

GUINEVERE'S FATE

Ben Bova

The news from the south was not good. The High King, Ambrosius Aurelianus, had fallen ill. And Merlin had disappeared.

Arthur's army was heading south once more, after trouncing the wild tribes of the north and staving off an invasion threatened by the Danes in Berenicia. Now we sought to escape the worst of the long, cold, wet and dreary northern winter. Southward we plodded: knights, squires, footmen, churls and camp followers, long lines of men mounted and afoot, of horses and oxcarts, slowly threading our way through the bare trees and brown hills of the empty countryside toward the warmer clime of the south and Ambrosius' great stone castle at Cadbury.

Twice we had been attacked, not by invading barbarians but by our own Celtic people, brigands who fell upon small groups of our men when they were isolated from the main column.

Lancelot was leading a small hunting party, scouring the hilly countryside for game to bring back to the cook pots, when bandits tried to ambush us. Arthur had commanded me to go with Lancelot because I had gained a reputation as a good hunter. My namesake, Orion, was famed as a hunter. We were afoot, looking for signs of deer, when they came screaming fiercely out of the woods, armed with swords and staves.

One of the squires went down while the others ran back toward Lancelot, who already had his sword in hand. The youngest of Arthur's knights, barely old enough to have the wisp of a beard starting on his chin, Lancelot must have looked like an inexperienced boy to the bandits. What a mistake!

He stood his ground, without shield or helmet, as the squires ran back toward him. I stood at his side, grasping my own sword, every nerve in my body tingling with the anticipation of battle. I had been created to be a warrior, and my senses speed up whenever I am in a fight.

But there was no need for that this day. Lancelot waited until the bandits were almost upon him, then drove forward like a hurricane of death. Almost faster than my eyes could follow he cut down the first two brigands that reached him. His sword was a blur as he hacked the life out of two more. Four of them tried to circle behind him, but I slashed the arm off one of them and the others turned and ran.

It was all finished in a few heartbeats. Lancelot stood among the corpses, his sword sheathed in blood, not even breathing hard.

Arthur was not happy with our report.

"Britons attacked you?" he asked Lancelot.

"Aye, my lord. Hungry men, from the looks of them. God knows this countryside has been picked bare. There isn't a deer or a even a boar anywhere around here."

Arthur rubbed his bearded chin. "If they're starving they'll attack again. We'll have to be on our guard each step of the way."

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Portly, red-faced Friar Samson rode beside Arthur each morning, praising his victories as God's will and urging Arthur to cleanse the land of the pagan invaders. Arthur listened respectfully, even though Samson could become pompous in his pronouncements. On the morning after still another bandit attack, after patiently listening to Samson's droning lec-

ture, Arthur asked the priest to see to the souls of the footmen trudging along the trail behind us.

The friar's face flashed anger for a moment, then he meekly bowed his tunsured head and turn his horse back away from the knights.

Gawain trotted up beside Arthur. "Had enough of piety for one cold morning, eh?"

Arthur said nothing.

"Why so downcast?" asked Gawain, riding alongside Arthur. "Those bandits were nothing more than a pack of knaves, Britons or no."

"Hungry knaves," Arthur replied glumly. "Look at the land around us."

I could see what he meant. For many days we had ridden through devastation. Since the Romans had abandoned Britain, barbaric invaders from across the seas had invaded the island, burning, raping, looting, killing. Towns that had once been peaceful and prosperous were now blackened with fire, abandoned, their people flown or dead. Farm fields stood bleak and fallow, abandoned by peasant and lord alike. The land lay gray and barren, crushed by the endless wars.

The countryside was so bare that Arthur had to split his army into four separate columns as we worked our way southward, so that we could find some fodder for our mounts. The foragers came back to camp each night with meager pickings; many days they found nothing at all. Even I, mighty hunter that I had been created to be, could find only an occasional half-starved rabbit. Deer and larger game had long since been devoured.

What was even worse than the invading Saxons and Jutes and Angles was the fact that each petty Celtic king made war against the kings around him. Where once they had given at least a nominal obeisance to Ambrosius Aurelianus as High King, now they fought each other while the invading barbarians established their own kingdoms along the coasts.

"I had thought to drive out the barbarians," Arthur said so softly that I - riding behind him as a squire should - could barely hear his somber voice.

"We will," said Gawain lightly. "Next spring, once the weather clears."

"And who will till the fields?" Arthur asked bitterly. "Who will build new houses? Who will make the land green and prosperous again?"

Gawain laughed. "That's peasant's work, not fit for a knight to dirty his hands with."

He spurred his mount and trotted up ahead, to where Lancelot was riding point, alert now for ambushers along the trail, leaving Arthur to plod along in somber silence.

"I wish Merlin were here," he muttered, more to himself than me.

"You don't need Marlin anymore, my lord," I said, nosing my mount to plod alongside him on his right, the side that would be unprotected by his shield in battle.

"Perhaps not," he said, with a rueful smile. "But I'd feel better if he were here."

I smiled back at him, knowing that Merlin was in reality one of the Creators, those godlike beings from the far future of this time who toy with human fate for their own amusement.

We would not beat the winter, I realized. Later in the day it began to snow softly, quietly, as the pale sun dipped low behind the silver-gray clouds that had blanketed the sky all afternoon. Silently the wet flakes

drifted down through the calm, cold air, frigid as death. I have never liked snow, not since I had been killed by a cave bear in the bone-cracking cold of the Ice Age, many lifetimes ago.

"We'll have to camp up there," Arthur said, standing in his stirrups and pointing to a grove of deeply green yews off to the side of the trail. The woods climbed up the slope of the hills. A good place for an ambush, I thought.

That evening we were attacked again. Most of the knights and squires were dismounted, huddled around meager fires, shivering in their jerkins and cloaks as they waited for the evening meal.

