit high above them with the rest of Arthur's most trusted lieutenants, watching the battlefield, getting a sense of the carnage that will come this morning. You

see the giant squares of soldiers and armory off in the rain-soaked distance, knowing that behind the haze of rain and gloom sits Lancelot, just as you do, thinking of you as you think of him.

It is a good day to die, Gawain, Arthur says as he puts a hand on your shoulder. The sound of his voice seems to part the rain and bring a ray of sunlight solely on your body, warming you, filling you with hope. That has always been his greatest strength, you think, smiling. That he can make you believe even when you know there is no reason to. Or worse, when you know that the only reasons you have left are bad ones.

You ask yourself how it all could have come to this, the Round Table, warring with itself on the shores of a foreign land. But you know the answer already, for you and the answer are one.

It began long before, though exactly how much no one can say, when Lancelot and Guenevere finally gave in to their lust for each other. The Queen protested theirs was a true love, but you can sense a lie when you hear one. The queen was and is a creature of the flesh who would devour a man's heart as soon as she would take him into her bed. She would have had you-and you would have accepted, burning for her as you did all those years-but she sensed that you were immune to her charms. She knew she would never control you with her embrace, and so she cast you out. You, the prize of the kingdom, the center of the court. The man no woman in Britannia could possibly resist; enough had followed you into bed to prove it.

It was no secret what Lancelot and Guenevere harbored for each other. From the first day the Gallic champion came to Camelot it was obvious to all how he and the Queen yearned for each other. But as long as the King said nothing, who could challenge it? You went to Arthur a dozen times to object, and a dozen times he sent you from his throne room, telling you that his was the will of Britannia and that you were in no position to question it.

It bedeviled you, for those years, why your cousin and King would allow his wife to betray him like this, even if only in her heart. You would allow no such thing. You would cast her out... or you would at least take advantage of her easy virtue. After all, that is what you tried when you approached the Queen yourself, only to learn that even in this you were second to Lancelot.

You knew, however, that they would consummate their affair one day, and when they did, you would be there to expose them both for the traitors that they were. You had long to wait, but it would be worth it.

The day came when you lay sleeping in Morgana's bed, having fallen there after the annual celebration marking the defeat of Rome. Morgana never held your eye as the Queen did, and in some ways, she was an even more dangerous conquest, being Arthur's half-sister. They hated each other, the King and his witch-kin, but still, blood was blood. You wondered, as Morgana pulled you aside during the festivities and kissed you in the hallway, how close your relation to her really was. Her being Arthur's half-sister made you her...what? Half-cousin? Did that even matter? When she kissed you again, you decided it didn't. And when you kissed her back, it was like the thought never crossed your mind.

Long afterwards, you laid in her bed, naked and spent. She rolled over and rested her leg across yours, her arm across your chest and her head tucked into your neck. You felt her breathing, smelled her skin and thought that perhaps you could be with her forever. Was she really so strange, with her sorcery and portents? Surely the stories of her consorting with Elves weren't half as true as the courtiers made them out to be.

She stirred and raised her head to your ear. You hoped she would bite it, as she did before, but instead she whispered to you that right at that moment, Lancelot was sharing Guenevere's bed just as you were sharing Morgana's.

You sat up in a heartbeat, knowing two things. The first was that the day you had dreamed of for more than a decade had finally come. The second was that you owed Morgana for it, and you would repay her whatever the cost.

You kiss her deeply before leaving the bed, grabbing your clothes from the floor and donning them as fast as your fingers would go. You grab your sword in its scabbard and without belting it on, you dash from Morgana's bedchamber, hurtling down the hall to the quarters where you normally kept a room.

You burst in, waking Gaheris, a distant cousin to both you and the King. But blood is blood, and you tell him you are going to arrest the Champion for bedding the Queen. He cannot believe it, but he will follow you, just as soon as he recruits a few of his friends to lend their strength. You keep the group at a dozen, knowing both that you will need that many to capture Lancelot, and that if you bring any more, the clamor of your group will alert Lancelot before you can surprise him.

There is no time to armor up. The best you can manage are dueling jackets of studded leather and bucklers, both taken from the gymnasium. They will have to do.

The Queen's doorman is not there, as he ought to be; Lancelot either paid him off or he is like everybody

else in Camelot, sleeping off the excesses of last night's revelry. You think for a moment that you and Lancelot are surely not the only two in the kingdom to have awoken in a strange bed, next to the object of long or passing desire. But this is the Queen, you remind yourself. This is high treachery against the Lord of Britannia.

This is your chance to prove to him that you are better than he is. That you deserve his woman. That your arm is stronger, your sword is swifter, your heart is stouter.

You splinter the door with a single kick, and you see what Morgana foretold. Lancelot and Guenevere are together, naked and still. The breaking door wakes them both, and Lancelot sees you are coming. Almost too fast to follow, he shifts out of bed, bringing Guenevere with him. He shields her with his own body, moving across the chamber and thrusting her into her wardrobe, closing her in behind the heavy oak doors. She will be safe, you think. It is the least he could do for her.

You would tell Lancelot to surrender, but he knows why you are here, and he can guess who learned his secret and shared it with you. He knows these things just as well as he knows the one thing you have not shared with your fellows: that this morning, you have not come to take prisoners.

In a single fluid motion, he grasps a goblet from a side table and hurls it at you. You just barely dodge it, allowing the missile to hurtle by you. It hits Gaheris instead, who is right behind you, smashing his skull. You don't know at first that your cousin is dead. You only know that Lancelot missed you and that if you don't cut him now, he will hit you with whatever he throws next.

You rush in with your fellows behind you. You drive your sword at Lancelot, but he steps in like you are not even coming for him, and he boxes your ears.

In the few seconds it takes to clear your head, you hear the sounds of battle as if they are occurring in another time and place. You finally blink the stars from your eyes and look up to see Lancelot gone and the rest of your cohorts disabled. Most are lying on the ground, unconscious. One is standing still, out on his feet.

You make to charge after Lancelot when you notice Gaheris on the floor. His eyes are open, as if he never even realized he had been slain.

Lancelot escapes in those minutes between the melee and the arrival of other guardsmen at the bedchamber. They find you kneeling over your dead cousin, weeping like a child. You hardly knew Gaheris, but blood is blood, you tell yourself over and over again. Blood is blood.

And blood there shall be.

In the days following Gaheris' burial, it is not difficult to force Arthur's hand. Your word is beyond question in the court, and Lancelot slew a hero of the Round Table. What other crimes must be committed for the King to take action?

The damage goes deeper than you know, at first. Broken, the King orders Guenevere exiled from Camelot, never again to show her face to her husband or to go within a day's travel of the Silver City. In later days, you would hear that wandering the countryside, ashamed and cast out, she lost her mind and took to the deepest forests as a wild woman. You never know exactly how much of that to believe, but that does not stop you from wishing it was all true.

Lancelot is likewise cast out and disgraced, though you cannot be satisfied with that. You call for his head, as do many of your fellows. But what you did not expect is that for every one that seeks to punish Lancelot, there is another who would defend him. In a single day, the Round Table is riven, half of its number leaving the castle to join Lancelot in his home country of Brittany.

Arthur considers simply leaving it at that, but you remind him that Brittany is part of his domain, too, and that nowhere in this mortal realm can Lancelot go that Arthur may not follow. Surely, the King of the Britons must understand this? But he is a tired monarch, saddened by his most recent loss, just as he was saddened to have lost so many fine knights in the fruitless quest for the Sangreal. You have heard him murmur at times that his own reign draws to a close, and that he would rather give Lancelot peace than to mark his final days with the blood of his friends. But you will not allow him to entertain such folly. You place him in his armor. You rally his troops. You put out the word from Orkney to Byzantium that Lancelot is a marked man, and whoever gives him comfort will face the wrath of the Britons.

Lancelot sends word back that he will remain in Brittany with the far side of the Round Table, and that should justice come looking for him, it will not need to look hard. That is all the invitation you need. Arthur's army virtually musters itself, though the discontent you saw among the Round Table has now spread across

the realm. Towns, villages and households all are split on the guilt or virtue of Lancelot's coupling with the Queen and with his violent escape across the Channel. Families break apart over it as sons go off to join the traitor while others stay home to serve their King. They will meet again on the fields of Brittany, and it seems very likely none of them will ever go home.

The trip across the water is a quiet one, as if the Furies know of the coming bloodshed and thus refrain from storming through the Channel. As Arthur lands and makes his camp, you sense the same division in the land, in the people, that you felt back at home. This is when you first begin to realize that no matter who wins the battle here, Britannia will have lost, as will have all the lands she came to serve.

The morning of the battle, you join your lord and King overlooking the formations, feeling the rain soak you to the bone. The green fields turn to mud. The sky grows an ever darker shade of slate. Off in the distance, the dark sea roils and peaks, its jagged waters seething. Arthur looks upon the field, a depression in the earth he can already imagine piled thick with bodies and broken weaponry. You watch as his gaze drifts, focusing on nothing at all, while tears begin to glisten his eyes. As they roll down his cheeks, they merge with the rain, as if he were not weeping at all. But you know, just as you know he will never be able to give the call to arms.

You raise your sword and cry havoc, and in a surge it starts. You lead the thundering charge of heavy horse while twin rushes of arrows from either side pass each other high above. Before you, the first lines of walking knights and their spearmen on both sides go down as the shafts punch through the weak spots in their armor.

You ride into Lancelot's second line, hewing on either side of you, cleaving a fresh enemy with each stroke. You cannot stop to think if any are friends, for this is war, and right now, there can be no friend who stands against Arthur.

Your legions follow your lead, just as Lancelot and the rest of his troops come to meet you. You crash together in the press and clash steel at first on horseback, then on foot as you both unseat each other at the same time. Seconds blur into minutes as you and he strike and counterstrike, neither reaching the other. All around you, the battle rages on, heedless that the heart of it is here; whether the Round Table lives or dies will be settled in this private match between the unstoppable and the unmovable.

Then he wounds you. And again. And once more. With every blow he lands, your ability to stop the next wanes that much more. He drives you to your knees with the force of his last hit, and unless things change drastically, this will be the end of you.

But things do change drastically, for as Lancelot raises his sword in what you know will be the death blow, Arthur cries out to him, asking him to stay his hand. He looks to the side, seeing his friend and King, and in that moment, you see relief in his eyes, to behold the one person who alone can make things right again. His arms comes down slowly. He relaxes.

This is your moment. You grip your sword with both hands and stand into your swing, putting everything you have into this one and only act. Lancelot realizes a second too late what has happened, and he moves back to avoid you, but your steel slices through his neck in a cut so fine the blood makes a high whistle as it sprays out from the right side. Lancelot drops to his knees, letting go of his weapon, clasp a mailed hand to his throat to hold back the blood. Somehow, within moments of your wounding Lancelot, every other man on the field knows it, and they all forget their combat, lowering their weapons to watch the greatest among them slowly slip away. There is no strength left with which to fight among them. The greatest they have ever known will soon be gone from them. The treachery upon Arthur will have been avenged.

The King parts the crowd and approaches his best friend. Arthur looks like a ghost, thin and drawn. He never even entered the battle, though he could have won the battle alone if he wanted. He could have spared so much of this bloodshed, had he only the strength to get involved.

He approaches Lancelot, kneels and whispers something in his fallen champion's ear. Lancelot smiles, and though his face is whitening by the second, he looks up to face his lord. He takes Arthur's hand and kisses it, leaving a bloody handprint on Arthur's mailed glove. Arthur then stands and unsheathes Excalibur, holding it high with both hands. Lancelot lets go of his neck, allowing more blood to stream out of his wound. He puts his hands on his knees to support his upper body, and then nods a little. He is ready, and Arthur obliges.

In an instant, it is over. Lancelot's head tumbles across the mud. One of his own picks it up and bundles it, bringing it back to Arthur. The King gives the command for the body to be cleansed and buried in his homeland with every honor of the court. Lancelot's

soldiers understand and quit the field. They are done here, just as the Round Table shall never see their like again.

Arthur orders the rest of his own forces back to their ships. It will be a roomier ride home, you think, looking at the bodies littering the field. They will all be buried where they fell, and this field will forever more be known as a place of valor, where honor and bravery came one day to die.

At last, Arthur finds you and tells you that you must stay here. He no longer has the fire to say it, but you can see it in his eyes. He blames you for all of this. Lancelot could have had Guenevere forever, for all Arthur cared. It was never worth the sundering of the Round Table. He knew it, and just as he hates you for forcing his hand, he hates himself for allowing you to do so. That is why you cannot go home. You are every bit the criminal Lancelot was. More, even. And for your deeds, you must remain in the land you hate, looking at your home from the Channel shores.

The decision stuns you at first, and you rage. You cannot believe Arthur would blame you for what happened. In the days that follow, you vent your anger, roaming as a robber knight, taking advantage of the confusion that follows the Battle of Brittany. Wherever you go, you rob the lowly and weak. You take what you want, be it a basket of apples or a young bride's virginity. Nothing will tame your fury at this exile, this betrayal. Were you not the Round Table's bravest? It's boldest? It's strongest? Surely, those who sided with Lancelot deserve your fate, but not you. Not you.

It is less than a year later when you learn of Mordred's rise to power in Britannia and his campaign of terror. You hear of how he appears with a host of soldiers in the west and marches from city to city, forcing all loyalties to him and killing those that resist. You hear, later on, that those who rally to Mordred are one day never seen again, taken away in the night by the Elves. But you know such talk is nonsense. There is no such thing as Elves. Not anymore.

But there are, and town by town, city by city, they steal your homeland away from you, sending its people to strange fates. The people of Brittany are scared, and they need someone to protect them, for it is only a matter of time before the legions of Elves come across the water and make this place their empire, too.

You do not care if they do. You have no allegiance to these people you have taken so much from. Perhaps, you think, when the Elves come across, you will welcome them personally. That is when you learn who is leading their soldiers. Who is ruling them

from a distant throne. Who is the same person who took you into her bed and whispered of Lancelot's treachery and set into motion the destruction of the Round Table.

You have been nothing more than a small piece in a large and terrible game. Morgana's passion was not for you, but for the land she sought to conquer and for the half-brother she would destroy. You were nothing to her but a minion who carried out his mission with greater zeal and effect than even she could have hoped for.

When you learn this, your anger drains away. You opened the gates of Britannia to her greatest enemy. You made for the downfall of the Great Reign. You helped to kill your lord and King, your very cousin. Blood is blood, and you betrayed it.

For days you wander as if dying, unable to grasp the enormity of your deeds. Finally, you come back to the beaches of Brittany, where the ocean foam gently rises and falls, covering your armored boots. You look out to the sea and put your sword to your breast, ready to cleave your own heart. What else is there for you to do?

Listen to me, the voice says from that place between places you have visited only in your dreams. Her voice is like sweet water in the desert, filling you with life. Listen well, hero of Britannia, for your work is hardly done.

You had always scoffed at the Lady as a myth, but you need only hear her speak those few words for your eyes to fill with tears. You ask her to tell you what to do. She whispers for you to serve Arthur's sentence, to pay for letting jealousy and vengeance corrupt your heart. And when you are finished wandering, when your pain has finally turned to remorse, when you might somehow be able to begin repairing the damage you have done, come back to this place and seek the Lady once more. Only then will your final destination will be revealed.

And so you wander, heading deep into Europa just as Morgana begins to extend her control of it. Everywhere she seems to be watching, and you must use all of your tricks to stay hidden from her gaze and a step ahead of Mordred's soldiers. Even against these thralls of autumn fire, these soulless creatures of Arcadia, you cannot raise your sword. And so you run and hide and cower. You do the one thing you never knew you could: to live in spite of your sword instead of by it.

The days spin into weeks, and weeks into months. Some three years on, you have become a lonely traveler, a strange figure on the horizon, riding in armor you need not wear, carrying weapons

you dare not draw. Your days as a champion seem as distant as a dream, though you have never been far from that day in Brittany and the misery it caused. The ghosts of a thousand yesterdays follow you like mute witnesses to your exile. You see not their faces, hear not their voices, feel not their chilling touch. But you know they are there. And one day, just as soon as you stop fearing them, you will turn to face them only to find that they are no longer there.

That day has come, you hear a voice in your head say as you are drawn back to Brittany, riding heedless through lands long since claimed by Morgana and policed by her son's vassals. That day is now, the voice tells you as you leave your horse and step on the sandy beach where your warships landed a lifetime ago. That day is here.

Some distant compulsion has brought you here, to these rough beaches, staring out to the cold, dark sea between Europa and Britannia. The voice inside your head tells you it is time to go home, and the thought of it warms your heart. But no home in Britannia; that land will not have you. Home before you left it, home where you were made into a man. Orkney is where you belong now, even if there is nobody left there to meet you. In some ways, you almost hope that is the case. Shouldering the weight of a thousand ghosts, you can bear. The stares of those who disdain you, you cannot.

You look back at the legion of spirits on the beach, standing in their battle dress. They are the soldiers of Camelot who fell here, and they are led by Lancelot. Without sound, he reaches out, and you take his hand. It feels warm in your grasp and you wonder if would take it all back if you could. You would not, for you despise him now just as you ever did. But now you know what you are truly capable, of things both great and terrible.

You let go of his hand and look up, only to see that the visions of your dead comrades are gone. Where they stood you see a large stone cliff bounding the beach, and within its shadows, there is the shape of something familiar.

You approach a cleft in the rock and see stored within it one of the landing boats used to ferry Arthur's army-your army-across the Channel. It is in remarkably good shape for having been left here since then. But perhaps it is not excellent craftsmanship that preserves it, you think. Perhaps it is destiny.

You shove the small boat into the water and jump in. You raise sail and a strong, steady wind rises, as if created for your little

craft. Before long, Brittany is behind you, and you begin your journey back to where you belong.

Your trip is not two hours old before you are caught in the worst storm you have ever seen. Great swells and a screaming wind buffet your ship but somehow fail to sink it. Your sail tears away in the gale and your mast snaps like a piece of kindling. All you can do is grasp the edges of the boat, brace your body as best you can and hope it ends soon.

You lose track of how long the storm batters you, but at its height, you sense that this is no ordinary tempest. High above, beyond the black clouds, you hear a voice wandering on the howling wind, something beyond this world speaking through the elements. You only hear the most distant of voices, and even then it is impossible to make anything out. But after a while, you grew ever more certain it is Morgana speaking. But to whom? And for what reason? You wonder if perhaps she has found another enemy on these waters and has spent all of her attention on them. Whoever that person may be, you wish them luck. And you thank them, for were it not for them, you reckon Morgana would have certainly found you and made sure you visited the bottom of the sea.

A wave tosses your little boat like a toy, and you hurtle through the air, and into the water. The weight of your armor drags you deep beneath the surface. For a moment, you wonder how bad it would be to simply let it take you to the bottom.

No. You want to live. You have work to do, even if you do not know what it is. The struggle must go on.

And so you claw at the buckles and clasps that bind these metal plates to your body, and one by one, you strip them away from you. But there are so many more to go, and the top of the water is growing ever more distant from you. The burning in your lungs gets worse as you realize that you are drowning...

Gawain stirred in his sleep as he felt the voice of something beautiful call to him from another time and place.

"Gawain?" he heard. "Gawain, wake up!"

He opened his eyes. It was dark in the bedchamber, but thin beams of morning sun were squeezing through the gaps along the edge and centerline of his window shutters. He sat up, his hand to his chest. He could breathe once more, though he could still taste

the salt water filling his lungs.

Boudicea sat next to him and rubbed her hands across his shoulders and back. "Bad dream again?"

Gawain nodded. He blinked a few times and breathed steady. That was the worst one yet, he thought.

"You were turning blue," Boudicea said. "I was beginning to think something was wrong."

"I'm fine," Gawain said, running his thick fingers through his tangled hair.

Boudicea kissed him on the head and stood. "Good. Then get out of bed."

Gawain noticed that she had already bathed and dressed. How late was it? Might as well face the day, he thought as he sat up and swung his feet to the cool, stone floor.

As Boudicea opened one of the shutters, the sun hit Gawain square in the face. He squinted and raised his hand against it.

"Blood and thunder, woman!" Gawain grumbled. "Are you trying to blind me?"

Boudicea smiled and opened the other large set of windows, fully lighting the bedroom. "One of these days, you'll get up on your own," she said.

Gawain looked up at her, blinking the sleep from his eyes. "Where's Arthur?"

"On the Vault Wall."

"Already? He's not bothering the troops standing watch, I hope."

"Not a bit. He's waiting for Wulfgar's ship to arrive, in fact. He can't wait to see little Hrothgar again."

"I doubt Hrothgar is so little anymore," Gawain said. "I'm surprised Arthur remembers them so well. They only come once a year, if that."

"Arthur will be seven in another month. His memory is quite a bit better than you give him credit for."

"Hmm. I suppose you're right."

"He's not a baby. If you'd just give him a chance, you might see that."

Gawain cast a sidelong glance at his wife. It was too early to get into this. "Well, it will be good to see Wulfgar again. We need all of the soldiers and supplies he can bring us."

Boudicea was quiet for a moment. "Did you ever wonder why he so enjoys Hrothgar's time here?"

"Boudicea, not this again, please."

"Arthur is alone, Gawain. Half the people here revere him for who he descends from. The other half hate him for the same reason."

"So? Nobody ever said being a Pendragon would be easy."

"Hrothgar is the only one who treats him like a person. The business with Brom should be proof enough of that."

Gawain sighed. "I thought Arthur took care of that."

"Are you joking? Brom has ten years and a hundred pounds on Arthur. Not to mention a half-dozen brothers to give him courage."

"Such cowardice. They surely get it from their father."

"Martigan?"

"Mmm. He's as craven a blackguard as they come. I can't imagine his spawn are any different."

"They're not," Boudicea said. "They're worse."

Gawain grimaced.

"There's bad blood between us, but it needn't involve our children," Boudicea said before pausing to think. "Sending his own after Arthur. What kind of barbarian has Martigan become?"

"The kind who has a brother of his own to avenge," Gawain said.

Boudicea shook her head. "Brittany was almost ten years ago. I just don't understand..."

"Because you weren't there," Gawain snapped. "You're not the one who put his kin to the sword that day. I am. And he will never let that go until one of our families is destroyed."

"This is madness," Boudicea said. "Is it so hard for Martigan to put aside this vendetta? At least until Morgana is overthrown?"

"Martigan is of the old ways," Gawain said. "As am I."

"Times are different now. That is why any of us are here, so far from home. By the Lady, Gawain, finish this business between you and Martigan before it gets out of control."

"Don't bring her into it. This is Pendragon business,"

Gawain said sharply. "We end it when we end it."

Boudicea clenched her jaw. "You have three days. Then I'll end it myself."

"I have no doubts about that," Gawain said, and then smiled.

"You're damned beautiful when you're angry, you know that?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "How can I forget? You remind me every other week."

"Boudicea, I love you as I love our son. But you know better than anyone the life that awaits him. Brom, Martigan and all that

are the least he'll have to contend with. We shield him from that at his peril. And ours."

Boudicea's expression softened.

"Just talk to him, Gawain. He needs to know things are going to be all right."

"Only if he makes it so."

"Perhaps. But for now, he is just a child in the middle of something he does not understand."

Gawain looked at his wife.

"He needs his father, Gawain."

"I'll talk to him."

"You promise?"

Gawain nodded. "You have my word."

"Thank you," Boudicea said before kissing him. "Ugh. You taste terrible. Go brush up, you big brute. There's a fresh basin on the table."

Gawain said nothing as he reached for the porcelain bowl with his big, beefy hands. He curled his fingers around a bristled brush, lathered some minty soap on it and scoured his teeth and tongue until the dead feeling in his mouth went away. He rinsed and spit, leaving behind a feeling of being mildly burned.

"You said he was watching for Wulfgar?" Gawain asked.

"On the wall," Boudicea said. "See that you talk to him before long. He begins his lessons with the Dreamer today."

"So soon, too," Gawain said. "You think he is as gifted as they think he is?"

Boudicea nodded. "More, even."

"King and conjurer both, eh?" Gawain said as he stood on the cool floor. "I wonder if Britannia could ever be ready for such a thing."

"It will find out soon enough," Boudicea said, "but not yet."

She leaned over and kissed Gawain again. "Much better," she said. "I'm needed at the Proving Ground in a quarter of an hour, so I'll see you later this morning."

"Running parade drills?"

"Teaching that doggerel army of yours how to fight properly, more like," she said, smiling. "Today, I think they'll fancy a spot of close combat training."

Gawain whistled. "Just try not to break too many arms, eh? I can't have troops moping about in slings, and the Builder's busy enough without mending people, too."

She winked at him before leaving. Once she was gone, Gawain

hauled himself to his feet, took off his bedclothes and got dressed for the day.

Alone, he opened his wardrobe and withdrew a fine quilted shirt and leggings, as well as a thick leather jerkin to go over top. As he put it on, the shirt felt a bit tight, and the leather felt even more so. Gawain looked at himself in a tall mirror standing near the wall and ran his hands over his stomach.

"At least she never fell for your looks," he said to himself, looking at the large belly that somehow sneaked up on him over these last few years. He was as barrel-chested as ever, and his arms were even thicker than before. His upper body was large enough that his neck was almost gone, just a big head and puffy face leading directly into a mass of corded muscle hidden somewhere under what one of Gawain's marshals liked to refer to as the girth of affluence.

Girth, hell, Gawain thought. Too much soft living. Too many celebratory banquets. Too many easy days.

He looked out the window to the wide expanse of Skara Brae outside. Every day he looked upon his home and every day, he noticed something about it that was not there the day before. Every day he bore witness to the city's growth and its continued existence.

Of course, Gawain thought, when the enemies of Britannia could come and wipe this place out in an afternoon, there's much to celebrate.

He left his bedchamber and walked through the wide, marble-floored halls of his manor house on the way to the armory. He looked at the tapestries on the wall, the carved stone columns holding the upper floors in place. Never in his highest days at Camelot did Gawain live in a place such as this. Though for all of its riches, its fine decorations, its massive space, its fine stone-crafting and woodwork everywhere, it was another man's home entirely. There was a time when the walls would have been covered by hanging weapons, old suits of armor, the pelts of strange creatures slain in battle. A warrior's home.

This was the home of the Lord High Protector of Skara Brae, Gawain mused. As much the home of an office as of a man. And his family.

Gawain walked past the other bedchambers of the top floor, most of which were reserved for guests. One of them, however, was even tidier than the others. A small bed laid against the wall, perfectly made. A suit of armor, fit for a child, hung on its series

of wall pegs, each piece cleaned and polished. Practice weapons likewise hung in precise order, while the tools of maintaining such gear all remained in perfect order on a small workbench. Such order, Gawain thought. Such discipline. How could he be so worried over what a few scoundrels thought of him or his family?

He followed a wide, stone staircase that spiraled down to the ground floor and a great hall from which led to half a dozen other rooms and chambers almost as large. In the center of the hall roared a fire trapped in what looked like a huge support column. It was in fact a cleverly designed fireplace and chimney that radiated heat through the different floors of the house. Not that it was particularly needed, of course. In Skara Brae, every day felt like early autumn, Gawain thought. Today should be no exception.

Gawain walked past the large kitchen taking up one of the side rooms. The smell of sweet bread turned his head and he paused for a moment to consider fixing him a little something to eat. Then he thought of the rapping Boudicea gave his knuckles the last time he had a little something before mealtime, and moved on.

Across the great room was the side chamber containing racks of arms and armor crafted by the greatest smiths the city had to offer. On her way out, Boudicea had taken his plate out of its case and hung it for donning.

Silently, Gawain put on his shirt of mail before the ritual of buckling on the many pieces of his armor. As he fastened their buckles and clasps, he marveled once more at their ingenious design that let him armor up alone. In the old days, it would have taken a squire to help him get dressed within an hour. Now, these amazingly light, thin plates took a quarter of the time to assemble. And they felt like nothing at all, compared to the old stuff.

Archimedes and the geniuses he had in his workshop could not be rewarded enough, Gawain thought as he admired each piece of armor as he held it, from the finely detailed greaves to his massive breastplate with a relief of three interconnected spirals in the center of it. The entire suit was cobalt blue, with silver filling in the engravings that covered its surface. More silver outlined the edges of the plates, displaying the suit's intricacy to anybody who desired to look. The design was wholly different from the ivy-covered make of his old armor, the suit he had worn into the city. This was armor of station, of rank. It was, to anybody in the city who wasn't entirely addled in the head, the obvious look of the City Marshal, the lord high protector of Skara Brae. No, the simply ivy plate would no longer do. That was the badge of a different time,

and of different responsibilities. Of a different man.

With one of his massive hands, Gawain lifted his broadsword from its hanging rack on the wall while he picked up his helmet with the other. From either side of the helmet sprouted two curling ram's horns, and along the top ran a high ridge that went from the back of his head to the top of his long nosepiece.

He pulled a long, embroidered cloak from another wall peg and clasped it across his shoulders. Already he was sweating underneath his padded jerkin, mail and plates, which had only ever grown heavier year after year. As he hefted his large shield from its hooks on the wall and slung it over his shoulder.

Gawain could feel a familiar pain creep across his lower back. Living with reminders of old injuries never seemed like a burden. But living with his age was something else.

He exited the armory, crossed the great room once more to the hall entrance and left his house. Outside the huge oak door stood a quartet of finely arrayed knights wearing shining plate armor and long cloaks of the same blue of Gawain's armor. They snapped to attention as Gawain opened the door and remained in place long after he passed them, having given them a cursory salute that all four sharply returned.

Gawain squinted once under the bright morning sun. Out from behind the thick stone walls of his fortress home, he could hear once more the business of the city, even at this early hour.

How this place has grown, Gawain thought as he walked across the grand plaza outside of his home. The expanse of open space was just one of many across the city's central district. And like the others, it was not there seven short years before. As ever more people came to it, Skara Brae kept growing outwards, to make room for them. At first, they came from Britannia, those few fortunate enough to escape. But then they came from the conquered lands of Europa. And with every wave of newcomers, the city expanded outward just enough to accommodate them, sprouting walls and towers and buildings from the earth in a way that seemed both sudden and yet gradual enough to not notice it happening. How it worked Gawain could not pretend to know. It was enough to accept it as the work of the Builder, whose arcane craft kept the city growing, just as it kept it hidden from Morgana's gaze, and Mordred's grasp.

He crossed the plaza as Skara Brae came to life in a flurry of morning rituals. There was all of the activity and business that one could have expected in Camelot on a festival day. Only every

day is a festival in Skara Brae, Gawain mused, because it is one more day we have survived.

He looked skyward, expecting as always to see Morgana's eyes staring right back at him. But there was only a clear, bright blue streaked with a few cottony clouds. The sun felt warm on his face. The gentle breeze carried the scent of a nearby bakery's fresh bread. Boudicea's was better.

Somewhere, shopkeepers were calling out their wares. Criers from the city's three theatres were hawking the merits of their shows above those of the other two. And everywhere there was the kind of prosperity that had been the dream of Camelot. This was what Arthur the King always dreamed of, Gawain thought. But none of this would have existed if not for his death.

Gawain watched children play games on the intricate patterns of cobblestones that made up the central plaza. The contests of skipping Griselda, threeque and skitters were all things he remembered from his own childhood. As he watched four children stand in separate squares and kick a small leather sack to each other, he wondered who ever came up with such things. People with no greater cares, perhaps. May they never know any different, he thought.

The children caught sight of him and scurried well out of his way. Maybe Boudicea is right, he thought. We kept Arthur here for his safety, and instead he has become a prisoner.

Outside of the plaza, Gawain crossed the hatchwork of boulevards and side streets that comprised the central district. The tightly packed blocks of stone buildings stood three, four, five stories into the air, casting deep shadows over much of the district except in those few places where there was a park, a smaller plaza or land set aside for a common building yet to be raised.

As Gawain passed a crowd of people receiving the morning news from a city bard, the bard noticed him and worked him into the most recent report of the raising of troops to defend the city, and of the impending arrival of even more heroes from the Contested Lands.

The crowd turned to see their Marshal pass by, and many of them cheered and waved to their hero of heroes. Gawain raised his hand to them as he passed, waving and seeing their smiling faces, so full of awe and admiration. Not one of them had the spark. You knew that already, he told himself. But still you look, don't you? Still you hope that maybe there are more of them out there. More like Arthur, like you, like Lancelot. Like...the boy.

As he scanned the crowd, he saw those among them who cast steely looks his way. The brother of a man imprisoned for theft. The mother of a rogue castrated for rape. The little son of a man beheaded for suspected treason. Gawain looked them all in the eyes in turn, and only the boy has the brass not to look away. He will be trouble someday, Gawain noted. He will not rest until his father has been avenged.

After all, he thought, blood is blood. You should know that better than anyone.

But that was not what disturbed him. It was the thought that the ones who really hated him, who really wished him harm, were hidden among those cheering and smiling. That their anger over what happened in Brittany and the crimes thereafter was something to conceal deeply until the time was right to strike and gain vengeance. After all, is not revenge something worth waiting for?

On the far side of the plaza there stood a large, turreted, stone wall which had marked the outer edge of the city when he came here so long ago, with the infant Arthur in his arms. Now it was just a divider between the city's core and its outlying districts, with twelve arched portals within it, allowing people to pass through as if they were the hour marks on a sundial. Gawain walked through what he thought of as the ninth gate, toward the west. As he did, he stepped over the deep, wide groove in the street where, from somewhere below ground, a massive stone slab could be raised into place that would seal the gate.

They called the inner city the Vault for just that reason, knowing full well that should the Enemy ever find this place, and should they breach the charms meant to hide it, and should they get past every other wall and defender in the city, there would still be this final bastion, this last great barrier before them from which a dozen champions could hold off an entire army.

If only I had a dozen champions, Gawain thought, walking through the western arch and joining a wide street that would eventually take him all of the way to the city's outermost portal. If only I had a dozen champions.

Gawain traveled the full distance of the Western Way, easily a mile or more, and finally reached the city's outer wall. As usual, there were a dozen armored soldiers there, patrolling the top of the wall, manning the towers. But the Gatekeeper was among them, and his presence alone made the others unnecessary. Gawain could see Gaian energy burning off him in waves, but even then, not so brightly as in years past. Even his time was coming to

a close, Gawain thought. And what will we do when he is gone? Or the Builder? Or the Dreamer? Gawain closed his eyes and thought of their passing and the chaos that would certainly follow. The last failure of the city's charm of hiding. The sudden presence of Skara Brae within the vision of Morgana. The inevitable invasion of Mordred's Arcadian legions and the slaughter they would bring. Gawain thought of these things and more, until he opened his eyes again and cleared them of tears. The Gatekeeper was still there, burning strongly, quite nearly a god among mortals.

His light still shines, Gawain thought. Forever should we be thankful for it.

The Gatekeeper sensed Gawain's eyes upon him, turned to face him and raised his lance in greeting. Gawain raised his hand and waved back.

"Lord Gawain," the Gatekeeper said. "Your boat arrives today?"

"It does," Gawain said suspiciously. "Do you sense a shipwreck? Or perhaps an ambush on the shore?"

"Ever the worrisome one, eh, Gawain?"

"Don't trifle with me. What do you see?"

The Gatekeeper shifted his spear in his hand, leaning on it a little, like a walking stick. "Omens and portents are the Dreamer's specialty, not mine. Which reminds me, young Arthur is upon the wall. Does he not have an appointment with the Dreamer to attend?"

"He does. I have come to fetch him, in fact."

"See that you do," the Gatekeeper said, motioning to the top of the wall. "The Dreamer is not one to be kept waiting."

Gawain snorted as he passed the Gatekeeper and ascended the stone stairwell in one of the nearby wall towers. He climbed the spiral steps to the top of the wall, which looked and felt as if it had formed itself from a single piece of stone; even its parapets seemed as if they were simply enormous, cubed protrusions from the rock, a natural formation of some impossible kind.

Gawain walked around the wall, which was wide enough for carriages to pass each other without touching. Its broad curve made it feel almost straight as he walked, looking for Arthur. After a minute of walking, he found him, sitting between two parapets, looking out to the sea.

As Gawain neared him, he looked upon his son with admiration. Not of my seed, perhaps, but most definitely of Pendragon blood, he thought. The boy had rangy limbs and a big head,

skinny in a wiry, athletic way. His coppery hair ruffled in the sea breeze. The boy turned to face Gawain, looking at him with wheat-colored eyes.

Boudicea had once called him an old soul. Only when he looked young Arthur in the eyes did he really understand what she meant.

"Good morning, Da."

"Morning, son," Gawain said as he took a knee. "Looking for Lord Wulfgar's ship?"

Arthur nodded. He pointed to the horizon and suddenly focused his attention. "I think I see it!"

Gawain squinted against the morning sun and looked to the water. It sparkled.

"I don't think they're out there yet. It's hard to see much of anything, though."

Arthur frowned. "Oh. I thought I saw something."

"It will come soon enough."

Arthur smiled and nodded. "Do you think there will be any kids on the boat?"

"Maybe," Gawain said. "You know there are plenty of boys your age here in the city."

"None of them will be my friends, though," Arthur said. "They all think there is something wrong with me."

Gawain knelt to look the boy in the eye. "I know it's hard, son. But you must ignore them. They don't mean anything."

"Brom doesn't think so. He keeps saying that him and his friends are going to hurt me."

"It's not you, Arthur. Brom is saying those things because his father doesn't like me."

"But why, Da?"

Gawain pressed his lips together. "It's difficult to explain, son. I...some of his friends and some of my friends had a big fight a long time ago, and he still is angry at me for it."

"Brom says I have a bad name."

"That's because it reminds him of your grandfather."

"But he was the king before the bad times started."

"He was. And many people loved him. But there are those who are so sad that he is gone that they hate even to remember him."

Arthur thought about that for a second. "Maybe they didn't like him but they didn't say it when he was around."

"Maybe so."

"Why would they do that?"

Gawain exhaled. "It's complicated. I'll explain it to you someday, when you're older."

"You always say that."

"And I always mean it. Besides, you have other things to think about. Like your meeting with the Dreamer today."

"Oh, that..." A pause. "Da?"

"Yes, son?"

"Can I stay home today?"

"No, son. You need to see the Dreamer for your lessons," Gawain said. Then he saw the boy's expression darken, and he tried to take a different approach. "This is a big day for you. He is going to teach you how to use magic!"

"Da, Brom is really going to hurt me. He said so yesterday."

"And that's why you want to stay home?"

Arthur nodded, looking Gawain straight in the eyes.

"Arthur, you have to go to your lessons. It's important."

"Then will you come with me?"

Gawain shook his head. "I can't."

"But why?"

"You are a very special person, Arthur. And because of that, people like Brom and his father are not going to like you. They may say horrible things about you and about me and about your mother. They may even try to hurt you."

"But..."

Gawain held up his hand. Arthur stopped talking.

"They are testing you, Arthur. They are trying to see how strong you are."

"But I'm not strong."

Gawain held Arthur firmly by the shoulders. "Don't ever say that again. Do you understand?"

Arthur nodded, his eyes glistening. "I won't say it."

"Ever again?"

"Ever again."

"Good. You're not weak, Arthur. You are the strongest person in the world."

"Brom doesn't think so. He says that I'm a bastard and that you're a coward and that Momma is..."

"Is what?"

Arthur whispered it into Gawain's ear. "What does that mean?"

"Something bad," Gawain said, standing. "Let me tell you something, son. The world is full of people like Brom. They try to get people like you to think they aren't worth anything. But do

you know what? You are stronger than Brom, and there is nothing he can say or do that can change that."

"What if he fights me?"

Gawain smiled thinly. "Arthur, I'm going to tell you something you must always remember. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"It is not alright to ever start a fight," he said. Then he clenched his fist. "But it is always alright to finish one."

Arthur looked away as he took that in. "I really wish you would come with me to the Dreamer. Just for today. Please?"

Gawain swallowed. "No, Arthur. Today, you have to go there by yourself."

"But what if Brom gets me?"

Gawain held up his fist. "Hit hard and fast. And don't stop until he runs."

"But you said it's not okay to start fights."

"Brom already started it," Gawain said, tousling Arthur's bushy hair. "He just doesn't know it yet."

Arthur grumbled to himself as he ran through Skara Brae. He looked back one last time to see Gawain waving to him from the parapets of the city's outer wall.

"Brom already started it," Arthur said, mimicking Gawain.

"Easy for him to say."

Even though there were many people about doing mid-morning things, Arthur could hear his footsteps over all of the background noise. Each sharp sound of hobnail against cobblestone brought him closer to where he really did not want to be.

He followed the Western Way about half the distance to the Vault Wall, then turned left and followed the gently curving Via Arcanum, which circled the middle of the city. But soon enough, he had to turn off of that too, heading right into one of the city's many smaller districts. In here stood the Dreamer's sanctum, as well as a hundred blind corners and narrow, crooked alleys. The hairs raised on Arthur's neck as he ran deeper into the district, on a boulevard of shifting shadows and mysterious sounds.

On either side were ancient stone buildings with lichen-covered faces that did nothing to muffle the sound of his echoing footfalls. All of their doors were closed, their windows dark. Arthur suspected he could see dim faces within watching him

as he passed, eyes glinting in the darkness.

He rounded a corner and jumped over a puddle that had filled in a few missing cobbles. His speed picked up, and he forgot that he was running to take his mind off of his fears. He was running because he loved it.

He leaned down a little and put on some more speed. The rain barrels, hitching posts and carriage stops that lined the street became hazy at their edges as Arthur passed them, and with every step, those street side obstacles became ever more indistinct.

Arthur threaded between them, blurring past one, two, three before kicking off the ground and hurtling through the air. He landed on his toes without losing speed right as a corner approached him. There was no time to stop or change course without hitting the building before him, so he went even faster. He reached out with his leg and bounced off the building's stone face. He dug in with his other leg and ran up the side of the building without thinking. Three steps along he felt himself falling to the ground, and he kicked off once more, somersaulting to the street without breaking stride.

