

ENCHANTMENT

Ben Bova

The night was black and cold. Freezing rain pelted down hard and relentless. I stood beneath the scant shelter of a crumbling archway, its ancient stones dripping and slimy with green moss. Icy mist rose from the graveyard beyond the arch like ghostly spirits rising from the dead. It was easy to see how the people here believed in their supernatural terrors. Ignorance and superstition always went hand in hand.

I was soaked to the skin, despite the heavy woolen cloak I had draped over my tunic and chain mail. My body automatically clamped down my peripheral blood vessels, to keep as much body heat within me as possible.

It had been raining steadily for days, and now the rain was turning into sleet. Back south where Ambrosius ruled as High King in Cadbury castle it was harvest time with bright golden days and a smiling orange full moon. Here along Hadrian's Wall it was already winter; snow was on the way. Arthur's long campaign against the barbarians was grinding to a halt.

Once the Roman legions abandoned Britain, barbarian tribes from across the sea invaded the island. Saxons, Angles, Jutes, Frisians, they swarmed onto Britain's shores and burned, looted and raped their way inland. It was Arthur's hope to drive them back into the sea.

Arthur and his knights had fought all summer long, battling the invading barbarians in a bitter campaign that had started far to the south and now had brought us to the border of the Scottish lands. The aging Ambrosius Aurelianus, who styled himself High King of all the Celts, remained in his fine castle at Cadbury, ready to move against the Saxons on Britain's south shore if they tried to push inland.

There were too few knights for Arthur to drive the barbarians entirely out of Britain. But he crushed their military power, annihilated the flower of their fighting manhood. Thoroughly cowed, they retreated to their fortified villages along the coast, but they would push no farther inland. Not until a new generation of boys grew to fighting age.

Meantime the wild and fearsome Scots and Picts had swarmed across the unguarded length of Hadrian's Wall to spread fire and terror through the northern lands. Three days ago we had trapped their marauding army against the wall and slaughtered them. They had thought the old crumbling wall was meant to keep them out of Britain's northern reaches. Arthur showed them that the wall had other uses. It became a trap. Pinned against the wall, they could not flee when Arthur's knights rode down on them.

It was a terrible day, raining hard, the ground beneath our horses' hooves a sea of cloying, slippery mud. Sir Bors wanted to wait until the rain stopped and the field dried, but Arthur feared that the barbarians would escape across the wall by then. So we charged through the rain and mud into the wild, disorganized mass of frenzied barbarians. Soon the mud was churned into an ocean of blood.

I rode behind Arthur. I served as his squire, and my duty was to protect his back. He divided the knights into two divisions, one headed by Bors, the other by himself. We charged from opposite directions, catching the freezing, rain soaked barbarian warriors between us. They fought bravely at first, but no man on foot can stand up to the charge of knights protected by chain mail, shield and helmet, driving home an iron tipped lance with all the power of a mighty steed at full gallop behind it.

The barbarians crumbled after that first charge. The battle became a melee, with enemy warriors scrambling madly up the overgrown old stones of the Wall, made slippery by the incessant rain, slicker still by their own blood.

Arthur wielded Excalibur, stroking to the right and left, slashing the life from every warrior he could reach. Lancelot was at his right hand, his own sword a blur of swift death. I stayed on Arthur's left, alert for treachery. I knew that Arthur had been marked for assassination; I myself had been ordered to kill him by Aten, the Creator who had sent me to this time and place.

The battle ended at last; Arthur was barely touched during the fighting. Night fell and the knights huddled around fitful campfires, sheltering beneath the flat-sided tents erected by their churls. But repose was not for me.

I followed a summons implanted in my mind and headed off to the distant graveyard. Now I waited in the freezing rain beneath the dripping stones of the ancient archway. I half expected Aten or one of the other Creators to rise out of the mists in the graveyard. Instead, I saw the cloaked and hooded figure of a monk making his way around the perimeter of the cemetery, head bent and shoulders stooped against the pelting rain.

He carried a lantern that flickered fitfully against the miserable night. Once he reached me, he lifted it high enough to see my face.

"You are Orion?" he asked, in a voice thick with age and rheumy congestion.

"I am," I said. "And you?"

"I am but a humble messenger sent to fetch you. Follow me."

Coughing fitfully, he led me around the edge of the graveyard, not daring to cut through it toward his destination. Dark bare trees stood along the muddy path, stretching their empty arms to the cloud-covered sky. At last we reached a small dome made of stones. A monk's solitary cell, I realized. A place built for solitary prayer and penitence. A place, I thought, for hunger and pneumonia. Through the rain-soaked darkness I could hear waves crashing against a craggy cliff. The sea was not far off.

I had to duck low to get through the cell's entrance, and once inside I could stand straight only in the center of the cramped little dome. It was a relief to get out of the rain, although the stones of the cell's interior were slimy with mold and dripping water. The beehive shaped cell was empty. In the dim light of the monk's lamp I could see that there was no chair, no hearth, not even a blanket to sleep upon. Nothing but a few tufts of straw thrown on the muddy ground.

"Wait here," wheezed the monk.

Before I could reply or ask a question, he stepped outside into the icy rain and disappeared in the darkness.

"Orion."

I turned to see Merlin. The old wizard stood before me in a circle of light, his dark robe reaching to the ground, his ash gray hair neatly combed and tied back, his long beard trim and clean, rather than in its usual knotted filthy state. He had stayed behind at Cadbury castle, many weeks' travel from this place; yet he was here.

"My lord Merlin," I said, as befitted a squire addressing his master's mentor, a man reputed to be a mighty wizard.

He smiled wanly. "No need for obsequies, Orion. We can speak frankly to one another."