"Where's the cook wagons?" Sir Bors growled. "They should be here by now."

Arthur turned to me. "Find them and hurry them here, Orion."

With an obedient nod I replied, "Yes, my lord."

Yet I did not like to leave Arthur's side. I knew that Aten and others among the Creators were plotting his death, and I had vowed to protect the young *dux bellorum*. Arthur was Ambrosius' battle leader; he had spent the summer driving the invading Jutes and Angles back to their seaside encampments while Ambrosius sat at Cadbury castle keeping a wary eye on the southern Saxons, whom Arthur had humbled before campaigning northward.

Now Ambrosius was dying, if the word from the south could be believed. Many among the knights were already muttering among themselves that Arthur should be the next king. That is why the Creators wanted him killed.

The Creators thought of themselves as gods, yet I knew they were the descendents of human beings from the far future. They had godlike powers, true enough. Aten had created me to be his warrior, his assassin, his hunter. I had killed for him many times on missions of battle and death. Through the ages of time and space I had done Aten's bidding, learning to hate his smug superiority, his mad obsession with dominating spacetime and forcing the human race to obey his will. Many times I had died painfully, yet he restored me to send me on yet another mission of blood and murder.

Aten had sent me to Britain in this dark age to assassinate young Arthur, to prevent him from bringing the petty British kingdoms together and building a Celtic empire that would stretch from Ireland to the long rivers and frozen marshes of Russia. I refused to kill Arthur. Instead, I protected him against Aten's schemes.

So now I rode a tired steed through the dark, snowy evening, searching for the kitchen train that should have caught up with the main body of our column an hour ago.

I saw the flicker of flames through the black boles of the leafless trees. Urging my mount forward, I began to hear the shouts and curses of men fighting. And dying.

The kitchen wagons were strung along the trail, two of them ablaze, churls and cooks desperately trying to defend themselves against men attacking from both sides of the trail. Most of the kitchen workers were huddled beneath the wagons, a few on their roofs, fighting with knives and meat hooks, swinging heavy iron pots like clubs, using whatever they could lay their hands on as weapons.

My senses went into overdrive, as they always do when I go into battle. Aten had built that capability into me. As I drew my sword and spurred my horse into a charge, I saw that the attackers were hardly bet-

ter armed than their victims. They looked to be young men, boys even, fighting with staves and hunting knives for the most part. A few of them had bows, and they were standing off to the far side of the trail, trying to pick off the men fighting from atop the wagons.

With the loudest, most ferocious yell I could muster I charged the bowmen. They whirled to face me. To my hyperalert senses their movements seemed sluggish, languid, like men moving through molasses. In the lurid light of the flaming wagons I saw their eyes widen as I charged at them. Two of them pulled arrows from the quivers at their hips and began to pull their bow strings back.

They both got off their shots before I could reach them. I saw the arrows floating lazily through the snowy air, spinning as they flew. I had neither shield nor helmet with me, even my coat of chain mail lay bundled in the pack behind my saddle. The first arrow I flicked away with my sword but the second hit my horse in the neck. I felt him stumble as I swung one leg over the saddle and leaped to the ground a scant few feet in front of the bowmen.

They were all nocking arrows, but they were far too slow to save themselves. I slashed into them, my sword ripping the nearest one into a geysering fountain of blood. The next one fell, his head severed from his shoulders, and the others dropped their bows and ran.

I turned to the footmen battling the kitchen help hand-to-hand. They were totally unprepared for a swordsman, and I was no ordinary fighter. Within minutes they were running, howling, into the snow-filled night. My sword dripped with their blood.

The men who had ducked under the wagons scrambled out now and got to their feet. Friar Samson was among them, his rough homespun robe caked with snow and dirt.

"God sent us a deliverer!" he cried. His barrel-chested build gave him a voice powerful enough to fill a cathedral. "On your knees, all of you, and give thanks!"

I said nothing, but I thought of Aten and the other self-styled gods. If Samson knew that they were deciding his fate, playing with the human race the way mortals play at chess, I wonder what he would think of his God?

Once up from their knees, the kitchen men turned into fierce warriors now that the enemy was beaten, and began to cheerfully slit the throats of the poor fools who lay in the snow wounded and too weak to defend themselves. Friar Samson ignored the slaughter, but I stopped them, yanking one of the butchers off the back of a screaming, crying boy who could have been no more than twelve or thirteen.

"We'll march these prisoners back to Arthur," I commanded. "Let him decide their fate."

Reluctantly, they allowed me to take the two youths who were still alive and able to walk. I walked with them, after giving my downed horse a merciful thrust through the heart.

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The knights and squires roared with approval when the kitchen wagons creaked into camp. Arthur, though, sat grimly on a fallen log as I explained to him what happened. Bors, standing to one side with his burly arms folded across his chest, looked ready to hang both prisoners.

At last Arthur turned to the two wounded youths. One of them had been stabbed in the arm, the other's face was swollen on one side, where a kitchen churl had banged him with a skillet.

The youths sank to their knees before Arthur. He wore only a plain rough tunic over his chain mail, but Excalibur gleamed in its jeweled scabbard by his side, and it was clear to them that this young warrior with the soft brown beard and sad eyes was a man of authority, even though Arthur was not that many years older than they.

"Why do you attack us?" Arthur demanded. "We are fighting the invaders to protect you. Is this the thanks you give?"

"Hunger, sire," answered the smaller of the two. His voice cracked, whether from puberty or fear I could not tell.

"Our village is in ruins," the older one said, a smoldering trace of resentment in his deeper voice. "You have much; we have nothing."

"You have a dozen dead friends," Bors growled, "if Orion's story is to be believed."

"Two of them were our brothers," replied the younger one, his face downcast.