He grinned to himself. If only they could see him now, hurtling through the streets like a thunderbolt. He was fast as the wind, and dodgy as lightning. He was-

Brom caught Arthur across the chest with his forearm. The force of the blow was enough not just to knock Arthur off his feet, but to flip him backwards so that he landed hard on the cobblestones.

"Hazar!" cried one of Brom's brothers.

"Nicely played, that!"

"Look at him gulping air, wot? Looks like a fish, he does."

"Right then. Let's have some fun with him, lads."

Arthur still couldn't breathe. He could see, but only if he squinted hard enough to make the stars in his head move aside.

Brom leaned in towards Arthur's face, leering. He had a mane of lank, black hair that hung in his face in thick strands. His eyes were just as dark. Even now, Arthur couldn't help but notice how Brom's skin was the same shade as that of a toadstool.

Arthur tried to move, but two of Brom's brothers held his arms. Another had a fistful of his hair. Brom took a firm grasp of Arthur's chin and held it up, examining the boy's face.

"You don't look so special to me," Brom said. His brothers murmured and grunted in agreement.

"Please," Arthur said, gasping for breath. He wanted to say more, but that was all he could croak out. "Please."

"Please teach me some manners, is that what you're asking?" Brom said. "Please throw me a beating? Speak up, your lordship. Your subjects can't hear you."

"Please...leave me...alone..."

"What he say?"

"Dunno. 'Please bugger me rotten,' sounded like."

"Yeah! Izzat wot the king likes?"

"I think he said 'Please kiss my princely jewels,' Brom. That's wot I think he said."

"He's got some brass on him, talk to you like that, Brom. You gonna take that?"

"Show him who's king, Brom."

Brom looked over Arthur's face. His hand was big enough to palm Arthur's skull.

Brom pulled his fist back. "He said that our uncle died screaming like a child." He let go and punched Arthur in the stomach.

Pain exploded in Arthur's gut, and he threw up his breakfast. Tears filled his eyes.

Brom backhanded Arthur in the face. "He said his mother's not a whore." Arthur tasted blood in his mouth.

"He said his father is a valiant man." Another backhand. More blood.

"He said," Brom growled, his voice shaking, "that he is the King of Britannia." He head butted Arthur in the face. Stars filled his vision, right before it all went red. Something warm and wet was coming out of his nose.

"Britannia's got no king, thanks to the likes of him," said a brother.

Brom drew a large knife from his belt and laid the point of it against Arthur's face.

"I didn't do anything to you," Arthur gurgled.

"Wrong again, Pendragon. You bear a tainted name. Your people killed my people, and for that you will pay." Brom tapped the dagger point on Arthur's cheek. "Every day." Tap. "For the rest..." Tap. "...of..." Tap. "...your..." Tap. "...life."

He flicked the tip of the knife and cut Arthur across the bridge of his nose. It burned, but did not bleed, so quick and skillfully laid a wound it was.

"Gah! Little bastard's wet himself."

"Careful you don't get any on you, Brom."

"Now listen, you little stain," Brom said in nearly a whisper. "There is no place in this city where I cannot find you. There is no

place where you are safe from me. I am going to hurt you whenever I want. And if you tell anybody about it, well..." He rolled the blade along Arthur's face, right below his left eye. "Things will get worse before they get better."

Brom backed away from Arthur and nodded to his brothers. "Let him go."

Arthur dropped to the ground, limp. He was wet all over from his own blood, sick and filth.

"Come on," he heard Brom say.

One by one, he listened to their footsteps pass by him, waiting for a gratuitous kick that never came. They didn't even stop to piss on him, like he figured they would. There was only the voice of one of the brothers as he left. "Be seeing you, yer grace."

Alone in the street, left with nothing but his pain and prospects that this would happen again, little Arthur crawled into a dark corner, curled up and started to cry. His body bucked from the strength of his sobbing, but for all of the energy of his sorrow, no sound came out of his mouth.

He didn't know how long he laid there, cold and damp. He could not tell if, at one point, he had passed out or merely lost all sense of time while he kept his eyes closed. It didn't matter, really. The world was nothing a timeless absence of light and a distant feeling of injury, for all he cared.

"It's alright, young one," said a voice both rich and majestic. "You are safe now."

Arthur cracked his eyes open and looked up. Standing above him was a tall man with long, curling locks that spilled over his shoulders. He was dressed as a noble, but in a fashion of no worldly court. He wore about his shoulders a cloak that could easily be mistaken to be a light chain mesh, but Arthur could see it was the finely scaled hide of a creature unlike any he had ever seen or read about in even the most outlandish bestiaries. This regal individual carried no weapon, and when Arthur looked into his eyes, he instantly knew why.

"Let's get you inside and tended to," the Dreamer said, helping Arthur to his feet.

"I'm okay," Arthur said, managing to walk on his own.

"There is no shame in accepting help, Arthur."

"I know," he said quietly. "But I can make it by myself."

"Suit yourself. Come, my home is but a short walk from here."

Although Arthur knew the way to the Dreamer's sanctum, being taken there by the Dreamer himself felt like he was going to a

weird new place, alien and unknown. As they traveled together, Arthur noticed ever more people in the street, and in doorways and outside of storefronts. But for once, he was not the focus of people's stares.

"They fear me because they do not understand me," the Dreamer said. "You must know a fair bit about that."

Arthur said nothing.

"It's alright," the Dreamer said. "I wouldn't have much to say after a beating like that, myself."

"You saw?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Then why didn't you help me?"

"Because I see things long before they come to pass. So long, that I can never know when they will happen. Only that they will." The Dreamer breathed deeply. "I am sorry for what Brom did to you."

Arthur shrugged. "You didn't do it. And you couldn't stop it, I guess." He looked at the Dreamer. "It's okay, though. I'm used to being on my own."

"That makes two of us, then," the Dreamer said with a hint of a smile. "Here we are."

They arrived at a large house that, like so much else in Skara Brae, seemed to have been made from a single piece of stone, stone that was forced into this shape from the beginning. The house was a circular structure, like a great tower condensed to only two or three stories. A wide lawn surrounded it, and a low stone wall surrounded that. They walked through the yard's entrance, a simple, curved arch of stone on the east side of the wall. Once through, Arthur noticed that the sounds of the city were gone. The breeze ceased as well, and when he looked up, the clouds seemed to have paused their slow drift across the sky.

"Where are we?" Arthur asked.

The Dreamer looked at the still clouds, then at Arthur.

"Very good, young Pendragon. Few would have had the courage to enter my home, let alone the talent to notice what sets it apart from the waking world."

Arthur narrowed his eyes. "But where are we?"

"There is no simple answer, so let us say we are somewhere between here and now."

Arthur looked at the clouds again. "Can we go inside?"

The Dreamer nodded. "I was hoping that you would ask. Follow me." He stepped in front of Arthur and walked along the

mossy flagstone path from the arch to his house's door. As the Dreamer approached it, the massive, circular door of veined marble rolled to one side, disappearing into a cleverly designed hollow in the side of the house's outer wall.

"Don't look back," the Dreamer said over his shoulder before entering the house. It looked dark inside, and once the Dreamer entered the shadows within, he disappeared from Arthur's sight.

Arthur stepped over the threshold, feeling a coolness wash over him as he did. Behind him came the growling sound of the great marble door rolling back into place.

Arthur meant to ask the Dreamer how he had moved the door without ever touching it, but the question died on his lips the moment he saw the inside of the Sanctum. Before him was a single chamber many times larger than the entire house had been on the outside. From the high, domed ceiling, soft rays of sunlight streamed through panes of crystal, giving the room a comforting brightness.

Arthur found himself standing on top of a wide staircase that descended through the Sanctum's seven great floors, a series of concentric rings each nearly as wide as the top of the Vault Wall where he met with Gawain earlier that morning. On every floor, vast bookshelves were recessed into the outer wall, filled with thousands of tomes. Chairs, desks tables and couches sat in welcoming arrangements, as if the house was meant to hold many more guests than it currently did.

"Come down, Arthur," said the Dreamer.

Arthur descended the staircase, and as he did, the bookshelves on each floor seemed to hold even more volumes than the floor before. But the shelves themselves were getting smaller, and the books stayed the same size...Arthur's head began to hurt.

He tried to ignore that, as he went deeper into the Sanctum, the luxurious furniture of each level increasingly resembled strange rock outcroppings that had grown upward from the stone floors. He thought he could hear the sound of voices whispering to him, saying things he knew in languages he could not understand. With every flight of stairs, the voices multiplied. A dozen. A hundred. A thousand.

The sound of it all weighed upon him like as many fathoms of water. Each footstep became harder to take, and his entire body trembled from exertion. The pain of his injuries vanished before the great fatigue that wore on him. He felt like sleeping, like he would pass out on his feet and keep trudging forever

in a weird fugue, wandering through the hinterlands between waking and slumber.

When his foot touched the landing on the seventh floor, everything cleared. The voices hushed. The weight lifted. The pain subsided. And in an instant, Arthur felt whole in a way unlike ever before.

The Dreamer sat in the middle of the heart of the Sanctum on a low stone dais, surrounded by the night sky. Arthur didn't bother trying to see the book-filled walls that were there before. Somehow, he knew he would never find them.

"Is this where I will learn magic?"

The Dreamer's eyes had become milk-white. His voice now had an eerie duality, to it, like he was speaking twice, one voice just a split-second after the other. "I have nothing to teach you, Pendragon. You already know it, else you would never have reached the bottom of the stairs." He motioned to a space before him on the dais. "Sit."

Arthur did, crossing his legs and resting his hands on his knees. "Now what?"

"Silence," the Dreamer said. He slowly raised his hands and placed them on Arthur's temples. "You are sleeping, Arthur, as are we all. But not all who slumber dare to dream."

The Dreamer's fingers felt cool against Arthur's skin. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the Dreamer's words.

"Dreaming is what distances us from oblivion. For when we do, we reach a place we forgot existed. A place where there is no doom, no frailty of the flesh, no weakness of the spirit. Where all things are made possible and the only sadness is what we bring with us."

Arthur felt the Dreamer's fingertips grow warm.

"In that place, we remember what we once were, and what we may be again." He let go of Arthur. "But only if open our eyes to see what was there all along."

Visions rushed past Arthur so fast that he felt as if he was hurtling through an endless gallery of images preserved forever in his mind's eye. Images from his own lifetime, from others' lifetimes, and of times to come.

"Tell me, young king, what you see."

"I see Britannia laying before me, stretching to the water."

"Go on."

"I see her people in chains and her land divided. Above it all, I see a wicked queen who has put fear in their hearts where

there once was courage.”

“And how has she done this?”

Arthur furrowed his brow in concentration, but kept his eyes closed. “I see a dark knight on a dark horse, leading her armies. He is a great champion, slaying all who dare oppose him.”

“All but one.”

“Yes...I see a dragon rise from the earth. The knight tries to fight him, but the dragon is too strong. Its claws break his sword. Its teeth destroy his armor. And his breath turns him into ash that blows away on the wind.”

“There has always been a guardian of Britannia to see to her people,” said the Dreamer. “A creature of endless strength, bravery and conviction. You are that, Arthur. Yours is a majesty none can match. It courses through your blood. It stirs in your bones.”

“I know it,” Arthur said. He felt older now, not afraid like before. “But there is something else there. Something others have tried to hide.”

“No, Arthur. You try to see what is not meant to be seen.”

“I see the dragon take the form of a man. He reassembles the dark knight’s armor and wears it himself. As fire burns deep within him, and nothing will put it out.”

“Arthur, no.”

“I breathe flame upon my enemies and those who dare to hurt me. I turn them all into ash! I smash them into dust!”

“Arthur...”

“I set fire to it all, and the flames spread wherever I want them to go. All of Britannia is covered by them, and they leap the water to the land on the other side. I fan the flames, blowing them across the countries. All who see it run for their lives, fearing me as the fire burns.”

“Arthur!”

“It burns!”

“Arthur!”

“IT BURNS!”

“ARTHUR!”

The boy awoke, snapped to consciousness. Sweat covered his body.

The Dreamer withdrew his hands from Arthur’s head. He shook his fingers, grimacing.

“What did you expect to achieve with that, old fool?” Arthur said in a voice not his own.

The Dreamer gasped. “Mordred!”

"I run in the boy's veins every bit as much as my own father does. More so, even," Arthur said. "Is that what you were trying to do? To awaken the old king in this pitiful, little bastard?"

"It takes a thief to catch one, Mordred."

"So it does. But you have overlooked something, Dreamer."

"And what is that?"

"Now I know that the boy lives. Now I know where he is."

"Ha! The Builder has made Skara Brae proof against you! Come to Orkney if you like, but this city will always elude you."

"I'll not contest the powers of magic I don't understand, Dreamer. That is more to my mother's liking."

"Then why do you smile?"

"Because I don't have to storm Skara Brae to reach the boy," Arthur said, tapping his head with his forefinger. "I only need to go right here to be greeted with open arms."

"No..."

"My father is dead in more ways than one. You of all people should have known that. When I killed him that day at Camelot, it was just a formality. He had given up his spirit long before that. He didn't ride out to meet me in combat. He rode out so I might end his suffering."

"Stop your lies," the Dreamer hissed through clenched teeth.

Arthur shrugged. "Why lie when the truth hurts my enemies so much more? My father is gone, and for all your dream-trickery, all you have awoken in my son is that which I see fit to give him."

"He will be the doom of you."

"Hah!" Arthur said. "The longer I wait to claim him, the more his strength becomes my own. Why else would I let him free in your pitiful little stone city?"

The Dreamer lurched forward and placed his hands on Arthur's head again.

Arthur grabbed the Dreamer's wrists. "Don't waste your energy. The boy belongs to me."

The Dreamer lowered his head a little and tightened his grasp.

Arthur writhed. "Stop! He is mine!"

The Dreamer shone like something lit him up from the inside. "You cannot have him."

Arthur stopped moving. "Very well, elementalist. But know that I will always be there in most distant corner of the boy's mind, calling to him. One day, he will hear, and he will listen," he said as his voice trailed off. "And when he does, that is when I will come for him."

The Dreamer's hands slid from Arthur's temples, and he slumped, kneeling before Arthur, unable to move.

Arthur came to for the second time. "Dreamer? I...what happened? I don't remember anything." He looked at his mentor. Something was dreadfully wrong, he knew that much. "Dreamer?"

The Dreamer sat before him, still as death. He looked like a reflection on glass. A ghost.

Arthur tried to put his hands on the Dreamer's shoulders, but they passed through.

"Forgive me, young Pendragon," the Dreamer murmured. "There is so much more for you to learn, but my strength has gone from me."

"But...I thought you would live forever."

"If only that were true. But I have used too much of my energy to remain with you any longer. My time draws near."

Arthur blinked back tears and swallowed hard. "Did I hurt you?"

The Dreamer looked fondly upon Arthur. "No, my lord. You have only ever given me something wonderful. Something I thought I no longer had."

"What?"

"Hope."

A long, quiet moment passed between them, and as it did, the Dreamer faded ever more before Arthur's eyes. "Now it is time for you to go, I think," the Dreamer said. He was barely visible now.

Arthur looked up the long staircase, fearful. "But I don't know what to do." He looked back, but the Dreamer was gone.

"None of us do, young Pendragon," whispered a distant voice. "None of us do."

A deep rumble issued from beneath the Sanctum, and all at once, the floor and the walls shook. Books tumbled from their shelves. Thin, spidery cracks shot across the stone surfaces, and as they widened, bits of rock chipped and fell away. The rumbling grew louder, and soon large pieces of stone were falling from the ceiling and walls.

A large chunk fell and exploded at Arthur's feet. Had he not sidestepped a moment earlier, the stone would have split his head and killed him. Time to go, the scattered fragments seemed to say.

Arthur turned and ran up the stairs, bounding upwards two and three steps at a time. Many stairs split and heaved up and

down. Entire sections of the walls collapsed and fell inward. A giant piece of the ceiling plummeted to the floor, filling Arthur's ears with the sound of thunder. Soon the rumbling was all Arthur could hear. He could smell only dust.

He rushed out of the front door, over the stone path and through the arch separating this place from the rest of the world. Like the house itself, the arch also cracked. Moments after he leaped through it to the safety of the street, it collapsed. Behind him, Arthur heard the final destruction of the Sanctum. He covered his ears and closed his eyes and hoped it would all end soon.

When he found the courage to look back upon the ruined house, its wreckage was fading from view just as the Dreamer himself had done. Arthur stared in silence at the process, and in a few minutes, the Sanctum, the wall and the arch all were gone. And in a few minutes more, the city seemed to expand ever so gradually so that each building and street grew just enough for the open space to be filled without any of the surrounding landscape looking much different than it did before.

That is when Arthur realized that a crowd had gathered to witness the Sanctum's fall. Filling the street were dozens of people, all just as dumbfounded by the cataclysm as he had been. And beyond the far edge of the crowd, dozens more were running to the scene to investigate the huge commotion they had heard. But when they arrived, there was no longer anything to see, and the newcomers had to content themselves with the confused stories of those who saw...something. They just weren't sure what.

Arthur pushed and dodged past all of the grown-ups, fighting to get free of the growing press. When he finally reached the open street, he leaned against the next closest building and tried to slow his breathing. He listened to the thumping of his heart. He covered his face with his hands, but after a second, he realized that the dried blood from Brom's beating was no longer there. It was, now that he thought about it, like he had never been beaten at all. His shirt no longer had dried vomit on it, either. In fact, it was cleaner than when he put it on that morning. His britches were likewise unsoiled.

He stood straight and flexed his fingers, feeling the muscles in his forearms tense, storing new strength. He balled his hands into fists and imagined them crashing into Brom's face, and into his rotten brothers, too. And suddenly, despite everything that happened, he felt happier than he had been in a long time.

He looked up and saw Gawain arrive at the scene with a doz-

en soldiers. He deployed them to manage the crowd and then caught sight of Arthur. He approached to comfort his son, but when he got close enough to speak to him, he stopped and his eyes grew wide. Something was different about the boy. Something was...wrong.

Arthur could see it in Gawain's eyes, his understanding that Arthur had changed. And with that understanding came both wonder and terror. The knowledge that the boy's power was something far stranger than anything he could understand.

Arthur extended his hand to Gawain, but the old knight took a step back without thinking. Both realized it, and Gawain regained his composure. But the moment had already come and gone, when Arthur knew that more than anything, his father feared him. That he would forever more watch him with wary eyes while begging a terrible question for which no easy answer could be given.

Arthur, what have you done?

CHAPTER 5

SOMETHING WICKED

The Gatekeeper watched the sun rise over the edge of the Caledonian Sea. He had stood on the Vault Wall since night fell hours before, thinking about the passage of the Dreamer. On this night, he had not dared to sleep.

The sun crossed the surface of the water, bringing with it a welcome daylight that glowed red through the low ocean clouds. The Gatekeeper walked the length of the wall, searching the sea for signs of movement. He found none except for a pod of whales that floated lazily in the water, dipping below and surfacing minutes later, exhaling their clouds of vapor before diving deep and vanishing from view.

When he came full circle to the city's main entrance, the Gatekeeper descended from the wall and looked up once more at it. There would be some time before the sun came up over its upper edge, and until then, Skara Brae would remain a quiet city of waiting shadow. This was his favorite time, when the day was made from the promise of things to come and details not yet done. It was a pity, he thought, that these early hours were always the day's shortest.

He turned from the wall as the morning guard assembled and took their positions among the parapets and towers. He nodded to the watch captain, who assumed command of the wall. With that done, the Gatekeeper left the middle edge of the city behind him and walked slowly into the heart of Skara Brae.

As he passed the ancient houses and shops, he ran his hand along their warm, mossy walls. He could feel time in his fingertips, the echoes of so many days gone by. The silent patience of the earth.

He listened to the stone, hearing a deep emptiness within it.

There was a time when he could hear the heartbeats of his kin. The Traveler, the Jester, the Believer, the Reaver, the Dreamer. Now, all gone. There was only the sound of himself and of one other, so far away and so faint as to be less than an echo. The Builder.

They think us immortal, he thought. But people knew nothing of it. To them, a thousand years is eternity. But to this stone, it is merely the time between moments. A trifle unworthy of note or mention or of memory. For when it is all over and gone, there will only be the earth remaining, just as it was in the beginning.

He withdrew his hand and rubbed his fingertips together. But what of us? What will remain when we are gone? He closed his fingers into a fist. We shall find out soon enough, he thought.

He crossed the ring roads that sectioned Skara Brae into its concentric districts. The rows of buildings looked like dead trees to him, no longer growing as they once had. What was here is all that there will ever be unless Gawain's people see fit to build upon it, the Gatekeeper thought. But even then, no human hand could match the subtle mastery of the Builder's craft. None could match stone as she did, coax it into different shapes, bend it to their will. That art was hers alone, for she invented it. And now, that too shall perish from the world.

The last few districts passed quickly as the Gatekeeper headed for one of the great buildings of the city center. So many had grown here since Gawain's arrival, he mused. The Builder spent so much energy to make him and all of the others feel at home. A palace for their lord and protector. A proving ground for their army to sharpen its skills, and a great smithy to sharpen their swords. A hall to discuss matters of the day, and a temple where they might square things with the spirits of Gaia. He paused. There was something new here, he could sense it. Something made of stone, but hardly so simple as that.

He moved into the center of the city, where there ought to have been the palace, the proving ground and the hall, all arranged tightly against each other. But instead these buildings had all moved out and apart from each other, and in so doing, pushed the rest of the city's rings out as well—to make room for a huge, circular plaza that contained nothing but a stone block in the middle of it. The plaza's emptiness looked hazy, a ghost of a thing not yet fully formed. The Gatekeeper squinted to see past it, and there by the stone stood the Builder. Her hands lay on the stone, and as it and the plaza grew more distinct, so did her own image begin to fade. The sight of it sent a shiver of

dread throughout the Gatekeeper's body.

"What are you doing?" he asked, more as an accusation than as a question.

"What does it seem?" the Builder answered, not looking up.

"That you are making a Heartstone."

"Too right, you are," she said. "That business with the Dreamer last month got me to thinking. I may not have another opportunity to do this, so now's the time."

"But it will be the end of you! You are fading already."

She nodded. "But this will ensure that long after I am gone, Skara Brae will remain hidden from those who wish her harm."

"You speak madness. None can protect this city so well as you and the spells you weave. Not me and my spear. Not Gawain and his meager army. And not some stone artifact meant to maintain an echo of your spellcraft. Skara Brae needs you."

"That...boy," she began, "he did something to the Dreamer. Or he did something so awful that it took the Dreamer's remaining strength to fix it."

"Do you think he meant to destroy him?"

"No. But it hardly matters. The Dreamer got close to Arthur, and it cost him his life."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I'm not. But I'm taking no chances, either," the Builder said. "I will not be taken by him as the Dreamer was, and leave this city with nothing. If I must go, and I know that I will, then it will be on my own terms. It will be after I have ensured that my best efforts will continue after I am gone."

"It doesn't have to be this way," the Gatekeeper said, half a question.

"You know it does. And if you have a splinter of sense about you, you will consider how you must also leave something of yourself to guide these people."

"And let our time with a whimper? We have an obligation to these people and to the future of this place. You more than anyone ought to understand that. We do not have the luxury of simply walking away."

"Nor do we have an obligation to explain ourselves. Least of all to each other."

The Gatekeeper moved to enter the plaza and approach the Builder, but an obelisk of stone, twice as large as the Gatekeeper himself but as ghostly and indistinct as the Builder had become, suddenly burst upward from the ground to block him.

"I'll thank you not to distract me," the Builder said, not looking up. "This is delicate work I'm up to. Completing a Heartstone is no easy thing."

The Gatekeeper sidestepped the obelisk but another sprung forth to keep him from entering the plaza. Gritting his teeth, the Gatekeeper sidestepped again, blurring into motion such that the rest of the world seemed to stop in time altogether. Using all of his speed, he circled the plaza, but every time he sought to place one foot over the threshold towards the Builder and the Heartstone, another obelisk blocked his way. In frustration, he drew his spear and sliced the nearest obelisk in two, the top half sliding down the bias of the cut until falling away altogether. As the obelisk tumbled into pieces, it disappeared and the Gatekeeper crossed over where it had stood...only to find another before him.

"I have little enough energy to finish what I have started here," the Builder said, annoyed. "But I have more than enough to keep you at bay."

The Gatekeeper sliced through the obelisk and advanced again into the plaza. More stones came up, this time surrounding him on all sides.

"You cannot do this! It will destroy you!" the Gatekeeper said.

"I know it," the Builder answered.

The Gatekeeper swung his spear upward to slice his way out, but the stones moved in, pinning him in place. Exasperated, the Gatekeeper gave up. "You are as infuriating as ever," he said.

"And you, as meddlesome." A pulse of energy left her and channeled into the Heartstone, making it and the plaza as real as anything else in the city. The Builder was breathing hard. She glanced up at the Gatekeeper, and with a flick of her fingers, the obelisks holding him captive vanished.

The Gatekeeper rushed to the Builder and put a hand on her shoulder to steady her, but she shimmered like a ghost. The Gatekeeper withdrew his hand as if it had been burned. Eyes wide, he looked at the Builder. "What did you do? You..."

"...will join our brothers and sisters very soon, I think."

"I don't understand," the Gatekeeper said. He turned from the Builder and touched the weird stone she had been crafting in the center of the city. It was wide, low and circular, like the base for an enormous column. It was perfectly smooth and without decoration.

"It looks like the stump of a great stone tree," the Gatekeeper said.

"All Heartstones are, in a manner of speaking." The Builder's image sat on the ground. "I put everything I had left into it."

"I can feel your strength within it."

"If you say so," she said distantly. "I made it because after the Dreamer vanished, I could feel my own strength going. I knew I could not keep this city growing and yet proof against Morgana forever. So I made that," she said, nodding toward the Heartstone. "It will keep Skara Brae hidden from those who wish to do its people harm. And to those who already know of it, they will see only the ruins, not its true self. But the city will grow no more. It is a mortal place now."

The Gatekeeper sat next to the Builder. "This was not necessary. You only needed to hide the city until Morgana's threat ended."

"And how long would that take? Not even the Dreamer could tell you how this would all finish. But he did learn one thing, and it is that the son of Mordred is far more than he seems. Whether it is good or ill, I cannot say. But whatever he is...whatever he turns out to be, he will be the tipping point in this conflict. He will bring this thing to its end."

"Right you are," the Gatekeeper murmured. "But what end will that be?"

"No longer my concern," the Builder said, shrugging. "This world has grown too young for creatures like us. Gaia's blood has quickened and left ancients like us with only two choices. We can fade from memory or we can be overcome by the ways of things to come."

"Is there any difference?"

"One gives us the chance to decide how to exit this stage. I care not to see this war with Morgana ravage the city I worked so hard to create. Giving up what little time I had left seem like a small price to keep this place safe."

"Safe from Morgana, perhaps. But what of Arthur? There is something wicked about him."

"Something wicked," the Builder said to herself. "And something good. Like anyone else, no?"

"Always the philosopher, you are."

"The truth is, the boy is in Gawain's hands now."

"And so is your beloved city," the Gatekeeper said. "I cannot govern it with you gone."

She sighed. "I always knew it would come to this, leaving Skara Brae to its people. But for as long as I thought about it, it still comes as a surprise to me."

"Life does that."

Her expression brightened. "Now who is the philosopher?"

He smiled back. Then he looked at the Heartstone. "I will miss you, Builder. You, more than any of the others."

She arched an eyebrow. "Do tell, brave sentinel."

"It is a fool's obsession, I know. But I have always thought of you as more than..." he paused, uncertain. "This contest of ours, just now, the business of spear and stone, it reminded me of the sport we had in the beginning. When the earth would tremble from the strength of our games. Do you remember that?"

"How could I not? It was a special time. The world was still wild, and we had a full run of it." She drew close to him. "I remember you rushing at me, how I would build stone walls to hold you back, and how you would crash right through them. I remember swearing to myself that if you could reach me, you could have me. But you never did."

"There were times that I could have. But then it would dawn on me that I had no clue what to do if I did. So I held back."

"It's alright," she said. "I was always scared of following through on my promise."

"Perhaps it is just as well," the Gatekeeper said, laying his hand on the Heartstone. "I would have ruined it for us in the end, I'm sure."

"No," he heard her whisper in his ear. Her breath was like the slightest breeze. "You would have loved me, and I would have been the luckiest creature in the world."

Suddenly, he realized, as he felt the presence of his fellows in the Heartstone, that the echo of the Builder faded to nearly nothing, flickered, then returned as something else. He looked up, and she was gone.

He crossed his legs and sat on the ground, against the Heartstone. He closed his eyes and remembered the days gone by, when he and the Builder were young, before the generations of man that would trouble the world. He remembered the game they played, and how she looked at him and how hard they fought. How she could hold off an army with those stone shields she would conjure, and how he would explode them with each strike of his spear. How he could feel his pulse quicken and pound, and how he could hear how hard she would gasp in between laughter. And then, how he would ache to drop his spear and take her in his arms, to draw her in to him roughly, to look into her eyes as she breathed before

him. To kiss her mouth, her neck, her shoulder. To...

His eyes opened.

To waste every chance you ever had, he thought. To give her nothing better to stay for.

Somewhere distant, he could feel her watching over him, nodding and smiling that smug little smile of hers. Now you're getting it, you foolish, foolish man, she thought to him. And it only took you a thousand years to do it, too.

"Let me come with you," he said.

She shook her head no. Not until your work is done and your time is at an end.

"That could be another thousand years."

But now you know I'm worth the wait, she thought to him. And that I shall wait here, in this place between places. I will wait for you forever, Gatekeeper. I will wait for you...

He realized that there were tears in his eyes.

He stood and wiped his face with his hand. Just then, one of the city guardsmen entered the plaza, looking at it in amazement. He continued to walk forward to the Heartstone, oblivious to the Gatekeeper, until he nearly bumped into him.

"My lord," he said to the Gatekeeper. "I did not know you were here."

"It's alright," the Gatekeeper said, laying a hand on the young soldier's shoulder. He turned to look back at the Heartstone. "The Builder has joined the Dreamer."

The soldier gasped. "This cannot be! We are defenseless without her."

"Fear not. She has given us a gift by which to remember her." He nodded toward the Heartstone. "Today, we have much to celebrate."

"My lord?" the soldier said, confused.

"Indeed, we do," the Gatekeeper assured him. "For all things, an end. Even the Dreamer. Even the Builder. Even...me."

"Will you vanish from us too, then?" The soldier looked scared, almost like a child preparing to bid a parent farewell forever.

"Not until it is time," the Gatekeeper said. "But until then, there is much to do, and the first of it is to summon your lord Gawain here, so he may see what the Builder has left behind."

"I will bring him, my lord."

"Excellent. And when you do, tell him something else for me."

"Yes, sire?"

"Tell him Skara Brae has a new king."

Gawain was still reeling from the news of the loss of the Dreamer, and his horrible knowledge that somehow young Arthur had something to do with it, when he heard of the Builder's departure. To learn that she was gone too, that she had put the city under some immortal enchantment, that now its matters would be handled by Gawain and his followers...it all felt like things had suddenly spun out of control.

But how long have you waited for this day? Gawain asked himself. How long have you yearned to rule rather than follow? How long have you wished to prove that the same blood that made Arthur so great runs just as strongly in your veins as well?

Gawain looked upon the large golden signet ring on his right hand. It bore the ancient seal of the city, and had been given to him by the Gatekeeper during the ceremony that commemorated both the Dreamer's passing and Gawain's ascension to the city's throne. It would be the badge of rulership all future lords of Skara Brae would wear, and Gawain knew that there once was a time when he would have burned to wear such a thing. Now that he did, he could only think of how heavy it felt.

It only took a month for the Dreamer to pass, and then the Builder, and then for Gawain to receive his ring. He had fought in battles that lasted longer and wrought less change.

Morning had arisen once more on the city, and Gawain found himself patrolling the outer wall. Below, by the main entrance, the Gatekeeper kept his vigil as always, but somehow, Gawain felt that at least for today, it would be better to keep watch as well. He couldn't explain it; it was just a gnawing feeling in his gut that maybe the Gatekeeper's diligence might no longer be what it once was. The same kind of feeling that had dogged him ever since he spotted Arthur outside of the Dreamer's house, looking both thrilled and terrified at the same time. Gawain could not cast out his memory of how the sight of the boy struck hear in him. And how that feeling had not really gone away since then. Gawain thought, what had happened to him? How had he changed? And why does he frighten me so?

On the city wall, Gawain looked to the ocean's edge and far beyond to take his mind off Arthur. It worked a little. Periodically, he scanned the horizon through the curious looking-glass given to him by one of the city's tinkerers during his coronation. Through it, he spied distant views as close as if they were inches away, and every time he placed the glass against his eye, he expected to see the masts of ten thousand Arcadian warships

sailing silently across the sea to claim the last piece of free land in all of Britannia.

But there were no ships to be seen. There was not much of anything, in fact. Only...what's that?

A dark point in the distance grew on the water, a tall mast of a large ship on a straight heading for Orkney, if not for Skara Brae itself.

Suddenly, twin feelings of fear and excitement rushed across Gawain's skin beneath his heavy, ornate armor. Perhaps this was just the first of an Arcadian armada coming at last to destroy the city. Perhaps this would be the end. But there was that part of him, the old recklessness that preferred a glorious doomsday to the slow death of waiting for a battle that might never happen. Besides, how could that be? Gawain thought to himself. Didn't the Builder render us unknown to all?

Gawain kept his eye on the ship and soon it became clear that it was only one vessel. And more than that, Gawain knew its make: a dragonship from Nordheim. In fact, if the figurehead he spied was what he thought it was, he even knew whose ship it was. About time he showed, he thought.

Gawain secured the spyglass in its carrying tube and headed to the staircases at the city's main gate. He descended the stairs, and as he did, the guardsmen there snapped to attention.

Gawain walked to the great gate and looked up as the massive door that kept the city shut away from the rest of everything. "Open it," he said, though directing the comment at nobody in particular.

The Gatekeeper emerged from an early morning shadow. "King for a day and already you wish to open the city?" he said.

Gawain scowled. "A ship approaches. I believe it to be friendly."

"And you will let them in, then?"

"Most likely."

"The Builder made this city invisible to Arcadian eyes and unreachable to Arcadian blood. Sooner or later, news of this place will become known among the free people of Europa. Every survivor of every city Mordred burns will come here seeking refuge. Will you admit them all, now that the Builder is gone? Now that the city can no longer grow along with its people?"

Gawain did not turn to address him. "Skara Brae answers to me now," he said. "And I will say when we open our doors and when we keep them sealed."

A thin smile crept across the Gatekeeper's face. "So be it," he

said, stepping away from the main gate.

Gawain could hear the sounds of the portal's great locks and seals undoing themselves. One by one, they opened with a great booming sound of heavy metals falling upon each other, as if the chains of the world were rattling.

At last, the inner and outer gates that stood on either side of the city's door retracted into the ground. When they locked into place, the double door itself swung open slowly, its huge weight creaking on its enormous hinges.

Gawain looked through the door and could see the cold bleakness of the Orkney morning on the other side, stark contrast to the eternal springtime the Builder had contrived for the city. A guard handed Gawain a heavy fur cloak from one of the gatehouses. Gawain accepted it with a nod and threw it over his shoulders. "I have business at the water's edge," he said to the Gatekeeper. "Keep an open eye for my return."

"That I will," the Gatekeeper answered. "I hope for your sake that you are sure who pilots that ship."

"You and me both," Gawain said under his breath as he crossed the threshold.

In an instant, the unending springtime of the city seemed like a dream, dashed by windy rain that stung his face and caused his entire body to clench. Gawain felt like retreating into his armor to keep out the cold. But then the old, familiar feeling of the elements seemed to soak into him, and remembered the glory of enduring the hardships of the world. It had been too long since he felt them last.

But cold it was, and Gawain drew his fur cloak around him and headed along the winding trail of ancient stone leading away from the stone ruins of Skara Brae and across low meadows to the sea.

As Gawain walked the lonely island road, he looked to the sky for a sign that Morgana was watching. He knew she was out there somewhere, and even now there still lingered the fear that one day, those terrible eyes would stare down at him, letting him know that where her gaze landed, the armies of her son would soon follow.

Nothing.

It was, after all this time, as if Morgana had forgotten this place had ever existed. Forgotten that Gawain was at the center of it. Forgotten that it once used to mean something. Perhaps the Builder did her job only too well, Gawain thought. Perhaps she has

hidden this place so well it has ceased to matter. Or maybe Morgana simply no longer cared about it enough to bother Mordred to destroy it. After all, no dragon ever bothered to step on an ant.

Then again, there was always a first time for everything.

Gawain arrived at an ancient stone quay large enough to hold even the mightiest warship. He walked out on the long breakwater and held vigil on the edge between land and sea, feeling the rain dance across his face and armor, smelling the sea spray that misted the air, watching for the dragonship he knew was headed for Skara Brae.

As he stood, a mist rolled in from the sea, swallowing the coastline and obscuring Gawain's sight. Within a few minutes, the only thing he could see was the same grayness of the overcast sky all around him. He held his position and kept his eyes forward, knowing that soon enough, this too would clear.

Soon Gawain lost track of time, and the longer he stood there, the more disoriented he became. Soon he felt a bit dizzy and somehow unsure of his own balance, as if he had been enchanted into hanging by his feet from the sky of the world and as soon as he realized it, he would detach and fall upward into the hard earth.

He screwed his eyes shut and breathed deeply. "This madness must pass," he told himself. This madness must pass. He breathed once more and opened his eyes.

Gliding silently through the water, a wooden head of a dragon parted the mist and seconds later, the rest of the huge Nordheim vessel emerged. On the bow stood a warrior of the Danelaw wearing a coat of shining mail underneath a flowing surcoat that bore the image of four warhammers joined at their handles to form a cross. It was the standard of the royal house of Wulfgar, and Gawain smiled when he saw it.

The soldier on the bow sighted Gawain and raised his hand, presumably to the sailors on deck behind him who had not yet come out of the mist enough to be seen. Thick wisps of the stuff clung to the ship like drapes unwilling to let go.

Gawain watched the great ship move by, nestling along the pier until the great bow reached the end of it and the vessel finally stopped completely. Another few feet and it would have run aground. But for as long as Gawain could remember, no Nordheim sailor had ever done such a thing. It didn't seem so outrageous that if they had, they would die of shame for it. After all, Nordheim's pirate kings had a reputation to uphold which all began with being the master of the seas as well as of the sword.

A long gangplank extended downward from the ship's tall mid-deck and moments later, a single Nordheim warrior stepped onto it and slowly strode down to the quay. He was younger, taller and broader than the rest of his kin, arrayed as the others, except his mail's glint has a brighter, more silvery shine to it, and his surcoat was embroidered with glittering metallic thread: gold, silver, bronze, threaded platinum and probably a few others Gawain could only guess at. The warrior wore a great northern sword on his belt and carried a magnificent kite shield strapped to his back. His leather gauntlets and boots bore the intricate stitching and decorations only a noble could afford. Unlike the others from his ship, he didn't wear the conical helmet with its distinctive nose-piece. He simply let his head go bare, showing off a handsome mane of blonde hair.

"Gawain," the warrior boomed. "It is good to see you, old friend."

"Hrothgar!" Gawain exclaimed. "You've grown like a tree, boy!"

Hrothgar examined Gawain's armor and finery. "And you have the look of a king."

Gawain shook his head. "Skara Brae needs no king. Just her protectors."

"Haw!" Hrothgar guffawed. "That ring on your hand speaks different."

Gawain reflexively closed his fist. "You noticed, eh?"

"It's hard not to. Quite the lump of gold."

"The coronation is tomorrow."

"Then we thank the Lady for our timely arrival, when we might see a friend become a lord," Hrothgar said. "But first, Let me offload my ship and we can retire to the city. I don't wish to keep my people out here in the open any longer than need be."

Gawain nodded in approval, and Hrothgar gave the signal to his men on board to assemble their baggage train.

"I know you never lack for supplies here, but the sons of Nordheim do not pay a visit without bringing gifts," Hrothgar said with a smile.

On deck, Gawain saw a cohort of Hrothgar's soldier-sailors moving about. All were armed and armored; some scanned the sky for signs of enemy movement, though Gawain wondered what could be seen at all in this soup. Most were stacking supplies to be offloaded; huge sacks, boxes and barrels of trade goods from as far off as Babylonia and the Caliphates of the Ninth Dynasty.

Within minutes, they began carrying their cargo from the ship and onto the quay, passing by Gawain and their captain without sparing a single word for them. They had a job to do and no time to waste on pleasantries.

After the baggage train came a procession of dozens of people who had been crowded on the fore and aft decks. Some were common folk in tattered clothing, with whatever they owned slung over their shoulders. Others were displaced merchants and craftsmen, people of potential means who might yet make something of themselves once they had someplace new to call home. And still others were once lords and ladies of domains now under the Faerie Queene's control. They wore their finest traveling clothes, letting their porters carry the rest in ornate trunks. The strongboxes that came with them no doubt contained the remnants of their wealth, assuming most of them had not already exchanged their coins for gemstones to be sewn inside their jacket linings.

Gawain caught Hrothgar's eye and nodded to the civilians coming off the ship. "Passengers or plunder?"

Hrothgar looked somewhere between annoyed and amused. "Slaving was never my trade, even in times as trying as these. No, they are the last to escape the Danelaw before Mordred put it to the torch."

Gawain turned ashen. "The Danelaw fell?"

"You didn't know?"

Gawain shook his head. "You are the first to come to Orkney in many moons. We know nothing of what has happened in the rest of Europa."