Arthur shook his head. "Orion, find Kay. Tell him to send these two back to their village, or what's left of it. Let each of them take as much food as they can carry."

Bors' eyes popped. He started to object, but Arthur forestalled him with an upraised hand.

"We are not your enemies," he told the youths. "War has ravaged the land. We are trying to drive out the invaders so that we can all live in peace once again."

I took the prisoners to Kay and explained Arthur's decision. Kay looked dubious, reluctant, but he piled both youth's arms with food from the nearest wagon. The boys scampered away, despite their wounds, staggering slightly under their loads.

As I watched them disappear into the snowy darkness, I thought that Arthur knew how to be a king. If he lived long enough, he might indeed bring peace to this troubled land.

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I wrapped myself in a thick, rough blanket and leaned my back against one of the yew trees. I had volunteered to stand watch because I need little sleep. Another of the superior abilities that Aten had given me. He had built me to be a warrior, with all the strength and blood lust that a killer requires. Yet I was sick of killing, tired of the endless wheel of death and blood.

The piercing cold of the winter night began to seep through the blanket. Without consciously thinking of it, I clamped down on the blood vessels close to my skin, to keep my body's interior warmth from escaping. Still, the bitter cold and the wet flakes of snow chilled me. I unbuckled my sword and leaned it against the trunk of the tree. I could feel the dagger that Odysseus had given me, ages ago at Troy, pressing iron cold against my thigh where I kept it strapped beneath my tunic.

All I really cared for was Anya, the gray-eyed goddess whom the ancient Greeks knew as Athena. She was the only one among the Creators who truly cared for the human beings that her fellow Creators used as puppets. I loved Anya, a desperate, foolish passion that roused the jealousy of Aten, that egomaniac. She loved me, too. As impossible as it seems, this

goddess, this Creator, loved me just as I loved her. Time after time, in the frozen wastes of the Ice Age and the temperate Paradise of the Neolithic, in the Macedonia of Alexander the Great and the far-flung interstellar empire of the Fourth Millennium, Anya had loved me and tried to protect me from the cruel whims of Aten and the other Creators.

As I sat in the cold, snowy woods, with the camp fires dying down to smoldering ashes, I thought of Anya. Aten and the other Creators tried to keep us apart, but she had come to me here, in Arthur's time. She had helped us. Arthur called her the Lady of the Lake. I knew her to be my love.

I saw a glow deep in the woods, just a tiny pinpoint of light but it didn't flicker as a fire would. It was as steady as a shining star. And growing brighter.

I jumped to my feet, the blanket falling from my shoulders. Snow was still sifting silently through the night; the green branches of yews were decked with white, bending under the growing weight of the snow.

And the light was getting brighter, coming closer.

Anya! I hoped. Could it be her?

"Not your precious Anya," called a deeply resonant male voice. "She has no time for you now."

He stepped out from the trees and I could see that it was the Creator who called himself Hades. They enjoyed giving themselves names of classical gods and goddesses. This one styled himself after the ancient Greek lord of the underworld. He was tall and broad of shoulder, cloaked in a magnificent mantle as black as infinite space, threaded with finest traceries of blood red. His hair and close-cropped beard were dark, his eyes darker still, like polished onyx.

"I understand that Arthur misses his old mentor, Merlin," said Hades.

Merlin was in reality Hades, appearing in disguise to guide Arthur in his youth. Aten and most of the other Creators wanted Arthur killed, so he could not interfere with their grandiose plans for a barbarian empire that would keep humankind enslaved for millennia. Hades had opposed them originally, but now was moving toward their camp.

"You swore that you wouldn't interfere."

Hades smiled cruelly. "A promise made to a creature? How will you keep me to it, Orion? You can't even move your fingertips."

It was true. I stood frozen like a block of ice, totally under his control.

"But you can feel pain," Hades said.

Suddenly my chest constricted in white-hot agony. I couldn't cry out, couldn't even breathe. My legs were too weak to hold me up. I toppled like a felled tree onto the cold snowy ground.

Hades bent low and whispered to me. "Merlin will see Arthur one more time, Orion, whether you like it or not. At the castle of his foster father, Ector. Make certain that Arthur goes there, Orion. Elsewise, this little pang I've given you will feel like a love tap."

The pain ebbed. I lay gasping on the snowy ground as Hades drew himself up to his full height and turned away, laughing softly to himself.

Rage filled me. Despite the lingering pain I lunged at his retreating back, whipping out Odysseus' dagger as I leaped. I hit his body with a satisfying thud and we both fell to the ground. Before he could think I had

the dagger's point under his chin. His eyes went wide as a pressed it deep enough to draw blood.

"Once you take human form you too can feel pain," I snarled. "You can feel death."

And then he was gone. Vanished. I lay alone on the wet cold snow, my dagger in hand, my anger melting into helpless frustration. I drove the dagger into the snow hard enough to penetrate the frozen ground beneath.

"That was foolhardy, Orion."

I turned over onto my back and Anya stood above me, splendid in white fur that reached to her booted feet. A hint of a smile curved her beautiful lips slightly. Her gray eyes were serious, though, almost solemn.

"You cannot kill a Creator, Orion," she said calmly. "You know that."

Scrambling to my feet I replied, "I can frighten him, though. The terror in his eyes was worth the pain he inflicted on me."

Anya shook her head like a schoolteacher disappointed with her pupil. "Orion, my love, no matter how they provoke you, you must remember that many lives are at stake here. You must think of Arthur and all the others you have sworn to help and protect."

I nodded meekly. "Hades intends to see Arthur in his guise as Merlin."

"At Ector's castle, I know," she replied.

"Is it a trap?" I asked. "Do they intend to assassinate Arthur there?"

"No," Anya replied. "But it will be a test. Both you and Arthur will face a test that will be crucial to the unfolding of this line of space-time."