"Then I have much to tell you," Hrothgar said.

"And what of them?" Gawain said, motioning to the people disembarking.

"They have nowhere left to go," Hrothgar said.

Gawain paused for a moment to look upon the newcomers. "Then they shall be welcome here."

Hrothgar grinned. "You scared me for a moment there. I thought you might refuse them."

"It crossed my mind," Gawain said. "Things have changed in Skara Brae. We can no longer accommodate all who come here."

"Then things have changed everywhere," Hrothgar said. "But I assure you, these poor folk have had it worse than your people here."

"What happened?"

"The Danelaw put up a decent fight, but in the end, Mordred

was just too much for them. My fleet took on everybody we could and scattered to the seas. There were twenty ships, but I know not what became of them. We were to meet off the coast of Nordheim and then head here, but none of them showed." Hrothgar looked grim. "I have to assume the worst."

"But why come here? Did you not think Morgana would follow you?"

Hrothgar laughed a little. "Gawain, my kind have made a base of Orkney for longer than anyone can remember. Besides, something has kept Morgana from laying Skara Brae to waste so far. I imagined my hiding here would make no difference. Frankly, I have been more concerned over convincing the Lords of Stone to let us into their city."

Gawain looked at Hrothgar. "They are gone, all but one. And he no longer cares to govern Skara Brae. That has fallen to me."

"Gone? How?"

"When I came here after Camelot fell, only the Dreamer, the Builder and the Gatekeeper remained. The Builder faded away after rendering the city invisible to Arcadian eyes. The Dreamer..."

Hrothgar said nothing, but hung on Gawain's every word.

"...I'm not sure what happened to him. He just disappeared."

"And the Gatekeeper?"

"He tends to himself now. He remains a friend, but still..."

"The loyalties of immortals can be a fickle thing," Hrothgar said. "Even more so when they sense their own end."

"Long had I thought they would protect us when Mordred's armies come calling. Now we have only ourselves to rely on."

"I would think you would welcome such a thing, Gawain."

"Aye, but heroes are scarce, and our enemies are legion. I cannot hold off Mordred on my own."

"Well, I cannot claim to have brought you an army, but I have a few passengers yet who you might be glad to meet," Hrothgar said, turning Gawain's attentions back to the ship.

A pair of warriors disembarked, each bearing the countenance of a champion. For a second, Gawain thought he saw the faintest sign of the spark within them, but it was too hard to tell. It had been so long since he had seen it...

"I present to you Cambol of Gaul," Wulfgar said, clapping the first knight on the shoulders. Gawain took one look at Cambol and tasted something unpleasant in his throat. Was it the stranger's Gallic good looks or the paladin's field plate that displeased him more? Maybe it the pair of swords he wore—that flashy conti-

mental swordplay always looked better than it really was?

"Sire," Cambol said to Gawain, bowing low before him. "Long have my people pledged their allegiance to your cousin and the court he made, and long have we fought against Morgana and her thralls, both mortal and otherwise. I humbly ask you for the honor of serving you here against Mordred and those who serve him."

"Save the pleasantries for a proper court," Gawain said. "We make no puffery here in Skara Brae."

Cambol looked surprised as he rose to his feet. "I meant only respect..."

Gawain looked him over. "Let us hope so."

Cambol pressed his mouth into a thin line. "Very well, my lord. I thank you for your hospitality."

"Mmm," Gawain said as Cambol took his leave.

A beautiful woman walked across the stone quay, outfitted in a patchwork suit of light armor plates, chain mail and leather fittings. Ragtag armor that could only have come from the deepest strongholds of Germania, Gawain thought. Last he had heard, it was the only country in Europa that was both free from Morgana's reign as well as the reign of anything else. A lawless frontier of dark woodlands and forbidding mountains where travelers went to disappear forever.

"Lorelei of the Teutonic Order," Hrothgar said.

Gawain looked at her strong facial features and braided hair, which seemed to be a dozen shades of blonde, with the odd hint of bronze running through it. He had to work hard to stop from staring, but that didn't keep him from thinking what surprises she held in store for the lucky bastard who could prize her from her armor.

Lorelei strode to Gawain and saluted him. "Greetings, lord protector," she said crisply.

"I see the Order's sense of formality hasn't changed," Gawain said.

"The Order bows to none," Lorelei said, nodding her head a little. "But we live to serve."

"And where are the rest of your fellows?"

Lorelei's expression darkened. "Gone," she said before excusing herself and heading down the quay with her pack of weapons and gear slung over one of her shoulders.

"At the Battle of Freisburg," Hrothgar said, his eyes following the comely young maiden. "Mordred surrounded their freeholds

and moved in with everything he had. Maybe twenty of them survived that day. Over the last year, Mordred found every one of them. Except for her."

"Lucky girl," Gawain said, turning to watch Lorelei a little more.

"Luck had nothing to do with it." Hrothgar said, his voice low.

"She your best, then?"

"She thinks so. We shall see," Hrothgar said.

"You know, Hrothgar, glad as I am to see you, I was expecting your father, not you," Gawain said. "Where is Lord Wulfgar?"

"With his ancestors," Hrothgar said.

Gawain felt like he had stepped into ice water. "What? But how?"

"How else?" Hrothgar said. "Mordred killed him."

"I'm sorry," Gawain said.

Hrothgar shook his head. "Don't be," the young Northlander said with a smile. "His was a glorious end."

"When did it happen?"

"During the fall of the Danelaw. When we picked up our passengers."

"So the lords of Nordheim have you to call their chieftain, eh?"

"I suppose so," Hrothgar said. "It is hardly my wish. There were many more worthy than I am. I'm simply the last one left to take the job."

"There will be no rest for the likes of you, then. How are you with a sword?" Gawain asked. "Did Wulfgar teach you all of his tricks?"

Hrothgar pressed his thumb into the crossed hammers of the Wulfgar crest on his surcoat. "No swords. The Fist of Nordheim has no need for them."

Gawain looked at the massive warhammer lying at Hrothgar's feet. It looked like it was forged from a single lump of alloy, though Gawain dared not guess what it might be. Surely something heavy and damned near indestructible, something maybe crafted by somebody who stayed with the Dwarves before their kind forever turned their backs on the world.

Hrothgar took his hammer in hand and held it before Gawain, inviting the knight to hold it. Gawain took it in both his hands and could scarcely keep it upright.

"Whouf!" Gawain said, tipping the massive weapon back into Hrothgar's grasp. "You fight with that thing?"

Hrothgar's smile told Gawain everything he needed to know.

"Right," he said, handing the hammer back to its owner. "Welcome to Skara Brae, then. Is that all of them?" Gawain asked Hrothgar, still watching Lorelei and Cambol.

"You sound disappointed," Hrothgar said.

"Perhaps, a little. To be honest, I had hoped there would be more than just three of you."

"The situation is more dire than you realize. Europa has fallen, Gawain. Mordred's armies have run unchecked from Iberia to the far side of Germania. And for every kingdom that falls to Mordred's sword, two others swear allegiance to him to spare themselves."

Gawain grimaced. "Nova Roma? Byzantium?"

"Ha!" Hrothgar laughed. "They were the first to give themselves to Mordred."

"Poland and the Joined Kingdoms?"

"They resist, but are surrounded. Already the southern fiefdoms falter, or so I have heard. I cannot imagine King Gollancz will last the year."

"Gollancz was a good man."

"Long may he reign," Hrothgar said. "Nordheim's people remain free, but only because most of us are on the open water. We can only land in the most northern ports, however. We were ambushed in Sudenheim not three months ago and lost nearly half the fleet in dock. Since then, we have lived on the run."

"Then let me thank you again for your delivery of soldiers and supplies to me," Gawain said. "You and your crew are welcome to stay here for as long as you like."

"My crew is grateful," Hrothgar said. "Our hearts live on the sea, but our luck cannot last there forever. I would rather stay here and join your fight against Mordred than let him run me down like a dog."

"I doubt it would ever come to that, but let Skara Brae be your home, if you wish it."

"I do. This city will be the last stand for the free people of Europa. It is a fight I wish very much to be a part of."

"Mmm."

"Yours is a just cause, Gawain. There are many who would join you, if only they could make the journey."

Gawain said nothing, looking out into the mist.

"You doubt yourself?"

"For seven years I have feared Morgana's eyes appearing in the sky and looking down on us. I have feared Mordred's troops ris-

ing out of the sea, besieging my city and enslaving anybody they did not kill. And why not? They know we are here, even if our magic hides us. So for seven years, I have built an army just in case such a day would ever come..."

"What are you saying, Gawain?"

Gawain looked at his friend. "I think Morgana has forgotten about us, Hrothgar. And I don't think the Builder's magic had anything to do with it."

"So much the better then, yes? Gives you the element of surprise."

"It gives us options."

Hrothgar wrinkled his face as if he smelled something disagreeable. "You're not talking of calling off the war, are you?"

"Skara Brae is the greatest city in Europa, free or otherwise. Here, we have surpassed even Camelot's glory. None suffer for want of anything, least of all peace. Would it be so bad to keep it that way? For our children's children to grow up in a world without war?"

Hrothgar drew close to Gawain. "If I didn't know any better, I would say that the protector of Skara Brae had become a coward," he said quietly.

"Watch your tongue."

"Only when you remember the reason for all of this," Hrothgar said, gesturing to his ship, and in a sweeping arc, back to the city. "What of your boy? Of Arthur? Surely when he comes to manhood, he will turn the tide. Isn't that what you've told me all of these years?"

"I am not sure anymore." Gawain said.

"He is either the savior of Europa or he is not."

"Arthur is not what you think he is, Hrothgar," Gawain said. "He is not what anybody thinks he is."

Hrothgar fell quiet for a moment. "One day, when this time of darkness is long behind us, I will return to those lands Mordred put to torch and chain, and I will spread word of those who made Europa free once more. I cannot imagine a greater shame than if all I had to say of Skara Brae was that its lord and protector had lost his nerve."

Gawain exhaled. "You don't understand."

"Then make me."

Gawain told him everything. The ravishment of Boudicea, her rescue from Camelot, the delivery of Arthur and the flight to Orkney for him, for Gawain, and even for Boudicea herself.

Hrothgar looked at Gawain in disbelief. "The boy is not your own?" The northlander quickly glanced over Gawain's shoulder to make sure that none of his own sailors were within earshot. "He is Mordred's?"

"He is more than that, I fear. The fires of Arcadia burn deeply within him. More so than I think any of us thought in the beginning."

"Who do you mean by 'us'?"

"Myself. Boudicea. The Gatekeeper. Ghyslain."

"The last one is not familiar to me."

"He is the spellcaster who brought me the boy in the first place."

"Student of Merlin?"

Gawain shook his head. "I never found out. I assume he was. Of course, for all I know, Merlin himself is still out there somewhere, waiting to play a part in this whole mess."

Hrothgar motioned to Gawain that they should catch up with the others who had left the ship. "What has Boudicea said of this?"

"I have to believe she either knows and does not care, or she does not know and is better left ignorant," Gawain said. "I make no mention of it. I cannot imagine what it was like for her during those long days in Mordred's tower."

They walked along the length of the stone quay. Hrothgar scanned the sky for signs of trouble, and then noticed that Gawain did not. "So sure are you that Morgana has forgotten of this place?"

"Forgotten, can't see us or no longer wants to. Frankly, I don't care what the reason is. The city is safe as a result of it, though. I know that much."

Hrothgar was finally beginning to understand. "But if Arthur reveals himself as one of them..."

Gawain nodded. "Can you imagine how brightly Arthur will beckon to Morgana once he succumbs to his Arcadian urges? Arthur was there when the Dreamer perished, and there shone within the boy something brighter than I had ever seen. Something strange and unknown to me. Soon Morgana and Mordred will be unable to ignore him, and they will come looking for him. They will destroy everything in their path and they will punish whoever dared keep them apart from one of their own."

"Unless he remains hidden," Hrothgar said.

Gawain nodded. "That is one option."

"I do not like where this conversation is going. Are you suggesting we kill..."

Gawain waved his hand. "Let us not think of such dark things," he said. "For now, the boy bears watching, and watch him I will. In the meantime, I shall continue to keep building the city's strength in case we need it one day, hoping all the while that we never will."

"So you really don't mean to fight?"

Gawain shook his head.

For a few seconds, they said nothing. In the distance, the waves softly broke against the stony shore. The sound of wet pebbles crunched under the feet of Gawain and Hrothgar, as they had beneath of those who went before them.

"But what of Britannia? And Europa?" Hrothgar asked.

"They will have to fend for themselves or come here. As long as we make no trouble, then neither will Morgana," Gawain said. "I'm tired, Hrothgar. These hands of mine have shed enough blood for a dozen lifetimes. Better to keep the peace now, and let that awful work fall to somebody else. Perhaps, it will be you when the time comes."

"None of us came here just to wait, Gawain." Hrothgar said. "Surely you must know that."

"None of them came here to die either," Gawain said. "Yet that is precisely what will happen the moment if we go to war against Morgana. I will not have the slaughter of Skara Brae added to my list of failures."

"Then everything you have done here means nothing."

"Do not question my methods," Gawain said through clenched teeth.

"And what if they do?" Hrothgar said, motioning to Lorelei and Cambol, who were walking together near the head of the procession. They were talking amongst themselves and laughing.

Gawain said nothing as the group walked the rest of the way to the city gate.

Before the massive doors to the city, the Gatekeeper stood to greet the newcomers, spear in hand. He said nothing as he simply opened the gates with a wave of his hand. Everyone who passed him, he looked directly in the eye and addressed by name. For the sailors, it was, as always, a most unsettling experience. For Lorelei and Cambol, it felt more like an initiation than anything else.

Gawain stepped aside to let Hrothgar go in before him. "First one out, last one in," he said with a thin smile. Hrothgar nodded and walked through the portal, shimmering from view, just as everyone in the procession had done before him. At last, there was

only Gawain and the Gatekeeper standing out in the gray cold of the Orkney shore.

"Welcome back, Lord Gawain," the Gatekeeper said. "The guards told me you went out alone."

"Only because you weren't there to stop me."

"Indeed. Or maybe I knew what awaited you outside," the Gatekeeper said. He nodded to the gate. "Go straight through..."

"...and don't look back." Gawain said. He stepped forward and shimmered through the portal.

Alone, the Gatekeeper made ready to go through the portal himself when he stopped and looked over his shoulder. Something was not right. He could sense it.

Gripping his stone spear before him, he moved away from the city gate slowly, steadily. He scanned the ground and air before him, peering through the distant mist of the sea, which had begun to creep inward across the island.

He waited until the feeling in his gut subsided and at last, he relaxed, cradled his spear in his arm, and turned back to Skara Brae.

He walked back to the city gate expecting to feel one of Mordred's black arrows slice through the air at him, or the feeling of a thousand pairs of Arcadian eyes fix on his frame. But there was none of that.

He entered the city and drew the gate closed behind him, but not before he violated his own law and looked back to the outside world one last time. It was as quiet out on the island as it had ever been. But something was not right. Something had happened right before his very watch, but he could not tell what it was, and that was the worst part of it all.

Boudicea finally found Arthur standing alone on the sea-watch balcony, perched on the highest roof of the manor. She had been looking and calling for him for half an hour, and was about to set the pages to the task of finding her son, before she decided to look in one last place. When she climbed the staircases to the roof, she could not help but think of the time five years earlier when little Arthur had toddled out of view and set the household in a panic. It was Boudicea who located him then, too. When she saw her giggling boy standing on the balcony edge, looking out at the sea, she was certain that the moment she reached for him,

he would take another step and plummet to the cobblestones so many stories below.

Today was different. Arthur was still a boy, true, but he had a ranginess about him and a demeanor that suggested he was somehow growing up faster than he let on, that there were more years inside of him than out. He was leaning on his elbows against the balcony, his long, embroidered cloak billowing and flapping in the wind. He wore a partial set of dress plate armor, made specifically for him as a gift by Skara Brae's finest armorer. Boudicea suspected he did the suit to pay an old debt to Gawain, but her husband laughed at the very notion of it, and the armorer would only say how proud he was to outfit the son of Skara Brae's new lord and protector.

The blade hanging from Arthur's belt was another matter. That, she learned when Gawain brought it out of an old chest of personal treasures, was the weapon of the Goblin King Prenelius, whose kind Gawain had driven out of the Isle of Aran shortly after the Round Table had been founded. On Arthur, it looked like a full-length sword, but in reality, it was just a long knife, made by forgotten hands plying a forgotten craft from a forgotten time.

She watched his face in profile, and in it she saw none of her own features, nor any of those of her family. There had been those who tried to convince her how Arthur had her eyes or chin, but she knew different. She was his mother. She knew better than anyone else how, even at only seven years old, Arthur was growing to look like his father more and more with each passing day. The more she looked at him, the more she could not ignore in Arthur the terrifying beauty of Mordred.

Boudicea drew a breath to say something, but Arthur had spied her from the corner of his eye and spoke first. "Mother," he said flatly. Boudicea's breath faltered in her throat. For a moment, he sounded exactly like...

"I'm sorry if I worried you," he said, turning to her. "It was so busy downstairs, I kept getting in the way, so I came up here."

Boudicea smiled and took him into her arms. "You are never in the way, my little dragon. You look quite handsome today! I'm sorry your father made you wear that silly armor."

"It's okay. It's not as heavy as it looks. I kind of like it," Arthur said. He looked at Boudicea. "You look beautiful, Momma."

Boudicea, in searching for Arthur, had somehow forgotten her layers of formalwear, the intricate patterns sewn into the cloth, the delicate cut of her skirts, how it all accented her womanhood.

How far from the battle clothes she preferred to wear. Still, her boy's admiration was enough to make her smile. "I like your armor better. Want to trade?" she said, reaching out to him.

"No!" Arthur said, laughing and clutching his breastplate. "It's mine."

"Alright then." Boudicea kissed him on the head. "So what were you looking at up here?"

"There are dark clouds coming," Arthur said, nodding to the wall of thunderheads advancing across the ocean towards the island.

"That's a pretty big storm. We'd better go downstairs. It's almost time for us to go to the coronation, anyway."

Arthur did not move. He kept looking at the distant clouds. There was a twinge in Boudicea that made her worry.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Don't know. I just feel like there is something out there for me to see, but I can't tell what it is."

Boudicea put her hands on his shoulders and gently guided him to the stairs. "Come on, love. It's time to go."

As they went downstairs, the sounds of the wind and the ocean's distant rumble faded before those of two dozen house stewards, pages and cooks rushing to prepare the evening banquet. The house's great room had been nearly emptied and instead made to look like a great hall. On the table that dominated the space of the room stood a magnificent laurel wreath surrounding a gargantuan bouquet of flowers. Tendrils of ivy hung over the edge of the tabletop.

"I like how you did the table, Momma."

"Thank you, Arthur. To tell the truth, I didn't know what I was doing, so I just put it together." Boudicea adjusted the wreath. "Things like this are not what I usually do."

Arthur looked at the arrangement and cocked his head. "The wreath is Da, and his new position, isn't it? Wreaths are for rulers."

"Right you are! And what of the rest?"

Arthur chewed his lower lip. "The flowers are for you?"

"Close. They are for all women," she said. "Knights live for justice and glory, but their deeds mean nothing if the ladies of the court don't approve of them."

"That makes them the most powerful of all, doesn't it?" Arthur asked. "The ladies, I mean."

"Yes, Arthur, it does. But only in a world where there is law

and a court to enforce it."

The boy stood quiet for a moment. "What is the ivy?"

Boudicea touched a length of it, feeling one of the dark spade leaves between her fingertips. "Just as the flowers are for all ladies, the ivy is for one in particular. The greatest one, who we must never forget."

"And who is that, Momma?"

"Boudicea!" shouted Gawain from across the great room. His voice caromed off the bare walls. As he walked across the floor, his footsteps fell heavy on the marble floor. He wore a coat of gleaming plate mail so ornate it looked to be made of gold and silver. His broadsword was tied to a baldric that hung over his shoulder and across his chest. It too seemed to have been spun from precious metal. He had been perfectly groomed and cut quite the dashing figure despite-or maybe because of-his sanguine girth. But there were whitening streaks in his beard and at his temples that Arthur could have sworn were not there a few days before. Back when the Builder was still around.

Arthur watched him as he moved, his long stride, how his thick arms swung at his sides. Despite his huge belly and doubling chin, there was a power underneath all of that which still burned, Arthur sensed. It was that which tamed dragons and broke armies. But for all of that, there were so many layers of fine cloth, gilded armor and furred cloaks on top of it, did even Gawain himself remember who he once was? Arthur wondered, and the shook it from his head. How could a thought like that get in there?

Gawain exhaled loudly. "Boudicea, have you found...Arthur, there you are! Has us worried sick, you did."

"Sorry, Da."

"Sorry you'll be, if you do it again," Gawain said. "Come along now. The rest of us are ready to go."

Arthur hurried to Gawain's side, holding Boudicea's hand and pulling her along. When he reached Gawain, the old knight looked back at the table.

"What's all that, then?" he said to Boudicea.

"Oh, that's..." Arthur began, but Boudicea hushed him with a glance.

"It's cluttering the table, is what it is," Gawain said. "We've got a dozen of my marshals coming here later in the day, and they'll have no where to eat with all that before them. Have a page get rid of it."

"But..." Arthur said.

"Don't interrupt," Gawain snapped. "Boudicea, I'll not have our table made into a damned flower garden. Not today."

Boudicea caught the eye of a servant girl and glanced at the table. The girl hurried to pull the decorations off.

Gawain pulled at the rim of his breastplate's collar in an attempt to find a little more room for his neck. "Let's get moving. They're waiting for us."

Together, they walked through the arch of the house's main entrance. A pair of pages in formal dress opened the twin doors for Skara Brae's first family, and as they did, Arthur had to squint against the sudden brightness of the morning sun.

In the courtyard before the house, and in the grand plaza beyond that, stood a vast body of people waiting for their new leader to show himself. There were armored knights—those of Gawain's personal guard, the city army, and the marshals tasked to lead them. But there were also champions of a hundred nations scattered throughout the crowd, who had come to the city over the last year in the hopes that someone would lead them to victory, and their homelands to freedom.

Then there were the nobles of the city. There were the highborn few who had descended from a dozen generations of Skara Brae, but there were those too who came from the outside and brought their vast wealth with them. Both put on their best for the day, wearing the kinds of dress best remembered from the courts of a bygone era, when the promise of Arthur and a unified Europa was real, and the dream of chivalry still a waking one. Together they stood, these patricians, flanked by their seconds and servants, putting on display not just their own greatness, but how it deferred to those who would safeguard them.

There were the merchants and shopkeepers and craftsmen and their families. Long had they toiled to build something for themselves in a world that had stopped making sense when Arthur died. But never had they lost hope, and it was here, in Skara Brae, where they could rebuild what they lost when Morgana's shadow crossed the land. They knew they were safe, and they knew who had kept them so. They lacked the finery of their noble patrons, or the shining armor of their champions. But they had the look that Gawain had come to love and dread in equal measure: the look of those who trusted their lives to the care of another. As Gawain met their eyes, it was as if the entire crowd spoke to him in a single, silent sentence: Save us, and be praised.

And there, before them all, stood Gawain's marshals in their

signature plate armor covered by their finely woven and embroidered surcoats. Silver ivy leaves spread from the center of their chests, glinting against the pale green cloth behind them. The marshals stood in two columns flanking the walkway outside of the house's main door, and they held their great swords before them, points to the ground. But when Gawain, Boudicea and Arthur emerged, they swung their steel up, forming a canopy of blades for their lord to walk under. And as Gawain did, and as his wife and son followed, the marshals followed, two by two, their swords still held high. Hrothgar, Lorelei and Cambol went next.

The crowd silently parted for the procession of heroes, which made its way toward the city's Great Hall. But Gawain had only taken his first dozen steps before someone in the crowd cried "Long live lord Gawain! Long live Skara Brae!" The crowd erupted in cheer that thundered against Arthur's ears. He could feel the weight of the joyful noise press his chest, but all he cared to notice was the look of noble sureness on Gawain's face, a monarch whose years of waiting had finally paid their due.

The crowd filled in behind the procession, keeping a respectful distance on all sides, but never did their cheers subside until Gawain reached the steps of the Great Hall, some minutes later. The Gatekeeper stood waiting, looking as he always did, the bulk of his armored coat underneath ancient and royally colored fineries. He carried his spear as usual, but he also held a war scepter in his free hand, tucking it into the crook of his arm. On his head sat a ring of magnificently carved, interlocking plates of thin stone made to look like a laurel wreath. There was a special majesty to him this day, too, Arthur thought. Moments like this don't come along very often.

Boudicea took Arthur's hand and led him up the stairs of the Great Hall, where the Gatekeeper and Gawain already stood side by side. When Arthur reached the top, he turned to face the people below as the rest of the procession climbed the stairs. He looked at the thousands of faces surrounding him, how they smiled and gazed upon the man who would become their sovereign. All of their eyes were fixed on Gawain with a faraway look of amazement.

Arthur felt that something was not right. Somewhere in the crowd were enemies...

Arthur zeroed in on them without even trying. It was Martigan and his son, Brom, and their minions Killian and Connacht and a dozen more whose names he did not know. Their faces were

masks of smoldering rage, of retaliation waiting for air enough to burst into flame. Arthur studied them all, the hate in their eyes. Brom shifted his focus to Arthur, and across the distance of that vast courtyard outside of the Great Hall, their eyes locked. Arthur shivered; he needed no special talent to guess the intent of Brom and his father. He was under the gaze of predators that would not rest until they had their fill of blood.

You can be afraid, a voice said within Arthur that only he could hear. Or you can defeat what scares you and destroy fear itself. It would be an easy thing for one of your kind. For within flows the blood of dragons and kings. What courses through the likes of him that should give you pause?

Nothing, Arthur thought. Nothing at all.

And at that, Arthur smiled, for he knew that his torment would end, and end soon.

Once the procession reached the height of the stairs, the Gatekeeper handed Gawain the scepter and placed the stone laurel wreath on his head, speaking to him in the forgotten tongue of the ancients, in the language of stone. Then the Gatekeeper stepped aside as Gawain entered the Great Hall, as did those behind him. After that, the people in the courtyard filed into the Hall to partake of the ceremony to come. And even though the Hall could not possibly hold them all, and even though the Builder was no longer there to work her magic, somehow every commoner found room inside the Hall to bear witness to Gawain's coronation. Then, at last, when all had been admitted, the Gatekeeper went in last, closing the Hall's vault-like doors simply by looking at them, sealing the entire city within a single building of stone.

All fell quiet, and finally Gawain stood and took to a podium set before the audience. He softly placed his hands on either edge of the podium and breathed once and slow, before speaking.

Boudicea heard none of it, though. She did not have to, for she had heard Gawain rehearse it more times than she cared to remember. It was a decently worded bit about the legacy of the city and everyone's duty to honor the sacrifices of those who came before them, especially the Lords of Stone, whose reign would finally end on this day. The rest was, to Boudicea anyway, fairly predictable stuff about how Gawain would honor the city and protect it from harm, safeguarding it above all from Morgana and her myriad agents of doom.

But her familiarity with the speech was not why Gawain's deep baritone faded away and was replaced by the sound of wind softly

rushing through leaves. No, that was a sound she knew only too well, no matter how many years it had been since she had heard it last.

"It has been too long," said the voice that seemed to whisper into Boudicea's ear along. It was the Lady.

"It has," Boudicea thought.

"For many moons have I slept after I arranged for your rescue and for Arthurs flight to safety. Not once in all of that time have I heard you call for me or even speak my name."

"I will never forget what you have done for me," Boudicea thought. "I did not wish to know what more your attentions might cost me."

"You feared I would take him away again."

Boudicea looked at Arthur. He looked back at her and smiled.

"Yes."

"Right you were to be afraid, for there is much to fear," the Lady said. "And he is at the heart of it all."

"Arthur?"

"Yes, Boudicea. Arthur."

"But of course, he is. You said he would..."

"He is a danger to you and everyone around you," the Lady said.

"What?"

"Boudicea, I have slept long, and I have yet longer to go before I may wake fully, if ever I do at all. You are the last mortal who pays me heed, and when you stop, then forever will I vanish from the thoughts of mortal folk. But until then, I still dream, and of late, visions most dire have troubled my slumber. Visions of your son. And of Mordred's."

"Do not speak his name to me."

"You cannot escape him, child. Not when he runs so strongly in the one standing next to you."

"He is more his father than anything else," the Lady whispered after a pause. "Surely you can see this."

"It does not matter," Boudicea thought. "He is a good child. You judge him unfairly on things he has not yet done. On a man he has yet to be."

"It is easy for Gawain to prattle on about how he will keep your city safe when he seems to think that Morgana has forgotten Skara Brae, and that Mordred has stopped looking for his son. But neither is true, Boudicea. How long will it be until that boy draws Mordred's search to your very home? And how long will Skara

Brae withstand Morgana's full fury?"

"You don't know that will happen."

"You presume to know better than I? Even now, as a mere shadow within my own Garden of Dreams, I know how thinly the blood of Gaia runs in Arthurs veins. You are just a simple girl who does not even know her own son."

Boudicea clenched her jaw. "Arthur will save us all. You said so yourself."

"Indeed, that was supposed to be. But Mordred's congress with you did not yield another Pendragon, as I had presumed. Arthur is one of them, Boudicea. He belongs to Mordred and to Morgana and to the Arcadian lords that she must answer to. When Arthur's time comes, they will speak to him in words you cannot hear. He will give himself to them, and all will be lost."

Boudicea closed her eyes and fought the urge to scream. "What would you have me do, then?"

"Isn't it obvious?" the Lady said. "The boy must die."

"No!"

"It is the only way, Boudicea. Anything else risks him joining Morgana. Once he does that, she will be invincible."

"You ask the impossible. I will not slay my own son just to ease your fears."

"Are you so selfish that you would set the world on fire just to defy me?"

"I would do it before I let anyone hurt my son."

"You disappoint me, Boudicea. This is all part of something larger. Don't you understand?"

"He is my boy. And I am his mother. His mother! What can possibly be larger than that?"

"You will never know," the Lady said, sounding tired. "But know this: there are others who see in Arthur what you will not. Some who you consider enemies, some who you consider friends. And they will not hesitate when the time comes. Do as I say, and at least you can have a hand in how it all ends."

"Never."

"Then Mordred really did break you," the Lady said. "And Morgana has won already."

The voice of the Lady left Boudicea's ear in time for her to hear Gawain's final words and the applause that followed. Moments later, she felt Arthur squeeze her hand.

"Why are you crying, Momma?"

The revelry of the coronation feast at Gawain's house exceeded the wildest expectations of its planners. On top of the dozens of invited guests already inside the manor house, there were dozens more who had been at the coronation and who wanted to bask in Gawain's glory for as long as the day would let them. The courtyard outside Gawain's manor was thick with people, and for blocks in every direction of the place, bakers, butchers and brewers turned out their stocks to feed the cheering throngs of Skara Brae, without a care to the cost or consequence. For who could quibble about inventories on a day like this? Nobody. At least, not when the air was thick with rumors that Gawain would be footing the bill for everybody inside and out.

Within the house, things were hardly more restrained. Most of the marshals and dignitaries were well into their cups by the middle of the afternoon and gorged on the succulent meats, breads and pastries set before them. This was a feast like none had ever seen since the fall of Camelot, and it was Gawain's very intention to make everybody know that indeed, the glory days had returned.

The guests lining the great table in the main room were boisterous to the point of embarrassment, but if any of them cared, few were inclined to show it. At every table somebody would swear loud oaths to their new lord, raising a toast to him, his family, their city and anything else that might be worthy of a drink.

Gawain sat at the head of the table, still in his ceremonial armor and cloak, pounding down every flagon offered to him with a gusto that Boudicea had never seen before. She went through the first few rounds with him, but when her head began to get fuzzy, she slipped away under the pretext of fetching more ale. When she caught sight of the crowd outside, she realized that even if things did not get out of hand this day, they were still fairly beyond what anybody intended this revelry to be. Her thoughts turned to Arthur, and she hurried back through her home, shoving past her guests to get to the stairs, past the guards posted there, and bound up to her son's bedchamber.

Arthur was sitting on his bed, holding the goblin dagger Gawain had given to him. He was looking away, through his bedroom window when Boudicea entered.

"There you are," she said, leaning against the doorframe and smiling.

Arthur turned to his mother and let the dagger fall across his lap. "It was really hot and pushy down there," he said. "I hope it's

okay I came up here."

"It's fine, love," Boudicea said. "I'm going to have some marshals look after you for the rest of the party, alright?"

"Can they fight?"

"I am sure they can. But why do you ask?"

Arthur thought for a moment. "Because I am in danger, Momma."

Her blood chilled and she entered the room fully, closing the door behind her. "Who is it? Is it Brom?"

"Him, and others," Arthur said.

"Arthur, look at me. Brom and his friends will never bother you again. You are the Lord Marshal's son now. They must obey you as much as me."

"As much as Da?"

"Yes, Arthur," Boudicea said as she kissed his forehead. "As much as Da."

"I think he is in danger, too."

"We all are, love. The world is a dangerous place."

"But this place isn't supposed to be," he said.

"Who taught you all of this?"

"I don't know. It just comes in my head sometimes. When I sleep, mostly."

Boudicea chewed her lower lip for a second before the sound of breaking crockery somehow sounded through the din downstairs. She opened the door. "I have to go back downstairs. You can stay here if you like. I'll put Cambol and Lorelei on the stairs. "If you need anything, just ask them."

"Yes, Momma. Thanks."

She tousled his hair. "Not at all, little dragon," she said, and then left Arthur alone in his room. He picked up his goblin dagger once more and ran his thumb along the edge to test it. A thin, red line emerged across his skin. When he sucked at it, he did not taste blood. He tasted...autumn.

Downstairs, Boudicea looked at the crowd of nameless faces pressed shoulder to shoulder. How many people did Gawain invite, anyway? And where the hell was Gawain? The table was now occupied by a new set of revelers, and Gawain and his closest guests were all gone, off drinking themselves into oblivion in a distant corner not yet filled with unknown guests.

Boudicea shouldered into a pair of the city's merchant princes as they tried to make their way upstairs. "Don't," she said to both of them, staring daggers. They got the point and shuffled back-

wards off the steps, merging clumsily into the crowd. Boudicea stood on the first step, cursing under her breath at the two marshals who had been posted here but now were gone. She kept an eye on the crowd until she spotted Cambol and Lorelei on the far side of the room, chatting with a few other guests. They were drinking, but they looked clear-headed enough.

She fixed her gaze on Cambol and hoped he might somehow guess she was looking at him and cast a look in her direction.

She hoped hard. Harder. And then...

Cambol looked up and saw her. She waved and pointed at the stairs. "Can you help me?" she mouthed slowly.

Cambol nodded, then spoke to Lorelei, who came out with him. Clear-headed they were, indeed. They threaded between party-goers without even bumping into them, which to Boudicea seemed impossible, given how tightly packed the room had become.

"My lady?" they said together once they reached Boudicea.

"I need you to stay on these stairs and make sure nobody goes up." She pointed a finger to the ceiling. "Arthur is depending on you."

"Is there something wrong?" Cambol asked.

"Probably not," she said. "But you two need to make sure of it."

"Depend on us," Lorelei said. "Arthur will be safe with us."

"My thanks to you," Boudicea said. "If he tries to send you off, don't listen to him. He thinks too strongly of himself, I think."

"No worries," Cambol said.

"I'll be back soon," she said.

"Take your time," Lorelei said. "Tonight, you should be free of worries."

Boudicea smiled thinly. "I am a mother. Worrying is what we do."

She disappeared into the crowd, and once gone, Cambol and Lorelei stood shoulder to shoulder on the second stair, looking over the heads of everybody in the room.

"This is madness," Cambol said.

"Indeed," Lorelei said. "None of these fools will even remember being here, come the morning."

"Half of them will prefer it that way."

"And the other half will curse themselves for it."

"Aye. But will...hey, look sharp."

"What is it?" Lorelei asked.

"Look, but don't look like you're looking. Halfway across the

room, by the end of the table."

"Mmm. Dark hair? Looks like he just swallowed a bug?"

"That's him. He's been staring at us since we came over."

"Who is he?"

"Don't know," Cambol said. "But he's not a friend, that's for certain."

"Neither are the ones behind him. Looks like six of them."

"They're not looking for trouble here and now, are they? How stupid would you have to be?"

"Plenty. Or plenty drunk," Lorelei said. "Or maybe a bit of both."

"Hmm. Must be a lot of that going around tonight."

"We should keep an eye on them, just the same," Lorelei said.

"They look like they're waiting for us to clear the stairs."

At that moment, Hrothgar came by, holding a massive tankard in one hand and a turkey leg in the other. "My friends! You're not drinking?"

"Not anymore," Cambol said. "Lady Boudicea asked us to hold the stairs for her."

"Ah, that's rotten luck, then. The ale is most good, indeed!"

"Another time. You see the dandy with the dark hair, across the room?"

Hrothgar turned and pointed. "Him, there?"

"Gah! Not so obvious!" Cambol hissed.

"That's Brom, son of Martigan," Hrothgar said with a shrug as he took a bite from his turkey leg.

"Well, he has a murderous look about him," Cambol said.

"His people have a unsettled score with the house of Gawain," Hrothgar said, taking a pull off the flagon. "Goes back to the Battle of Brittany. Gawain slew Martigan's brother, and the debt has never been repaid."

Lorelei grimaced. "Nor has it been forgotten, I'll wager."

Hrothgar furrowed his brow and looked back at Brom's group. "You don't suppose he's thinking of doing something rash tonight, do you?"

Another crew of knights joined Brom, led by an older figure who carried the air of authority about him. Martigan. As they spoke amongst themselves, Lorelei noticed they were all wearing swords at a party where every other guest had left their arms at home.

Gawain re-entered the room, his face red, his ceremonial armor hanging from him, half-undone. He laughed and leaned on one of

his fellows while carrying a flagon in either hand. As he came into the room, a great drunken cheer came up from the crowd as the partygoers raised their drinks high to toast their new lord.

The crowd somehow found enough room to part around Gawain as he and his marshals headed for the huge keg of brew set up near the back of the banquet hall. As they went, the guests filled in behind them, deciding that if it was time for Lord Gawain to get a refill, then it was time for themselves, as well.

Lorelei watched one of Brom's lackeys draw close to him and said something into his ear. With all of the noise in the room, it was impossible for Lorelei to hear what was said. It was too far away to read lips, but whatever it was, it could not have been good, for Brom looked right at her and sneered before turning and leading his contingent from the main hall, and out of the house altogether.

Lorelei felt a chill run through her. "Oh, no," she said.

Hrothgar's festive mood dissolved. "What is it?"

By then, it was too late. Martigan's crew had broken through the crowd and in a matter of moments, managed to isolate Gawain from his marshals. They stood around him in a tight circle while the crowd in the room watched on in their stupor.

"Lord Gawain!" Martigan said as he drew his sword. In a single, fluid motion, the rest of his crew did likewise, six knights in all.

Gawain seemed to sober up instantly. For a tense moment, he locked eyes with Martigan, knowing that the men standing behind him had cut him off from help. He was on his own.

Someone in the crowd gasped at the sight of the drawn blades, and that was the signal Martigan needed. He advanced and brought his blade crashing down on Gawain's collar, where there was a slender chink in the metal plates of his armor. The blow rang loudly throughout the hall, and as Gawain groaned and dropped to one knee, a woman's scream split the air in the hall. Suddenly, it was quiet, as the stupefied crowd tried to process what had happened. Then the panic hit them as Martigan's men moved in for the kill.

People reeled backwards in every direction to put distance between themselves and the bloodshed they knew would follow. It took just a split-second for that wild retreat to turn into a stampede and people crushed for any exit to the house.

Hrothgar plowed into the crowd to aid Gawain, but the people were pressing too thickly against each other for him to get through, despite his size and strength. Cambol and Lorelei held

their position on the stairs, convinced that at any moment, assassins would try to force their way up the stairs, and to Arthur.

Bleeding from his shoulder, Gawain roared and got back to his feet, backhanding Martigan with a single, reeling blow. Martigan's followers lunged toward Gawain, who turned to face them. But he had also grabbed Martigan by the arm and brought him around as well, using him as a shield.

Three of the assassins could not stop their attacks, and they sunk their blades deep into Martigan, running him through. Gawain hurled Martigan's body aside while the blades were still stuck fast to it. Heedless of the danger, he charged straight into his attackers, taking them on in a mad brawl of flashing blades, crushing fists and the promise of mutual slaughter.

For a few desperate seconds, Gawain made the best of it, knocking one assassin out cold and disarming another. But now blows were beginning to connect on him, and just as he got wobbly on his legs, one of the enemy swordsmen raised his blade to finish him off.

"No!" shouted Hrothgar as he finally broke through and slammed the swordsman with his shoulder. The assassin flew off his feet and landed hard against the wall. There was a terrible crunching sound and he fell limp to the floor.

Hrothgar steadied Gawain back to his feet while Martigan's crew regrouped. Hrothgar drew himself to full height before them, and for that moment, he seemed ten feet tall.

The remaining assassins moved in with blinding speed and accuracy. The first brought his sword down against Gawain, but he blocked the blow with his arm, letting the blade break against the heavy metal armguard he wore.

At almost the same time, Hrothgar grabbed the assassin by the belt and the collar and heaved him upward. The killer hit the ceiling with the same force that his comrade had hit the wall with, and he fell to the floor a dead man.

The next two assassins Hrothgar dispatched by grabbing both of their heads as they rushed in and smashed them together. They each dropped like bags of sand, blood pouring out of their noses and mouths.

The fourth got in close and just as Hrothgar turned to face him, the assassin drew a knife and sunk the tip of it into Hrothgar's belly.

Before the blade could go any deeper, Hrothgar grunted and grabbed the assassin by the throat, lifting him off the ground.

With his other hand, he grabbed the assassin's knife hand and squeezed, breaking his fingers and the bones across the back of his hand. After that, Hrothgar simply pulled the knife from his gut. The blade rang dully as it fell to the floor.

"When you see your master in hell, tell him who sent you," Hrothgar said. He held the assassin tightly, wringing the very breath out of him when the second wave hit.

Three more minions came into the room, their blades already drawn. Behind them was Brom, clad in black leathers, a short sword in either hand and murder in his eyes.

Hrothgar threw the dead knight into his fresh attackers, knocking two of them off their feet and buying himself some valuable time. He looked around to see if he had any help, but Cambol and Lorelei were still on the stairs trying like hell to keep the crowd from bowling up there and crashing through the upper floor of the house. Gawain was on the ground, wheezing as blood poured out of the wound on his upper shoulder area.

"Get up, you old warhorse!" Hrothgar shouted. "Don't let me have all the fun, eh?"

Another one of Brom's men came in close, lashing Hrothgar across the chest with a deep knife strike. The giant Northlander howled at the injury and choked his attacker with a fatal blow across the head that sent him spinning to the floor.

The wounds felt wrong, Hrothgar thought. I'd taken worse from better fighters and not bled so badly. It burns...

And it hit him. He looked at his hand, covered in his own blood. He licked it and tasted almonds. Then it was settled: these bastards were using poison, and lots of it.

Brom entered the main hall as Hrothgar vomited and dropped to his knees. "So the northern giant is chopped low, eh? I expected better from you." Brom put a foot on Hrothgar's shoulder and kicked him over onto his back.

"Won't...bring your...father back..." Hrothgar managed to say. That was when Brom spied Martigan on the floor, impaled.

By now, the house was emptying rapidly, and Cambol and Lorelei could finally leave the stairs and get in the fight. But no sooner had they gotten off the first step than three of Brom's minions stepped before them, drawing their swords. Lorelei flexed her fingers. "Just the three of you?" she asked. Cambol smirked.

Brom looked at the body of his father for a moment, then headed past Hrothgar and went straight for Gawain, who was still on his hands and knees. The Lord Marshal was heaving his guts as

well, another victim of poisoned blades.

Brom crouched over Gawain and put one of his short swords against Gawain's throat. "After I kill you, I am going to head upstairs and do the same to your boy," Brom said, his voice growing. "Then I will find your woman. Tonight, the House of Gawain comes to an end."

Lorelei and Cambol double-teamed one of the minions before them, disarming him and sweeping him off his feet in a single, coordinated attack. The other two heavies moved in fast and were met by a flurry of fists and kicks that left them reeling and bloodied. "You jokers should have brought an army," Cambol said, cracking his knuckles.

Somehow, Hrothgar managed to get to his feet, despite his wounds and the venom in him. He slowly picked up a dropped sword from the melee and held it before him in two hands. "Let him go," he murmured.

Brom looked up at him, long locks of dark hair hanging before his eyes. "Make me."

The clamor of the battle filled the room until a small voice somehow cut through the clamor and rung clear in the ears of everybody who was still fighting.

"Stop it."

All turned to see where the words came from, and they saw young Arthur descending the staircase, his goblin knife in hand.

"Arthur, turn back!" Cambol said.

"My lord..." Hrothgar said before a fit of coughing cut him off.

Arthur walked before Brom, eyeing him straight on. "Killing a poisoned old man won't bring you any glory," Arthur said.

"Killing a weak little boy won't either, but I'll do it, all the same."

"If you want revenge, Brom, you'll have to take it from me. Not him," he said, nodding at Gawain.

Brom's eyes widened, and he grit his teeth, seeking the strength to cut Gawain's throat.

"Let. Him. Go." Arthur's voice rang like steel, and Brom was powerless to disobey. He dropped Gawain and backed off a step.

"I should have killed you a long time ago," Brom hissed.

"You're right," Arthur said. "You should have."

Brom dropped Gawain and lunged for Arthur, swinging both his swords down on the boy with blinding speed. He could practically taste the spray of blood, hear the sound of crunching bone. But instead, there was just the singing of steel and a shock that ran

up his arms strong enough to make him drop one of his blades.

He watched Arthur in amazement. The boy stood, holding his goblin knife with both hands. He had parried him? So the young Pendragon had some fight in him after all.

Brom feinted with his remaining sword to draw Arthur's blade into a high guard. He exploited the opening by kicking Arthur in the stomach, doubling him over long enough for Brom to draw close and prepare a killing stroke.

Arthur looked up to see Brom's sword come down. He dropped his own blade without thinking and put up his hands, slapping them together on the flat sides of Brom's sword, stopping it inches before his own face.

Brom leaned in with all of his weight and strength, grinding his blade ever closer to Arthur's head. The boy put everything he had in keeping Brom's sword frozen in place, but it was not enough. He was too small.

Too weak...

Too...human.

Orange fire blazed forth from Arthur's eyes as the boy screamed something in a tongue nobody in the room could understand. Arthur pushed Brom's sword up and back with such sudden savagery that he wrenched it from Brom's hands and hurled it across the hall, where it sunk into a wooden door.

Brom scrambled back a step, tripping over the body of Gawain and falling to the floor. Arthur stepped over Gawain, advancing on Brom, his eyes still afire, his face a mask of Arcadian rage.

Brom frantically kicked against the floor to put some distance between himself and Arthur, but he could not get away fast enough. Arthur was upon him, standing over him, his fists curled into knots.

Time hung still for that moment, when everyone in the room, even Gawain, watched Arthur with a sense of dread over what would happen next.

Boudicea and a dozen of Gawain's marshals burst into the room with weapons drawn. "Arthur!" she cried, running to him and sweeping his into her arms. He writhed in his mother's arms, bucking and kicking so he might pursue Brom further.

Brom got to his feet and leapt through a window. His remaining guardsmen did the same, running through the chaos outside and disappearing into the crowd.

The marshals ran to Gawain and Hrothgar, seeing to their wounds. They instantly realized that the two champions had been

poisoned by the green ichor starting to form on their wounds, and to counter it, they poured vials of a silvery elixir into their mouths. "Rest easy, sire," one of them said to Gawain. "This will cure your ills before you know it."

Boudicea tightened her grip on Arthur, and finally turned him to face her. His eyes still blazed Arcadian fire, but as soon as he saw his mother's face, his own mask of rage turned back into the visage of a frightened young boy. His eyes cooled to a glow and finally went out altogether right before they filled with tears.

Boudicea held him close and felt him bury his face into her shoulder.

"It's alright, Arthur," she said to him, stroking his hair. "It's over."

Boudicea looked at the faces of those left in the room. None could ignore what they had just witnessed, and despite whatever Boudicea would tell her boy, they knew that nothing was fine and nothing was over. Something had just begun in their presence, though what it was, none could say. All they knew was that it was something terrible. Something terrifying.

Something wicked.

CHAPTER 6

TAINTED SAVIOR

Somehow, in the weeks that follow that night of the attack, the details of it begin to fade from your memory. It began with you hearing the noise of battle, and the screaming that followed. You hurtled downstairs to see what was the matter, and there was Gawain, stricken and helpless on the floor. So too was Hrothgar. Cambol and Lorelei were tied up fighting and in the center of it all was Brom, smiling that smile of his. It was the same look on his face whenever he hurt you. And now, it was the look of when he hurt your family. You always knew it would come to this, and when you glimpsed his sneer, there would be no more thinking about it. There would be only action, equal and opposite to what he had visited upon you.

In that instant, everything in your vision washed over with the color of autumn leaves. The color of fire. And that was when you knew you knew you were going to kill him.

You don't remember who stopped you, just that hands stronger than yours kept you from breaking Brom's skull into a dozen pieces and grinding his brains between your knuckles and the stone floor. The fearful, amazed look in his eyes makes you feel alive like never before, and for all of the fury and horror of that moment, there is a deep part of you that never wants this mayhem to end.

Then a voice tells you that it is all over, and somebody pulls you away from the fighting. Slowly and by degrees, the burning vision in your eyes fades, and you are filled with the urge to destroy no more.

There is much commotion afterwards. You learn that Gawain and Hrothgar were poisoned by Brom on behalf of his father, and

as a result of it, the entire city is in an uproar. At least, that is what the adults are saying. It's hard to catch what they are talking about. When they see that you are nearby, they switch topics or talk around the issue, using words they think are too complicated or vague for you to understand. But you follow it enough to know that something very bad happened on the night of the coronation, and that the wounds Gawain and Hrothgar got were just a small part of a larger thing. This is something you know you are in the middle of, something that is not yet over, and something that will get a lot worse before it gets better. You know this as much by what people are saying around you as what they are not. You can tell by how some of them have that same scared glint in their eyes that Brom did, even if no other part of their face betrays their fear.

Momma tells you that she will explain everything soon, and that she will never let anything bad happen to you. You hug her back and kiss her, but you don't tell her that you think that something bad is already happening to you. Only you can't figure exactly what it is, and that is the worst part of it all.

You go to bed every night while the house is still full of people talking and shouting. For a while, Momma stays with you, trying to answer the hundred questions you have about what happened. Before long, though, you start asking things she would rather not talk about. Why didn't more people come to defend Gawain? Why did he seem to have so many enemies? And why didn't the Gatekeeper do something to keep him safe? That's when she tells you that of the Lords of Stone, only the Gatekeeper remains and that he has given up on his duties. This, you already know. You were there when the Dreamer perished, but to hear her speak of it gives a heavy kind of sadness you never felt. You ask her why the Gatekeeper stopped being the Gatekeeper, and why so many of his kind are gone. Weren't they supposed to live forever?

Her answers are both vague and evasive, but they circle around the notion that they are no longer part of this world but have left to join another. You ask her what would make them want to leave. She looks at you as her eyes fill with tears. She opens her mouth to speak, but the words die on her lips. After a moment, she says how much she loves you, and wishes you sweet dreams, knowing full well that on every night since the attack, no one in the House of Gawain has slept well at all, much less had any joyful visions before the dawn.

Your eyelids grow heavy, and you begin to imagine your mother is still by your side, singing ancient lullabies as you

drift into slumber. When you can still hear her singing, but her words are something new to you, something you cannot possibly predict, that is when you know you have crossed over into the realm of dreams.

Your eyes open to a world awash in sepia light, making things at once both familiar and strange, Boudicea still sits by the bed singing, but her voice has trailed away to a distant whisper, as if heard through layers of cotton. You get up from your bed and she does nothing to acknowledge you. She goes on as she has done since the beginning of the dream, singing an unknown song in an unknown tongue to a bedside that merits her attention whether you are there or not. You move past her and head for the door, but before you close it behind you, you look back at her. She is still there, unmoved.

At the sound of the door clicking shut, the world goes silent and still, frozen between moments of time. Downstairs, Gawain and his marshals are seated at the banquet table, joined by Hrothgar, Cambol and Lorelei. Everyone is like a statue, their bodies held in place as they argue amongst themselves. Their faces are twisted as they shout and strain. One of them has his hand on his sword handle and is pointing to your room. Others have their arms crossed. Gawain has pounded the table with his fist, and a wave of wine hangs in the air, sloshing over the lip of a flagon that has begun to spill. Hrothgar is next to him, but his is not a look of anger, but of deep and worrisome thought. Whatever arguments fill the air, they compete for attention with those in his mind. Likewise, Cambol and Lorelei speak amongst themselves, talking about the argument taking place before them, rather than taking part in it.

Beyond the far side of the chamber are the house servants, bent over and pressing their ears to the door, listening to the clamor of their lords. There are other servants here, too, content to stand apart from their fellows and either pretend nothing is being said, or practicing the kind of detached interest that can only come from those who have dedicated their lives to walking in the shadows of others.

A dozen guardsmen more stand outside the house, dressed in full armor and with weapons drawn. Several stand together in front of the main door. A few others have spaces themselves out in the courtyard. You look back and see one standing on the roof with a loaded crossbow. One of those weird repeating kinds, with a box full of bolts attached to the top. No doubt more soldiers are

on the other side of the house as well. The streets are empty of people, though. Every house is closed and shuttered, and on every notice post you see official proclamations about the treachery of Brom and his father, as well as a note that Brom himself is still at large. There is both the promise of reward for whoever turns Brom in, as well as the threat of punishment for those who help him hide or escape. You think once more of how you would have ended his life, which would have spared everyone the pains of bringing him to justice. It could have been over by now.

You turn from the notices with a taste of ashes in your mouth. If these fools must find him, let them do it themselves. You have elsewhere to be, only you do not fully realize it until you find yourself at the city gate. Between you and it stands the Gatekeeper, and he is the only person in Skara Brae, besides, you, who is moving. He also looks upon you with knowing eyes, the sight of a man with secrets to share and the sense to know better than to speak of things that will only invite disaster. As you approach the gate, he steps aside and gestures to the city's great portal.

"It waits for you," he says with a grin. The mighty doors of Skara Brae unlock and unbolt themselves without making a sound. Slowly, they swing open.

You step to the threshold and cross over to the world outside. "Don't look back," the Gatekeeper tells you. You disobey his order and turn about, only the city is no longer there as you know it. In its place is a pitiful stone ruin on a spit of blighted land. It lies naked beneath the cold fire of a sun that burns dimly through an amber sky. The clouds hang low, like they are slowly sinking through the sky to settle on the earth some day. You expect there to be wind, but there is none. Nor is there the far-off thunder of the sea against the shore. You head to the water, but like so much else of the world around you, it is frozen in motion. It makes the water look like a vast piece of dark, chipped glass.

You set your foot on it, waiting to fall through. But you never do. It would hold the weight of an army. You start to walk across it, not knowing where you are going, but somehow aware that you are heading south.

Crossing the Caledonian Sea, you look up to the sky, expecting to see something there, a pair of eyes, perhaps, watching you as you trek along a paused world. For what feels like days, you traverse the peaked chop of the ocean, fearful that with a single slip, you might fall and gash yourself on the sharp edges of the water, on the impaling points where waves come together, on the hang-

ing daggers of fluid suspended in mid air that splashed off the ocean surface. At one point, you grow tired and lay down to sleep in the depression between two large swells each high enough to create a pocket of shadow between them. You put your ear to the surface as you rest, hearing nothing. The abyss beneath you is as still as anything else in this world. You close your eyes, but you cannot sleep. There is only a waking fatigue that slowly drains away after hours of mind-numbing silence and solitude.

You begin walking once more and in the distance, you can see a line of earth along the water top. The craggy cliffs of northern Britannia come into view, and your heart begins to race. All your life you have dreamed to come here. You have heard the stories of what it once was like. You have also heard the stories of what Mordred and Morgana have done to the land, though such tales are never meant for your ears. You only have what snippets you have stolen from grown-up conversations to guide you, but what you do know is not good.

You climb the northern cliffs and haul yourself onto the land, where you see that everything you have ever heard about the new lords of Britannia are true.

Before you stretches a weird town where there are no houses or shops or stables or manors. There is only a webwork of grim black towers that look like they were formed by a dark liquid dripping upward, but frozen in place. They form a kind of a nest where a town or a village might have been, and everywhere you walk, there are long strands of this same glassy material that comprises the spires. These strands spin off of a village and cross the land for miles in any given direction, until they connect to another settlement. And another. And another. You realize, as you continue south, that whatever used to be here, the villages, the towns, the cities, all of it has been overgrown by this strange darkness from another world. Wherever it has spread, there is nothing growing on the ground, and the sky overhead has taken on a sickly orange cast.

You keep moving south, following a thin ribbon of alien cityscape that must lead to something important. As you do, you see dim pairs of orange eyes in the darkness, little almond-shaped slits of light that peer through the shadows between buildings, watching the way rats might eye a piece of potential food. As the buildings themselves get larger and more densely packed, the eyes crowd the darkness even more until finally, you see them out in the open. They are strange, twisted forms of people whose

skin has turned to the color of a bony wax, whose ears are long and pointed, whose eyes burn with the same kind of autumn fire you have felt within yourself. They remain motionless too, but you can hear the thoughts of every one of them as you pass. They greet you by name. They whisper dark secrets into the far corners of your memory. They promise you things that can't possibly be true. And all of it, from the tiniest detail to the most laughable falsehood, somehow makes your blood run cold.

Your feet and lower legs are trembling so hard that were you to stop walking you would fall down. So you continue on, trying not to dwell on the increasingly weird look of the people here until at last you see something you cannot possibly ignore.

It is the Spire. The tallest power in the land, from which all others have extended. Here is the heart of everything you have witnessed. And here you see only the faintest traces of humanity in those around you. There are more people here than you have ever seen on Skara Brae's most crowded days, only they are not doing the kinds of things you'd see back home. They are working vast furnaces to craft blackened steel. They are herding groups of people-real people who look like you-into vast cages where they wait to be led again to even vaster stone circles. There, you see one flashing orange with light, and the people standing there are half disappeared, right in that moment of being whisked between places, from here to...someplace else. Someplace bad. Someplace where they are unmade from what they are and turned into these...Elves?

It is like some barrier has broken deep in your memories, and suddenly, you know what they are. You know where they have come from. And you know what they want: everything.

That is when it hits you, why you have been walking all this time. You try to stop yourself, to turn and to run, but your body will not listen to you. A prisoner within yourself, you watch as you march to Mordred's castle, walking by phalanxes of thousands of Elven soldiers, true Arcadians clad in arms and armor wrought from faerie ores like none you have ever seen. They stand like statues, but you swear you can feel their burning eyes follow you as you walk through the massive gate of what has become Camelot. It opens like the maw of a beast, and you expect the door to close behind you, swallowing you within the fortress forever.

Inside the gate, an entire army of Elves stands ready for war, arranged in tight, unbreakable formations, their spears forming hedgerows of barbed points, their shields interlocking to form an

unbreachable wall. And before them all, sitting on a black mare born of shadows and fire, is Mordred, the Elf King.

He is like a giant in his massive suit of black plate armor. A great sword hangs at his side that would take three men to lift properly. Across his back is a bow whose arrows pierce stone and seek their targets like ravenous beasts, never deviating from their kill.

Mordred is smiling as he watches you approach. Like the Gatekeeper, he can move freely, though all he does is shift in his saddle. You can hear the plates of his armor click against each other as he does.

"She took you from me before I could lay eyes on you, boy," Mordred says, looking down on you. "She thought she could keep you from me."

You cannot say anything. You cannot even breathe.

Mordred leans forward, staring right into you. "She should have known better. For the King of the Elves will always reclaim what is his."

Mordred dismounts and walks toward you in slow, heavy steps. His arm is outstretched, his finger points directly at you. "Arthur," he says, as if testing the words on his lips.

The army behind him echoes him in a deep, vast murmur. "Arthur..."

"You have come to me because you know this is where you belong. Take my hand and become what you were meant to be."

What is he saying? What does this mean? You want your mother, but she is so far away. You want your mother!

"She cannot help you," he says, his lips curling into a snarl. "Nothing can. For you and I are one."

You have only enough energy to shake your head. You don't want it.

He towers over you. You are so small, He could smash you like a bug.

"Take my hand," he says, opening a plated gauntlet and holding it before you. It is as if he will pull you up to his height and make you as great and terrifying as he is if you just touch his steely fingers. Part of you wants to, despite the fear. But...no!

"Take my hand," he says. It is not a question. It is a command.

Don't do it! No. No!

Mordred closes his fingers slowly, as if testing the air between them. "Interesting," he murmurs. "Perhaps you are wise to fear me, then."

He looks on you through eyes of fire. Then he leans forward

and speaks in a voice that is deeper than his, and something less than human.

"You'd best run home, boy. Will you send a message for me?"

Again, it is not a question.

"When you return to that hidden city of yours, tell that whore they call your mother that she cannot hide her boy from me forever. Tell her that I am coming for him."

You shake your head without trying to.

"Then tell the one who calls himself your father that his city will fall. That I will march an army to its gates, and I will smash them. Then I will butcher his army and I will take everyone in the city to the plains of Arcadia."

You shake your head once more.

He looks up for a moment, searching for a thought. "One more thing." He returns his gaze directly at you, locking on to your eyes. "The hooded man approaches with a gift for you. Go ahead and take it, for it is yours. But know this, little one. It is mine as well. And I will take what is due to me."

Somehow that frightens you more than anything, and the sight of this makes the Elf King laugh. It is a hideous sound, like a soul coughing, and the legions of the damned behind him all echo it into the sky.

"Run home, Arthur. We will meet again soon enough."

You do not need to hear him twice. His voice chases you through the upcountry.

"Run away..."

And across the water, growing louder.

"...run away..."

And to the gate of the city, louder still.

"...run away..."

You have come all the way home, but still you feel no safer than before.

"Turn around," says the Elf King, and suddenly, you twist to see him standing over you. His army stands behind him, their eyes blazing, their sharp, white teeth glinting in the orange light of the sky.

His hand flies to his sword, and in a screaming screech of metal, the blade comes out of its scabbard, sparks dancing across its edge. He holds the great sword high above his head with both hands. You are unable to move, but you can feel hot tears running down your cheek. You don't want to die.

"Welcome home," he says. His voice echoes across the sky like

thunder. The force of it makes your chest hurt. The sound fills the world as the sword comes down.

"NO!"

Arthur sat up in his bed with his arms crossed in front of him. Shaking and short of breath, he opened his eyes to his dark bedroom. He was home, and he was alive. But that dream... it seemed so real. He could still feel Mordred's blade biting into his flesh.

He looked around the room for fear that he was not alone. And there, to his left, within an arm's reach of the bed, sat Gawain in a chair. He was in his armor and a naked sword lay across his lap. But he was awake, and even in the low light of the bedchamber, Arthur could tell that Gawain's stare was fixed on him.

"Da?" Arthur asked.

"I'm here," Gawain said, not moving.

Arthur rubbed one of his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking." Gawain shifted in his seat and what little light was in the room shone along the length of Gawain's sword. Arthur suddenly felt aware of it to the point of distraction.

Arthur nodded to the sword. "About what?"

"Enemies," Gawain said in almost a sigh. "They are closer than we thought." Arthur could not tell if that was said to him or just a thought made verbal by accident. "What were you dreaming about?"

Arthur took a deep breath.

Gawain leaned forward. "Tell me."

Arthur told him everything. The stopped time. The journey to Camelot. The meeting with Mordred. By the time he had finished, Arthur was speaking in short gasps between sobs.

"He said he was the Elf King. And he wants to kill me," Arthur said. "Da, I'm scared."

Gawain looked at the boy with steel in his eyes. He had kept a tight grip on his sword, and he noticed that all while Arthur had spoken, the boy's eyes had never left the blade. Maybe he knew the dark thoughts Gawain had been turning over in his head the entire night. Reasons to do something necessary. Reasons not to do something terrible. But still, there were questions. And none had easy answers.

"Arthur, what do you remember of that night Brom attacked me?"

"I wanted to hurt him so bad," Arthur said. "I was strong enough. Somehow, I got strong. And there was somebody in my head telling me to kill him."

"And why didn't you?"

"I didn't want to be like them, Da," Arthur said. His voice shook.

If you're not sure, then do nothing, Gawain thought. You can't afford any more mistakes.

He thought long and hard while Arthur calmed down.

At last, Gawain sheathed his sword in a crisp, quick motion. He stood over Arthur, who had to crane his neck to look at him.

"Sleep," Gawain said. "You're in no danger tonight."

"Where are you going, Da?"

"To bed. In the morning, we'll talk."

"About what?"

"About your father."

The rolling breakers of the Caledonian Sea surged beneath a gray and rain-filled sky. A tiny boat, rowing across the waves, dipped into a trough in the water and would have disappeared from view had there been anything there to bear witness to it. The boat crested the next breaker, riding the foam and spray and heading into a low spot in the water. Undeterred by the cold wind or the stinging drizzle, the boat's cloaked oarsman kept at his work, driving his craft forward with deep, powerful strokes. He was soaked through, and his woolen clothes hung heavily on his frame.

He looked over his shoulder as he crested a wave and in the near distance, maybe only another few minutes' journey, was the fog-shrouded Orkney shore. The oarsman smiled for a moment, but that is all it lasted for. Heading down the far side of the wave, a spot of rogue chop hit the boat broadside and from underneath, bucking it high into the air. The oarsman floated out of his seat, and likewise, a large leather-wrapped bundle levitated off the bottom of the boat. It had been sitting securely between the oarsman's feet, but now it was just as airborne as he was. Without thinking, he let go of the right oar and clawed in the air for the package, but a second later the boat crashed against the water. The oarsman smashed face-first into the floor of the boat before the bucking waves threw him back upright. As he cleared the stars from his eyes, he found himself leaning on the gunwale, trying his best to keep from pitching over the side. He tasted blood

in his mouth and wondered if he had lost any teeth. He probed about with his tongue. No, all there.

That is when he spotted his leather bundle disappearing beneath the surface. His eyes went wide and he loudly drew in a breath. The boat began to ride up another wave, and the oarsman stood up and dove away, reaching for the bundle as he hit the water. He splashed in and felt the bundle's strap slide against his fingers as it sunk out of reach.

The oarsman pulled himself downward into the dark depths, trying to keep the bundle in sight despite the stinging his eyes felt from the sea water. He desperately swam deeper, hoping to catch his plummeting bundle and ignoring that voice in his head that told him it was impossible, his belongings were gone and he would be too if he stayed under much longer. But he cast all of that aside and kept swimming. He reached out for the bundle in one last grasp, but it was too far away.

Let it go, he heard. It isn't yours. It isn't worth dying for.

He went even further down, gritting his teeth and fighting the urge to fill his burning lungs with a breath of sea water. It is gone, he thought. But I'll die down here before going back up without it.

He reached down and touched the seafloor under what had to be a dozen fathoms of cold darkness that separated him from sunlight. He cast about with his hands and found the bundle, the feeling of which nearly made him cry out in surprise. He pulled it in close and slung it across his chest. It felt heavier than it was, and he knew it wasn't because he was so tired, or because he was so far under water. It was because the bundle itself was testing him, just as it had every day of these last ten years. Now it would see if he had the mettle to swim twice as hard as he did going up as he did going down.

He looked up to see a dark shape descending on top of him. He moved aside and watched his boat come to rest right on the sea floor where he had been.

The oarsman pushed off from the bottom and kept kicking hard, pulling with his hands. The surface seemed so far away, and with every stroke he made, his vision closed in from the edges that much more. It was only a matter of time before he blacked out, but at least his lungs didn't seem to hurt so much anymore.

When his head broke through the surface and he took in a deep breath of air, he thought it was just a happy dream to die by. But the pain in his body told him otherwise, and the way he immediately began to sink back beneath the waves was his reminder to start swimming again.

He still could barely see from his salt-blinded eyes and the darkness his mind had nearly succumbed to. But he knew which way was the shore, and he lifted a leaden arm out and paddled toward it. One by one, he stroked through the water, floating on the rollers. After a time, he could feel the waves themselves changing as the sea got ever more shallow. Eventually, he washed to shore half-dead, but alive enough to know that he had made it. He had arrived at the place he had been looking for ever since the day after Camelot fell.

Bors rolled over on the stony beach, laughing to himself. He had to remove the bundle from his back just to be sure it was really still there, but it was. Excalibur, the sword of swords, and the badge of kings. Even now, it seemed more perfect and polished than it should, Bors thought, but after carrying it for so long, and after having gone through so much just to get it here, little would surprise him about it anymore.

"Almost there," Bors said to the sword. "Almost there."

Bors lay there on the beach, clutching the sword in its raggedy carrying case for what felt like hours. But the tide began to come in and reclaim the beach, and Bors knew it was time to move on. He slowly got to his feet and trudged inland.

Time to see if all of those stories about Skara Brae are true, he thought as he crossed into the low heather that ringed the beach. Was it really two cities, one a pitiful ruin and the other an endless temple of magic? Did the Lords of Stone really exist, and were they indeed as protective of their home as it had been said? And what of it being so much bigger within than without? Surely such sorcery had to be seen to be believed.

Sorcery, he thought and glanced skyward for a moment. Bah.

By the time he finally saw the city, night had fallen. But the full moon gave enough light to show that Skara Brae was as he expected it to be, nothing more than the sad reminders of an ancient place fallen to the ravages of time. But still, he had been driven to come here by an unspoken command, and he could not rest until he at least saw what was on the other side of that stony archway that served as the city's gate.

As he approached, the door slowly swung open, and he looked to see if anyone was watching him approach, or who might be working the gate. Nothing. It was as if a city of ghosts had offered to admit him in the only way it could. He thought of the sword, and of the thousand mysterious coincidences he experienced since he took it upon himself to deliver it to the hands of one born

to wield it. Or at the very least, to keep it from falling into Mordred's hands. Not once had he dared to claim Excalibur for himself, and perhaps that was why the sword had never contrived to fully escape his possession. As much as the sword burdened him, it also, in its own way, accepted him as its courier. And once that role had been agreed upon, there was nothing the sword would not do to ensure that certain things would not stand in Bors' way as he chased rumors of a boy born in the darkest halls of Camelot, spirited away from there by sorcerous means, and hidden so he might one day assume the destiny that destroyed his grandfather and brought the world to its knees. But it was a destiny far better than the one Morgana commanded, that much Bors knew for certain, and any hardship was worth enduring in order to make sure Morgana's plans for the world did not come to pass.

He paused at the threshold, turning over that thought that there could be no looking back once through. That was alright. He hadn't looked back for anything since that day in Camelot.

He crossed over and entered the city. He could feel Excalibur tug against him for a moment, as if the sword itself was unsure whether it really was meant to come here, but the resistance lasted only for a second, and was gone. It was not the first time Bors had felt such a moment from the sword. But he hoped that it would be the last.

Inside the gate, the city transformed to the vision of what he had heard in the stories, and suddenly, he cursed himself for refusing to believe that such a thing could be. Not all magic needed to be as dark as Morgana's, nor of such sinister purpose. There were older, greater powers in the world, and there were those unafraid of such strength, and canny enough to know how to yoke it. Where had much mastery gone? Bors thought. Why was there no living match for Morgana in spellcraft? Where was the Merlin of the day to conjure castles from the ground, to draw down lightning from the sky, and to render the bodies of men impervious to harm? Were such things ever more than a dream to tempt men into darkness? Surely so, Bors had once thought. But upon seeing the grandeur of Skara Brae...

"Who are you?" barked a guardsman. He and another stood before Bors with crossed spears and grim stares. "How did the likes of you find this place?"

"The likes of me?" Bors said. He drew himself to full height, threw back his hood and flipped his cloak back over his shoulders, revealing his worn surcoat bearing the emblems of Arthur and old

Camelot. Underneath, a coat of dull mail hugged Bors' muscular frame. He was harder and stronger now, made even tougher by his many years of evading Mordred's patrols, skirmishing with the Enemy when need be, living in the wild and coping with hardships no knight would ever wish to confront. Pains of hunger, of despair, of the endless sorrow due to one sworn to serve a king who was no longer there.

He held forth his leather bundle and pulled back a flap of it to reveal what it contained. Excalibur shone before the guards with the radiance of distant water in the morning sunlight. Both spearmen gaped at the sight of it, seeing a splendor in that magical artifact that not even the city they guarded could match.

"I am Bors, liege of Arthur, and knight of Camelot. I have stood before Mordred and his minions, and I bear the scars to prove it. I have come here in search of the last Pendragon, and to return to his family what has always been rightfully theirs. I have traveled to the far corners of Europa to come here, and I am nearer to completing my mission than I had ever dreamed possible."

With a single, violent motion, Bors threw the leather flap back over Excalibur, covering the sword. He stared at each guard.

"That is who I am."

They backpedaled away from him, fast.

"Smartest thing you've done all day, no doubt."

"S-shall we inform Lord Gawain of your arrival?" asked one of the guards.

"Don't bother," Bors said as he walked between them. "He will know it soon enough."

Bors stopped for a moment once the guards were behind him and spoke to them without turning to face them.

"Mind the gate," he said. "It opened for me by itself. I hope for your sake it doesn't do that for just anybody."

As Bors ventured deep into the sleeping city, the spearmen at the gate looked over their shoulders at the great doorway, which now stood closed, even though no mortal hand had touched it.

Once he was out of sight of the guards, Bors closed his eyes and held the bundled form of Excalibur before him. "Show me," he murmured. His face had a look of concentration of it, as if he was straining to hear the faintest of whispers. After a moment, he opened his eyes and walked through the streets on a direct path to the center of the city.

When he reached the central plaza, it still seemed empty of peo-

ple. There was only the Heartstone, sitting there like a large stone table. Bors looked upon it with some confusion. "Here?" he said.

He found himself taking another step forward, though he resisted as he did so, making his walk a jerking parody of itself. He seemed a puppet on strings.

"But I don't understand," he said. "He is here, isn't he? Should I not seek..."

Bors winced in pain and dropped to one knee.

"Point taken," he said after stifling a groan. "I'll do it."

He got to his feet and removed Excalibur's leather cover. He walked to the Heartstone and touched its surface. In that moment, he could feel the magic of the city thrumming into his hand. It became clear to him exactly how and why it was that anybody who sought refuge here over the last ten years could find this place so easily, yet it remained almost unknown to the forces of Mordred, much less located and besieged. It was a wondrous magic, full of energy and subtlety, the kind crafted by those who'd learned their art before time was measured in centuries. The kind made by those who were no longer around to do it again. It was a priceless thing, even if it did not keep the city entirely safe from Morgana and her agents.

Bors gently placed his hands on either side of the sword's cross guard, making sure not to even brush against the weapon's handle. Holding the sword aloft over the Heartstone, he took a deep breath and held it for a second. "It begins," he said and as he exhaled, he slowly drove the point of the sword into the Heartstone. It seemed as if the rock flexed beneath the blade before being punctured by it, and Bors could have sworn that the rock actually rippled like water when it finally admitted Excalibur. He kept pulling down, and when the sword was deep enough into the Heartstone, he leaned forward and put his body weight on the pommel to embed Excalibur further.

He had expected a shower of sparks, or a dramatic explosion of stone, but there was nothing. Just a quiet scraping sound, and a faint ringing of metal when he finally let go of the sword and left it standing, quivering just a little, in the stone.

Gawain felt a rush of fatigue sweep over him and he half-stumbled. Pausing to catch his breath, he felt the chronic pain and weariness he had labored under for every day since he had become the sword's custodian leave him. It did so as he realized that his mission was complete; he had kept the sword of kings out of Mordred's hands and delivered it as best he could—as best as the sword

itself wanted him to-into the hands of friends.

He smiled. And then he laughed. And tears came to his eyes as the sounds of his happiness echoed off the flagstones and into the lonely morning air.

"You there!" came a voice from the shadows of the plaza. "What have you done?"

Bors watched a group of three armed and armored youths emerge from the plaza's far side. They had seen everything, and now they were coming at him with swords drawn.

"The Heartstone, Brom!" said one of the swordsmen. "He's broken it!"

Bors watched the biggest one of the three, obviously their leader, halt his advance and move toward the Heartstone. The swordsman slowed as he neared the Heartstone, and at last, he reached out a hand to touch it, and the sword that pierced its heart.

Brom turned to Bors, snarling. "You damned fool," he said. "The stone's enchantment is gone! You destroyed it!"

Bors shrugged. "I suppose I have, then."

Brom came at him, fast. His toadies, Killian and Connacht, followed. "You've doomed this city! You've taken away our only protection!"

With a cry, Brom thrust his sword at Bors' face, only Bors raised his hand and swatted the flat of the blade aside. Then in a single motion, Bors twisted his body and struck at Bors' arm, jarring the sword from Brom's grasp. Killian and Connacht took a step back in surprise.

Brom grit his teeth. "Go on, then. Finish it. Let Gawain know he has won."

"Gawain?" Bors said. "I do not serve him," he said. "I serve the one they call his son."

"Arthur?" Brom said, eyes narrowing. "You broke the Heartstone on Arthur's behalf?"

Bors paused. Arthur is his name, he thought. Of course it is. It is so perfect.

"I did," he said to Brom. "You might say he ordered it."

Brom looked back at the Heartstone, then to Bors, and a sly grin crept across his face. "Then you just doomed him," he said, backing away. He retrieved his sword from the flagstones and sheathed it. "When they put that little Elven bastard's head on a pike, I'll remember to thank you for it!" And with that, Brom and his cohorts ran from the plaza.

Bors looked upon the blade of Excalibur, and the growing

morning light that shone off it. He approached the Heartstone once more and touched it again, this time feeling none of the arcane wonder coursing through the stone as it once had. Indeed, Brom was right. The stone's enchantment was gone. But in its place was something...

"Beautiful," Bors said to himself. "Beautiful."

Boudicea lay the tip of her quarterstaff on the sandy floor of the proving ground. She drew a large circle around herself, and when it was completed, she snapped the stick up and held it in both hands. Her body tensed, and her feet shifted outwards a little, widening her stance. She could feel three bodies surrounding her, even if she could not see them. Her blindfold made sure of that.

She felt the shape on her right come toward her. It was huge, and arcing out from it was a massive force. Just before it impacted on her chest, she moved forward a step and brought up her staff. It locked inside the crook of what had almost crushed her. She felt the energy of it swing around her body, and she pivoted on one foot while lifting her staff. It didn't take much of her strength to hurl what had come at her high overhead and safely out of the circle, where it landed on the sand with a loud thud.

"Whouf!" said Hrothgar as he lay on his back. His huge war hammer lay not far from where he did.

Lorelei chuckled. "The bigger they are, northlander. The bigger they are."

He sat up. "Like to see you have a go at her, then! She's no spring lily, that one."

Lorelei looked at Boudicea, who was somehow looking right at her through her blindfold. She had an arm outstretched, and was pointing a finger at Lorelei.

"You're next," Boudicea said.

Lorelei drew her sword slowly so it gave a metallic scrape coming out of the scabbard. "I've got a live blade," she said.

"So cut me then, girl!" Boudicea said. "You think I haven't tasted the sting of steel before?"

Lorelei hesitated and looked at Hrothgar, who was still sitting on the ground. This time, he was the one who was smiling. He nodded toward Boudicea as if to say, By all means, after you. I insist.

Lorelei held her sword high and in both hands. She advanced slowly and methodically, approaching the line in the sand that surrounded Boudicea. She kept an eye on the circle, knowing that once she crossed it, she would be in range of Boudicea's staff. But until then, she...

Boudicea whirled and launched her staff right into Lorelei's gut. The maiden from Germania dropped her sword and doubled over, groaning. Then slowly but surely, she fell to the sand.

"Too slow, too far," Boudicea said as she nudged the toe of her boot underneath her staff. With a flick of her foot, she popped the staff up in the air and caught it in her left hand. "Caution is not a shield. You think Mordred and his kind will hesitate before you? Think again."

Only Cambol was left, flanking her on the left. Boudicea turned to face him. "Come on, then," she said dismissively.

Cambol drew his sword and readied his shield. As he circled her, she stood where she was, her head down, both hands on top of her quarterstaff.

Without a sound, Cambol came in low, with his shield held in front of him, keeping his sword back and ready to strike. In another instant, Boudicea would be flattened by the shield or stung in the calf by the sword. Either way, once on her back, she would be as good as done.

Cambol wasn't entirely sure what happened next, but he both knew it was by no means according to plan. He felt a numbing pain crack across his sword arm, and his fingers suddenly stopped working. He thought maybe his heart stopped for a moment as another crack high against the right side of his ribcage spread the numbness throughout his body. He stumbled forward and felt another strike against the back of his head that drove him against his own shield, just before he hit the ground face-first.

"You think when you should be fighting," Boudicea said, whirling her staff with one hand before driving it into the ground, where it stood like a tent pole. She let it go and removed her blindfold. "Even a blind woman could sense what you were going to do next."

The three warriors all lay on the sand in the middle of the great arena of Skara Brae. The proving ground had rings of seats that could accommodate the entire city, but now, they were empty, and only the echoes of the recent sparring could have been heard in its vast expanse.

"If you aim was to deflate our pride," Hrothgar said, picking

himself up, "you needn't have bothered. Our showing in your house against Brom and his lot did that just fine."

"Speak for yourself," said Lorelei. "Not all of us shamed ourselves that night."

"And where were any sober marshals? Not where they were needed, that's where!"

"Enough!" said Boudicea. She hadn't raised her voice, but somehow it seemed loud enough to shake the coliseum's foundations stones. "I didn't bring you here to discipline you. Or to place blame for the other night. I came here so what happened then won't happen again."

"By beating us bloody?" asked Cambol.

Boudicea pursed her lips. "The problem you all have is one of distance," Boudicea said as she stood in the middle of her circle. "Hrothgar thinks he can attack from outside with that hammer of his. Lorelei dares not close until the time for it has passed. And you," she said, pointing at Cambol, "came straight in, thinking you'd just bowl through me once you got close enough."

"Meaning no disrespect, my lady..." Hrothgar said while getting back to his feet.

"Boudicea," she said sharply. In here, or on the battlefield, you need only call me that."

"Boudicea," Hrothgar said, nodding. "I'm not sure we know what we're supposed to gain from this. If you aren't beating us for punishment, then why are you doing it?"

Boudicea looked at the rest of them in turn. Each was wondering the same thing.

"You learn something about yourself when you are beaten," Boudicea said, the tone in her voice softening, if only for a moment. "Not just defeated. Not just humiliated. But beaten. Made to feel pain well past what was needed to make you stop fighting. What you've felt so far is just a tickle compared to what's coming next."

The three groaned. Cambol looked positively mutinous. "But why?" he said.

"Because when you have been beaten enough times, you will learn that pain is just another feeling that can be ignored, and even in battle, there is nothing to fear."

Cambol said nothing, but shook his head a little.