"At Ector's castle."

"Yes. In Wales. Up in the mountains."

"But we're heading south, for Cadbury. The High King is ill. Dying."

"You must bring Arthur to Wales, Orion. To the country where he grew up as a boy."

"And the High King?"

"Trust me, Orion." Anya's image was fading, flickering in the dim light of the fading camp fires.

"Don't leave me!"

"I must, my darling. I don't want to, but I must." She became as dim and misty as a ghost.

"Wait! Please!"

"There is too much for me to do, Orion. I cannot stay."

She faded into nothingness, leaving me standing in the snow with my dagger in one hand and my heart as empty as the distant-most stretches of outer space.

Why? I raged to myself. Why can't we be together? The Creators manipulate space and time as easily as you or I walk across a room. Why can't Anya be with me? How can she truly love me when we're kept apart?

Then, in the deepest cavern of my mind I heard Aten's sneering laughter. It is he who keeps us apart, I realized. Him and his fellow Creators. My fists clenched and I longed for the day when I would destroy them all.

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It wasn't difficult to get Arthur to move into the mountains of Wales. Obviously we were not going to outrun the winter; snow and biting gales swept over us, day after day.

"We used to go sledding down these hills, Kay and I," Arthur was saying, smiling happily for the first time in many weeks. "We'd steal shields from the armory hall and ride them in the snow."

It was a bright, clear morning when we saw Ector's castle standing atop a steep hill, its watchtower silhouetted against the crisp blue sky. The storms had moved away, the air was biting cold but as clear as polished crystal. Arthur trotted up ahead, Lancelot and his foster-brother Kay at his side, men and horses puffing steamy clouds of breath into the cold morning. I stayed slightly behind them, as a humble squire should. But I scanned the woods on either side of the climbing trail, alert for danger.

Ector was Arthur's foster father. Merlin had brought the infant to him, and Ector had raised Arthur to the strong young man he was now, with his own son, Kay, as Arthur's playmate and brother. None of us knew who Arthur's true father was, although Ambrosius accepted the youth as his own nephew, knighted him, and made him his *dux bellorum*, battle leader.

All the scheming politics and blood-soaked battles seemed far from Arthur's mind as he spurred his mount up the final turn of the trail that ended at the castle gate. Like many of the castles of this dark age, Ector's castle Wroxeter stood near the ruins of a Roman city, Viroconium. We had passed the city, down in the valley below: its crumbling dark stone walls had awed Arthur's knights, even frightened some of them.

"No human hands could have built such walls," I heard someone mutter behind me. "This must have been the work of giants."

"Or wizards," half-whispered another voice.

I merely shook my head. Ordinary men had built those stone walls. Other ordinary men had put the town to the torch, gutted its stately homes and public edifices, hauled away many of the stones for their own buildings.

Part of Ector's castle was stone, I saw. The base of its outer wall was a haphazard collection of stones scavenged from the Roman town. Atop it was a stout wooden palisade, with a slightly leaning wooden watchtower flanking the main gate. Very few castles were entirely built of stone at this time. Morganna's keep in Berenicia was stone, although the other buildings inside its walls were wood and even wattle. The High King's headquarters at Cadbury was the wonder of its age, walls, buildings, towers, even the stables were solid stone.

As Arthur and his retinue came up to the castle gate, a helmeted head appeared at the tower top and called, "Who approaches the castle of Sir Ector?"

Sir Kay stood in his stirrups and proclaimed, "His son, Sir Kay, with his foster brother, Arthur, *dux bellorum* to the High King."

It took no small time, but eventually a wizened, white-bearded face appeared at the tower's top. "Kay? And Arthur? Have my boys truly come home?"

"Yes, Father!" Arthur shouted happily. "I've come home."

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Ector appeared overjoyed to see his son and foster son once again. He welcomed us personally as we rode through the castle gate and dismounted onto the packed earth of the courtyard. Arthur towered over the old man, but he stooped down and embraced his foster father with all the warmth of a son's love.

Friar Samson insisted on offering a mass of thanksgiving for our safe arrival at Wroxeter castle; we had little choice but to participate there in the cold morning, heads bowed in pious respect. All the other knights knelt on the snow-covered ground, together with most of the squires. I stood to one side, watching to make certain no one knifed Arthur while he prayed.

At last the knights were shown to quarters in the stoutly timbered largest structure of the castle, each attended by one squire. Arthur chose me to accompany him, for which I was grateful. All the others of the army had to camp outside the castle's main wall.

As soon as we were settled a page appeared at Arthur's open door and announced that Sir Ector would receive Arthur and his knights in the great hall, downstairs.

Ector's great hall was not as big as I had expected, although it was well timbered and its earthen floor pounded smooth and swept clean. The old man sat in a high-backed wooden chair next to the enormous fireplace that covered one entire wall of the room. Big enough for half a dozen men to sit in, the fireplace had only a meager fire crackling in it, sending gray smoke up the wide stone chimney.

Ector's wrinkled, white-bearded face was wreathed in smiles. "Tonight we will feast," he said in a high, piping voice as Arthur strode up to him. "But now, I have a surprise for you!"

He turned in his chair toward a curtained doorway. Merlin stepped through.

He appeared older than Ector, with a beard the color of ashes that ran all the way down to his belt and long gray hair that flowed past his shoulders. He looked newly scrubbed and combed; often enough I had seen him as mangy as a bedraggled alley cat. This day he wore a handsome long robe of midnight blue decked with glittering stars that fell in soft folds down to the floor. Its hem was richly trimmed with fur, as was its collar and the cuffs of the wide sleeves. Despite his seeming years he stood erect and walked with a purposeful stride to stand beside Ector's chair. I could see his eyes clearly beneath their shaggy gray brows: they were the eyes of Hades, black and glittering like two chips of flint.