"The killing stroke that will claim us will not hurt. Chances are, we will never see it coming or feel its sting. The end is not what we really fear. It is the pain. Forget that fear, and you will be able

to forget these things that make it so easy for me to throw you around this arena.”

Boudicea nodded toward Hrothgar. “You don’t attack in such wide, swinging arcs because you’re so tall or strong. You do it because it lets you smite your enemy without letting him get close enough to threaten you.”

She looked at Lorelei. “You hesitate for fear of a bad engagement, of getting cut down before you can even attack.”

Cambol. “And you rush in, hoping to strike first, even when it does not favor you.”

Boudicea redrew the circle in the sand around her, which had gotten obscured by her students’ shuffling footwork during the last round of scrimmage. “Distance,” she said. “Now try again. This time, all at once.”

Hrothgar shot a look at Lorelei. Is she serious?

Must be, she said with a return look.

All of them circled for a few seconds, gauging each other’s movement, as well as Boudicea’s lack of it. Again, she stood like a maddening statue before them, mocking them with her utter lack of concern. At least this time she wasn’t blindfolded, but none of them could shake the feeling that it wouldn’t have made any difference.

Without a word, they rushed in together. Boudicea caught Lorelei’s blade in the middle of her staff while turning her body enough so Cambol’s sword thrust went wide. Boudicea bucked her staff up, dislodging Lorelei’s sword and sending it ringing into the head of Hrothgar’s hammer as it fell. The impact was enough to send the hammer slightly off target so instead of crushing Boudicea’s head, it slammed into the sand, raising a little cloud of dust.

Hrothgar was quick on the reply, though, and brought up the back end of his hammer’s shaft in a reverse strike that took Boudicea off guard. She ducked back quickly to avoid the blow, but then had to place her hands against the ground to keep from falling over. Arched backwards, she kicked her legs up and over in a semicircle that sprang her back to her feet. But her staff was left on the ground and Cambol was upon her.

He came forward with a combination of shield swings and sword thrusts that kept Boudicea moving backward long enough for Lorelei to move to her flank and come in low with a sweep at her feet. Boudicea jumped up to clear Lorelei’s steel and on the way down kicked Cambol, who absorbed the blow on his shield

and braced his legs enough to keep from being pushed back from the impact. He slashed down at Boudicea, who cartwheeled out of the way and toward her staff, but she was stopped short by Hrothgar, who simply moved to the staff and placed his foot on it.

In a deep crouch, Boudicea sprang at Hrothgar, watching for his hammer to come out once more. She reached out with her hands and caught the leading edge of the hammerhead and swung off it, arcing high over a sword strike from Cambol and landing behind Lorelei who was trying to set up another attack on her. She flipped back twice and got out of range of her students, and when she returned to a fighting stance, she saw them standing together in perfect fighting positions, breathing hard, but clear-eyed and focused.

"Do you want your stick back, then?" Lorelei asked.

Boudicea smiled in return. "Not that badly. Nicely done, you three. Nicely done."

They relaxed, but Hrothgar did not look convinced. "I'm not entirely sure what it was that we did right."

Boudicea calmly retrieved her staff and brushed the dust off of it. "You forgot to keep making the same mistakes you always made before," she said. "And that is a fine start."

Cambol ran a polishing cloth along the edge of his sword before sheathing it. "Wish I knew that back in the manor house." He balled his left hand into a fist and slammed it into his right palm. "I'd give anything for a rematch with those bastards."

"You might get your chance," Lorelei said. "Brom remains at large, and nobody's seen him leave the city."

"You'll have to get in line for revenge," Hrothgar said, patting the area on his side where he had been stuck with a poisoned blade. "Some of us have more debts to pay forward than others."

Hrothgar was about to say something more but Boudicea cut him off. "I think you'll all get your chances at redemption," she said. "But don't be in such a rush for revenge. It's a fool's errand."

"From what I hear, you have more reason for revenge than anybody," Cambol said.

"My reasons are my own," Boudicea said. She looked hard at Cambol, and suddenly, he had to look anywhere else than in her eyes. There was something behind them that scared him something fierce.

Lorelei studied Boudicea for a moment and then summoned the courage to speak. "Why isn't anybody talking about what Arthur did to end it? The brawl, I mean."

"Aye," said Hrothgar. "That was something wicked strange. Never seen mortal eyes do that. Only Elv--"

"I know there are stories about me," Boudicea said sharply, interrupting Hrothgar before he could go any further. "And about Arthur. I suppose you all want to know if they're true."

They all shook their heads yes.

"Well, let's have it, then."

"I've heard tell the Elves stole Arthur when he was a baby and replaced him with an imposter, and now we're seeing his true colors," said Cambol.

Lorelei scowled at him. "That's ridiculous."

"So are orange eyes, yeah? Anyway, that's what I heard. I'm not saying it's true, but..."

"It's not," Boudicea said.

"And the bit about you being a witch?"

She shook her head.

"Um...drinking dragon's blood?"

Again, no.

"I heard you were taken captive after the battle of Camelot," Hrothgar said flatly. His words seemed to hang in the air.

The rest of the group tried to look at Boudicea without looking like they were looking at her.

Boudicea swallowed. "I was."

"He said Mordred..." Hrothgar's voice trailed off.

"Go on," Boudicea said.

"I cannot," Hrothgar murmured.

"Then let me say aloud what others dare not say," Boudicea said. "I was the last one to fall the day King Arthur died. I stood over his body and defended it with my last breath when Mordred claimed me for his own."

Boudicea gripped her quarterstaff. "Mordred..." She started again. "The reason why you saw what you saw that night, when Arthur did what he did...Mordred is his father."

Silence.

"When Gawain took us in, we had nowhere to go," she said sadly. "Arthur's father is something we do not speak of, but it has always been there between us. Within Arthur is the blood of kings and the fire of Arcadia." She looked at her students. "I cannot say which runs stronger. Nor can anyone."

"Why...why are you trusting us with this?" asked Cambol.

Boudicea shrugged. "Everyone knows what happened with Arthur that night. Everyone has their own thoughts on what it

means. But you three were there. I don't know what will come of this, but I need you to know that I think you will do the right thing when the time comes."

"The time for what?" asked Lorelei.

Boudicea slowly shook her head. "I just don't know."

"Then it is time you found out," said a strong and deep voice. They all turned to see the Gatekeeper standing within the proving ground's main entrance.

"How does he do that?" whispered Cambol to Hrothgar. "Just appear like that, I mean."

"What is it?" Boudicea asked.

"A crowd has gathered and is headed to your home. Brom is leading them."

Hrothgar swore under his breath.

"Don't they know Gawain and his cohort are there? If it's a fight they want..." Boudicea began, but when she saw the Gatekeeper shaking his head, she stopped.

"They don't want him," he said. "They want Arthur."

As night fell, Arthur was still thinking about what Gawain told him earlier. The entire story seemed so unreal, a nightmare. But in his heart, he knew it was the truth, and that above all was what troubled him the most. Not that Mordred was his true father, but that he did not feel nearly as disturbed by that fact as he thought he would have. It was as if he had known all along, and finally to have Gawain admit to being an impostor lifted a strange weight Arthur did not even know he had been carrying. Suddenly, Gawain seemed something entirely different to him. Not the unfathomable tower of a man he both admired and feared. No, he knew now what had made the great knight such a distant figure to him.

Gawain fears me, Arthur thought.

And smiled.

He caught himself in that moment of enjoyment, and felt deeply ashamed. To revel in the terror of others was not him. Brom, perhaps, but not him. Where did that come from?

From Mordred, no doubt, Arthur thought. He recalled his dream from the morning and how invincible and horrifying Mordred was. Could he really be his father? It explained many things,

from how the Dreamer treated him to what happened during the celebration night brawl. All of it made sense, but yet, Arthur had not heard his mother say these things. It was all from Gawain so far, while his mother remained strangely absent for the entire day.

If only she could look him in the eye and confirm Gawain's story. If only she could let him know it was true. And if only she could do it and still say with her whole heart that she loved him.

That was when he felt the same kind of fear he felt coming off Gawain, like heat from a fire. That somehow, everything was going to be terribly different, perhaps because things had never been what they seemed. Arthur thought of his mother and his stomach hurt at the thought of her turning her back on him. He could more easily accept her wanting to kill him than to abandon him. Without her, where would I go? he thought. Who would take care of me? Where would I live? Who would love me anymore?

He thought of these things and felt an even deeper shame to have taken pleasure at the fears stirring deep within Gawain. It is just because I am mad he never protected me from Brom, he thought. But maybe he had a reason for that. He is a great fighter, Gawain is. Maybe he wanted me to be a great fighter, too so I could defeat Mordred one day. He probably just didn't want to fight my battles for me.

He clenched his hand into a fist and looked at it. He thought of how that same fist came within seconds of killing Brom. I was so angry, thought Arthur. I would have killed him.

He opened his hand and flexed his fingers. I would have killed him.

Arthur looked out of the window in his room upon the darkening city. As far as he could see, little points of light were appearing, as they did every night, in the windows of the city homes. Street lanterns were magically igniting and burning their soft yellow flames while in every house, similar lanterns built into the walls burned just as softly. It was a gift of light to all within Skara Brae, a final luxury afforded to them by the Builder before she vanished.

Arthur looked upon the lights and slowly breathed in the night air. It was cool and almost still. Gawain had said that outside the city, the weather was never so nice day after day. There was wind and rain and cold and all of those other things that often made staying outdoors in Britannia less than a pleasant task. "It hardens the skin," Gawain had said, "As well as the spirit. We have it easy here, and one day, when we leave, we will find we have grown soft."

Arthur could not remember any one time Gawain had said those words and others like them. It was more like something he had come to expect out of Gawain every day, for the elder knight always had something to grumble about, some reason to compare Skara Brae unfavorably to the outside world. This was especially true lately, when it seemed that Gawain's love for the city vanished along with the Lords of Stone who once took care of it. Maybe he was learning that being a leader is harder than it looks, Arthur wondered. It must be.

Arthur narrowed his eyes to see better through the darkness, trying to focus on the hundreds of yellow pinpoints he had grown used to seeing every night. There were a noticeably larger number of them now, and they were moving through the street, gathering together, combining their strength. Arthur watched first with curiosity, then with dread, for it became only too clear to him what this was, and what it meant.

He felt that anger burning inside of him again, wanting to wash him over and give the strength of somebody else. Arthur shook his head. "No," he said. "I don't want it."

He looked out the window once more, just to be sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing. But as it grew closer, he could begin to hear their voices, and at the head of them all, was the one he had come to know best, that single voice that rang more loudly in his ears than any other.

Arthur shuttered his window and rushed downstairs, where Gawain, and a half-dozen of his marshals sat around the fireplace. At the sound of Arthur clomping down the stone steps, the warriors all looked up from their flagons and viewed the boy with a mixture of curiosity and annoyance. It was getting late, after all, and there was drinking to be done.

"Brom is coming!" Arthur shouted.

Gawain shot a glance to his marshals: check it out. Without a word, they left their seats and went to the main entrance of the manor house while Gawain himself stood and approached Arthur.

"Brom is in hiding, son."

That last word rang strangely in Arthur's ears, and the expression on his face must have showed it, for as soon as Gawain said it, he looked like he wished he hadn't.

"Not anymore," Arthur said. "There is a big crowd with torches and they are coming right here! I saw them from my window."

"He would be a fool to come here," said Declan, Gawain's lead

marshal, though he too moved to the front windows to check for himself. The look on his face soon turned grim. "He's right. There is a crowd headed this way. I cannot tell if Brom leads them, but they are armed and carrying torches."

"They mean to burn us out," Magnus said, another marshal.

Declan looked upon the stone interior of the manor house. "No, the torches are meant to give themselves courage. This house cannot burn. Too much stone."

"Maybe the building would survive," Gawain said, "but we would not. There is enough furniture and finery in here for a decent blaze. I, for one, do not wish to roast like a chestnut while Brom laughs at us from the courtyard."

"They're getting close," Declan said.

They all went to the front of the house, but Gawain motioned to Arthur to keep back. "They might have bows," he said.

Arthur did as he was told, but high above, he could hear the heavy footsteps of two marshals moving fast across the roof. Crossbowmen, Arthur thought. But what good would two be against so many?

Gawain also looked upward, as if suddenly reminded of his rooftop guards. "Hold!" he shouted. "If they shoot into that crowd, then we really will have a fight on our hands," he said in a low voice. Declan nodded.

As the mob drew closer, their chants could be made out. "Give us Arthur! Give us Arthur! Give us Arthur!"

As Arthur heard the mob, a shiver went up his back. This was really happening.

Declan chewed his lower lip. "So are we going out to meet them?" he asked Gawain, his hand on his sword handle.

Gawain shook his head no. "Not yet. Let's hear them out first."

Declan looked like he'd been slapped in the face. "Hear them out? My lord, their leader tried to kill you in this very house. We dare not..."

"I decide what we will dare," Gawain said. "There is no room here for heroes. You are either with me or against me."

"I am with you, of course, sire."

"Good. Then stop distracting me and keep an eye on that crowd." Gawain motioned to the crowd with his chin. "Watch for archers among them. If they start shooting, these windows will be the last place we'll want to be."

Declan looked at Gawain for a moment before turning his attention to the mob, a look of disgust on his face.

"This isn't like the other time," Gawain said. "Even if Brom is behind it. That was a carefully considered attack with a purpose and a plan behind it. This is different."

"How?" Declan said.

"Isn't it obvious?" Gawain murmured before glancing over his shoulder at Arthur, who had taken up a position on the staircase.

Declan looked at the boy, focusing on his eyes. There was none of the orange Arcadian fire in them. At least, not yet.

"Brom wasn't the only one scared by what he saw that night," Gawain said. "The whole city is talking of an Elf child in our midst. They all see him as the liege of Mordred, and I cannot say that I blame them."

"Then what are you saying?" said Declan, more loudly and sharply than he intended.

Gawain looked at Arthur, who was paying close attention to the conversation. "Head upstairs, boy. This is no place for you, now."

"I don't want to go back up there," Arthur said. "I want to stay with you."

"I don't want you here!" Gawain shouted.

Arthur looked stung by Gawain's words, and after he blinked a few times, he backed up a few stairs before turning and running up as fast as he could.

"He gets that from his mother," Gawain grumbled.

Outside, the mob drew closer, and their chants filled the air. In the darkness and the torchlight, it was hard to tell how many of them there really were. All Gawain knew was that there was an awful lot of them. Too many, in fact.

Brom was out in front of them, with a torch in one hand and a naked sword in the other. He was wearing armor underneath his raggedy cloak, as did the handful of lieutenants who held close to him. Behind them were the rest of the group, a crowd representing every walk of life within the city. From rich to poor, native-born to newcomer, all had united behind Brom on this night and for this specific purpose.

Brom held his torch high, as did his minions. And with that, the crowd fell silent, leaving only the sound of flickering flames.

"Gawain!" Brom shouted, grinning. "You have brought one of Mordred's own to Skara Brae!"

"What nonsense," Declan said. I thought there was an enchantment on the city to prevent the Elves from even finding the city, let alone enter it."

"There was," hissed Magnus. "Now shut up!"

"You cannot hide him anymore, Gawain!" Brom said. "His eyes burn with the mark of the enemy. You know it as well as we all do."

"Brom!" shouted Gawain. "You are a wanted man! What makes you think you have any standing here!"

"You have...what? A half-dozen men in that house? I have three hundred out here. Your guards on the roof have already thrown down their weapons."

Declan watched Gawain's face, and his reaction to the news that the archers up top had already given up. He turned to the window. "Lord Gawain will never bow before the likes of you!" he shouted.

"Don't be so sure," said Brom. "These people don't trust you any longer. They take their orders from me now."

Gawain studied the crowd outside intently and cursed under his breath. "They all look to be armed. A lot of them have tools for weapons, but they've brought steel just the same."

"They are just a rabble too scared to see Brom's words for what they are," said Declan.

"And what are they?" said Magnus. "You seem to have all the answers, so let's hear it, then."

"Brom wants this city, and he will stop at nothing to make Gawain a villain in the eyes of anybody willing to believe it."

"Is that what you really think?" Magnus said. "Brom knows that Arthur is tainted, and he's come to do something about it."

"Don't be an idiot! I..."

"He's right," Gawain said.

Declan looked confused. "My lord?"

Gawain sat back from the window, but kept staring through it with a faraway look in his eyes. "I've spent the last seven years trying to convince myself that there was nothing wrong with the boy," he said. "Every time I saw something strange about him, something unusual, I found a reason to ignore it. But I cannot pretend any longer that Arthur is something he is not."

Magnus nodded in agreement.

"The boy is dangerous," Gawain said. "Whether his blood is Mordred's or that of the Pendragon's is moot. Look at what he has done just by breathing. He has divided our people. Turned us against each other."

"He has given Brom an excuse for sedition, and that is all," Declan said. "He is your son! You cannot possibly think these things!"

"I only pretended he was my son for reasons I have long since forgotten," Gawain said, his hand moving to his sword handle. "He was a burden given to me by a sorcerer who tricked me into believing a meaningless prophecy."

"And what of Boudicea?" said Magnus.

"She'll understand," Gawain said, standing from his seat and moving toward the stairs.

"My lord...Gawain!" Declan shouted. "Where are you going?"

Gawain looked to Magnus, and nodded to Declan as he spoke. "Don't let him try anything."

Declan looked at Gawain in disbelief, then at Magnus, and then at Gawain.

"Give us the boy, Gawain!" Brom shouted. "Or we will come in and take him for ourselves!"

Gawain placed a foot against the first stair. Declan saw it and sprang into action.

"No!" he cried. He took a half-step toward Gawain when he was stopped by the sound of scraping metal. He looked around the room and watched the rest of the marshals draw their weapons. Magnus already had his sword out, pointed right at Declan.

"Don't make us do this," Magnus said.

"That boy is the grandson of the Once and Future King!"

"Don't take another step forward," Magnus said. "Please Declan, I am begging you."

"Listen to me. We can take them," Declan said. "Brom and his cohort are the only ones that matter. When we kill them, the rest..."

"To what end?" Gawain asked. "I'm tired. This whole city is tired. And now, it's time to stop carrying the burden we have borne for so long." Gawain headed up the stairs.

Declan hooked his feet into the legs of a stool and kicked hard, sending the piece of furniture flying through the air at Gawain. It would have landed right at his feet, tripping him, but Gawain sensed it coming, and in a single clean movement, drew his sword and cut the stool in half before he landed.

Gawain and Declan locked eyes, and in that moment, each knew the other would not be swayed.

"Kill him," Gawain said softly to Magnus and his guards, and then turned back to climbing the stairs.

The guards looked at each other with some uncertainty. Did Gawain really just order them to kill one of their own?

"You heard him," Magnus said sadly. He stepped forward toward Declan. "Let's do it."

As Declan watched Gawain ascend the rest of the stairs, seeing the knight's body disappear from view felt like he was watching the setting sun vanish behind the horizon.

He felt a burning sensation start in his breast and spread through his body. Looking down, he saw a long blade sunk to the hilt in the middle of his chest. "I'm sorry," he heard Magnus whisper into his ear.

Declan lost the strength in his legs and fell to his knees. So this was how it would end? he thought. Seems unfair.

"L-long live...long...l..." Blood foamed in his mouth and he could speak no more. There was a horrible weight in his chest pressing the air from him, and he felt a kind of numbness spread outward from his heart to his extremities. It hurt terribly, but Declan felt a weird sort of distance from his body so the pain seemed like it was out of a dream; there and known, but detached from the present.

He lost balance and watched the world turn crazily as he fell to the floor. Hands took hold of his body and turned him so he faced up to the ceiling, and there above him was Magnus.

"You deserved better," Magnus said, his face etched in sadness. "See you soon."

Declan felt Magnus close his eyelids, and everything went dark. And still. And cold.

"He's gone," Declan said to Gawain's guardsmen. "One of you cover his body."

Upstairs, Gawain moved to Arthur's room and pushed it open with his free hand. There, the boy sat on his bed, with his legs drawn in and his arms wrapped around his knees.

"Come with me," Gawain said.

Arthur shook his head.

Gawain tested the weight of his sword in his hand. "I wasn't asking, boy."

Arthur looked at the sword, then at the man holding it. "Brom is down there. You're giving me to him, aren't you?"

"Let's not make this any harder than it has to be, yeah?"

"Why won't you protect me?" Arthur asked. His eyes were as bright and intense as Boudicea's.

"You wouldn't understand," Gawain said.

"I'll never forgive you for this."

"I know," Gawain said. "Now come on."

Gawain's guardsmen watched their lord marshal descend the steps with Arthur before him, one of his mailed hands resting on

the boy's shoulder, guiding his forward.

"When we get out there, they might not be satisfied with him," Gawain said to Magnus, motioning to Arthur. "Be ready for anything."

Magnus nodded and opened the door for Gawain, who walked through it with Arthur before him.

Outside, the crowd was silent as Arthur was walked out to them. They formed a huge semicircle in front of Gawain's manor, and their torches lit the plaza in a low and uncertain orange light. Brom and his minions stood apart from the crowd, several steps closer to the house, waiting to receive Arthur.

"Brom!" Gawain shouted as soon as he left the house. "I'm coming out!"

Brom stood with his arms crossed, the stance of a conquering hero. "Bring me the boy."

Arthur looked at Brom and thought not of his arrogance now, but of his weakness and fear from the other night.

"Please make me strong again," Arthur whispered to himself. "I'm so scared. Please give me my power back. Give me the fire inside."

But nothing happened, and with each step toward Brom, Arthur felt a thickness in his heart that made him feel like he was walking under water. His legs had begun to tremble, and he knew if he stopped and rested on them, they would shake hard. So all he could do was keep moving, because the last thing he was about to do was let them all see how scared he was.

"You're doing the right thing, Gawain," Brom said.

Gawain looked at the mob. These were the same people who had attended his coronation just the other day, and who cheered his ascension. Where immortals had faltered, Gawain had stepped forth, and the people had loved him for it. And now...this. How quickly had they turned, Gawain thought. Had they ever been loyal to him? He thought not, that they were just as scared as anybody else was, willing to follow whoever they thought could protect them in a world full of dangerous mysteries. These simple folk could not understand Morgana or Mordred. They could not grasp who the Elves really were or what they wanted from this world. A curse on them all, Gawain thought. They do not deserve the likes of me.

Gawain stopped before Brom and took his hand off of Arthur's shoulder. Brom looked down upon the boy. "Not so dangerous now, are you?" he said.

"At least I never needed the whole town behind me to fight you," Arthur said. "I did it myself."

Brom glowered and his hand shot out, grasping Arthur hard by the chin and cheeks. "Listen here, you little bastard. By the time I'm through with you, you'll wish you'd never been born."

Brom let him go and turned to face the crowd. "We have him!" he shouted, and the throng of people cheered wildly.

Surrounded by the chanting noise, Brom drew his sword and held it high, gaining another cheer from the crowd. Arthur looked up at Brom and his raised steel, and suddenly, his fear was gone from him. Strike me down, he thought. See if you've got the strength for it.

"You all know how he showed his Elven blood the other night, when he tried to kill me," Brom said, his voice echoing off the buildings ringing the plaza. "For years he has lived among us, a spy for Morgana! And now one of his agents has destroyed the Heartstone! We are defenseless before Mordred, thanks to him!"

Gawain was taken aback. Heartstone? "Brom, what are you talking about?"

"See for yourself," Brom said. "Someone in league with the boy drove a sword into it. It's enchantment is surely ruined."

Gawain's mouth went dry. "A...sword?"

"Enough talk," Brom said. He tensed and brought his sword down.

Arthur closed his eyes. It was like the dream he had, only not so bad.

Brom's sword fell through the night air to Arthur's head.

I am not afraid, Arthur thought. I am not afraid.

A terrific clang knocked the sword aside and sent a shock up Brom's arm that was enough to make the entire thing go numb. The sword flew from his grasp and skittered across the plaza's cobblestones.

Brom looked up and saw Boudicea in the air above him, her body crouched tightly in a high leap, her arm extended from having thrown her quarterstaff like a spear at him. The boy's mother had come to protect him, and in that moment, Brom realized just how much of a mistake he had made.

Gawain took a step backward as Boudicea landed next to Arthur. So did everyone in the crowd, reflexively distancing themselves from the boy whose blood they had called for, and the mother who showed them all what it meant to fight for something worth dying for.

"Brom!" shouted Hrothgar from somewhere behind the crowd. The people in the mob whirled to see where the voice was coming from, and when the mighty northlander charged in, they scattered before him.

Hrothgar had his hammer in hand as he ran forward. Running alongside of him were Lorelei and Cambol. Brom's minions looked upon them and drew close to Brom, ready to fight to the last.

"Stay close to me," Boudicea said to Arthur. She looked down at him and saw Arthur looking up and nodding to her.

"Why do you defend him, Boudicea?" Gawain asked.

Boudicea turned to face her husband. "He is my son. I don't need any other reason."

Gawain sized her up. Even without her staff, she was more than dangerous, and he knew it. "He's not your son. He's Mordred's son."

Boudicea's entire body tensed.

"You gave the Elf King an heir," Gawain said.

"Don't judge me," Boudicea said. "You're not man enough for it."

Gawain ground his teeth together. "I took you in after Mordred made you his whore," he hissed. "And this is how you repay me?"

"Are you going to talk all night? Or do you need Brom's permission to kill me?"

"When I get done with you, you'll wish you never left Mordred's tower."

"Let's have it," Boudicea said evenly. She didn't look for her staff, or cast about for another weapon. She simply moved so she stood between Gawain and Arthur and closed her fists.

"You idiots!" Brom said. "Don't you see this is what he wants? For us to fight each other? When we are dead, he will open the gates to the city and let Mordred inside!"

"You're a fool," Hrothgar said.

"Am I, northlander? Then what is that sword doing in the Heartstone?" Brom said, pointing in the direction of the central plaza.

Boudicea whirled at the sound of Brom's words. What did he just say?

Gawain took advantage of her distraction and thrust his sword at Boudicea's heart.

You made me do this, he thought as he drove the point home.

Boudicea realized what had happened when it was too late to

do anything about it.

Arthur! she thought.

Momma!

There was a loud screech of steel and a shower of sparks as Gawain's sword skewed to the side, hitting nothing more but open air. A large shield had interceded from out of nowhere and saved her.

Arthur looked at the tall man standing by his mother. He had no idea where he had come from so suddenly, but he didn't care. He had saved his mother and stopped Gawain. He was tall and strong, his weathered face creased with deep lines and scored with small scars. He looked down upon Arthur and smiled, and in that instant, Arthur knew he was safe.

"Sire," Bors said.

CHAPTER 7

FEATS OF STRENGTH

Gawain staggered back a step, his sword-arm still jangled from the terrific shock that had just run throughout. He looked upon the man who had stopped the killing stroke against Arthur, and somehow, some way, Gawain was positive he had to be seeing things.

"You?" he said, half-meaning to keep it to himself.

"Yes, Gawain." Bors arched an eyebrow and grinned. "Me."

"I thought you were dead."

"You're not the only one."

Gawain relaxed his body and looked at Arthur. The boy stared defiantly back at him, his face unchanged from the mask of stoic resignation it had been moments before.

Bors noticed it, too. "You cannot have him, Gawain."

"Unless I go through you first."

"Unless you go through me first, aye."

Not far away, Brom seethed. Who was this old knight who came out of nowhere and stopped the killing blow? And why did Gawain see fit to have a conversation with him while everyone else just stood and stared, slack-jawed? Didn't they realize that their perfect opportunity was slipping away from them?

Brom shouldered past his minions, who were standing before him. "Suffering cats!" he said. "I will put an end to this once and for all."

He advanced toward Bors with his sword drawn. "One side, old man! The boy is mine."

Bors did not move, but watched Brom rush in.

"Brom, wait!" Gawain said. But it was too late.

Brom thrust his sword at Bors almost too fast to see. It was a

blur of steel that made a rushing sound as it went, so quick it was. Brom expected to feel the shudder of impact along the length of the blade, and into his arm, but there was a different kind of impact, and then another, and in that split-second, he found himself whirling to one side, sliding across on the ground while still standing on his feet. When it was over, his sword blade was warped in the middle, and there was an imprint in his breastplate in the shape of a hand. That's when the pain in Brom's chest really made itself known.

Brom suddenly found it difficult to breathe, and gasping, he looked up to see Bors standing as he had been before, only now his right hand was outstretched.

"Don't trifle with me, boy," Bors said. "I have neither the time nor patience for it."

Brom cast aside his sword. He glanced at his comrades to make sure they were still with him. They were, but slowly, they were all taking little steps backward to gain some distance between them and Bors.

Arthur's eyes kept darting back and forth as he watched Gawain, then Bors and back again to see who would make the next move.

"Give us the boy, stranger," Brom said. You..."

"I am Bors," he said, "and there is no place except here where I am not known, so take care who you call stranger."

Brom scowled. "I'll call you whatever I like, you dog. This is not your city. Here, we make our own rules."

Bors laughed to himself. "I'll just bet you do."

"You want to taste steel then, yeah? You cannot beat us all."

Bors nodded to Gawain. "Ask your friend here what he thinks of that."

Brom looked at him. Gawain shook his head no. Don't do it, Brom, he said with his eyes. You'll just die for nothing.

Brom grit his teeth and cursed under his breath. "That boy has destroyed the Heartstone! He..."

"ENOUGH!" Bors said with the force of a thunderclap. It echoed throughout the plaza, and along the streets of the city so that all could hear.

Bors took a step ahead to address the crowd. "That is no mere sword that has been driven into the stone," he said. "That is Excalibur."

Among the crowd, there was a gasp of recognition among many, and looks of confusion from the rest.

"It is the Sword of Kings," Bors continued, "and for ten long years, since the fall of Camelot, I have carried it in the hope that one day I might find somebody worthy of it. That journey has brought me here and I drove the sword into your precious Heartstone so that only the one who deserves Excalibur will retrieve it."

"You speak of swords and stones as if they will deliver us from evil," Brom said. "But I have heard the stories of old Camelot, and those so-called heroes. All they did was let evil triumph, in the end. They gave everything to Morgana. Everything except this place. That, you did yourself."

"We lost our way, indeed," Bors said. "But there is still one here who can set all of that right. That is why I came here. That is why I put the sword in the stone."

"And so you propose to give it to him?" Brom said, pointing once more to Arthur.

Bors turned to the young Pendragon and smiled. "Only if he wants it. And only if the sword will give let him take it."

Arthur looked at him and smiled back. "Thank you, sir," he said.

"No, my lord, it is I who should thank you."

"For what?"

"For making it all worthwhile."

"I don't understand, sir."

Bors caught sight of Boudicea standing just a few feet away. When he saw her, tears had filled her eyes. He felt his water up as well.

"Someday Arthur, you will."

Bors moved to Boudicea and she rushed forward and hugged him with all of her strength. Enough, even, to knock him off-balance for a moment.

"You came back," she said. "You came back."

Bors held Boudicea by her shoulders and pushed her back a little to see her face better. Suddenly he found it hard to talk, looking at her so closely. "Aye," he whispered. "Aye."

Apart from the reunion of Bors and Boudicea, Brom approached Gawain and spoke to him in a low voice. "We cannot allow this," he said.

Gawain watched Bors and Boudicea and felt something ugly stirring inside of him. Something dark. Something from the old days. "Allow what," he said flatly.

Brom looked at Bors and Boudicea. And especially at Arthur, standing behind them. "That."

"So you're my friend now, are you?" Gawain asked.

"Enemy of my enemy and all that," Brom answered. "We can take them."

"Perhaps." Gawain glanced to one side and saw that the mob Brom had assembled was dispersing, their confidence shaken and their bravery thinning out by the minute. "Your army is abandoning you," Gawain said. "What do you propose?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Brom said. "They all need to go. The knight, the mother and the child. And all who would defend them."

"A tall order, that," Gawain said, sizing up Hrothgar, Lorelei, Cambol and most of all, Boudicea, Bors and Arthur. "We need to tip things back to our favor. And we need to do this the right way."

"A pox on all that," Brom grumbled.

"Trust me," Gawain said. "I have just the idea."

"Nothing too fancy, I hope."

Gawain shook his head. "Just something to even the field. Then we'll do what needs to be done." He focused on Arthur. And then, on Boudicea, and the spark of hate he felt when he tried to strike her down grew to a flame that would not die.

Brom smiled. It was on.

Gawain stepped forward, and instantly, Bors detected it, his body posture reflexively changing even though he had not actually seen anything yet.

"What do you plan to do with my son, Bors?" Gawain asked loud enough for all in the plaza to hear him.

"He is not yours," Boudicea said. "He never was."

"Did I not help you raise him?" Gawain said. "Did I not give him shelter after you abandoned the child to the whim of some sorcerer?"

Boudicea clenched her fists. Bors put a hand on her shoulder. It's all right, he said, with a single, gentle touch. It's all right.

"The boy was sired by Mordred," Gawain loudly proclaimed. "But I raised him and took him into my home. He is mine to command still, and I'll not hand him over to the likes of you, Bors."

"You'll do as you're told," Bors said. "Leave the boy alone. The blood of your cousin runs in him. He is the rightful heir to the throne."

"What throne! Mordred destroyed it! That bastard," Gawain shouted, pointing at Arthur, "is heir to nothing!"

Boudicea stepped in front of Bors and fixed a cold, hard stare upon her husband. "Leave this place and never return, Gawain,"

she said. "It's over."

His eyes narrowed and his voice reduced to a growl. "I decide when it's over in Skara Brae. Not you."

She shook her head just a little bit, a disbelieving gesture toward Gawain that despite everything that had been said and done in the last few minutes, was more about disappointment than anything else.

"I tried to love you," she said.

"You should not have bothered."

"Never did I think you capable of this, Gawain. Was everything you told me about my son a lie? How you considered him your own?"

"Everything is different now," Gawain said. "Arthur is more Mordred than anyone else. He is too dangerous. He will be the death of us all."

"I'll be the death of you if you even try to lay a finger in him," Boudicea said.

"Strong talk coming from the whore of Camelot."

Boudicea's eyes went wild and she readied to spring forth and strike him down, but Bors' strong hands held her close.

"I see chivalry has been forgotten in Skara Brae," Bors said. "So be it. But even you cannot resist a challenge, can you, Gawain?"

"What do you propose?" Gawain said.

"A duel. The boy goes to the victor."

"And what of the loser?" Gawain asked.

"Exile."

Gawain stood quietly in the plaza.

"Don't think too hard," Bors said. "It's not your strong suit."

Somewhere in the crowd came a distant chuckle. Then another. The sound of it only made that ugly feeling in Gawain's heart grow ever more stronger. He would take care of them all. This smug crusader. That little bitch. And that worm of a boy. They would all pay for this outrage. "Meet me in the Proving Ground, dawn. We'll settle it then."

"Done."

Gawain backed away from Bors for a few steps as Brom and his cohorts fell in alongside of him. "Don't even think of running," Gawain said to Bors. "You'd never make it out of here alive."

"Running," Bors said. "Now that is something you were always good at."

"Let's go," Gawain said to Brom before turning his back on his house and those standing before it.

Brom motioned to his cronies and as one, they followed Gawain as he strode away from the plaza, into the heart of the city. As they went, the crowd dispersed to let them pass. Many simply went their own way, slinking back to their homes under the weight of their shame for having partaken in such a display of madness this evening. Others still wanted to see blood, and made straight for the city's arena to get a decent seat for the duel to follow. For a fight like this, waiting through the night would be a small price to pay for a view to kill for. And then there were those who remained in Brom's thrall, and now that of Gawain as well, and they followed their heroes wherever they went, hoping that the safety they felt when they went to destroy Arthur would not fade now that the boy's fate seemed so uncertain.

High above the isle of Orkney, an orange-eyed raven circled in the sky, riding the ocean winds, scanning the horizon for signs of movement. Finding none worth noting, it banked south to fly home. The edge of the island came into view when it noticed the ruins below, which had been quiet and still for so long, were now a living city, teeming with people and bursting with energy. But there was something else, the presence of a power both singular and ancient, a power that could only mean one thing. The raven cried loudly, letting the high wind carry its voice like a papery message tumbling on the breeze, winding its looping way over the miles to the distant shore of Britannia.

A thrall of Morgana, himself once a steward of Inverness but now far more Arcadian than man, looked up when he heard the raven's call. His long, pointed ears twitched at the sound of it, and a smile crept across his wide, toothy mouth. This was the news he had been waiting for all this time, the message that made his lonely vigil on the northern shore worth all of the cold isolation it had yielded this far. The thrall screeched loudly into the air, crying in a language that sounded like the grinding of glass. The scrubby little plants on the shore around him shook at the intensity of the racket, but the thrall kept it up, drawing forth a dagger as he did. His voice reached a high pitch that might have shattered crystal had he not driven the dagger into his neck at that very moment. He drew the blade across in a single swift motion, and a gout of orange sparks spewed from the wound. He dropped to his knees

as his cry died in his throat. And still smiling, he pitched forward, landing on his face before his entire body, weapons, armor and all dissolved into a drift of lazy orange embers that slowly dispersed on the ocean breeze.

Far to the south, one of Mordred's taskmasters was giving the whip to a rebel of Sherwood, who had been caught in a patrol earlier that morning. The helpless woodsman was tied to a lashing rack, his clothes already shredded. A crowd of Arcadian soldiers jeered and taunted the young man as he wept under the sting of each additional crack of the whip. Blood ran freely from the deep gouges that crosshatched his back, and the taskmaster knew it was only a matter of time before the rebel either gave up the location of the rest of his friends, or died. Perhaps if luck was on his side, the taskmaster thought, there would be a bit of both. The location of the other rebels wasn't so important. They were obviously in Sherwood. That wasn't the problem. The problem was figuring out how to make the forest burn, when it seemed that some other power would not allow fires to burn there in quite the way that Lord Mordred wanted...

The taskmaster threw his head to the sky as if struck under his chin, and he emitted the same kind of scream that his comrade on the far northern shore did. Every other Arcadian in the crowd, some six or seven hundred of them, did the same, and the clamor was such that the rebel's eardrums burst and his skull shook. Under the pressure of such noise, the poor boy's heart finally gave out, and he died, strangely alone amid so many Arcadians whose attention was purely elsewhere for the moment. When their cries finally dwindled, they returned their attention to their plaything, only to find that he had expired without either betraying his friends or giving them all the satisfaction of witnessing his final moment. Enraged, the Arcadians bared their teeth and the ones that were fastest and closest to the body tore chunks of flesh off of it and ate it raw before their fellows would push them out of the way in a feeding frenzy that reduced the body to bones before it got cold.

Even further south still, the dark city of Camelot continued to slowly extend its tendrils across the soil of Britannia. The sepia sky that surrounded the city was full of a vast flock of ravens that circled the city's highest spire, cawing and cackling to each other as they did. Then the cry reached them, and the birds responded in kind, shrieking and laughing while they wheeled together in an ever-tightening circle. Finally, they came together as a single mass

of flesh and feathers, and as one, they dove to the base of the spire, racing by the phalanxes of Arcadian soldiers beneath, who stood in ranks by the thousands. They raced through of the vast gates that enabled entire armies to enter the spire in a single formation, and once inside, they turned upward, flying to the highest point within the spire before balling up and then dropping down, hurtling through the huge pit in the floor and downward further still, through the abyssal well at the heart of the city that led deep underground, beyond the bones of Old Camelot, below the ancient waters of the ancient land, and beneath the oldest stones to have ever seen the sun.

In the deep, dark heart of the city, the well opened into a chamber at least as large as the entire surface city was. It was an enormous dome carved from the earth, shored up by the same magic that allowed the Spire to spread across the land like a never-ending blight. And in the center of that dome, surrounded by miles of descending, circular stairs that formed a final, mammoth descent, stood the throne of the Elf King.

Mordred sat there as if sleeping, surrounded by the ten thousand of Arcadian soldiers who sat on the ring-stairs that surrounded him. He was as still as a statue, his skin as pale as any elf in his court, his ears lengthened, and his lips distorted by the enlarged and pointed teeth they concealed.

The ravens burst into the throne chamber, blasting apart into a wide flock that filled the space of the dome, each screaming to a single Arcadian and waking them from their stasis. Thousands of flaming orange eyes snapped open and the Arcadian host stirred at the news the birds brought them. There are people in Skara Brae. The boy is in Skara Brae. The sword is in Skara Brae.

The largest raven in the flock, itself the size of an eagle, landed on Mordred's shoulder, and whispered something into its master's ear. The Elf King's eyes opened and he stood from his seat, his black armor glinting under the dim light of so much Arcadian fire in the dome.

Mordred's army drew their weapons in salute to him and in sudden silence, waited for their lord to give the word.

He looked upon them, his closest bodyguard, his most seasoned troops, these destroyers of kingdoms and despoilers of dreams. They had one last conquest before them, the one they had been waiting so very long for, the one that he himself had burned to discover, the one that would give him final satisfaction.

The great raven whispered the last of its report into Mordred's

ear and then took flight again, leaving a few large, black feathers swinging in the air as it flapped off.

Mordred grinned and a low voice crept out of his throat that echoed within the chamber like the rumble of a deep earthquake. "It is time."

Outside, Hrothgar, Lorelei and Cambol tended to the funeral pyre of Declan, setting his body atop the wood and arranging it so he would have his most prized possessions at his side when the flames met him: the armor he had worn since he was a squire, his sword Carramon, forged by the secret masters of southern steel. The medallion of valor awarded to him by the King of Brittany during that land's final, desperate defense against the legions of Mordred that was as heroic as it was futile. And lastly, his chronicles of Arthur, which he had personally transcribed from a dozen different sources to account for the many deeds both great and regrettable of the Once and Future King, so that when he perished from the world, those he had left behind and those who would grow up without him would never be without the story of his life to inspire them. Such were the artifacts of Declan, Gawain's first marshal.

Cambol lit a torch under the early morning starlight and placed it at the bottom of the pyre. The flames caught quickly, and within moments, the entire pile was aflame, lighting the plaza. Cambol stood back from the fire, feeling the heat of it on his face. Hrothgar and Lorelei stood with him, and together, they watched it burn.

Inside the house, Bors looked out the window at the fire. "He was a good man," he said. "It would have been an honor to help give him a proper departure."

Boudicea looked out at the fire as well, and she shook her head. "Better to have them do it," she said. "It will bring them closer together."

Boudicea raised her eyebrows. "One way or another, they have all lost their families. In a world such as this, it is as good a bond as any."

Bors focused on Lorelei. "What happened to her? She bears the crest of the Teutonic Order."

"Lorelei?" Boudicea said. "She's the last of them. Daughter of Maximillian the Elder."

"I heard about the battle of the Black Forest," Bors said. "She's the only survivor I've met from that."

"Then you know how she lost her father."

"And still she came here, after all that," Bors said. "Perhaps there is some heroes' blood left in us to turn things back, after all."

A silence passed between them as the distant sound of the roaring fire filled the room with a soft crackling. Arthur slept on a couch across the room, huddled under a thick blanket. He had refused to sleep upstairs after everything that had happened, and Bors and Boudicea could hardly blame him for it.

Boudicea looked at her old master, for whom ten years of wandering only seemed to have made him stronger, despite how much it had also aged him. His hair was more white than black now, and the creases in his face seemed to have been etched permanently there. The scars from a host of small wounds could be seen on any part of his body not covered by armor, and the notches in the sword that he had laid across his lap gave silent testament to the many furious battles he'd fought between that terrible day in the crypt and now.

She found herself thinking of the fall of Camelot, and of the days that followed. And even though those times were never far from her thoughts, she suddenly found them too difficult to bear. Without thinking, she looked to Bors and felt strong once more. Yet, as she watched him, sitting there by the window, slowly running a sharpening stone across his sword blade, a sadness took hold of her.

"What happened to you, Bors?" she asked quietly.

He stopped running the stone. "It doesn't matter," he said, resuming his sharpening.

She drew close to him, put her hand on his chin, and turned his face toward hers. "It does to me."

He breathed deeply, searching for the words to tell her what needed to be said. For the first time, Boudicea thought that Bors looked old.

"When I dove into the water, I kept thinking of two things. The first was that I had to keep the sword out of Mordred's hands."

"And the second?"

Another pause. "That I had abandoned you."

They sat quietly together.

"It was ten years ago," Boudicea said. "And you did the right thing."

Bors looked pained. "Did I?"

"You've heard what happened to me, then, I suppose." "I know everything," Bors said. "When I jumped into that vortex, beneath the crypt, I fell through a deep, dark tunnel that landed me in a strange place between places. It felt like I had fallen asleep and was moving through a dream. I tumbled across the abyss until I finally touched ground in a garden."

Boudicea's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Aye," Bors said. "That garden."

"The Lady allows few mortals into her home."

"Few mortals refuse to give back what is rightfully hers, though," Bors said. "With Excalibur in hand, I landed in the Garden, and there she stood before me, more beautiful and bright than I could ever have imagined. She spoke in whispers, but her words rang like peals of thunder within my head. And whatever she said, I was powerless to disobey."

"What did she say?"

"She wanted to know why I kept the sword," Bors said. "I told her I couldn't bear for Mordred to have it. Nor could I bear to see such a thing vanish from the world. Not when it was needed so very badly."

Boudicea laughed a little to herself. "Noble as your decision was, I can't imagine the Lady took kindly to it."

"That's not the half of it," Bors said. "When I told her what I did, she got this strange look in her eyes, and she sat on her throne, staring at me all the while. I've seen that look before; it was that of an executioner wondering how to dispatch his victim. And in that moment, I grew horribly afraid. Finally, she said that were it up to her alone, she would have banished me to the dark places."

She looked at him, questioning. Dark places?

He shrugged. "I don't know what they are, either. But I wasn't about to press the issue with her. They sounded like someplace I didn't want to be, and that was enough."

"The Lady never told me any of this."

"Small wonder, that," Bors said. "I think she keeps her counsel close, and her secrets closer. She told me all about what happened to you, though."

Boudicea looked like she had been slapped in the face. "What did she say?"

"Enough," Bors said. "She said you had a bravery she could never match. That you and you alone could have done what you did, in that tower." Bors swallowed. "She also gave me a message

to give to you."

"Oh?"

"She said that whatever else Arthur was, he was yours. And that was enough."

Tears came to Boudicea's eyes as she looked at her sleeping son. "They all wanted to kill him."

"People are sheep," Bors said with a hint of anger in his voice. "Until they become wolves."

Boudicea sniffed. "You know something, Bors? Right before you stopped Gawain's sword tonight, when the only thing that stood between that crowd and my son was myself and a few friends, that was the most scared I had ever been. Not at the battle of Camelot. Not in Mordred's tower. And not in flight from that place. It was tonight."

"I never had children," Bors said, "But most of my friends did. They always told me you never truly learn to worry until you've got little ones at your feet."

She laughed a little. "Too true." She looked back at Arthur. "So how did you know he was here? Did the Lady tell you?"

Bors shook his head. "She told me that it was the sword, more than her, that was allowing me to keep it. And so, she would let me to leave her home with something that did not belong to me. But she said I needed to be tested still, and so she sent me away from the Garden, back through another tunnel of darkness. When I opened my eyes once again, I was practically in Babylon. I was whisked through time and space that far to the east."

"Babylon!" Boudicea exclaimed. "No wonder why it took you so long to find us!"

He nodded. "For some three years I wandered, not knowing exactly what to look for. But then, the sword told me that you had had Arthur, and at last Britannia had its king. From then on, the sword wanted to get to Arthur. It directed me like a divining rod to him. Finding your son was never the problem. Getting to Skara Brae and avoiding capture, was."

"It could not have been easy for you."

"Nothing in my life has ever been." He ran his sharpening stone over the length of his notched sword once again, making a slow, grinding noise as he did. "Every notch in this steel is a hundred of Mordred's minions I have run through. Every one of them disappeared in a shower of orange sparks. But none of them truly died. Their bodies are destroyed, but their spirits return to Arcadia, where they wait to infect another one of our countrymen with

their tainted spirits. Then they transform them into their likeness, just as if they had never been slain in the first place."

He ran the stone over his blade again.

"Our fight has been nothing more but a delay, an annoyance. There are as many Arcadians in Mordred's army as ever before. More, even. And all the while, our numbers dwindle as our own people replenish the ranks of the enemy. We cannot go on like this, Boudicea."

"What do they want from us?"

"Ever since the time of our most ancient forefathers, creatures from the shadows have crept forth and troubled us. How many stories have you heard as a child of Elves stealing children?"

"More than a few. Usually it was just to get my sisters and I to go to bed."

"You're not the only one who thought the stories were just that."

"But why are they here, Bors?"

"The Lady said that Arcadia has become a tainted place," Bors said. "Its people had lost their ability to have little ones of their own, so they had to steal the children of others and bend them into Arcadian form. So it has been for too many eons to count."

Bors paused and ran his stone again. "It all changed when Morgana devoted herself to Arcadian ways. Her lust for magic power drove her into the arms of the Faerie Queene, Titania, and she became her most trusted disciple."

"Titania?" Boudicea said. I have never heard of her."

"I doubt many people have. She never leaves Arcadia, and the Lady seems to think that she and her paramour Oberon are in a deep slumber while Morgana rules their kingdom. That would explain Arcadia's sudden desire to emerge from the shadows and challenge us in the daylight. It is not the Elves, it is Morgana."

Boudicea shivered. "What made her hate Arthur so?"

"It is a long story, both dark and unhappy in the telling," Bors said, hoping that would be enough to satisfy Boudicea. But one look at her let him know that it was not. "Arthur's father, Uther, convinced Merlin to weave a spell so he might take the appearance of the Duke of Cornwall. Thus disguised, Uther tricked Cornwall's wife Igraine, and slept with her. When Cornwall was slain in battle not long after, Uther married Igraine, and young Arthur was born nine moons later. But by then, Igraine's other child, Morgana, had learned what happened."

"She could not have been more than a child," Boudicea said.

"She wasn't. But her sense of things arcane has always been

an unnatural one, and she knew from the moment that it happened that her mother had been ensorcelled. She hated Uther for that, and she hated her half-brother even more for it. As Arthur became the favored son, and later the king of a broken country, Morgana retreated ever further into the shadow, seething in her wrath, searching for the power with which to strike down her brother and destroy everything he would ever build."

"Morgana was Cornwall's daughter?" Boudicea asked. Bors nodded.

"So what did she do?"

"Turned us against ourselves. She knew we could defeat any enemy. So she found what flawed our hearts, and that became her weapon. Our pride, our arrogance, our wrath, our lust. One by one, we fell prey to these things. All Morgana had to do was be patient enough to let it happen. In the end, she hardly needed to do anything for it all to fall into ruin." Bors stopped for a second, and looked at Boudicea. "What fools we were."

"You must not despair, Bors," she said. "You're the only one I can depend on not to."

He smiled. "Don't worry, Boudicea. I'm not despairing. But only a fool could say that we can win this war fighting it as we have. Gawain was a fool to think that he could just hide here forever. Every person in Europa will be made a slave to Arcadia, in one way or another, in due time."

"Unless?" Boudicea said.

"They fear the sword and whoever wields it, that much the Lady did tell me. And your boy, regardless of what anybody else says, has the mettle to wield it. He is the only one who can deliver us from Morgana and Mordred. The sword must go to him. Everything else falls by the wayside."

"He is young for such a burden," Boudicea said.

"Indeed. Half again as young than when his grandfather was thrust into his destiny. And the challenges facing him are at least twice as great."

"Then what makes you so sure he is ready?"

Bors looked at her fondly. "He has his mother's blood in him."

She had nothing to say, and simply sat through the uneasy pause that followed.

Bors cleared his throat. "I should have killed Gawain out there, for what he tried to do to you."

"I owe you my life," Boudicea said. "But I'm not one of those ladies of the court you used to champion. I can take care of myself."

"I know," Bors said. "You need no defending. And had I not intervened tonight, I am sure you would have bested Gawain some other way. That is not the point."

"Then what is?"

"Fighting women...," Bors said, seething. "It goes against everything we once stood for. Our strength was to fight for those who had none, and in turn, those we championed passed judgment on our deeds, to deem us worthy for recognition. It was a good system, and as knights, we all realized there was something greater behind it."

"Chivalry."

"Aye, that. The only kind of decency that still made sense in a world ruled by the sword. We were supposed to uphold that," Bors said. "It was knights like Gawain who forgot it, and let their passions and blood feuds govern their actions. Small wonder everything fell apart once that happened."

Bors ran his sharpening stone once more.

"If it wasn't for Gawain...," he said, and then stopped. "I'm sorry, Boudicea. Despite everything that has happened tonight, he is still your husband, and you still have a history together."

"It was one of necessity, and I'd just as soon forget it," she said, chewing her lip. "Bors, of all of the knights of old, you should be the last one to apologize for anything."

He looked at her kindly. "I am the last one, period."

"I've missed these nice fireside chats of ours, Bors," Boudicea joked.

The two laughed together for a while, listening to the pyre outside. They watched the flames together, but their thoughts were on different things, their minds in different places for a moment, until they both returned to the here and now.

"It's been a long journey, I won't lie. The longest," Bors said, looking at Boudicea. "But I'm glad to have made it."

She looked back at him. "I'm glad, too."

Under the early morning darkness, Brom walked through the main gate of the Proving Ground, only to find Gawain standing in the middle of the arena floor. Brom looked at the stands for signs of life, but found none. He looked around for signs of any additional guardsmen. Nothing.

"Been here all night, then?" Brom asked as he began the long walk from the gate to where Gawain stood.

"That's right," Gawain said, his voice echoing off of the stone walls of the coliseum.

"Sorry my company wasn't worth keeping."

"Nothing personal. I just needed to be here for a while."

"Well, you missed quite a party," Brom said, grinning. "Every decent girl in the city was there for the taking. Ale by the barrel...I don't think any of those taverns will ever be the same."

"Maybe next time."

"Maybe next time." Brom looked around the Proving Ground. "So many people got worked up over the duel this morning, I think they forgot it was supposed to be at sunup."

"You can be sure that Bors didn't forget," Gawain said.

"Well, neither did I." Brom looked around to make sure nobody else was in the arena. He approached Gawain and drew forth a small vial of clear liquid.

Gawain narrowed his eyes. "What is that?"

Brom held up the vial to eye level between them. "You know exactly what this is. It was nearly the end of you and that idiot Northman...Haakon? Hortimer?"

"Hrothgar."

"Right. Him."

"Get that vileness away from me."

Brom turned the vial in his fingers. The liquid inside moved slowly. "My father purchased this from a trader who had brought it all the way from the markets of Byzantium. The trader said it had been brought there from across the far eastern plains, where no man travels. It is my gift to you."

"I said I don't want it."

"Gawain, don't be like that," Brom said with a strange softness to his voice. "We both know you're not half the swordsman Bors is. You've spent all those years eating and drinking and poking that wife..."

"I never touched her."

"What?"

"Boudicea. I never touched her. Not like that."

"You had to have. At least once, to see how the fruit tasted from the tree, yeah?"

Gawain glared at Brom. "I don't owe you an explanation."

"I suppose not," Brom said. He looked at the poison again almost as if he had forgotten about it. "Look, you're going to need

an edge against Bors. Otherwise, he's only going to humiliate you as he did me last night. Neither of us want that to happen, so be smart and take this."

Gawain looked at the vial.

"Go ahead, take it." Brom held it close to him. "If it's your honor or you're worried about preserving, I think we all crossed that line some time ago. All that matters now is that little bastard and the ones who are protecting him. When Bors is on the ground and going cold, you'll be thankful that this stuff put him there."

Gawain exhaled slowly and took the vial into his hand. "How strong is it?"

"I wouldn't even let a drop touch your skin," Brom said. "Just pour it on the length of your blade. It will dry clear and nobody will know it's even there. All you have to do is scratch Bors with it and he'll be as good as gone."

"It didn't kill me," Gawain said.

"Only because we were...interrupted," Brom said. "Make sure that once Bors goes down, he won't get back up again. Today is no time for mercy."

"No," Gawain said, uncorking the vial and pouring its contents onto his sword blade. "It's not."

They watched the drops of venom run along the edge, thinning out as they went, slowly settling on the steel and spreading into a film that after several slow minutes vanished into an invisible, lethal varnish.

"I never thought I'd have to resort to this," Gawain said. He could not take his eyes off of his tainted sword.

Brom was not impressed. "You also never thought saving the world would involve killing a little boy, so let's not bog ourselves in the details."

Over by the gate, a number of common folks began to tentatively enter the Proving Ground, as if unsure that it was proper for them to be here.

"They are coming," Brom said. "Look alive."

Gawain nodded and set his gaze back on the arena entrance.

"It's alright," Brom said loud enough for his voice to echo throughout the Proving Ground. "There is still time."

The people at the gate turned to tell those behind them that they need not be afraid to enter. Then the first group came in, some three or four of them. They were followed by a dozen, and then a score, and before long, it seemed that the entire city was coming into the area under the predawn light.

"They have all come to see you," Brom said to Gawain. "They want to see your greatest victory."

"There is nothing great in victory," Gawain said. "Unless there are never any more of them."

Brom looked at him disapprovingly. Gawain took notice of it.

"You wouldn't understand," Gawain said. "But if you live by the sword as long as I have, perhaps one day you will."

"I'll do that and more old man," Brom said. "Just you watch."

They watched the people come into the arena, and a low background clamor arose from the noise of a thousand voices in conversation. The sky lightened, and the sun finally crested over the edge of the eastern arena wall.

"Sun's up!" shouted someone from the stands. "Time to fight!"

Cheers went up among the crowd, and slowly the voices settled into a single, repeated cry, "Fight, fight, fight!"

Brom looked toward the gate. "They're not showing."

"Give them time," Gawain said.

"The challenge was to fight at dawn. I'd say they are forfeiting on account of cowardice. You should declare yourself the victor now and..."

"And what?" Gawain said, glaring at Brom. "Bors will not give up the boy willingly unless we make him. If I do not beat him here, I will have to lay siege to my own house and kill however many people it takes. I have to kill Bors here."

Brom noticed some movement by the gate. "Then you might still get your wish." He pointed to a group of figures coming into the Proving Ground. "That looks like them."

Bors led his group into the coliseum with Boudicea and Arthur by his side, and with Hrothgar, Lorelei and Cambol in formation behind him. When Bors first stepped into the light within the Proving Ground, the people saw him and began to boo and curse. Some of them threw garbage to the arena floor. A few had even brought cloth banners with crude insults painted on them.

"They hate me," Arthur said quietly as he watched people on all sides jeering at him.

"Pay them no heed," Bors said. "I've fought before worse judges than this."

"You should not do it, Bors," Arthur said, with a gravity to his voice that was not there before. "I'm putting you in danger. I'm putting everybody in danger."

Bors looked at the boy and put a hand on his shoulder. "Things are going to happen here this morning that you will not want

to see. Things that you cannot un-see. Things you cannot un-hear. Vicious things. Vile things. Hurtful things from those you thought were your friends."

Arthur flinched as a glass bottle shattered on the ground nearby.

"Arthur, what you are seeing here, this is what the world is like. Skara Brae is only now becoming more and more like it. The place where you grew up could not stay the way it was."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you need to know that these people here, those who followed Brom to your house, and who follow Gawain now, they don't hate you. How can they? They don't even know you. They are just afraid of what they don't understand, and people like Brom and Gawain twist those fears into something that people will follow."

"Well, I hate them."

"No, you don't. You just wish you could understand them."

"I don't think I ever will."

"Give it time, young king," Bors said. "Give it time."

Boudicea put her arm around Arthur as they walked. "Do not worry, my little dragon. Bors is the finest swordsman in all of Europa. Whatever duel..." Her voice stopped as she searched for a way to refer to Gawain without using his name. "Come what may, Bors will prevail. He always does."

"Your mother is too kind," Bors said to Arthur. "What has she taught you of fighting?"

Arthur looked at her. "Not much. I don't like it."

"What do you like?" Bors asked.

"Reading. Running. I like to watch the ocean."

"You have the soul of a poet. Guard it well."

"Isn't that what you're doing now by fighting my fath-by fighting Gawain?"

"No," Bors said. "That merely protects your life. Your soul is something only you can see to." He nodded in Gawain's direction. "Not everyone does."

Across the dwindling distance of the sandy floor, Gawain and Brom stood shoulder to shoulder. Gawain's sword was out. Brom stood with arms crossed. Both were in full armor and regalia, their cloaks and surpluses moving in the breeze that filtered through the many archways of the arena.

Bors spoke low, but so that Boudicea could hear. "I count five archers in the stands. You?"

"Two on the left, three right. Brom's minions are in the lower

stands. Carrying steel, no doubt."

"No doubt." Bors leaned over and spoke quietly to Arthur. "Stay by your mother at all times this morning, no matter what happens. Do you understand?"

Arthur looked up at him, suddenly nervous. Why was he telling him this now? "Yes."

"Good man," Bors said. "Good man."

Bors motioned to the rest of the group to halt, while he moved on by himself to meet Gawain and Bors.

Boudicea looked at the others, and silently understanding, Hrothgar, Lorelei and Cambol closed in around Arthur.

"I can't see!" Arthur complained.

"You'll thank us for it before long," Hrothgar muttered.

"Be careful," Boudicea said to Bors as he walked away from her. He nodded to her over his shoulder before closing the rest of the distance to his challengers.

"What's this," Brom shouted, pointing at Boudicea and the others. "The challenge was for a single fight! Do you need the boy to fight for you?" A wave of mild laughter rippled across the audience.

"You should be the last one inviting Arthur to combat," Bors said to Brom before turning his attention to Gawain. "He your second, then?"

"He is," Gawain replied.

"Very well. Brom, is it? Know that if you so much as touch your sword before I'm through with your friend here..."

"Don't threaten me, outsider. You're the one who brought an entire entourage to a personal duel."

"Have it your way," Bors said. "So, Gawain, it's come to this."

"It has."

"He who yields, yields all," Bors said.

"Remember those words when you find yourself begging for mercy," Gawain answered.

"You first."

"Step back, Brom," Gawain said. "We have business, this one and I."

Brom was breathing heavily, excited at the prospect of flashing steel. "Behold!" he cried to the spectators. "Two great knights in dispute! The outsider challenges our lord and protector for the son of Mordred!"

The crowd gave up a huge cheer.

"Bors of Camelot, are you ready?"

Bors nodded. "I am."

Gawain leapt forth and struck like a serpent, thrusting his sword at Bors. Bors barely had enough time to turn aside and avoid being run through. Instead, Gawain's sword sheared through Bors' arm guard and sliced his upper arm. Not too deeply, but deep enough.

The crowd gasped as Gawain shot past Bors. In the space of a moment, he had moved from six feet in front of Bors to six feet behind him. He stood like a statue, his sword put in front of him in perfect form. Gawain turned and readied for close combat.

"I'm ready, too," he said.

Brom backpedaled away from the knights as Bors drew his weapon. Gawain could see that Bors was having problems keeping his steel steady. The poison was doing its work.

Brom shifted his sword to his left hand and let his right arm hang so blood could run freely from the wound.

As Boudicea and the others watched from the far side of the arena floor, Arthur paid close attention to Bors, how he moved. He had seen the exchange happen like it was in slow motion, and he knew there was something wrong with Gawain's sword. The cut wasn't so bad as to render Bors weak like this. It had to be...

He saw Brom watching eagerly from the side.

...poison.

"He cheated," Arthur said quietly. Then again, loudly, "He cheated!"

Boudicea looked at her son. "What was that?"

"Gawain, Momma. His sword has poison on it."

She looked back at the battle and narrowed her eyes. "How can you tell?"

"I just can," he said. "What are we going to do?"

"Nothing."

He looked at her in disbelief. "Why not?"

"Because Bors challenged Gawain alone. If we get involved, then we're the ones who are cheating."

"But Gawain...Brom..."

"I know," Boudicea said, gripping her spear tightly. "And so does he," she said, gesturing to Bors. "He said this would happen."

"Then why doesn't he do something about it?"

"Believe it or not, I think he is."

Bors and Gawain circled each other for several tense moments, their weapons out and just inches away from touching each other.

Bors looked pale and his breathing grew ragged.

"Strike now while you still can," Gawain said, sneering.

Bors said nothing, but maintained his distance.

Gawain slapped Bors' blade with his own, knocking it aside. Bors quickly recovered, and held the sword before him. "What's wrong?" Gawain asked. "You don't seem so eager to fight now, do you?"

Still, Bors said nothing. He glanced to one side to make eye contact with Boudicea, then with Arthur. He looked at the boy with a certain intensity as if to say, don't worry about me, I'll be alright.

"He's not going to make it, momma," Arthur said. "I should have killed Brom when I had the chance."

Boudicea looked at him sadly. "No, little one. It was good that you didn't."

Arthur watched Bors circle with Gawain, and already Bors looked unsteady on his feet. A sudden, angry helplessness filled him up inside, and tears came to his eyes. As he spoke, his voice cracked under the strain of not crying outright. "Why? Why was it good?"

"Because," she said, saddened by the sight of his anguish, "That's not how it should happen."

A cheer went up from the crowd as Gawain moved in and struck high with his sword. Bors parried, and the ringing of steel echoed throughout the coliseum. Gawain pressed the attack, hitting from above again and again, and each time, Bors' parry was that much weaker, his blade that much closer to his own head.

Arthur moved to run to Bors, but Boudicea put a firm hand on his shoulder. "We cannot," she said.

"We have to!" he said through his tears.

"Not yet," she said through her own.

Bors could hardly stand. His blood burned within his veins, and his arms and legs moved as if they were made of wet clay. A tightening in his gut made him want to double over and vomit. He was breathing hard, but could not get enough air into his lungs. It was like a millstone was sitting on his chest.

He watched Gawain circling and smiling the same way he did back in the old days. Back when he was settling one of those blood feuds of his. Or when he was venting his drunken wrath on a woman. There had been so many opportunities to stop him before now, Bors thought. But the king's cousin gets special treatment. Even in Camelot. Even at the Round Table. Even now.

Gawain fainted, and Bors reacted clumsily, nearly tripping over

his own feet. Gawain sensed the moment and moved in to cut him along the neck, but Bors got his footing and lashed out, punching Gawain across the jaw with his sword hand. The cross guard smashed into Gawain's helmet, knocking it off his head. Gawain reeled from the blow, and a huge gasp went up from the stands. Bors tried to follow up, but he wasn't fast enough. Gawain spun on his heel and backhanded Bors across the face with his free hand. The crowd went wild as Bors really did lose his footing this time, and fell twisting to the ground.

Boudicea could sense the tension in Hrothgar, Lorelei and Cam-bol. "Not yet," she said, sniffing.

Gawain turned and raised his sword to the crowd, taking in their adulation. He waved his hand for applause, and it came to him like thunder.

Gawain turned back to Bors, who was on his hands and knees. He still held onto his sword, but he was in no condition to fight.

"Get up," Gawain said. "I'm not through with you."

Bors slowly placed one foot on the ground, and with both forearms, he pushed on his knee to get himself standing. A thick stream of blood smeared the armor and dripped onto the sandy arena floor.

Gawain took up a fighting stance. "Come on."

"I...figured you for...many things," Bors said through ragged breaths. "A poisoner was not...one of them."

"Today, I am the victor," Gawain replied. "Nothing else matters."

Bors couldn't feel much of anything anymore, and even Gawain's words and the roar of the crowd felt like it was coming to him through a long tunnel, muffled, distorted and distant.

It was not supposed to end like this, Bors thought. But then again, how was it supposed to end? On the field atop a host of slaughtered enemies? At the end of a great quest? Before friends and allies, in the peace of a quiet moment?

You have lived hard and lived well and you did what you could to make the world a better place. There are many things left undone, but who can help that?

I'm ready, he thought, and the darkness took him.

Bors fell back and landed hard on the ground. His eyes had closed. The crowd went wild as Gawain threw his arms up in triumph. He walked away from the body so Arthur, Boudicea and the rest could attend to the body.

Arthur was the first to reach Bors. He grabbed the old knight

by the sides of his head and shouted into his face. "Bors! Bors!"

Boudicea rushed in and placed her fingers against Bors' neck. "He still lives," she said to Hrothgar and the others as they arrived. "But only by a thread."

"He's poisoned him!" Hrothgar said through clenched teeth.

Boudicea looked at him and nodded.

"I'll have his guts for this," he growled.

Arthur took Bors' hand. "I'm sorry they did this to you, Bors," he said through his tears. "I'm sorry you fought for me. I'm sorry I got you into all of this." He sniffled and swallowed and held back his crying for the moment. "But I will get them back for you. I'll get them all back, and I'll..."

Bors stirred and squeezed Arthur's hand lightly. "Don't do it, son," he gurgled through the blood in his mouth. "Don't be... like them."

Arthur closed his eyes tightly so nobody could see the light coming out of them. He gritted his teeth so hard he could hear them squeaking together as they ground. All the rage he felt, all the anger, all the fury, he held it inside of him, like it was an explosion held back by the thinnest of walls. He held his breath for fear of crying out. He did not move a muscle, for fear of thrashing. Even the smallest motion or expression might be the tiny crack in his resolve it would take for him to let the fury take over, and to do to Gawain and Brom what needed to be done.

No, he thought. There has to be another way.

He breathed deeply through his nose and tried to make the feelings inside of him subside, fade into the background. The sound of the crowd slowly went quiet, and all he could hear was his own heart. And Bors', which had slowed to a crawl, slowly working out its last few labored beats.

Thump-thump.

Thump...thump.

Thump...

Arthur opened his eyes and put his hands on Bors' chest. His palms rested on armor, but somehow he could feel the body that lay beneath.

"Not yet, Bors," Arthur whispered. "You have work to do."

Arthur thought of the venom in Bors' body and imagined it thinning away into nothing, and something bright and good coming in to fill its place. He thought of his own anger and making it a faraway thing, small and measly compared to a feeling more pure and good than that. The feeling he felt when he was with his

mother. The feeling of safety when he first saw Bors. The knowledge now that this was not yet over.

"Get up," Arthur said, and stood away from Bors. "Come on, Bors, please get up."

Gawain was walking in a tight circle, arms outstretched. He was looking up at the higher levels of the coliseum, but all he saw were a sea of distant faces, each too small and faraway to make out any detail on them. Still, he thought, let them think I am giving my attention to them and them only.

Brom looked at the knot of people in the center of the arena floor and smiled at the thought of Arthur wailing like a baby, and of Boudicea pounding on Bors' lifeless chest. Perhaps when this was over, he could take her for himself. After all, she and Gawain are through. Perhaps when she realizes that she will need an ally in Skara Brae, she will give herself to him, just as she gave herself to Mordred. Perhaps...what's that?

Brom squinted to see what was happening on the arena floor. "No," he said to himself, his voice drowned by the crowd's cheers for Gawain. "No. No! NO!"

This is a great day, Gawain thought as he watched the people in the stands. Bors is gone, and soon, so will Arthur. And as for the bitch who sired him, she will know my passion before she joins her son. And then, when he least expects it, I shall rid myself of Brom too, and Skara Brae shall answer only to me.

That's when he realized the crowd had fallen silent. He felt the presence of somebody standing behind him. He also felt a knot form in his stomach.

"I thought you said you weren't through with me," came a voice from a man who should have been dead.

Gawain slowly turned to face the voice behind him. It couldn't be who it sounded like. But it was.

Bors looked at Gawain from under the edge of his brow as he stood.

"It can't be," Gawain said. "This is..."

"Impossible?" Bors said. "You of all people should know how hard it can be to die by poison."

Gawain felt a tremor in his sword hand.

Bors advanced on him without any weaponry. "Let's finish this, you and I."

"You?" Gawain said through a nervous half-laugh. "You're not even carrying any steel." He paused to swallow. "It would hardly be fair."

"Fair?" Bors said. "That wasn't a concern of yours before."

Gawain glanced at the crowd. He doubted any of them could have heard his conversation with Bors, but it hardly mattered now. Their silence told him everything he needed to know. That it was over.

He looked at Arthur, who had backed away, with his mother and the rest of their group. But the boy looked at him with a strong, cold stare. And deep within it, there was that orange flicker of Arcadian fire that once again had made everything different from how it should have been.

"You should yield now before this turns tragic," Bors said. Gawain broke off his stare with Arthur and returned his focus to Bors. He tightened his grip on his sword. "Arm yourself." Bors pursed his lips and nodded. "So be it."

Gawain roared and rushed in, swinging an overhanded chop that Bors sidestepped. As Gawain tipped past the point of his own balance, he felt both of Bors' hands reach out and hit him. One somehow twisted his sword from his grasp and pulled it out of reach. The other struck him on the shoulder and sent him spinning to the ground.

Gawain landed hard on his back, knocking the wind out of him. Trying to catch his breath, he looked up and saw Bors standing over him, holding a sword-my sword!, he thought-to his throat. The point was placed underneath the tip of his chin.

"Don't move," Bors said. "I'd hate for you to scratch yourself on this. I hear it's not the cleanest of blades."

"You'd better kill me," Gawain said.

"The thought crossed my mind," Bors said. "But it's not for me to decide."

Gawain watched Arthur come into view. He looked at the boy and scowled at him.

Arthur saw Gawain on the ground, beaten and helpless. He looked to one side and saw Hrothgar holding a squirming Brom by the back of his collar. Boudicea had disarmed him while Lorelei and Cambol had their shields up to protect against Brom's marksmen in the crowd. Several archers stood in the stands, holding their crossbows over their heads to show they had no intention of firing. The archers slowly stepped out of the stands and walked slowly to the arena floor to turn themselves in.

"He does not yield, my lord," Bors said to Arthur. "What of him?"

Arthur looked at Gawain.

"Let him up," Arthur said.

Bors smiled and dropped Gawain's sword to the arena floor. Sand and dust stuck to the poisonous oil coating the blade.

Gawain remained on the ground, unconsciously rubbing his throat where a sword-tip had been just moments before. "Don't have it in you to kill a man, do you?" Gawain said. "That's the difference between us, boy. You'll never have a king's courage."

Hrothgar and Boudicea came over with Brom. "What of this one?" Hrothgar asked.

"Same goes for both of them," Arthur said, gesturing to Gawain and then Brom. "They must leave the city now and never come back."

"I'll be back for you, worm," Brom said, straining against Hrothgar's hands, which held him in place. "I'll come back here and I will..."

"You will be quiet," Arthur said with a sudden force to his voice. "And you will leave before I change my mind."

Gawain nodded to Brom. "Let's go," he quietly said before leaving.

"Hands off," Brom said, squirming his shoulders out from under Hrothgar's grasp. He glared at the Northlander, adjusted his cloak and followed Gawain.

"I'll take them to the gate and see them through," said the Gatekeeper, who suddenly was there without anybody noticing his approach.

"Blast!" Cambol said. "How does he do that?"

"See them to the water's edge, and give them a boat to sail in," Arthur said. "They are not allowed back on this island. Or anywhere on the Orkneys."

"More than fair," the Gatekeeper said. He lowered his spear and with the length of it, pushed against the backs of Gawain and Brom. "To the gate, then."

"Don't push me," Gawain said, walking ahead of the Gatekeeper.

As he passed Boudicea, he locked eyes with her. A whole silent conversation happened between them in that moment, a torrent of things unsaid and feelings kept hidden, all put forth in a single glance of raw emotion that let the other know exactly what was felt. It was all either of them needed.

The crowd watched quietly as the Gatekeeper walked Gawain and Brom out, and when they were gone, they turned their attention back to Arthur and his companions.

"Now they'll start with the cheering," Hrothgar grumbled.

"No," Lorelei said. "I think they've had enough of that for one day."

Arthur looked up at Bors and Boudicea, then looked at the stands, and then looked back at them for approval. They both nodded.

Arthur stepped forth and raised his face to the high slope of crowded seats that ringed the arena. He cleared his voice and spoke, and his modest voice rang in the silence of the coliseum, reaching every ear.

"I am not your enemy," Arthur said. "Our enemy is outside this city, and it wants us to fight each other so we can't fight it together."

He paused as his words sunk in, and still, there was silence within the Proving Ground.

"Mordred is coming here with his army right now. I can feel it," Arthur said. "Gawain said I have too much of Mordred in me. That's not true. I have just enough to know how to fight him."

From the crowd came a single, angry voice. "So you would be our king, then?"

Arthur looked toward the voice. "Yes."

"What makes you think you're ready?"

Arthur thought for a second. "Come with me to the Heart-stone," he said. "And I'll prove it to you."

As the Gatekeeper walked Gawain and Bors through Skara Brae, city folk emerged from their homes and from side streets and seemingly from out of nowhere to line the boulevard that led from the Proving Ground to the city gate.

"How quickly their allegiance turns," Gawain said.

"No," said the Gatekeeper. "These are the ones who did not follow you. They never shared your hate for the boy."

"I don't hate him," Gawain said. "But I know a threat when I see one."

"Enough to kill a child?" the Gatekeeper asked.

"He's no child, that one," Gawain said as he studied the stern faces of those who watched him leave the city. Each one of them said with their stares how disappointed they were of him, how badly he had betrayed them, how he had squandered their trust.

"He's got the oldest soul in this city."

The Gatekeeper nodded to himself.

At last, Gawain was beginning to understand.

"Old soul or not, I'm going to kill him for this," Brom said flatly.

"Best of luck to you, then," the Gatekeeper said.

"You don't think I can do it?" Brom said.

"You've failed more than once already," the Gatekeeper said.

"He is beyond your reach now."

"He will never be beyond my reach," Brom said quietly.

The crowds of people grew larger the closer that Gawain and Brom got to the main gate. "I thought the entire city was in the arena," Brom said.

"We thought that those who followed us were the entire city," said Gawain. "That was our first mistake."

"Where will we go, once we're outside?" Brom asked.

Gawain shrugged. "Across the sea and wherever our fates decide."

"I don't like the sound of that," Brom said.

"There's nothing to like about it," Gawain answered. "But it is what lies for us on the other side of that gate."

The Gatekeeper pointed his spear at the crowd and motioned from side to side for them to part and let him pass with his prisoners. The crowd did so, murmuring at Gawain and Brom.

"There are those among them who would see you dead," the Gatekeeper said.

"Then just give us to them and end this," Brom muttered.

"Your destiny lies elsewhere," the Gatekeeper said.

"Care to tell us where?" Brom said.

"I don't know what your destiny is," the Gatekeeper said. "I just know what it is not. And leaving one mob to fall prey to another fits that description."

The massive city gates unlocked and unbolted, and slowly, they swung open, revealing the spare landscape of the Orkney coast beyond.

Gawain paused at the threshold and looked back at the city and its people. "I only ever wanted to keep you safe," he said before he walked through the doorway, and disappeared from view.

Brom followed without hesitation. "Bastards," he grumbled as he approached the threshold. "A curse on you all, you worthless—" he began, but was cut off from being heard the moment he crossed the line.

The Gatekeeper was next to go, but he too turned to address

the people of the city. "You showed some courage in not following these two," he said. "But not enough to stand up for the grandson of the Once and Future King. That boy has showed more heart and humility this day than I have ever seen from those who would take his place. I hope in the time that follows you will show him a greater courtesy than that, for he has already earned it, and more."

He tucked his spear into the crook of his arm and walked through the gate as he had done do very many times before. Even now, after all of this, it felt strange. He followed his own wisdom, to not look back as he went through, and as was his custom, he closed his eyes. When he opened them, he saw the world outside of Skara Brae, where the seasons changed, where foul weather blew and where all was not peace and plenty. He saw Brom wrapping his cloak around him to protect against the chill wind coming off the ocean. Gawain was already heading for the water's edge.

"Forward, Brom," the Gatekeeper said. "A boat awaits."

"By the powers, this is a forsaken place," Brom said of the island. "It is all scrubland and rock."

"You'll find more of it than not, wherever you go," the Gatekeeper said. "You are in Morgana's world now."

Brom instinctively looked skyward, not really knowing why, but feeling that he had to, for there might be something terrible above him. If only he knew what it was.

Sitting on the naked branches of a dead tree near the heath line, a parliament of orange-eyed ravens began to caw. They took wing as Gawain walked by them, and circling through the air, they swung around and flew over Brom and the Gatekeeper, their cries growing louder by the second.

Brom clapped his hands over his ears, but the hideous cackling of the birds could not be shut out. The birds dipped low in their flight, brushing the top of Brom's head, before they wheeled away into the bleak, gray sky, vanishing over the sea. Their cries continued as they left, growing gradually softer as the murder shrunk to a cloud of black dots on the horizon.

"What was that?" Brom said as he brushed off a few large, black feathers that had drifted down to him during the ravens' fly over.

"Those are the eyes and ears of Mordred. He knows where we are," the Gatekeeper said.

"Then he did betray us! I knew it!"

"This is not Arthur's doing. Those birds have been here for

some time, now, long before Bors arrived. Longer still before he drove Excalibur into the Heartstone."

"What?" Brom looked confused.

The Gatekeeper nodded. "The truth is, Mordred has always known of Arthur and this place. He was biding his time before coming here."

"But what was he waiting for?"

"Perhaps you can ask him that yourself."

Brom shivered as the Gatekeeper's words sunk in. "But what about the Heartstone? You people said it would protect us."

"It was only postponing the inevitable. Look around you, Brom. This is the enemy's world. It is Morgana's world. Mordred's world. The likes of you and Gawain are merely trespassing in it."

"I want to go back," Brom said. He turned to the Gatekeeper. "Please."

The Gatekeeper pointed to Gawain, who was already at the end of the clearing surrounding the city, and was about to disappear into the tall bushes. "Your way lies with him."

"No, you don't understand!" Brom said. He held the Gatekeeper by the shoulders. "Please, I want to go back! I cannot live out here like this! Please, I will do anything!"

"Will you undo your crimes?" the Gatekeeper said.

Brom dropped to his knees and began to sob.

The Gatekeeper looked upon Brom, whose shoulders were heaving between his desperate breaths. "Now you know what it means to be afraid."

Brom looked up at him, his face streaked with tears. "I'm sorry."

"At last, we agree on something."

Gawain emerged from the heath. "Brom, come on! We've been spotted."

Brom looked at the Gatekeeper who wordlessly gestured to Gawain. Brom ran to the heath, and the Gatekeeper followed.

Through the scrubby brush they traveled until they reached the stony shore of the island, out to the ancient stone quay where Gawain had met Hrothgar's dragonship. It was gone now. Tethered there instead was a small, single-masted boat. In it laid large bundles under layers of thick cloth.

"Food, clothes, other supplies," the Gatekeeper said. "More than enough to get you to Britannia or Nordheim or wherever you go."

"Weapons?" Gawain asked.

The Gatekeeper nodded.

"Large thanks for small favors, then," Gawain said.

Brom eyed the boat and the provisions. "It's like he knew we would be cast out," he said to himself.

"One side had to go," the Gatekeeper said, "so I thought it would be prudent to be prepared. Those who have come here and stayed left behind enough ships for us to spare you one, I think."

"Thought Bors would win all along, did you?" Gawain asked.

"Long have I followed both of your exploits, Gawain," the Gatekeeper said. "Bors is thrice the knight you will ever be."

Gawain grunted in reply and walked to the boat and placed his hands on the bow. "Let's shove off," he said to Brom.

Brom turned to the Gatekeeper once more. He thought of begging once more, but the plea died in his throat.

The Gatekeeper's attention strayed from Brom as he noticed something far behind him, on the distant water. Something that he could not take his eyes away from.