"Merlin!" Arthur exclaimed, sheer joy on his face. "They told me you had disappeared."

In a soft, quavering voice that matched his graybeard's disguise, Merlin replied, "I left Cadbury castle to meet you here, Arthur."

"You must have flown like the hawk of your namesake," Arthur said, awed.

Merlin replied archly, "I did not walk that long distance, true enough."

"But how did you know I'd be here?" Arthur gaped. "I didn't decide to come here myself until - " Then he stopped, grinning foolishly. "Oh. Of course. You knew it all along, didn't you?"

Merlin/Hades smiled benignly. But his eyes remained cold, remorseless. He glanced at me, and my blood turned to ice.

Is he here to assassinate Arthur? I wondered. And if he is, how could I possibly stop him?

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That night Ector feasted Arthur and his knights. Sir Kay sat at one side of the old man, Arthur on the other. The wine was thin and slightly

sour, but nobody seemed to mind. Mead and beer were there in abundance. Soon the men were throwing chunks of meat and even whole chickens across the table, laughing uproariously with each greasy-fingered toss, each spill of a mug across the planks of the long table.

I sat down among the other squires, far from the roaring blaze in the fireplace and the noisy, brawling men. I could never get drunk. My metabolism burned off alcohol almost as quickly as I could swallow the stuff. It made me warm enough to perspire heavily, though, despite my distance from the fireplace.

I noticed that Lancelot touched nothing but water, although he ate as heartily as any of the others. Gawain, Bors and even Kay got uproariously drunk. I could have knifed all of them, I thought, before any of them realized what was happening. Arthur, though, remained sober enough. And so did Ector, although he laughed wheezingly at the knights' antics so hard I thought he would choke.

Merlin did not attend the feast. I thought I knew why. The rowdy merriment of mere mortals probably disgusted him. So be it, I thought, noticing that Friar Samson also was not present, and probably for much the same reason.

By the time the fire had gone down to smoldering, smoky ashes and most of the knights were snoring, their heads lolling on their shoulders or resting peacefully on the beer-soaked planks of the long table, Ector turned to Arthur and whispered something in his ear. He glanced smilingly at his son Kay, snoring loudly at his other side, then the old man got up from his chair. Arthur got to his feet and followed his foster father out of the hall.

I moved silently behind them, intent on protecting Arthur from any attempt on his life.

Ector led Arthur up a stairway and into what appeared to be his private quarters. It was a low-ceilinged room with a single window, closed with wooden shutters against the night winds. A large canopied bed stood to one side, mussed and unmade. Across the room was a trestle table and several chairs.

I stood in the doorway as Ector gestured Arthur to one of the chairs.

The old man glanced at me, then said, "Arthur, what I have to tell you is for your ears only."

"Orion is more than my squire, Father," replied Arthur. "I have no secrets from him."

Ector's white brows rose, but he shrugged and said to me, "Shut the door, then, and stand there."

"Yes, my lord," I said.

But no sooner had I shut it than I heard a scratching on the other side of the door. Not a knock. Scratching. Just as the ancient Egyptians and Trojans did.

Despite his years, Ector's hearing was still keen. "That would be Merlin. Let him in, squire."

Sure enough, it was Merlin, still in his star-flecked robe, although now he had a woolen skullcap pulled down over his ears. I smiled inwardly. Taking human form brings human frailties with it. Hades felt cold.

Arthur got to his feet, a tall broadshouldered young man among two wizened elders.

"Tell him the news," Ector said to Merlin.

The wizard paced slowly across the room to join Arthur and his foster father, never so much as glancing at me.

"Ambrosius is dying," Merlin said. "He will not survive the winter."

Arthur bowed his head. "My uncle has been very good to me. It's sad to lose him."

"Sad for Britain," said Ector. "Without a High King, every petty king in the land will make war on his neighbors."

"They are already doing so. The curse of the Celts," Arthur murmured, "unable to stand together against the invaders."

"The land needs a High King," said Merlin. "One who can bring all the Britons together."

Arthur asked, "Yes, but who?"

"You."

Arthur gaped at the wizard. "Me? That's impossible! The other kings would never accept it. I'm hardly twenty, and a bastard, as well."

"About your age," said Merlin, "nothing can be done. But about the circumstances of your birth..." He turned to Ector.

"You know who my true father is?" Arthur blurted.

The old man nodded and reached a hand up to Arthur's shoulder. "My boy, your father was Uther Pendragon, he who was king over much of this land. He who kept the Saxons in check by making a truce with them. He who was betrayed by Vortigen and died fighting the truce-breaker."

Arthur sank down onto the wooden chair. "Uther Pendragon was my father?"

"Why else would I give you the red dragon as your emblem?" Ector asked kindly.

Merlin said, "Uther was your father and Igraine, his queen, your mother. But they were not yet married when you were conceived."

"So Uther asked me to raise you as my own son," Ector continued. "He promised to make your birth known and proclaim you as his son and heir once you had grown to manhood."

"But he died before he could do so. And your mother, also."

Arthur sat in stunned silence.

"You must return to Cadbury at once and claim your inheritance," said Ector.

"You must become the next High King," Merlin agreed.

I watched and listened in growing confusion. Which side is Hades on? I asked myself. Aten wants Arthur killed. Now Hades is telling Arthur he should be High King? That's exactly the opposite of what Aten desires. Or is this another of their subtle plots? Arthur claims the kingship and he's assassinated by one of the others who wants the title. Is that their ploy?

"You are the only man in the realm who can bring the petty kingdoms together, Arthur," Ector was telling him. "Unless you make yourself High King, Britain will tear itself apart."

"And leave the pickings to the Saxons and the other barbarians," Merlin added.

Slowly, hesitantly, Arthur muttered, "I never thought...this is more than I...anyone..."