"What?" Brom asked. He turned to see what the Gatekeeper was looking at. "I don't see anything."

Gawain looked out to the water as well. He glanced back at the Gatekeeper, then back again out to the water. "It's nothing."

Brom squinted at the choppy water and the occasional white-cap. "Are you sure?"

"Shut up and get in," Gawain said. Brom did as he was told, and threw off the line. Gawain put his back into rowing the boat away from the quay, against the small waves lapping at the shore. Once the boat had some distance from the quay, Gawain raised the sail and took the boat out towards open water.

The Gatekeeper watched the boat disappear into the wall of mist that was coming in off the ocean. As the boat vanished, Brom kept looking back. Gawain never did once.

Alone, the Gatekeeper started walking back to the city, but before long, he stopped and looked over his shoulder. Something was not right.

High above him, but unseen in the mist, there came the cackling of a raven. It rang through the air, and the moment it stopped, there was a brief pause, and then an explosion of sound as the rest of the parliament cried out at once. The Gatekeeper scanned the skies, expecting the birds to burst forth from the mist and envelop him, but they never came. They stayed hidden, laughing at him, taunting him with their horrible voices.

Gripping his stone spear before him, he stepped toward the water line slowly, steadily. He scanned the ground and air before

him, peering through the sea mist creeping inward across the island.

The Gatekeeper could almost smell it now. Like something was burning.

"It begins," he said as a pair of tiny orange lights broke the surface of the water. Then another pair emerged. And another. And another. After the first few thralls silently rose from the sea, they came up by the dozens and hundreds and thousands, each slowly creeping out of the salt water and ending their long, slow march across the bottom of the Caledonian Sea.

The Gatekeeper clenched his teeth and set his stance. There was no time to warn the rest of the city. They would know what was upon them soon enough. But before they did, he would take a thousand or two of these dogs with him.

From the mist flew a single black arrow that wove through the air, snaking over the heads of the thrall army and homing in on the Gatekeeper. The ancient elemental raised his spear and cut it from the air, only to see a dozen more arrows come at him. He whirled his spear and smashed or deflected every shot, but for each arrow knocked from flight there were three, four, five more to replace it. The Gatekeeper railed against the storm as hard as he could, blurring his movements in ways he had no longer thought possible.

Out in the water, the thralls watched without moving as the Gatekeeper smashed the endless barrage and shattered arrows beyond number.

The attack stopped just as the Gatekeeper sensed the presence of something emerge behind him, and he knew that he had been fooled. He had no time to turn and face it before he felt Mordred's sword enter his back.

Mordred held the Gatekeeper there for a moment before withdrawing the blade and letting the body drop to the ground.

On his knees, the Gatekeeper watched as blood that was more than blood ran from his wounds. He felt his strength draining away, and his body fading from the skein of the world, soon to join his fellows in the place where all of their kind were destined to go.

There were thralls everywhere now, in the sea, on the stony beach, on the quay, on the ground leading to the city. How had so many come so fast? How had they not been seen?

"Arthur," the Gatekeeper whispered, shaking his head. "Forgive me."

"I'll tell him you said that," Mordred said as he raised his great black sword high over his own head with both hands.

The army remained silent, and only the sound of the ocean could be heard as Mordred brought his sword down and cut through the Gatekeeper's neck in a single clean stroke. The head fell from the body and tumbled across the stones.

Mordred kicked the Gatekeeper's body away and pointed his bloodied sword toward the city. From the ocean, the water rippled around the armored forms of thousands of Arcadian soldiers, each walking out of the surf and ending their long, slow march from northern Britannia across the bottom of the Caledonian Sea.

They covered the distance from the shore to the city gate, standing shoulder to shoulder, making no sound, and moving only to make room for more to crowd the earth. Once they reached the gate itself, they pushed forward no more, but their mass split in two.

Mordred slowly walked through them, his cloak lazily billowing behind him. He paid no mind to his lines of troops, heading straight for the city gate. He ran his hand across the stone arch of the city's entrance.

An Arcadian taskmaster approached the Elf King followed by a squad of lowly thralls. "The army stands ready for battle, sire. Shall I give the order to open the portal?" he hissed.

"No," Mordred said, running his hand across the stone arch of the city's entrance. "Let us withdraw a pace and wait."

"Sire?"

"We could besiege these walls for a year and not break them down. A deep magic still hums within. There is no sense in wasting our strength on it."

"Then how shall we open the gate to Skara Brae?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Mordred said, smiling. "My son will do it for us."

CHAPTER 8

Sword of Swords

Arthur kept looking over his shoulder to make sure that the crowd was still following him. It wasn't really necessary to do so, because he could sense their presence, starting from half a dozen steps behind him. But there was also the fear that maybe they had all broken off at some point, and he was walking on by himself, a fool.

Bors put his hand on Arthur's shoulder. "Don't worry, my lord," he said. "They will not leave you. Not before you pull the sword from the stone."

Arthur looked up at Bors, and into the bright morning sky behind him. It made the boy close one eye and squint the other as he spoke. "Why do you call me your lord?"

"Because that is what you are to me." Bors said as he walked alongside Arthur and Boudicea. Together with Hrothgar, Lorelei and Cambol, they all led the crowd of spectators from the Proving Ground to the Heartstone Plaza. "When your grandfather died, M-your father took the throne of Britannia. But that did not make him the true king. You are the last Pendragon. It is your right to rule Britannia, and no other's. So you are not only my lord, but you are the lord of everyone who once pledged allegiance to your grandfather."

"I don't feel like I am," Arthur said. "I mean, I know some of these people want me to be a king to them. But other people think I am a monster. What if I am?"

"You have a good heart," Boudicea said to him fondly.

"There is nothing monstrous about that."

He smiled at her. "Thanks."

She smiled back and tousled his hair.

"But...", he said, looking back at Bors. "When I told these

people to follow us, I didn't think they would really listen."

"Welcome to your first lesson in being a leader," Bors said. "Rarely do the good ones know for certain if they are up to the challenge."

"So am I always going to feel like this?"

"Like how, Arthur?" Boudicea said.

"Always being nervous and a little bit scared."

"I hope so, my lord," Bors said. "I hope so."

They walked on for a bit more without talking, but Arthur could hear the murmuring of the crowd. And even though he could not make out the words of their speech, he knew what they were saying. Who was young Arthur, really? Was he the danger that Gawain and Brom made him out to be? Or was he the savior they all hoped for so badly? Or was he something else they had not counted on? Something totally different? He shuddered at the thought of that, and he stopped himself from looking over his shoulder again. Instead, he looked back at Bors.

"I guess you were good friends with my grandfather, weren't you?" he asked the old knight.

"Your grandfather and I went on many adventures together," Bors said. "And I went on many more at your grandfather's request. He was my lord, too, just as you are now."

"But were you friends with each other?"

Bors gave a tight-lipped smile. "We were," he said. "in fact, he was my best friend."

"I see it sometimes, in my dreams," Arthur said. "How he died."

Boudicea spoke to her son in a dark tone he had never heard before. "Tell us what you saw."

"I..."

"Tell us."

"There was a big battle, and you were there," he said to Bors. "And so were you, Momma. And there was a room made of bones, and you were both there with my grandfather."

Bors and Boudicea looked at each other. "What then?" Bors asked.

"The monsters were chasing you, and my father was there. And Bors got away. And Momma got caught. And then..."

Boudicea bit her lower lip without realizing it.

"....everything goes black. That's where the dream ends."

Boudicea kissed him on the head. "Thank you, Arthur. I'm sorry I got stern with you before."

"That's okay," he said. He paused for a moment. "I don't like

that dream."

"I know, love," she said. "I don't like it, either."

"You have the same dream as me?"

"Every night."

"Does it make you scared?" Arthur said.

"Every night."

"Sometimes, when I have this dream, I wake up in my bed, and I cry."

Boudicea nodded a little. "Every night."

"Why did he do those things?"

"Your father? Because he is angry at the world, Arthur. Because he likes to hurt people."

"What is he angry for?"

"Being born, I think."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It will when you get older," Bors said. "For now, all you need to know about the Elf King is that he is only afraid of one thing."

"What is it?"

"Haven't you guessed?" Boudicea said.

Arthur shook his head, no.

"You."

The boy looked confused. "I still don't see why, though. Maybe it will be different when I pull out Excalibur, but even then, I'm so little. I don't think I can even lift that sword, Bors."

"You might be surprised. Excalibur has a way of making those who deserve it able to wield it."

"I heard somebody say once that it would be really bad if Mordred got Excalibur."

"Worse than you can imagine," Boudicea said.

"Does Mordred deserve Excalibur?" Arthur asked.

"Nobody knows how Excalibur decides who is worthy and who isn't," Bors said. "That is why we are so scared of Mordred finding Excalibur. Because maybe he can wield it. And with that sword in his hand, nothing and no one can hope to defeat him."

"Is that why they think I am so important?" Arthur said, gesturing to the people following him to the Heartstone Plaza. "Because I can kill Mordred with Excalibur?"

"They have their reasons," Boudicea said.

"But I haven't done anything to show them that I can do what they want me to do."

"At least you have shown them what you are not," Bors said.

"What's that?"

"A monster."

"Cheer up," Boudicea said. "In a few moments, you will draw the sword from the stone, and nobody will doubt you anymore. Wasn't that your idea?"

"Yeah," Arthur said glumly. "It seemed like a good one when I said it. But it was like there was somebody else talking through me then. Somebody who wasn't afraid. Now I'm not sure that I'll pull Excalibur from the Heartstone. What if it won't move? What if I can't do it? What if..."

"Stop," Bors said. "These are questions you cannot answer. All you will do is trouble yourself by asking them. Just do what you can, and if things go different from what you expect, than just..."

"What?"

"I don't know, myself," Bors admitted with a shrug. "But I don't think that a sword like Excalibur would direct me to this city, and allow me to drive it into the Heartstone, if you were unworthy of pulling it out again. Excalibur knew you were here, Arthur. It has sought you out."

"I hope you're right," Arthur said.

"We're here," Boudicea said.

The murmuring crowd went silent as they entered the Heartstone Plaza. In the morning shadows, the one cast by the sword stretched across the cobblestones and to where Arthur now stood, as if it had been lying in wait for him. Arthur looked at Bors and Boudicea. Then at Hrothgar, Lorelei and Cambol.

"It is time," Bors said.

"Should I say something?"

Bors shook his head. "Showing them the sword will be enough."

He looked at Boudicea, who winked at him as if to say, You're doing fine.

Arthur approached the Heartstone. With each step he took, he could feel something coming from the sword, a thrumming like a heartbeat. But not of something mortal, like the sound of Bors from the day before, at the Proving Ground. No, this was something different and wondrous and strange and frightening. It was elemental, immortal, arcane. And it was pounding out a steady beat that only young Arthur could hear.

Every step felt like a walk through eternity. His legs felt like would not move as he commanded them, and only by reflex did he manage to put one foot before the other without falling flat on his face. He could feel his chest pounding in time with the beat of the sword. Together, both sounds combined into a deep, relentless

rhythm that Arthur thought would kill him if it went on too much longer. It was time to take the sword and out and end it...and to begin something entirely new and dangerous.

Arthur neared Excalibur. The rest of the world fell away from him and it was just him and the sword and the stone surrounded by an ocean of time and space. He breathed deeply, closed his eyes and reached out-

"Bah!" shouted someone from the crowd. As heads turned, Magnus, Gawain's marshal, emerged and pushed his way through the people. "The sword is not meant for the likes of you!" Magnus said.

"Where has he been all this time?" Bors said. "I did not see him at the Proving Ground."

Boudicea shrugged. "I suppose that he had even less courage than Gawain and Brom did and laid low after you showed up."

"Well, he's showing some spine now," Bors said as he thumbed his sword an inch out of its scabbard. Boudicea took note of Bors' intent to draw and put a hand on his arm. "Not yet. Look."

Arthur stepped away from the Heartstone and towards Magnus. As he drew close to him, Magnus got visibly nervous. Arthur motioned to the sword in the stone. "You want to try?"

Magnus looked at the boy. Was this some kind of trick?" "Somebody should," he said as he headed for the Heartstone.

"It doesn't matter what we want, you know," Arthur said. "The sword picks its owner, not the other way around."

Magnus stared at Arthur.

"What makes you think it wants you?" Arthur said.

"You've got a lot to learn, boy," Magnus said with a snort. "Now step aside."

Arthur did as he was told, and then backed up a step. Magnus kept his eyes on Arthur as he reached out to grasp Excalibur. "I'm no Pendragon," Magnus said, "but I'm no Arcadian bastard, either. With this sword, I'll"

There was a crack like thunder, and Magnus flew back from Excalibur. He hit the ground with a loud thud several feet away from the Heartstone, causing the crowd to collectively recoil.

Bors motioned for Hrothgar and the others to see to him. Cambol got there first and put his fingers against the side of Magnus' neck.

"Is he dead?" Hrothgar asked.

Cambol shook his head. "But he might wish he was when he comes to. He got hit pretty hard."

"Let's help him up," Lorelei said, hooking her arms under Magnus'. Hrothgar steadied Magnus once he got to his feet and looked into his eyes. "How are you?"

Magnus slowly came to. "Huhrr...Are we in Skara Brae?"

"We are...what is the last thing that you remember?"

"I remember Gawain's coronation. Then a big dinner afterward. Then...no, that's all." He looked around. "What are these people here for?" Magnus asked. "And who put a sword in that stone?"

"That is complicated," Lorelei said, glancing at Hrothgar. She was half-trying to read his reaction to all of this. And half-trying to communicate to him: What do we do now?

"There is a story long in the telling that you need to hear," he said. "But for now, keep your eyes on the sword and the stone."

"Is that Excalibur?" Magnus said, his voice pitched a little higher with the excitement of discovery.

"It is," Hrothgar said.

"And is that Boudicea's boy going to it?"

"Aye."

"He means to draw the sword," Magnus said. "This is an amazing day."

"You don't know the half of it," Cambol said.

Arthur looked to Bors as Magnus cleared his head. Bors nodded to Arthur: It's all right, go ahead. Arthur turned to the Heartstone and approached it. Once again, he could hear the power thrumming in his head. Once again, the sound faded away as he went close to the sword. And once again, he closed his eyes. He took a deep breath. He reached out.

He found himself in a different place, a blank landscape filled with abundant wreathes of ivy that were just barely visible behind all of the whiteness.

The sword and the stone stood before him, the only dark and distinct thing he could see. Arthur was somehow both near to Excalibur and yet far from it, like it was receding from him as he approached. The more he reached for it, the faster it withdrew, always just beyond his grasp.

"You are not ready," Arthur heard in his head. It was a mighty voice, deep as the ocean and as old as stone.

Arthur dropped his hand. "Why not?"

"I am the sword of tyrants and kings, the voice said. Your grandfather was the latter. Your father is the former. You are neither."

"I know," Arthur said quietly. "I think I might be both."

"The two are parts of each other. But you still must choose to be

one over the other."

"But what if I can't?"

"Then you should think twice before approaching me again."

"I saw what you did to Magnus. Why did you have to hurt him?"

"So all might know that the Sword of Swords does not suffer lightly the folly of fools."

Arthur could see the whitespace surrounding him begin to fade. First the background of ivy disappeared from view. Then the whiteness itself thinned out and the world of Skara Brae returned, growing more colorful and sharp-edged by the second.

"When can I approach you again?"

"Sooner than you think," Excalibur said. "And yet...longer than you would like."

Arthur was back in Skara Brae in the same moment he had left it, his hand just over Excalibur's handle. He had never touched the sword, he realized. It had warned him not to invite the same punishment that befell Magnus. He thought, but why. Had it done the same for my grandfather, for everyone else who ever took the sword for themselves? Or was Excalibur just as unsure of me as Gawain was?

Arthur walked away from the Heartstone and went to Bors and Boudicea. The other heroes watched him in confused silence, as did the rest of the crowd. All were quiet, but Arthur could feel the weight of their stares as well as the intensity of their wonderment. What had just happened? Why did Arthur not try to take the sword?

Arthur looked at his mother with tears in his eyes. "I can't do it."

Boudicea held him close. "It's alright, love. It's alright."

Bors took a knee and put his hand on Arthur's shoulder. "What did the sword say to you?"

Arthur looked surprised. How did Bors know?

The old knight smiled softly. "It speaks to those who listen."

Arthur sniffled. "It said I wasn't ready."

"Do you know why?"

The boy shook his head.

"Because, Arthur, it knows that someday you will be." Bors stood, and in that moment, he looked to Arthur to be ten feet tall. "And when you are, it will be the greatest day that ever was."

Mordred drummed his armored fingers against the pommel of his greatsword while he studied the gate of Skara Brae, which remained as still and as quiet as it had when the Arcadian army first arrived before it. All around him, his troops stood in formation, shifting their weight nervously, murmuring amongst themselves. Finally, a taskmaster clad in black plate armor and carrying a giant cat o' nine tails approached Mordred.

"My lord, the troops wonder if we have been spotted here by their sentinels."

"So what if we have?" snapped Mordred. "That was the point! They would see us and raise an alarm, and they would cower behind their walls while we pounded on their gate. And then, when they could bear it no more, my son would break this city's accursed magic and come out to meet me. We would enter the city, without drawing our swords, and these simpering fools would chain themselves up for the long trip back to Camelot."

Mordred breathed loudly through his nose. The taskmaster looked away for a second, then back at his lord.

"Do you think that will...still happen?"

"I cannot say," Mordred muttered through clenched teeth. "It all came to me in something like a dream."

"A dream, my lord?"

"Yes, you idiot! A vision! It..."

"But my lord, if it was just a dream, how do you know if it would really come true?" the taskmaster said. "Are you certain that we should still wait here rather than attack? The troops..."

Mordred cut him off with a look that would have stopped a snake's heart. He grabbed the taskmaster by the collar of his armor and pulled him in close enough to kiss. "Certain?" he said. "I am certain of three things, you worm."

He held up a fist and extended his index finger fast enough for his metal gauntlet to make a snapping sound.

"One, I am certain that my son is in that city, and he has Excalibur with him."

Mordred extended a second finger, and the taskmaster flinched.

"Two, nothing is going to keep me from taking that boy and the sword into my possession. Not his mother, not that renegade Bors, not even the magic still in the city walls."

Mordred extended another finger. "And three, my lord?" the taskmaster whimpered.

"Three, I will reunite you with that Gatekeeper I beheaded if you ever question me again." Mordred let the taskmaster go, who

stumbled back a few steps. "Now, tell them to pull back," Mordred said.

The taskmaster signaled a ten-step retreat to the Arcadian phalanxes, which all moved as one.

Mordred nudged his black charger closer to the gate, and he raised his greatsword to the sky. "I call down the thunder and the fury," the Elf King said, and the sky above clouded over with swirling, black thunderheads.

Mordred's white eye rolled back in his head. "I call down the ancient fire, from the pain of the world." A mighty thunderclap split the sky and orange lightning leapt among the clouds, splitting into a dozen different branches.

"I call down the strength of Arcadia, and of Morgana, its servant, to strike down this place of stone that does not yield and magic that has not faded," Mordred said. He looked skyward. "Mother!" he cried. "MOTHER!"

The storm remained overhead, but its strength did not change.

"She does not answer," Mordred said to himself. He growled and returned his focus to the main gate of Skara Brae. "So be it. I'll do it myself, then."

As he wove his spell, his ears lengthened and grew more pointed. His sharp teeth, more bestial. His skin more waxen, his features more gaunt. He ripped the patch from his empty eye socket and bright orange flame erupted from it.

A great wind howled, and Mordred's thralls turned their orange eyes upward, hoping to see the glare of Morgana above them, staring down with eyes full of elemental rage and scorn for the living. But there was nothing more than black clouds turning in the sky. They came together in a single funnel over the city, spinning with increasing speed as the screaming wind grew louder and louder. The thralls cowered and held their hands over their ears. More than a few of them suddenly shrieked and fell forward, dead. But their cries have been drowned out by the clamor of Mordred's sorcery, and few within the army noticed their passing. They were all squeezing their eyes shut.

The clouds spun inward and withdrew to a single, dark point in the sky. And in place of the hideous noise was a sudden silence even more horrible than what had come before it.

Mordred pointed his sword at the city and grinned. "Now."

The sky exploded in orange light, and a single beam of energy came down upon the city gate, writhing like lightning but dancing like fire. It shattered the stone wall of Skara Brae, blasting

the great gate into a thousand jagged fragments and turning the huge stone gatehouses into teetering ruins. The sound of the blast echoed throughout the sky, and every creature, great and small, from Europa's farthest corner to Britannia's nearest shore, suddenly knew that something terrible had happened.

Out in the shallows of the Caledonian Sea, the blast's shock-wave could be felt even by a small boat rowing across the waves. A small boat being rowed by an armored knight, and whose passenger was a single wretched figure hunched over under a cloak of soaked wool.

"What was that?" Brom said, stirred from a light and fitful sleep.

"Nothing good," Gawain said. He pulled hard on the oars, drawing the boat out of a trough between the waves. His position in the boat had him looking back toward the shore. "There was a huge bolt of lightning a few seconds before it, though."

"Think it was Skara Brae?"

Gawain grunted and nodded during another pull on the oars.

"Hah!" Brom said, clutching his cloak below his throat. "Serves them right. Those bastards deserve some bad weather at the very least. We're lucky that storm didn't catch us out here."

"Hmm," Gawain said. He set the oars out of the water and sat forward in his seat, squinting at the island.

"I don't think it'll happen again," Brom said. "I think the lightning was just that once. The clouds over there seem to be clearing already."

"We're going back," Gawain said. He put the oars back in the water and started to turn the boat around.

Brom looked like he swallowed a hornet. "Are you mad? Gawain, a boy knee-high to a hedgehog just deposed you and told you never to return! Even if you had the worst homesickness in history, surely you would have sense enough not to..."

"Shut up," Gawain said quietly. But it was enough for Brom to close his mouth. "That was no ordinary storm. That was Elven magic."

"How would you know?"

"Believe me, I've seen it enough times. Something wicked is afoot at Skara Brae."

Brom buried his head in his hands. "Gawain, we're not going back there."

"Oh, really?" Gawain said between powerful oar strokes. "You going to poison me if we do?"

"I won't need to," Brom said as he sat back in the boat and

crossed his arms. "If that was just a bad storm, then the city is fine, and Arthur is lord of it, and he'll have Bors kill you the moment you set foot on shore."

"I don't think the boy is like that," Gawain said. "Or Bors either, for that matter. Else, they'd have had piked our heads rather than send us to the sea."

"Trust me, if we cross that little bastard again, his mother, Bors, Hrothgar and the others will have to draw lots to see which one can stick a blade in us first."

Gawain grumbled something under his breath in reply. He stopped rowing.

"And if that boom really was Mordred laying siege to the city, is Skara Brae really where you want to be right now? If what you suspect is true, then Mordred is probably marching an entire army into the city. And chances are even better that Arthur simply opened the gate and let them in."

"Bors wouldn't stand for that."

"He's a great swordsman, I'll give you that," Brom said. "But if Bors is all the city has to defend itself, then it's a lost cause."

Gawain looked at Skara Brae and the dim orange light in the sky above it. He took up the oars and brought the boat back on its original course to Britannia.

"Don't be hard on yourself," Brom said. "Morgana is going to come for that city. You said so yourself, right? It's only a matter of time."

Gawain kept his eye on the island.

"It would take a dragon to save Skara Brae now."

Gawain looked at Brom. "I killed a dragon once."

Brom waved his hand dismissively. "I heard it was just a small one, though."

Gawain looked at the island as it receded into the distance. "Didn't seem small at the time."

The blast shook all of Skara Brae, sending weblike cracks through every building within shouting distance of the main gate. Some were so badly holed through that they fell in on themselves crashing down into huge piles of dusty rubble.

In the Heartstone Plaza, the thousand-strong crowd whirled at the sound of the gate's destruction. Many were thrown from

their feet when the blast shuddered through the city, but not Bors, Boudicea and their fellow heroes. And not Arthur.

"Mordred's wrecked the gate," Arthur said to himself, sounding surprised that he knew enough to even utter those words. Then he said it again, this time loud enough for all to hear. "Mordred's wrecked the gate!" He looked at the crowd and motioned for them to follow. "Come on!" he cried, then dashed from the plaza with a speed that none had expected from one so small.

"Arthur!" Boudicea shouted. "Come back!"

"He's got the heart of a lion," Lorelei said.

"And the brain of a bird," Cambol said in exasperation, pointing to the Heartstone. "Where does he think he's going? Excalibur is still in the Heartstone!"

"Everyone to the gate," Boudicea said. "I'll raise the city marshals and meet you there. Get every man, woman and child not fighting back here for safety. We have to hold the city. Now go!"

Bors drew his weapon in a swift motion, and Hrothgar, Lorelei and Cambol did likewise a split-second later. Boudicea's words had put lightning in their blood and they raced from the plaza to the main gate. Just before he departed, Bors looked back at Boudicea. His eyes met hers, and in that moment, she sent him a parting message: Make sure my boy stays safe.

By the time Bors caught up to the other heroes, they were crossing through into the city's middle district. That's when they encountered the first crowds of panicked cityfolk. Some stood dumbfounded near the doors of their homes, with their families cowering behind them. Others were gripped with a frantic need to pack their most precious valuables, find their children, and argue what to do next. There were a precious handful of people who had grabbed proper weapons and had come into the street looking for the battle. A couple of them even had thrown on half-laced cuirasses or shirts of mail, having no more time to suit up than that.

"To the gate!" Bors shouted as he ran through the crowds. The sight of this grave and unflinching knight was what they needed to break free of their paralysis. They rushed to the city's center, suddenly aware that there would be no fleeing the city. There would only be this last stand.

The ones ready for battle stood out to Bors just as young Boudicea and Ghyslain had done so many years before during the battle of Camelot. There were perhaps a dozen of them, young and untested, but shining brightly with the energy that separated heroes

from those they protected. It was the light to dispel any darkness. It was the hope that come what may, the good and true might somehow always prevail.

"Follow us," Bors said to them, and they fell in with Bors and the others in their run to the gate. As they went, they passed at every cross-lane a few more cityfolk ready for the fight. Without being told, they fell in, moving swiftly alongside their fellows, forming an echelon of defenders eager to meet whatever evil awaited them at the city's shattered entrance.

Before them ran Arthur, who bounded over and around stunned and frightened cityfolk like they were frozen in time. "By the powers, he's fast," Bors whispered to himself as he watched the young Pendragon hurtle over the wall separating Skara Brae's middle and outer districts. Bors took the soldiers through the wall's large archway, and when they were through, he could see Arthur land many feet ahead of them without skipping a step or losing speed.

Down the main thoroughfare, the wreckage of the gate was impossible to miss. The leaning gatehouses on either side of the gaping hole in the wall were the exact image that had plagued Bors' nightmares ever since he had come here. It was the vision of the sundered city, of Mordred's army pouring through the gap, filling the streets in a flood of black armor, jagged weapons, and Arcadian fire.

Weird autumn flames danced across many of the stone buildings close to the gate, and it was only then that Bors realized that his eyes were not deceiving him; the stone really was burning. The Elven fury that blew the gates to fragments had ignited everything it touched, and now the immortal city of stone was crackling like kindling. Bors looked about for the signs of a bucket brigade, but there was none. Why would there be? Nobody in Skara Brae had ever considered the place being set on fire; that was half the point of building it entirely from stone. And even if they had, who among them would have the courage to fight the fire when Mordred's army was a few footsteps away?

Bors looked upon the hundreds of Arcadian soldiers coming through the breached wall, and he felt the same cold knot in his stomach that day when Camelot fell. Only this time, the enemy were not former countrymen who had turned traitor and given themselves to Morgana...or maybe they were. It was impossible to tell now, for all fully bore the look of Elves, with their long ears, devil-dog faces and spidery, gaunt frames. They moved with an insect's leggy agility, crawling over the tumbled wall-stones and

writhing together like a swarm.

The outer district was littered with the bodies of those caught in the blast that destroyed the gate, and the shrapnel that it had sent out in every direction. And there were those too stunned to move when the first Arcadian soldiers came through, and were cut down by them. And there were the crumpled bodies of the old, the young and the clumsy who had been caught underfoot by the crowd as it fled the sight of Mordred's army. Bors looked upon the twisted frame of a young girl, her face still frozen in a mask of horror. He stopped at her and felt that tightness in his throat that came whenever he suppressed his need to weep. She could not have been more than six or seven, he reckoned. And when he followed the bloody footprints leading away from her, he saw the bodies of a man and woman who might very well have been her parents. Bors decided that they were not.

Bors looked up, and there before the mass of Arcadians sat Mordred on his charger, a black-hearted reflection of Sandalin. Bors remembered how much his old steed had helped him during the battle of Camelot, and he wished that he had that magnificent warhorse's companionship now.

Then, from one side came Arthur, so small against the outline of his father, and so pale before the Arcadian darkness engulfing the city.

Bors skidded to a stop, as did the heroes alongside him as Arthur put up a hand that both told Bors to hold back, as well as hailed the Elf King.

"Bors, what!" Hrothgar said. "Arthur—"

"Has given the order," Bors said. "Just watch for now, but follow my lead, And be ready to spring at a moment's notice."

Hrothgar nodded and grunted. "I'm going to kill them all."

A strange quietude fell over the area near the gate as Mordred nudged his horse ahead a step to address Arthur. Arthur looked up at his father, whose face was shadowed by the lines of his plated helmet. All he could see was a glinting, milky-white eye within the darkness, and the lines of Mordred's sharp teeth.

Arthur felt the strength in his legs melt away as he realized that now that he had rushed to the gate, he had no idea what to do here. He had no weapon, and the courage that propelled him to this place had abandoned him as quickly as it had come. Arthur looked into the black pit of Mordred's face and thought to himself, *I am going to die.*

"You know why I am here, boy?" Mordred said.

"You want the sword."

Mordred nodded. "Among other things."

"I don't want you to hurt anybody else here."

"It is nice to want things," Mordred chuckled. "Bring me the sword, and perhaps then we'll talk." He looked around the ruined plaza. "I see you have brought some friends with you. But your mother is not among them. Tell me where she is."

"Look up," came a voice that echoed across the width of the outer district. Arthur swung and saw Boudicea standing atop a tall stone house, crouching forward, her arm outstretched. He felt a rush of air go by him and in the same moment, Mordred's horse screamed.

The Elf King's steed reared back with Boudicea's spear through its heart. Mordred was already leaping from his saddle, and Arthur could tell by how the horse fell that Mordred had reared it back to it would take the shot instead of him. The Arcadian charger fell to the cobbles with a dwindling orange light in its eyes, and somehow Arthur still felt sad for it to have died as it did.

Bors rushed forward and scooped Arthur with his arm before dashing away from the Arcadian line. Hrothgar came in next, swinging his hammer in a wide arc. The mighty Northlander plowed into the soldiers, clearing around him a space nobody could inhabit without being crushed.

Mordred moved forward and as he did, his troops followed closely, as if connected to their lord by an invisible string. He pointed his sword at Boudicea, who leapt from her rooftop and disappeared among the houses of the outer district. "Get her!" Mordred roared. "And kill all who stand in our way!" With that, the Elf King ran into Skara Brae with his legion of Arcadians close behind him. Dozens more came through the breached wall, spilling forth onto the cobbles of the city's outer district, regaining their footing, and running in the direction of their fellows, screaming alien war cries and jabbering to each other in Arcadian battle language that sounded like a concert of shattered glass.

Hrothgar looked over the heads of the Arcadians surrounding him, through the breach and to the grounds outside the city. The land was covered with enemy soldiers crowding shoulder to shoulder as they edged forward to pile into Skara Brae. There had to be thousands of them.

He whirled his hammer around him, sending enemy thralls flying in every direction like broken dolls. As they fell, the slain Arcadians caught flame and burned, bursting into a shower of or-

ange sparks that glowed brightly for an instant before disappearing. Hrothgar took no notice of it as he hurled his hammer into the base of one of the teetering gate towers. There was an explosion of stone as the hammer knocked free the base stones keeping the tower up, and seconds later, the whole thing slowly fell over in a terrific crash that caught an entire line of Arcadians beneath it. But more than that, the wreckage now blocked the hole in the city wall, and on top of the jumbled stone blocks stood Hrothgar, holding the body of a squirming taskmaster high overhead in triumph. "Come on you dogs!" he shouted as he hurled the taskmaster into the crowd, bowling over an entire squad's worth of warriors. "The Hammer of Nordheim is waiting!"

Away from the battle, Bors went back through the outer district with Arthur under his arm. Once the sound of combat receded into a dull roar in the background, Bors set Arthur down. "What were you thinking?" Bors asked.

"I don't know," Arthur said. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Well you sure impressed everyone who saw you," Bors said, racing through the outer district. "That much is certain."

"I just thought maybe I could get Mordred to go away."

"Arthur, Mordred will never go away. There is nothing you can say or do."

"If only I had Excalibur," Arthur said, looking back in the direction of the Heartstone."

Bors nodded. "It is no small thing to take a sword like that in hand, even if the world expects you to."

"You understand," Arthur said. "Nobody else does."

"I know what it means to fail at something you are destined for," Bors said, momentarily distant. "But the sword is still yours to draw, if you want it."

"I do," Arthur said. "But I am still scared."

"Of the sword?"

"No, of what I might do with it."

"It is terrible burden to be asked of you, this business with Excalibur and Mordred. But your people have never needed you more than they do now."

The sounds of battle grew closer and Bors looked back toward the gate area before returning his focus to young Arthur.

"My lord, I must go. It has been an honor to serve the house of Pendragon, and I know that you will do right by those who call you king."

Bors saluted Arthur with his sword, then turned and ran off, back to the battle.

Alone in the wide city street, Arthur watched Bors depart. Then he turned and began running in the opposite direction, back to the Heartstone Plaza.

Back at the gate, Cambol struck down a trio Arcadians who were trying to scramble up the base of Hrothgar's makeshift barricade. After killing the last one, he caught the attention of Hrothgar, who stood with captured weaponry in either hand—a battle axe in one hand, and a long-hafted morning star in the other.

"I'll hold things here," Hrothgar said as he bashed in the helmet of an Arcadian who got within striking distance. "Make sure nobody sneaks up on me from the back."

Cambol shouted to Hrothgar, "Are you kidding? I came here to rescue you! Come on!"

Three more Arcadians vaulted to the top of the rubble pile, their blades drawn. They hissed Elven curses at Hrothgar as they closed in on him, but the Northlander stood his ground. He clove the first enemy through the collarbone with his axe. He drove the spikes of the morning star into the chest of the second Arcadian before him. When he pulled the weapon free, orange sparks spewed out of the wound as the stricken thrall fell off the top of the wreckage, tumbling back towards the horde of his brethren outside of the city.

Hrothgar crouched low as he squared off with the third thrall, grinning wildly. The Arcadian shrieked and leapt forth, its sword before it, looking to impale Hrothgar as it landed. Hrothgar crossed his weapons into a defensive X to catch the body as it came in, but before the impact, the Arcadian was hit from the side and fell out of view, its face smashed in by a piece of thrown rubble.

Hrothgar looked down to see Cambol pitch a loose cobble, striking yet another Arcadian who had scrambled to the top of the pile. The shot stove in the thrall's helmet, and orange sparks sprayed out in all directions. "Hrothgar, let's go! We need to pull back!"

Hrothgar shook his head and turned his back on them just in time to intercept another few Arcadians trying to get over the de-

bris wall. "There's nowhere to run to," Hrothgar said as he cut his opponents to pieces or smashed them into crumpled, sparking forms. He punched one enemy in the face with his armored gauntlet, then following up with a blow from his morning star's pommel. "We must stand and fight."

Cambol blinked. What was this madman thinking? Didn't he know that he couldn't hold off an entire army forever? He looked back at Hrothgar on the pile. He could not see the many Arcadians coming up to challenge the Northlander; he could only see Hrothgar's form on top of the debris, staring down at his enemies and laying waste to all who challenged him. Cambol watched as Hrothgar dropped his axe and caught a spear that had been thrown at him. He spun it around and hurled it back, bellowing a Nordic war cry as he did.

At that moment, the other gate tower finally gave way and collapsed. This time the destruction left another hole in the wall, and Cambol could see the seething mass of Arcadian soldiers crowding to get through.

"See to that, would you?" Hrothgar said, windmilling the morning star and bashing in a fresh Arcadian with every revolution.

Cambol charged into the gap, bull rushing the incoming Arcadians as one, knocking back an entire squad of armored soldiers. He drove his sword into the fallen thralls without hesitation, and within moments, he had cleared the ground leading up to the breach. But he could see that holding that position would take more than he could give. Beyond the wall, Arcadian taskmasters whipped their troops into the breach, and as furiously as Cambol hacked and hewed at them, more soldiers were getting in than were being slain. They weren't even trying to fight. They wanted merely to get in and swarm the city with numbers.

Cambol fought without pause, cutting down Arcadians as they passed, trying to hold back a tide of black armor and Arcadian resolve. "It's no good!" Cambol shouted, if only to himself. "There's too many of them!"

A giant taskmaster loomed before him, raising its barbed whip. Cambol stopped him with a well-timed shield bash and a thrust of his sword. But it was an arrow to the eye that killed the Arcadian, and Cambol immediately knew where the shot came from.

There on a nearby rooftop crouched Lorelei, who was nocking and firing arrows from her longbow as fast as she could. She nodded to Cambol and fired again, putting a shaft into the heart of an Arcadian spearman trying to come through the wall's

second breach. From her vantage point, she could see over the city's main wall, where so many thousands more enemy soldiers covered the ground. As a mass, they surged forward to the wall, stepping on the bodies of the dying and the wreckage of the wall itself to get close enough to Hrothgar to duel with him. None lasted more than a few seconds before the wild Northlander, but even so, Lorelei could see that he was running out of time.

Lorelei cast aside her spent quiver and readied a fresh one from across her back, where she had slung as many as she could carry in the moments before the battle erupted. She resumed firing, timing her shots with Hrothgar's swings so that any Arcadian the Northlander could not reach was sure to take a barb.

As arrows rained down from Lorelei's position, Cambol could hold out no longer and was pushed back into a corner near the wall by the Arcadian line. They simply ignored him as they surged through the breach and spilled into the plaza area behind the ruined gate. For ten long minutes, Hrothgar's gambit had held back the enemy, but now they had overcome their obstacle and were filling the city once more. The few city militia who did not run at the sight of Mordred's soldiers fought as hard as they could, but they did not last long. All were hacked to pieces by Arcadian swordsmen, run through by their pikers or trampled by burly grunts looking to stomp their way into the heart of the city.

Lorelei's bowstring cut into her fingers as she fired everything she had at the Arcadians below. For every one she shot, their remains were quickly concealed by the presence of two or three fresh fighters. Hrothgar was entirely surrounded now. His morning star was gone-either broken or lost-and he was hewing away on all sides with his axe. Arcadians were rushing headlong into him, heedless of the price most of them would pay for it, just to weigh him down and slowly bury him under the a seething darkness of the living pile.

Lorelei blinked tears from her eyes as she nocked her final arrow and took aim at Hrothgar. The Hammer of Nordheim was making a last stand worthy of song, something the northern skalds would sing to their children to tell of the valor of heroes. This would be the Epic of Hrothgar one day, Lorelei thought. Only it couldn't end like this, with him smothering under the weight of the enemy.

She sighted Hrothgar as he fought against the Arcadians, who were pressing in on him from all sides now, giving him hardly any room to move. Anywhere within his reach was an enemy, and so he swung without looking, striking without discrimination.

Every movement of his arms clove through Arcadian armor or bashed it in, and his foes fell among him in such numbers that he was bathed in a constant shower of orange sparks as his fallen opponents burned up and vanished upon their defeat. The area around him was piling high with the empty armor of dead Arcadians. It was as if an entire colony of huge black insects was swallowing him whole. "Forgive me," Lorelei said, and fired.

She watched her arrow's flight as it drew closer and closer to Hrothgar. At least it will be a quick death, she thought, simple and clean. Lorelei held her breath and fought the urge to avert her eyes. She had to see. She had to know.

As Arcadians came through the second wall breach, they also ran up the back side of the pile, and it was one of these who raced up the wreckage and leaped at Hrothgar, both hands overhead on its sword, wanting to cut Hrothgar in two, down from the collarbone...

...bull's-eye.

The Arcadian twisted in mid-air, with Lorelei's arrow in its back. Squirming in its death throes, the creature tumbled past Hrothgar, who never even realized what had happened.

Lorelei leaned forward, screaming. "No!" She grasped for another arrow, but her quiver was empty, and all she could do was watch as Hrothgar disappeared under a growing number of Arcadian bodies as they leapt upon him, hanging on to his arms, grasping at his legs, holding on to his head. To the end, Hrothgar kept fighting, but at last, he was buried beneath his enemy. He slowly he lost his balance and tumbled forward off the pile, down into the army of Arcadians waiting below, outside of the city. He was gone.

Arthur could hear the battle throughout the city; the sound of ringing steel and cracking stone and cries of pain echoed to him from every direction. He blocked them out and raced back to Excalibur, knowing what he had to do.

Once in the Heartstone Plaza, Arthur saw hundreds of cityfolk cowering there. Most of them were huddled near the Heartstone itself. A few were trying to pull Excalibur from the stone, but it would not budge. The sword was not hurling them back as it did to Magnus, either, he noticed. Why would that be? Maybe it

respected their effort. Maybe they were unworthy but still only wanted the sword to defend themselves and their families, which was a reason nobody could fault, not even an artifact as strange and temperamental as this one.

When Arthur arrived, the people there took notice of him almost immediately, and they ran to him, reaching out with their hands, speaking at once.

"...please help us..."

"...we don't know what to do..."

"...you must draw the sword..."

"...you are our only hope..."