I could see the anguish in his eyes. It was one thing to be the High King's battle leader and thrash the invading barbarians up and down the land. But to be High King himself! The possibility had never entered Arthur's mind before this very moment.

"You must," said Merlin.

Ector smiled down at him. "You can do it, my lad. No one else in the entire land of Britain can."

Still Arthur sat, blinking in doubt, uncertainty.

Still standing by the door, I spoke out. "Why else do you think the Lady of the Lake gave you Excalibur, my lord?"

The two old men glared at me. But Arthur clasped the jeweled hilt of the sword at his side and slowly got to his feet.

"She knew?"

"She knows that you can be a great king," I said. "It is your destiny."

He stood straighter, squared his shoulders. "Then...I suppose it must be."

Ector clapped his hands in glee. And froze their, his wrinkled face smiling so widely I could see the rotted stumps of his teeth, like an uneven picket fence. Arthur stood immobilized, too, his hand on Excalibur's hilt, his face set in grim anticipation.

Merlin turned to me. "Congratulations, Orion. You've convinced him he should be High King."

"You're the one who convinced him," I said, knowing that neither Ector nor Arthur could see or hear anything.

"I told you I'd be neutral in this matter," Merlin said, in Hades' rich baritone voice. "I've set him on the road to Cadbury. Now his fate is in the lap of the gods." He laughed at his little joke.

"And the gods want him dead," I said.

"Most of them do. They agree with Aten. Only Anya and a few of the others want Arthur to succeed."

"As I do."

He laughed again, louder and more bitterly. "You? You're not even a mortal, Orion. You're a creature, one of Aten's constructions. What difference does your opinion make?"

"We'll see," I said.

"Yes, indeed we will."

With that, Merlin/Hades disappeared. He winked out of existence, as if he'd never been there.

Arthur and Ector stirred out of their stasis.

"Where's Merlin?" Arthur asked.

"Gone," I said.

"But how could he - "

Ector shrugged his frail shoulders. "He's a mighty wizard, Arthur. His comings and goings are pure magic."

I remembered from somewhere in another lifetime the words of a very wise man: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

*

The following morning Arthur was in a sweat to get started for Cadbury. The sky was a cloudless bright blue, but the land lay under a thick blanket of snow. With a handful of his best knights - and their squires - Arthur left Castle Wroxeter and headed south. Friar Samson accompanied us, wrapped in a thick black hooded robe, offering prayers and blessings as we left.

Ector insisted on coming along, despite the frailty of his years. "I'll go only as far as Castle Cameliard," he said, "to make certain that King Leodegrance makes you welcome."

Despite the numbing cold the weather was beautiful: the drifts of snow glittered beneath the crystal sky. Our horses floundered through the deep drifts as we rode slowly, painfully southward. And I wondered what awaited us at Castle Cameliard.

*

If Leodegrance styled himself a king, I thought, he must be a very meager one. Cameliard was a ramshackle set of thatch-roofed buildings set on a hilltop and surrounded by a palisade of lopsided, sagging staves, their tops once sharpened to points but now looking weathered, blunted, sadly neglected.

The castle's chamberlain recognized Sir Ector and invited us to spend the night. Our horses' hooves boomed on the warped planks of the sagging drawbridge that covered the moat, which was filled with reeking putrid garbage rather than water. The chamberlain saw us safely quartered in one wing of the main building, then ushered Arthur and Ector to an audience with the king.

Leodegrance sat on a throne of age-dulled oak. He was iron gray: his beard had obviously not felt a brush in weeks, his untrimmed hair fell lank and greasy below his shoulders, his face was square and blocky, his eyes the color of a steel blade. His tunic looked new and clean, however. He stared unblinkingly at Arthur as he and Ector approached the throne and made courteous bows. I remained at the doorway with Kay, who served as his father's squire this day.

Once Ector introduced Arthur and explained that he was going to Cadbury to claim his right to be High King, Leodegrance's face went even colder, crafty. Something was being calculated behind those iron gray eyes, I knew.

Throwing aside the usual diplomatic niceties, Ector asked bluntly if Leodegrance would support Arthur's claim.

To my surprise the king answered, "The son of Uther Pendragon? Of course you have my support."

Before Arthur could utter a word of thanks, though, Leodegrance smiled slyly and added, "Under one condition."

Ector said, "A condition?"

"A High King requires a wife, so that he can have legitimate heirs who will carry on his line," said Leodegrance.

"True," Ector agreed. "But Arthur is scarcely twenty. There is plenty of time for him to find a wife."

Arthur had already sired a son, Modred, by the witch Morganna. She was raising him in her castle in Berenicia, beyond Hadrian's Wall, raising him to hate his father.

"No need to search any farther for your wife, young Arthur," Leodegrance said, smiling broadly now. "I have a daughter, Guinevere. You will meet her tonight at dinner."

Arthur looked as if someone had pole-axed him.

*

Guinevere turned out to be a pretty and young, slim and sprightly as an elf, with long chestnut hair that tumbled down her back and sparkling brown eyes. All through dinner she chattered away nervously, sitting be-

tween Arthur and her father. Arthur picked at the slab of venison set before him; Guinevere ate heartily, tearing into the roast with both hands, talking every minute. From my seat across the room, crowded in with the other squires and the slavering shaggy hounds, I thought she seemed jumpy, almost frightened. And down at the end of the high table sat Friar Samson, his brows knitted into a scowl, hardly touching the meat set before him.

At the other end of the high table sat young Lancelot. His eyes never left Guinevere, not for a moment.

Is this the test that Anya warned me about? I asked myself. Arthur certainly looks uncomfortable, sitting next to her. Does Leodegrance plan to assassinate Arthur and claim the High Kingship for himself? Is Guinevere part of his plan?