"...sorry we ever doubted you..."

Arthur tried to move to the sword, but the crush of the crowd kept him from it. The harder he struggled against them, the more they moved in on him, Their hands all weighed on his back, forcing him down. Their leaning bodies made it impossible for him to stand up. Beneath so many, he could feel their weight closing in on him. He could sense the heat of all of their bodies, the darkness that was enveloping him as they smothered him in their panic.

"Enough!" Arthur yelled. He stood up and put out his arms and something invisible pushed back all of the people, creating a circle of empty space between him and them. The crowd looked at him in stunned silence, and for that moment, all that could be heard was the distant clamor of battle.

"I cannot do anything if you all get on me like that," Arthur said. "Now stand back, all of you!"

"Can you draw it?" came a voice from within the crowd. Arthur looked for where it came from, but it was lost among a sea of desperate faces.

"I'm going to try," Arthur said and stepped to the Heartstone. Without hesitation, he placed his hand upon the sword handle and grasped it tightly.

"What do you think you are doing?" Excalibur said to Arthur in its weird, soundless voice.

"What I should have done a long time ago," Arthur said, and he began to pull on the blade. He gripped it tightly for a second before he realized that the sword was not moving.

"Young fool," Excalibur said. "You are no more ready for me than you were before."

Arthur pulled harder. "I need you! Mordred is here!"

"I know."

"Bors told me that you are the only thing that can kill him."

"Not the only thing, but yes, his immortality is no proof against me."

"He is going to kill everybody in Skara Brae. You must help me!"

He felt an electric jolt run through his hand and up his arm. It hurt greatly, but the energy that shocked him also kept him from releasing the sword. "Do not presume to tell me why I should give myself to you."

Arthur squirmed under the pain. "I'm...sorry..."

"That is better." The shocking ended. "Do you think you are any match for him in battle?"

"No. But I could give you to him. And then he might go away."

Arthur heard something that he thought might have been Excalibur laughing. It was a strange sound that made him shiver.

"You are governed by two things," Excalibur said. "Fear and rage. And without fail, you feel one when you should feel the other. Both are natural things, but in you they are like a disease. They have made you a danger to anyone who dares to know you."

"I know."

"You are as cowardly as you are stupid," Excalibur said.

"Giving myself to you now would be a reversal of everything I am meant to accomplish."

"But...Mordred!"

"Say what you will of your father," Excalibur said. "At least he knows what he is and embraces it."

Arthur felt like the strings holding him up had just been cut.

"Begone, Pendragon, and do not return. I am finished with you."

Arthur let go and stepped back from the Heartstone. Scarcely a moment had passed since he first took grasp of the sword, and now, he looked upon the hundreds of faces that were focused on him, hoping for something wonderful to happen.

Arthur's words died in his throat. He shook his head and mouthed the word "no," before stepping off of the Heartstone and into the crowd, which slowly parted for him as he walked through. He headed to the plaza's northern entrance and looked down the main thoroughfare, where in the distance, he could see Skara Brae's defenders holding back the Arcadian line with all of the strength and courage they could muster. He could see, even from so far away, how every man, woman or child who took up arms to defend the city had the strength of ten ordinary soldiers. More, even. Perhaps fifty. Perhaps a hundred. Arcadian armor,

left hollow after their slain wearers sparked into ash and vanished, littered the streets of Skara Brae like the husks of a dark swarm of metal bugs, and all this was the doing of just a handful of souls who decided that Mordred could not have this city, no matter how badly he wanted it. Not this day. Not now.

Arthur looked upon the distant fighting, turned and strode back to the Heartstone, his face etched with a deep scowl. The sword would yield to him. Or he would die trying.

Before he even touched Excalibur, the sword's thoughts entered Arthur's head. "You again? I told you..."

"Shut up," Arthur said, jumping to the Heartstone and placing both hands on the sword's handle. With all of his might, he grasped it and began to pull. The sword still resisted, but as Arthur could feel the muscles in his arm and back bulge and strain, he could see thin cracks spreading out across the face of the Heartstone where Excalibur's blade had pierced it.

"What are you doing?" Excalibur said.

"I don't need your permission, Excalibur," Arthur said. "I just need you."

He felt a powerful force enter his body. It should have been pain, but it was something he ignored and made go away. He felt only the sword in his hands and the stone beneath his feet, and the strain across his body as he pulled.

"Do what you want," Arthur told Excalibur as another crack shot through the Heartstone. "But one way or another, you are coming with me."

"We'll see about that," Excalibur said.

There went through the city a terrible sound, like the sound of crashing boulders. It rolled like thunder through the labyrinth of streets in Skara Brae, and in the heart of the city's middle district, Bors felt the sound hit his body like it was a great gust of wind.

"What was that?" said one of the nameless fighters alongside Bors. He was a young man not especially large in frame, but covered with deeply cut, corded muscles. He wore a blacksmiths' apron over his bare chest, and he fought with a long sword that looked newly forged to Bors, yet already bore the nicks of much combat.

"Nothing good," Bors said. "What's your name?"

"Alderac."

Bors looked toward the oncoming Arcadians. They seemed like the crest of a dark wave engulfing everything before them. And before them ran Mordred, leading them on.

Bors felt his stomach tighten as he watched the cityfolk running before the invaders. The slow ones were inevitably swallowed up by the enemy, who shrieked and whooped as they tore them to pieces. Still, most of the cityfolk remained ahead of Mordred by a good margin.

"He's herding them," Bors said.

"He's what?" Alderac said.

Bors looked around him. Aside from Alderac, there were perhaps another half-dozen defenders like him standing in the street, awaiting their clash with Mordred's army. Bors could see Gaian energy cooking off each and every one of them like steam from of a winter river. The sight of it quickened his heart, and for a moment, he envisioned a great slaughter of the enemy, a final battle right here in the wide street that would save the city by the most narrow of margins.

Then he thought of the plains of Camlann, and of the sight of so many of his friends from the Round Table, their bodies broken and defiled, stamped into the mud and picked over by dark birds. That too, had been a final battle worthy of the title. That too, had been a great slaughter.

"It has been an honor to fight alongside you, sir," Alderac said to Bors as he readied his sword.

Bors looked at the young blacksmith. "Alderac, lead these people that way," he said, pointing down the ring street that marked the division between the city's middle and inner districts.

Alderac looked down the street, then looked back at Bors, confused. "But sir, that way leads to..."

"I know where it leads," Bors said. "If we die here today, and fail to protect these people, then it all will have been for nothing. Now you and your fellows go that way, and let nothing slow your pace. I will be right behind you."

Alderac watched the Arcadians advance. "Let me stand here with you," he said.

Bors shook his head. "Go to Arthur. He will lead you."

"Arthur?" Alderac said. "But he is just a boy! And Lord Gawain..."

"Forget what Gawain said! Forget what they all said!" Bors

yelled. "That boy is your king. Any hope we have left lies with him!"

Alderac swallowed and breathed heavily.

"There is nothing you can do for me here," Bors said. "Every second I gain for you now is one more that Arthur might need."

Alderac grimaced, then nodded in agreement.

"Just go," Bors said.

Alderac turned to his fellow defenders and raised his sword. "Skara Brae! Follow me!" he cried, and he ran down the ring street as Bors commanded. His fellows did likewise, falling in behind him spread widely apart, shepherding the crowd of cityfolk that ran between them.

Bors stood in the center of the street, holding his sword high, as the people of the city ran by him on all sides. He kept his eyes over their heads, focused on Mordred's approach. The Elf King smiled and pointed at Bors as the last of the city people ran by him. The crowd headed down the ring street as one, with the last of Alderac's fellows guarding their rear.

Alone on the street, Bors raised his sword. "Mordred!" Bors shouted. "Turn back now, and I will show you mercy!"

Mordred laughed as he quickened his pace, charging to Bors like a great beast. Behind him, his Arcadians picked up speed as well, thundering across the cobbles with such force that Bors could feel the vibrations of it through his armored boots.

"By the powers that command me, I shall never waver," Bors said as he slowly lowered his sword into a middle stance.

Mordred drew closer, his greatsword in one hand. The other hand was empty, but its fingers had lengthened into curved talons.

"Though I am scared, I will not run," Bors said, digging his feet against the ground.

Mordred cut loose an Arcadian war scream that rattled Bors' teeth. The army did the same, and the combined sound of it caused the stone buildings of the city to crack as they passed. Bors could feel the energy of it batter his body, yet somehow he stood before it.

Bors tensed his arms and gripped his sword and shield as tightly as he could. "Though I am weak, I will be strong."

"Arcadians!" Mordred cried. "Today, we reach our destiny!"

"Britannia," Bors said. "Your son has come home."

Three steps separated Bors from Mordred, and in that space between them, their energies clashed, the fury of Arcadia and the

strength of Gaia. Both Mordred and Bors felt the elemental powers that would not yield to each other, Yet one of them would, and it would spell a nameless doom of the other.

"I am ready," Bors whispered.

There came the scream of eagles and Bors looked behind him. High above and coming out of the sun hurtled a dark shape that was followed by a hundred more, each leaping high and fast, splitting the air with their cry.

A sudden joy burst forth from Bors. "Boudicea!"

She came down hard, landing on Mordred's chest plate with both feet, deeply denting the metal. Mordred flew back into his own troops from the force of the impact, and a moment later, the first of the Lord Marshal's Guard landed as well, a hundred of Skara Brae's finest warriors, men and women clad in armor made of thin, interlocking layers of stone. Each suit crafted by the Builder over her many years of quiet industry. Each suit shining with the power of the City of Stone. And within them, the heroes of the city followed their commander into battle with a fury not even they knew they could summon. But when Boudicea had come to them and gave the order to follow, they knew they had no choice but to obey. For she was the city's keeper now, and each person within it was hers to protect. And they knew then, in that moment both wondrous and terrible, that there was no greater anger in the world than that of a mother made to defend her own.

"Hello, Mordred," Boudicea said as she kicked the stunned Elf King in the head, sending his helmet flying. "I've been hoping to meet you again."

She elbowed Mordred across the jaw, and his head snapped back, orange sparks spitting from his mouth. His long hair hung in the air, shrouding his skull.

Bors watched in amazement as Boudicea drove her spear into Mordred's chest, pinning him to the stone. Sparks sizzled around the wound while Boudicea leaned on the spear and pushed it deeper between the cobblestones while Mordred's arms and legs reflexively raised up, helpless.

Mordred gasped something unintelligible, but Boudicea responded by grabbing Mordred's head with both of her hands. She bashed it against the cobbles once, twice, three times, and each time, a greater fury of sparks erupted from the back of the Elf King's head.

As Boudicea continued her assault, the guardsmen she brought to the battle fell into the Arcadian front line, landing among them

and visiting great havoc upon their ranks. Each swung their stone weapons with the grace of ancient ways, overwhelming their Arcadian opponents and defeating them by the dozens.

Bors snapped out of his shock and joined his fellows in the attack, spinning with his blade and taking off the heads of three Arcadians in a single blow. He sidestepped their sword thrusts, their axe blows, their swinging flails and their spears like they were figments of a dream, and he let his sword work its terrible craft among them, cutting them down as if they were no more solid than shadows. Bors could feel a strength course through him that he had not felt since that dark day in Camelot. But even then, it was not quite like this. It was like something he used to feel before, back in the glorious days of the High Kingdom, when Arthur ruled and could do no wrong. It was like those first battles that united the island, and then the kingdom, and then the empire beyond. It was before the slaughter of Rome and all of the dark feelings and unanswerable questions that followed. Before the Sangreal. Before Guenevere and Lancelot. Before Gawain and the beach. Before Mordred.

It was pure, and beautiful and endless in its glory. And for the first time in many years, Bors smiled as he fought, overjoyed to be here, now, fighting as he used to, with an invincible hope in his heart.

An Arcadian champion came forth and flattened Bors with a single blow from the massive tower shield he carried. Bors cleared the stars from his eyes and rolled out of the way, dodging the killing stroke the Arcadian drove into the cobbles. He swung his sword and cut the Arcadian's feet out from under him, and as the howling blackguard fell to the ground. Bors stood and beheaded him with a swift downward stroke. His sword broke against the stone, and without pausing, Bors hurled his shield into the chest of an Arcadian general who was trying to rally his troops to Mordred's aid. Bors then grabbed two nearby thralls by the helmets and smashed them together, taking the flails they carried from their hands as they fell. He whirled the chained weapons around him, punishing every enemy within reach as he headed to Boudicea to make sure that no thrall interrupted her vengeance upon Mordred.

By the time he reached her, Boudicea was kneeling on Mordred's chest, hanging onto her spear for support. She was breathing hard and near exhaustion, but Mordred lay dying beneath her, the orange fire in his empty eye socket slowly sputtering out.

The Arcadians saw their fallen lord and gave great cries of dismay at the sight of it. One of Mordred's generals sounded a retreat at the sight of their fallen lord, but with Boudicea's guardsmen among them, that retreat turned into a rout. Many ranks behind the front, the Arcadians who had not yet entered the battle still surged forward, and as they met their retreating brethren, the entire mass of soldiers crashed into itself, creating a huddled mass of confused warriors wanting to run but having nowhere to go.

Bors pulled Boudicea from Mordred's body. "You have finished him," he said as he helped her back to her feet. He pointed to the rest of the Arcadian army. "Now, let us finish them."

"I can't!" she said, shaking free of his grasp. "Not before I take Mordred's head."

"Now is no time for trophies, Boudicea."

"You don't understand," she said roughly before shoving him to one side. "He'll come back. He always...oh, no."

"What?" Bors said.

The body was gone.

"Bastard got away already," Lorelei said with a grimace. "He's hiding among his thralls. Buying enough time to put himself together again."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Bors said. "Let's go after him."

She drew her sword and grinned at Bors. "I thought you'd never ask," she said. Together they rejoined the guardsmen and showed their enemies the only kind of mercy they deserved.

Lorelei watched in horror at the columns of dust and smoke that rose from the outer district of Skara Brae. Orange flames danced into the sky as the city of stone somehow burned.

She looked through the breach in the wall, to the clearing before the city where Mordred's host had trampled the earth into dark mud. She turned to the remains of the main gate, where the towers had fallen, and the wall had been breached, and where so many suits of destroyed Arcadian armor lie in a jumbled pile. She searched for signs of life among the bodies lying together against the wall but found none.

"Be careful," Cambol whispered as he emerged from behind a pile of wreckage.

"Why?" Lorelei asked.

Cambol shrugged. "Might be a knifer hiding somewhere."

Lorelei pursed her lips at him. "They're all dead. I don't think they'll trouble the two of us." To make his point, she walked to the nearest suit of armor and kicked it hard. The metal clanged loudly as it flew apart.

"Doesn't matter, I suppose," Cambol said. "If any of these blighters were alive, we couldn't keep from being discovered. They have noses like dogs, ears like rabbits, and eyes like hawks."

Lorelei took a quiver of crooked, black-feathered arrows from a pile of mangled armor pieces and lost weapons. "You almost sound like you admire them."

Cambol salvaged a sword for himself and tested its weight in hand. He frowned and threw the weapon away before reaching down for a second one. He tested this one as well and smiled. Perfect.

"I don't admire them," Cambol said. "But I do respect them."

He looked back at Lorelei. "How can you not respect an enemy who has done this to our city?"

Lorelei looked at the shattered wall, and the burning stone beyond. "They destroyed our home. They probably killed everybody we know. There is nothing respectable about that."

Cambol began climbing up the ramp of debris and armor that led to the top of the wrecked portion of the wall. As he went, he feared that the slaughter he had witnessed was just the beginning of the horrors in store for him this day.

"I respect their purity of purpose," he said as he reached back and helped Lorelei up the pile. "While we fought amongst ourselves, they were coming in perfect formation, without discord or debate. Had we ever shown that kind of discipline..."

"Then we would be them," Lorelei said, pointing to the empty armor. "I don't want to be them. I want to be us."

"All well and good," Cambol said. "But if that is so, then there is something you must understand."

"Oh? What's that?"

"We're not going to make it."

Lorelei was about to say something when she felt something stir near her foot. She stepped back reflexively and raised her sword, ready to plunge it into the armor pile. "Something just moved!"

Cambol came over and moved aside loose pieces of wreckage and armor with his free hand while keeping his sword ready in the other. Within moments, a bloodied hand pushed up from the armor pieces and looked for something to gain a hold on. Cam-

bol clasped it and pulled. Lorelei did likewise, and together, they pulled Hrothgar out from under the Arcadian armor.

"He lives!" Cambol said. "I don't believe it."

Lorelei looked at the suits of armor, each of which had once held a living Arcadian thrall. She paid special attention to the one with her last arrow sticking out of it.

Hrothgar came around a little. "Too...many..."

Cambol noticed something elsewhere on the debris pile and ran off to fetch it.

"Easy, Hrothgar," Lorelei said. "You made quite a stand here, didn't you?"

Hrothgar's eyes cleared, and he realized who he was speaking to. "Didn't expect to find you back here."

"That makes two of us," Lorelei said. "But you know me. Can't pass up an opportunity to lose a fight."

Hrothgar chuckled weakly. "Who says we're losing?"

She smiled at him. "Well, it looks like you kept a few hundred from coming in, at the very least."

"I didn't do enough here," Hrothgar said. "Not even close to it."

Cambol returned with Hrothgar's warhammer in hand. He could barely carry it. "I saw this over there," he said, grunting as he lifted it to Hrothgar.

The expression on the Northlander's face brightened as he took the hammer in both hands.

Lorelei nodded in the direction of the city's interior, where the sounds of great battle could still be heard. "I think we're needed in there."

"Aye," Hrothgar said. "Let's...oh."

"Oh, what?" Cambol said nervously.

"They're coming back this way," Hrothgar said.

Lorelei squinted. "Why would they run out of the city?"

Hrothgar stood atop the pile and readied his hammer. "Don't know. Don't care. But I'm not letting any of them get away. You two want a piece of it?"

Cambol sighed in resignation and Lorelei grinned as both climbed the pile. They joined Hrothgar with weapons drawn, and together the three of them stood guard on the remains of the wall, waiting for the enemy to try to cross over a second time. There would not be a third.

Just then, there came a dry laughter to the side of them. It was an Arcadian soldier, his side stove in from a terrific blow Hrothgar

had dealt him some time during their combat.

"Disgusting creatures," Lorelei said as she looked down her nose at the Arcadian.

"Do not rush to judge," Cambol said.

"He's trying to say something," Hrothgar said. He crouched and removed the Arcadian's battered helmet. Beneath it, the Arcadian looked middle-aged with typical Elven features. But the long ears and pointed teeth slowly reversed themselves, and gradually, the thrall looked more human.

"What is this?" Lorelei said.

"It is turning human," Cambol said.

The Arcadian laughed once more. "You have slain nothing, Northlander," he said. "This dying body of mine is just a broken shell. I will simply go back to Arcadia, where another body waits for me. And then I will come back here, as if nothing had ever happened. Mark my words, every one of my brothers you killed this day will meet again."

Hrothgar placed a foot on the Arcadian's chest and raised his hammer. "I look forward to it," he said, and then brought the hammer down.

Cambol flinched as Hrothgar was hit with a shower of sparks. Lorelei watched the killing with a stony face.

Hrothgar removed the hammer from where it had embedded in the thrall's armor and nodded in the direction of the oncoming Arcadian horde. "Plenty more where he came from. Make yourselves ready."

Cambol grumbled to himself about doing things against his better judgment. Lorelei shook her head at him and approached Hrothgar.

"This might be it for us," she said.

Hrothgar kept his eye on the enemy. "Aye. Good way to go, though."

"I suppose," Lorelei said. "I'm sorry for everything, Hrothgar. I was wrong to doubt you."

"What do you mean?"

"Before, when you were on the pile, I thought... I tried to shoot you."

Hrothgar arched an eyebrow. "You missed."

She smiled nervously. "One of them got in the way. I'm glad it did."

"You and I both." He took her by the shoulder. "I know what you were trying to do. And I owe you for it."

The sounds of the Arcadian army got louder as they neared. "Don't think on it now," Hrothgar said. "Come on. Let's give these bastards what's coming to them."

They walked off the pile and headed into the city, past the burning buildings. Cambol whistled at the damage. "How did they get stone to burn like that?" he asked.

"Dark magic," Lorelei said. "The worst kind."

Hrothgar stepped over the bodies of a slain family who had been caught out in the open when the blast first sundered the gate. "This city is done," he said flatly. "Even if we win today, there will be no coming back from this."

"I don't know about that," Lorelei said. "We could rebuild. We..."

"No, he's right," Cambol said. "Whatever Skara Brae was, it is over now. There can be no more hiding from our enemy." He cleared his throat. "We are out in the open now."

As the battle raged in the city center, the Arcadians stopped running, as if they had all received the same order to do so, and obeyed in unison. They wheeled about, reformed into ranks and began fighting once more as invaders.

Bors noticed the change first but it did not slow his pace. He kept swinging into his opponents with an urgent fury. Boudicea fought by his side, and together, they created a vanguard that drove deep into the Arcadian mass, followed by Boudicea's guardsmen in an effort to split the army in two. They had hacked their way about halfway into the army when they regained its will to fight.

"They've got their spine back," Bors shouted to Boudicea. "What do you think of it?"

Boudicea drove her spear into three Arcadians at once and withdrew it, letting them drop to the ground. "Maybe they know there is no running," she said, blocking a taskmaster's sword strike and countering by thrusting her spear under his chin and through his head. She lifted him up and hurled him off of the spear, cartwheeling through the air and landing among his brethren.

Bors fainted and let two thrall's sword thrusts pass by him and go into each other. "Doesn't feel like it. This isn't so desperate. It's like—"

Bors ducked instinctively. As he did, he felt the rush of air skim

his back. Looking up, he saw that whatever missed him clove a thrall in half across its chest. Bors rolled and faced what had come up from behind him, knowing in his gut already what it was.

Mordred had Boudicea by the throat and held her high as he pointed his greatsword at Bors, hovering the tip just an inch away from his throat. Arcadian fire backlit the webbed fissures across Mordred's skull, like candlelight in a cracked vase.

"It is folly it is to fight me, Bors," Mordred said. He tightened his grip on Boudicea, who was struggling for breath, her hands clutching at his gauntlet. "This whore has tried twice and still she thinks something different will come of it."

"Let her go," Bors said.

"You are in no position to ask for anything."

"I'm not asking," Bors said.

Mordred laughed. "Look around you, old man. It's over."

Bors realized Mordred was right. In a span of moments, all of the momentum against the Arcadians had faded before the suddenly re-energized enemy. The battle had ground to a halt. Those of Boudicea's guardsmen who had not yet fallen had raised their arms in defeat. Bors looked at them, whose bravery and strength had been so incredible just moments before. He could see in their eyes a collective broken spirit, just as he was distracted by the aura of power that was cooking off of Mordred that shimmered the air like summer heat. Bors looked upon the Elf King and felt a deep, gnawing despair that told him to lay down his arms, to accept the inevitable, to be grateful to become their prisoner and accept whatever fate might come of that. Bors felt it in his heart as clearly as he felt a dozen other emotions that had kept him going ever since the fall of Camelot, and he was able to push it aside and see it for what it was, a sorcerous seduction of the spirit courtesy of Mordred's foul magic. Perhaps it no longer mattered that nobody had seen a sign of Morgana in years. Perhaps she had taught her son enough arcane tricks to make her presence here moot.

Even though Bors could shrug off the spell none of the guardsmen were so proof against it, and to an individual, their resolved crumbled before the might of the Elf King. Where stood the mightiest warriors of Skara Brae now was a legion of defeated prisoners who could not even bring their heads up high enough to look their captors in the eye.

"Give it up, Bors," Mordred said.

The sight of Boudicea hanging by Mordred's hand made bile rise into Bors' throat.

"If you don't drop your steel, I'll snap her neck like a twig," Mordred said. "She doesn't have to die."

"And make her live in debt to you? I cannot do it," Bors said, tightening his grip on his sword and readying for one last flurry of swordsmanship before a hundred Arcadian blades would bring him to his final end.

"You'll do it," Mordred said confidently. "You'll do it for her."

"Why?" Bors said.

A puzzled look crossed Mordred's face. "Isn't it obvious?" he said. "You love her."

Bors blinked. How did he know? How could he have discovered it?

"Because I love her too," Mordred said through his wicked, toothy smile.

Bors felt the strength in his arms drain away. His fingers relaxed, and his sword dropped to the street, clanging loudly as it fell. It was over.

From a nearby rooftop, Lorelei, Hrothgar and Cambol watched the capitulation in stunned silence. They said nothing as Mordred lowered Boudicea and gave her body to a pair of taskmasters to carry as the Arcadians disarmed the guardsmen and put a dark, iron slave collar on Bors. They lead him toward the center of the city by a long chain, just as they did to the rest of their prisoners, who shuffled along the street.

"I cannot believe it," Hrothgar said. "All is lost."

"Not yet," Cambol said. "Look at Mordred. He is right there, directing them. They all lost heart when they thought he was dead before. If we do it again, Bors and the others might have a chance."

"You might be right," Hrothgar said. "Lorelei, you think you could make the shot?"

Lorelei edged closer to the top of the arched rooftop and peered over to watch the Arcadian army below. She still gripped her longbow and had beside her a quiver of scavenged Arcadian arrows. They were crooked, black-feathered shafts with wicked, barbed heads. She drew one and slowly nocked it.

"It's maybe ten yards," she said. "I could hit a mouse at this range."

"Then do it!" Cambol hissed. "Kill him!"

"Don't miss," Hrothgar said.

Lorelei nudged herself to the rooftop edge and slowly pushed the longbow forward, holding it sideways so it would not rise above the roof's profile. She could only give the arrow a half draw

because there was no more room for anything more than that. But it would be enough.

She studied the Elf King's suit of armor, looking for weak spots by the neck, the armpits, or the groin. There were none. She waited for him to turn to face her, hoping that he would hold his head still enough for her to place the shaft in his eye. But that was no good, either. He kept moving as he shouted orders to the Arcadian phalanxes as they finished organizing themselves. Some of the ones near the rear split off from the main body and dispersed along the side streets to round up any straggling defenders of the city. Other units began going into houses door by door, taking the people hiding inside and adding them to the growing line of prisoners who were all walking slowly to the center of Skara Brae. To the Heartstone.

"What are you waiting for?" Cambol said. "Shoot him!"

"Shut up," Lorelei said to Cambol as she kept watching Mordred. There would only be one chance for this, she told herself. Just one shot to turn this thing around. And if I miss...

Mordred kept moving his head around as he moved among his thralls. Does he know I'm here? Lorelei thought. Is he just waiting for me to fire so he can catch the arrow? So he can have a reason to kill his prisoners? To bring even more pain to these people than what has already been done?

She relaxed the bowstring.

"What are you doing?" Cambol said, too loudly.

"It's no good," Lorelei said. "I can't get the shot."

Cambol quickly looked over the roof again and saw Mordred leading the army deeper into the city, moving farther and farther away. "You coward," Cambol said, spit flecking from his lips. "You could have ended it."

Lorelei averted her eyes. "You don't know what you are talking about."

"And they said Arthur was the one we had to worry about," Cambol said. "You have doomed us all."

Hrothgar grabbed Cambol by the collar of his armor. "Stop talking, brother," he said.

Cambol swatted Hrothgar's hand away. "We're all dead anyway, don't you realize that?" Cambol said, his voice screwing into a higher pitch. "She let Mordred live! We're all done for!"

Hrothgar looked at Lorelei and saw tears streaming from her eyes.

"I couldn't risk all of those people," she said as she wiped her

eyes. "Not like that."

"I know," Hrothgar said. "I know."

"Give me the bow, then," Cambol said. "I'll do what you haven't the stomach for."

Hrothgar stepped between Lorelei and Cambol. "Don't be a fool. Lorelei is right. We cannot chance it."

"So you've given up, too," Cambol muttered.

"If we shoot Mordred and we don't kill him, every prisoner will die," Hrothgar said.

"They are dead anyway." Cambol pointed his sword at Hrothgar. "And so will you be if you don't step aside."

"You're not making any sense, Cambol," Hrothgar said. "Put that thing away. We can still try to leave this place. We can..."

Cambol leapt forward and swung wildly at Hrothgar, who caught him in his arms. Together, they tumbled off the roof and fell hard on the street. "Hrothgar!" Lorelei shouted.

Hrothgar rolled over and pushed Cambol off of him. Both were wet with fresh blood.

Cambol groaned and slowly got to his knees. He had fallen on his sword, run through. "You've ended me," he said to Hrothgar. Slowly, he grasped the handle of the sword and pulled the blade from his body. A gout of blood followed.

"I'm going to meet my forefathers and leave all this madness behind me," Cambol said. "You have set me free."

He looked at them and laughed. His teeth were red from blood he coughed up, but still, he laughed. As the Arcadians came and surrounded them all, he took no notice of them. Even when one drove a spear through Cambol to finish him off, he fixed his eyes on Hrothgar and Lorelei until his body went slack.

"Come with us," hissed one of the black-clad soldiers.

Hrothgar could say nothing. Nor could Lorelei, who was fighting the lump in his throat that would burst forth into a wail if she so much as whispered.

Arthur gritted his teeth as he poured his strength into extracting Excalibur. The Heartstone was webbed over with cracks that threatened to shatter the stone altogether, but Arthur suspected the sword was somehow keeping it together to further defy his will.

His arms burned with fatigue, and his hands felt like they were going to fall off, but Arthur refused to let go. "You're coming with me," he said through clenched teeth as he redoubled his efforts on the sword.

"I think your father might have something to say about that," Excalibur responded within Arthur's head.

"He's here?" Arthur said as he released of Excalibur and spun around. He saw before him the plaza had filled with Arcadian soldiers who formed a ring around the Heartstone. They had all lowered their spears, creating a perimeter of iron points that threatened to skewer Arthur if he moved off the stone. He looked around and saw that all of the cityfolk who had been here had been herded away with the other prisoners. Doomed.

Arthur's heart sank at the thought of his people's quiet despair, of the helplessness they must have felt as they watched Mordred enter the plaza, triumphant, while Arthur struggled with Excalibur, too consumed by it to notice that it was already too late.

What a fool I am, Arthur thought. What a coward. What a waste.

Mordred made his way through the Arcadian ranks, bringing the chained forms of Bors and Boudicea with him. Arthur could see that Lorelei and Hrothgar were among the prisoners as well. Cambol was not there, though. Is he dead? he thought.

"Your city has fallen," Mordred said to Arthur. "There is nowhere else to hide from me."

Arthur looked at his father, thankful that standing upon the Heartstone actually made him taller than the Elf King. "What do you want?"

"The list is long," Mordred said. "But for now, I will settle for that sword you have been wrestling with."

"You can't have it," Arthur said.

"Aren't you the defiant one?" Mordred said, holding his chin in his hand. "And why not?"

"Excalibur won't let you. You are not worthy."

"Let us see about that," Mordred said, striding forward. He placed his hand on the sword and pulled.

Arthur closed his eyes.

When he opened them after several long seconds, Mordred was still there, trying to withdraw the sword. The Elf King cursed and let go of it. He cast a look at Arthur before retreating a pace from the sword. "You," he said to Arthur. "The sword said that it is still in contest with you. What does it mean?"

Arthur looked at the Sword of Swords shining in the sun as it stood in the stone. The sight of it gladdened him.

"It knows that I will pull it from the stone somehow," Arthur said confidently. "Until I fail, it won't give itself to anyone else." Mordred nodded in understanding, and in resentment.

"Fine," he said through a deep frown. He signaled for Boudicea to be brought forward. He forced her to her knees and placed the edge of his greatsword against the back of her neck. He readied himself to raise his sword, and looked to the side, to Arthur. "Give me Excalibur."

Arthur looked to Boudicea. "Momma, are you alright?"

Boudicea's iron collar would not allow her to raise her head or turn it. She spoke to Arthur without looking at him. "I love you, Arthur."

Arthur began crying. "I love you too, Momma."

"Give me the sword," Mordred said with grim intent. "I will not be made to wait."

Arthur went to the sword and took hold of it once more. He tried to pull it, but it would not move. The strength he had found before was gone. There was only the singular image of Boudicea under the sword consuming his mind's eye.

"I told you, Pendragon, I am not for the likes of you," Excalibur said to Arthur. "Let me go and end this foolishness."

"I can't."

"But you cannot draw me from the stone either. You know this. Do you really want her to die for this?"

Arthur let go of Excalibur. "I won't do it," he said.

"What?" Mordred said, surprised.

"I won't do it! You can't have this sword. It is not meant for you! You are everything my grandfather was not, and I won't let you have his sword!"

"Stupid boy," Mordred said. "It is no more his sword than it is yours. And it will be mine. The only question is," he said, raising his sword, "is how many must die before you prove yourself."

Arthur's eyes went wide as he watched Mordred. He was really going to do it.

Mordred brought the sword up and breathed in a short, sharp breath and tensed his entire body for the killing stroke.

"Stop!" yelled Bors.

Mordred relaxed his sword arm and looked at the knight. "Go on, say it."

"The boy has but one mother," Bors said. "Let me take her

place.”

“No!” Arthur said. He wanted to run to him.

Bors looked at him. “It’s alright, son.”

Mordred had his thralls take Boudicea away. Some others took Bors by the arms to force him into a kneeling position before Mordred, but Bors shook them off and did it on his own. He never stopped looking at Arthur.

“Look after her,” he said to the boy.

“I will,” Arthur said.

“Don’t let him frighten you,” Bors said. “You are the bravest person in the world.”

“Watch, Arthur,” Mordred said. “See what will happen each time you fail me.”

“Long live Arthur!” Bors cried. “Long live the king!”

“I will,” Mordred said.

Arthur’s tears ran hot across his face and he breathed hard and fast.

“And so it ends,” Mordred said.

Arthur looked at Mordred and grabbed Excalibur by just one hand. He felt the familiar resistance coming from the sword, but he didn’t fight against it. He didn’t fear it, or try to understand it, or try to overpower it. He simply ignored it and channeled into the blade a strength of his own. It was one borne of fear and fueled by rage and brought together by a bright, undying knowledge that if he did just one thing with his life, just one, it would be this.

Arthur grimaced and pulled his hand forth as the blade bent and shivered. It gave forth a sound like a primal scream that even made Mordred recoil before it. And then it broke, and the bottom half of the sword came free in Arthur’s hand. The sound of the breaking blade filled the sky with a rolling boom that many seconds later, still echoed out over the ocean and to the lands far beyond.

Bors stared in disbelief. “It cannot be,” he said.

Arthur stood before Mordred with the broken sword in his hand, looking at his father and waiting for whatever would come next.

“You have broken what could not be broken,” Mordred said, amazed.

Arthur tested the weight of the broken sword in his hand. “Now, neither of us can have it.”

“The sword means nothing to me now,” Mordred said. “Its

power is gone. But you," he said, pointing to Arthur, "you are the true sword of kings."

"Does that mean you'll let them go?"

Mordred stretched out his hand. "Come with me. You have gifts that would be wasted here. But in Arcadia, you will be shown how to use them. How to harness your power. How to become the true Once and Future King."

Arthur looked at Mordred, then at Bors, and saw a deep and haunted look in the old knight's eyes.

He broke the sword, Bors thought. The city is theirs. And now, he will give himself to them.

He hung his head, unable to look any more. "All of it...for nothing."

Arthur returned his attention to Mordred. "Will you teach me, in Arcadia?"

"I will," Mordred said. "I will be the father you have been waiting for, Arthur. And I will show you things of wonder that you cannot imagine. You will learn to live without fear. You will become stronger than any creature alive. And you will return here to rule forever."

"And will you let them live?" Arthur said. "You will let them go?"

"Them?" Mordred said with a dismissive look back at Bors and Boudicea and the rest. "They are nothing compared to you. I will gladly forget I ever defeated them, if you just take my hand and come back home."

Arthur took Mordred's hand.

Boudicea squeezed her eyes shut to stop the tears from running. The Elf King smiled.

"Father?" Arthur said.

"Yes, son?" Mordred said.

Arthur moved into him and drove Excalibur up through Mordred's breastplate, and into the Elf King's heart. He sunk the broken blade to the hilt, holding it there and bringing his face close to his father's.

"I don't believe you," Arthur said.

He withdrew the sword, and Mordred staggered back, a bright orange fire burning out of the wound. Mordred clasped his hands over the flames, but they kept spilling forth between his fingers. He looked at his son, confused, enraged, humiliated.

He fought to keep his balance, and clasped his hands together. As he did, his body burst into bright, sparking flame and he shrieked

something only his fellow Arcadians could hope to understand. He blazed a bright, white light, and all in the plaza shielded their eyes except for Arthur, who stared into the heart of it, unafraid.

"Remember what you did to me," Mordred gasped. "For I will not."

The image of Mordred fell in on itself, and the roaring energy swirled inward to a point, and suddenly, the Elf King was gone. But there stayed behind a small burning flame that hung in the air, like the center of a burning sheet of paper, and through the hole in the center, Arthur could see the distant image of another world.

Arthur held Excalibur to one side, and the Heartstone exploded into fragments. The remains of the blade dissolved into silvery liquid that ran across the ground in a dozen quivering beads. They came together and leapt to the broken sword Arthur held and merged back into a shining length of steel.

The Arcadian host stood paralyzed in front of young Arthur, who rested the point of Excalibur on the ground and placed both of his hands on the pommel.

"You cannot defeat us all, Pendragon," hissed an Arcadian general who stood near to where Mordred had vanished.

"I won't defeat any of you," Arthur said, lowering his eyes at the general. "This time, I will kill you."

The general shuddered at Arthur's words.

Arthur gestured to the fiery portal in the air. "You had all better follow him," he said.

The general raised a shaking hand and signaled for the slave masters unlock the collars on every prisoner. Then he had each soldier lay down their arms. And in formation, they came before Arthur, looking at him with fearful eyes. Their general placed his hands on the edge of the tear in the fabric of the world, and he stretched it wide so he might step through, and in a long file, the rest of the Arcadian army followed. For an hour, they entered the portal that took them back to Arcadia, and when the last one reached it, he stepped through, then reached his hands back and closed it behind him, and it burned out with a pop of sparks that drifted lazily to the ground and went out.

The people of Skara Brae watched the last of their enemy leave, and then they turned to Arthur and saw him as never before, just a boy before them, but at the same time, a giant among mortals, a champion of a lost age. And they gave a great cheer as they knew that at last, their defender had come to deliver them.

The Lion of Britannia.

The Last Pendragon.
The Once and Future King.
Arthur.

In the hours that followed, Skara Brae was a place that wished to celebrate its great victory, to rush into each other's arms and swoon with the ecstasy of deliverance. But the city still burned. The dead needed to be put to rest. And the remains of what the Arcadians did not destroy had to be gathered together and taken stock. For the champions of the city, it was a time to rest, to nurse their wounds, and to mourn their fallen comrades.

Lorelei busied herself by helping to build the great funeral pyre where the Heartstone had stood. There, the city's fallen would be sent to the next world in a single, burning farewell. Lorelei hoisted Cambol and put his body on the wood; his would be the first to burn. In Cambol's memory, Hrothgar sang an ancient Northlander hymn to mark his passing from this world to the next, where the mighty would live forever in the halls of the brave.

Upon those same flames Bors and Arthur hoisted the body of so many defenders who had given their lives for their home, and for the dream of freedom. And as they burned, the guardsmen of the city raised their weapons to their fallen, whose had defended their home when it mattered most, and who were laid to rest as if they had never been gone.

Alderac the blacksmith, Magnus and their surviving fellows worked to extinguish the smoking embers of the battle, to clear the rubble, and to stand a fresh watch on the wall. They scanned the skies for the signs of Morgana, to watch the water for the approach of a fresh Elven army, but for now, there would be none.

Boudicea took Arthur into her arms and she held him tighter than ever before. He did the same, forgetting that he was king and champion and lord, and simply was thankful that he still had a mother to hold on to, to let him know that somehow, things were going to be all right.

Bors approached her after she let Arthur go and took her into his arms. As they held each other, Boudicea looked into Bors' eyes, and though he could say not what filled his heart, he simply leaned forward and kissed her softly. And when it was done, she put her hands on his head and drew him in close, and kissed him back.

Arthur watched them together, sitting on a large chunk of what used to be the Heartstone. Hrothgar approached and sat near him.

"Who saw that coming?" Hrothgar said, of Bors and Boudicea.

"I did," Arthur said with a smile.

Hrothgar smirked. "You're full of surprises, my lord." Even though the giant Northlander dwarfed Arthur, Hrothgar looked upon the boy with the happiness that only a warrior can have when at last he has found a lord worth serving.

"I heard you took care of a few hundred of them at the wall," Arthur said.

"The story gets better every time they tell it," Hrothgar said. "But I won't stop them."

"We all need our heroes," Arthur said.

"I think we got another one this day," Hrothgar said, nodding toward the sword still in Arthur's hand. "How did you break it?"

Arthur held up Excalibur and examined it. "I don't know. But it hasn't said another word to me since then."

"It talks?"

"Just inside my head. Most of what it said wasn't very friendly."

"Well, you're the lord of it now, aren't you? Nobody has done that before."

"I suppose not," Arthur said. "I still can't decide if I made a mistake taking it as I did, though."

"Without that, you could not have killed Mordred. And everyone would have died."

Arthur shrugged. "I don't think Mordred is dead," he said. "And I don't think this thing is over, either. I think it has just begun."

Hrothgar clasped Arthur around the shoulder. "Given what I saw today, my lord, I wouldn't have it any other way."

Arthur laid Excalibur across his lap as he looked out across the plaza and what was left of the city. "Nor I," he said, as if at first surprised that he said it. The he grinned, and said it once more, certain and sure. "Nor I."

To Be Continued in

PAX ARCADIA

VOLUME II of THE DARK BRITANNIA SAGA