I wished I could be up at the high table beside Arthur to taste his food and drink. My body absorbs most poisons and breaks them down into harmless ingredients. I have been bitten by venomous snakes without ill effect.

Despite my fears Arthur got through the dinner with nothing more harmful than his discomfort at being placed beside the elfin Guinevere. At last the dinner ended. There was an awkward moment when the king pushed away the last bowl of apples and rose slowly and somewhat unsteadily to his feet. Everyone else stood, of course. Guinevere turned toward Arthur expectantly, but he simply stood beside her, his arms at his sides. After a few heartbeats she spun around and clutched at her father's arm. They walked off together, leaving Arthur standing there, looking befuddled.

Ector, Kay and Friar Samson went with Arthur to the corner bedchamber that Leodegrance had given him. I went too, determined to stand outside his door all night to guard against any possible treachery.

"Well," Ector asked, beaming, "what do you think of her, my boy?"

"Guinevere?" Arthur asked.

"Who else?"

Kay sat on the bed, bouncing slightly to test it. "She's a pretty little thing," he said, with a grin, patting the bedcover suggestively.

Arthur said nothing. I remembered how Morganna had enchanted him. She was another of the Creators in human form; she called herself Aphrodite. I myself had felt the power of her allure. It was clear to me that Arthur was still under her spell, at least a little.

"She'll make a fine queen for you," Ector prompted. "You can be married here and bring her to Cadbury with you."

"No!" cried Friar Samson.

We all turned to him.

"This girl is a pagan," he said. "She follows the old gods. She's not even been baptized!"

"Half the people of Britain have not been baptized," Ector said, frowning. "More than half."

"The High King must have a Christian wife," Samson insisted. "The example must be set."

"I'm a Christian," said Arthur. "Isn't that enough?"

The friar looked shocked. "How could even think of taking a pagan for your wife?"

Arthur stared down at his boots for a moment, then said in a low voice, "I don't want her for my wife. I don't want to be married. Not now. Not yet."

Ector went to his side, took Arthur by the elbow, and guided him to the Roman-styled wooden chair in the corner of the room. Once Arthur was seated with Ector standing beside him, I realized that he and the old man were nearly eye-to-eye.

"Arthur, you have been like a true son to me."

"And you have been a good father to me," Arthur replied.

"Often I have given you advice. Has it ever been false or harmful?"

"No, never."

"Then heed me now, my boy. A king need not like his wife. Kings marry for political reasons, not for romance. A king can always find plenty of women to bed."

"That's sinful!" gasped Samson.

Ector ignored him. "You needn't like your queen. You only have to have a son by her."

Arthur looked torn, pained. "Buy my father - my actual father - he loved my mother, didn't he?"

Ector heaved a great sigh. "Ah, that was something else, my boy. Uther's passion for Igraine led him to go to war so he could possess her."

"Sin," hissed the friar. Arthur glared at him and he said no more.

"Marry Guinevere," Ector urged, "and you will gain Leodegrance's support. It would be foolish to make an enemy of him."

"Besides," Kay chimed in, still sitting on the bed, "she might be a lot of fun."

"But she's a pagan," Samson complained. "So is her father."

Ector was not deterred. "By marrying a pagan, Arthur, you show the people that you intend to be High King for everyone, not merely the Christians."

Samson looked horrified.

Quickly Ector added, "You can always baptize her after you're married. She'd have no choice but to obey you, then."

Arthur's head sank. "I've got to think about this," he muttered. "Please leave me now, all of you."

Reluctantly, Ector, Kay and the friar left; Samson the most loath of all to leave before winning Arthur to his point of view. I stood in the drafty hallway and watched them go to their bedchambers, then rested my back against the wooden wall and listened to the wind moaning outside, intent on staying on guard until daylight. The only light in the hallway came from a torch set into a sconce down by the stairway that led to Leodegrance's great hall. As the hours crept slowly by, it guttered and died, leaving me in darkness.

I need very little sleep, but I confess that I was drifting as I stood guard, my eyes heavy, my head sinking to my chest.

A sound snapped me to full attention. The creak of a floorboard; the padding of running feet. Someone was hurrying down the dark hallway, making no effort to be silent about it. I can see like a cat, and I quickly discerned the approaching figure of a man, sword unsheathed.

I pulled out my sword and the figure stopped abruptly.

"Who's there? Orion, is that you?" Lancelot's voice, high and tense with anxiety.

"What are you doing, prowling about at night?" I whispered.

"Guinevere!" he said urgently. "She's being abducted!"

"What?"

"I saw them, out in the courtyard. A band of hooded men, all in white. Six or more. They have her with them!"

Kidnapping Arthur's intended bride? Why? Who? A thousand questions raced through my mind. I wondered if I should leave Arthur asleep and unguarded. Perhaps this was a ruse to draw me away from his door.

"Stay here and guard Arthur," I said to Lancelot. "I'll go after them."

"No! One man can't fight them all."

"But - " It was too late. He was already running down the hallway toward the stairs that led down to the courtyard, shouting, "To arms! Rise! Awake! To arms!"

I had no choice but to follow him. He was right: one man could not face a half dozen armed enemies, not even Lancelot. Behind me I could hear grumbles and curses as Arthur's knights stumbled out of their beds.

Down the wooden stairs Lancelot raced and out into the numbing cold of the courtyard, with me two steps behind him. The stars were like hard gleaming diamonds in the freezing black sky. Lancelot had a cloak over his shoulders, but it flew open as he ran.

Lancelot hesitated a heartbeat, looked around, then pointed his sword toward the postern gate.

"That's the way they were taking her!"

"How did you come to see them?" I puffed as I hurried after him.

"I was up in the tower, keeping watch," he called back over his shoulder.

"We should wait for Arthur and the others."

"No time! God knows what they could do to her if we don't reach them quickly!"

My mind kept warning me that this could be a trap, but I couldn't imagine Lancelot betraying Arthur. The young knight worshipped Arthur, followed him like a puppy.

The postern gate was ajar. "They're in a hurry," I said as we ducked through it.

Beyond the snow-covered ground at the castle wall's base, a pair of logs had been lain across the refuse-filled ditch of the moat. They stood out dark and bare against the snow. Guinevere's captors laid had them there to speed their escape. Did they know Lancelot and I were pursuing them?

I could see no sign of horses in the dim starlight. They were on foot. There was a rough trail through the snow that led into the woods made by more than six pairs of boots, I saw.

Lancelot plunged into the woods as if he were chasing a single helpless foe. I pushed on after him as he followed the trail through the banks of snow. Up ahead, through the black boles of the trees, I saw a light. It flickered fitfully; not one of the Creators, I reasoned. It looked more like a bonfire.

Lancelot was plunging ahead, hell-bent to reach the kidnappers. I grabbed him by the shoulder and forced him to thump heavily down in the snow.

"Wait!" I whispered. "See how many we face before you go dashing in."

"They might harm her!" he whispered back. "Kill her!"

"Getting yourself killed won't help her," I said.

He shook free of my grip and crawled through the snow toward the firelight, his sword glinting in his right hand. I looked back along the trail we had come. No sign of any of the knights, neither could I hear anyone coming along after us.

Setting my teeth, I pushed through the snow drifts, following Lancelot. He had dropped to one knee, eying the scene before him like a lion sizing up its prey.

In a small clearing a dozen white-robed figures were standing hand-in-hand, forming a ring around a blazing bonfire taller than a full-grown man. And Guinevere was standing with them, wearing nothing but a gossamer shift, her chestnut hair tumbling down below her waist, holding hands with the men on her right and left.

"Druids!" Lancelot whispered.

"They've been outlawed since the Romans ruled Britain," I said.

"But now they've returned to their ancient rites."

Human sacrifice was part of their ancient rites, I knew.

Lancelot tensed to spring into their midst. The Druids did not seem to be carrying arms of any kind, yet who knew what lay hidden beneath the folds of their robes?

Again I grasped Lancelot's shoulder, holding him down. He tried to wrench free, but I whispered into his ear, "They don't seem to be harming her."

As I spoke, they began to dance. Somewhere out of the darkness came the eerie wail of a wooden flute, and the Druids - with Guinevere among them - began a stately, slow dance circling around the crackling, sparking fire.

I stood up and Lancelot rose beside me. Together we walked out of the shadows of the trees, into the clearing, toward Guinevere. The Druids stopped, froze into immobility. I could see the shock on their long-bearded faces as the two of us advanced on them with drawn swords.

"Stop!" Guinevere commanded, holding out both hands to us.

"We've come to rescue you," said Lancelot.

"Rescue me? These are my friends."

"Friends? Bloody Druids?"

The Druids seemed thoroughly frightened of us. They were slowly backing away from us and our shining sharp-edged blades.

"We thought they were abducting you," I said.

Slight as a sparrow, Guinevere stepped toward me, no trace of fear in her demeanor. "They are helping me to escape."

"Escape?" Lancelot asked. "From what?"

"From Arthur. From marriage. He doesn't want me for a bride and I don't want to be married to anyone. Especially not to him!"

Lancelot looked as if she had clouted him between the eyes with a quarterstaff.

Through the dark woods I heard the shouts of angry men. Arthur's knights were approaching, probably with Arthur at their lead.

The Druids heard them too. Without word among them, they bolted in the opposite direction and disappeared into the trees.

"So much for your friends," I said to Guinevere.

Her brown eyes snapped angrily at me. "What can they expect at the hands of Friar Samson and his like? Your holy man would burn my friends at the stake."

Yes, I thought, and sow the seeds of bitter enmity between Arthur and the pagans still living in Britain. A civil war of the most brutal kind would be the result.

At that moment, Bors and Kay burst into the clearing, swords in their hands. Leodegrance and Arthur were right behind him, the king of Cameliard looking more than a little ridiculous in his night shift, with a shield on one arm and a heavy battle-mace in the other. Arthur had thrown on his chain mail. Excalibur gleamed in the firelight.

"It's all right, sire," I said, thinking as fast as I could. "A band of cutthroats abducted the princess, but Lancelot drove them off single-handedly."

Lancelot's jaw fell open at that, but he said nothing.

"They intended to hold Guinevere for ransom, sire," I went on, "knowing that she is to be your bride."

Arthur looked me in the eye, then nodded as if he knew what was going on. Sheathing his sword, he turned away from me and grasped Lancelot by both shoulders.

"Thank you," he said. "You have saved the honor of my bride-to-be."

Lancelot stammered, "It...I was glad to do it, sire."

For an awkward moment we all stood there next to the roaring bonfire, feeling slightly foolish. Then Arthur said, "Back to the castle, everyone."

Lancelot took off his cloak and draped it around Guinevere's slight shoulders. She smiled at him, then stepped to Arthur's side and allowed him to take her hand.

As the others started back toward the castle, Lancelot stood there in the clearing, looking downcast.

I said to him, low enough so that only he could hear it, "Arthur owes you a great debt, although he'll never know of it. You may have saved the kingdom this night."

Lancelot said nothing. His eyes were following Guinevere as she allowed Arthur to lead her back to the castle, back to her wedding. But she glanced back at Lancelot and smiled sadly.

In my mind, I heard Anya whisper, "You saved Arthur's realm from bloody civil war, Orion. Well done."

Before I could bask in the glow of her approval, Aten's smug voice intruded into my thoughts. "Very well done, indeed, Arthur. The seeds of Arthur's destruction took root tonight."

And he laughed his sneering, hateful laugh in the cold, dark winter night.