"As you wish," I said cautiously.

He gazed at me for a long, silent moment, those piercing eyes beneath the shaggy brows inspecting me like xray lasers.

"You are one of Aten's creatures, obviously."

"And which of the Creators are you?" I countered.

"Why are you resisting Aten's commands?"

I was cold, wet, tired from the long day's fighting, weary of being Aten's

pawn. This wizened old man, so shriveled and frail I could snap his spine like a dry twig, was toying with me and I resented it.

"Aten hasn't told you?" I asked. "Why don't you look into my mind and find out for yourself?"

He shook his head. "Aten has built blocks into your mind. Limitations. Do you recall when you first met Arthur?"

"At Amesbury fort, last spring," I said.

Again he shook his head. "No. Years before that. Arthur was merely a lad then."

I tried to remember. I could feel my face wrinkling into a frown of concentration. Nothing.

"Do you remember Grendel and the cave where you found Excalibur?"

"Anya," I said, as the memory of her matchless beauty surfaced in my consciousness. "She is the Lady of the Lake; she gave Excalibur to Arthur."

"But you remember nothing of Grendel and Heorot?"

"Nothing," I admitted.

"You see? Aten has blocked your mind. He allows you to know only enough to accomplish your mission."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"One of the Creators, as you guessed."

"Which one?"

He tugged at his beard for a moment, then smiled in a scornful, mocking way. "Do you really want to know, Orion?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Very well."

The light bathing him intensified, brightened until it was almost too dazzling to look at. It turned red, slowly at first, but then its color deepened, redder than fire, redder than hot molten rubies fresh from the Earth's fiery core. I felt its heat radiating against me, burning me, forcing me to squeeze my eyes shut.

"Don't be afraid, Orion. You may look upon me now."

We were no longer in the monk's cold, dank cell. We stood in a long columned hall, thick stone pillars so tall their tops were lost in shadow. Torches burned in sconces between the pillars, throwing baleful ruby light across the hard polished stone floor. Before me stood a man in the full splendor of youthful adulthood, magnificently garbed in a sculpted uniform of gleaming jetblack armor inlaid with intricate traceries of blood red. His hair and beard were dark, his eyes even darker, blazing like chips of onyx in the flickering light of the torches.

"You may call me Hades," he said.

Hades. The Creators took pleasure in appearing to mere mortals as gods and goddesses. The Creator who commanded me styled himself Aten, an ancient sun god. To the classical Greeks he was Apollo, to the Incas he was Inti, to the Persians of Zoroaster's time he called himself Ormazd, the god of light.

This one was Hades. In Greek mythology Hades was the brother of Zeus, lord of the underworld. Death was his domain.

"Where is Anya?" I asked.

Of all the Creators, she was the only one who cared about humankind. All the others played their games and manipulated history to suit their lusts for power and adulation. How many wars through the long millennia had been started by their petty jealousies and rivalries? How many millions of humans had been sacrificed to their obsessions and hates? Anya alone tried to help mere mortals. I loved her; through all the missions of murder and violence that I had endured, through all the deaths that I had suffered, Anya's love was the one joy that I knew, the only reason that I kept struggling. I wanted to find her, reach her, be with her for eternity.

But Aten kept us apart. He had created me, built me to be his hunter, his warrior, his assassin. It was Aten who sent me to die in the eternal snows of the Ice Age and a thousand other place-times. It was Anya who helped me, loved me, cared for me.

"Anya is far from here," said Hades, his face grown serious. "Aten knows that she opposes his desires concerning Arthur and he has stirred a disruption of the world-lines that she is striving to repair."

"She saved my life when Morganna was ready to kill me," I remembered.

"She won't be able to help you when next you meet the bewitching Morganna."

Morganna was in truth another of the Creators, the one who called herself Aphrodite: beautiful, capricious, cruel.

"Morganna seeks Arthur's destruction," I said.

Hades nodded solemnly. "She supports Aten in this. Anya and a few of the other Creators oppose them."

"And you?"

Hades smiled again, a coldly calculating smile. "I haven't decided which way I will go. As Merlin, I have helped young Arthur. He could become a powerful force in human history. He just might be able to make Britain into a peaceful, prosperous island, a haven of civilization in a world darkened by the collapse of Rome. But I doubt that he ever will. His time may already be past."

"Aten wants Arthur out of the way so that the barbarians can engulf Britain," I said. "He wants to see a barbarian empire covering all of the Old World, from Hibernia to the islands of Japan, all of them worshipping him."

"There is much to be said for such a plan," Hades said slowly. "It will bring about a millennium or so of disruption, but "

"A thousand years of ignorance and war, of disease and death," I said.

"What's a thousand years?" he quipped, shrugging.

"What's a few tens of millions of lives?" I retorted sarcastically.

"Orion, you bleed too much for these mortals."

"I will not let Aten murder Arthur."

His dark brows rose. "Bold talk for a creature. If Aten wills it, you will do whatever he wants."

"No," I insisted. "I'm not a robot or a puppet."

"He'll let you die, then. Very painfully. And you will not be revived."

If I can't be with Anya, I thought to myself, I might as well die forever.

"And he'll send another creature to carry out his commands. You'll suffer great pain and final oblivion for nothing."

"I will not assassinate Arthur," I repeated stubbornly. "As long as I live, I will protect him."

Hades stroked his beard thoughtfully, staring at me for a long, silent moment. "It will be interesting to see how long you can carry out your resolve. Aten will destroy you sooner or later, of course, but I wonder just how long you can get away with defying him."

"You find this amusing?"

"Very," he admitted casually. "You know, I came to this place-time and took on the guise of Merlin to help Arthur through his childhood. Aten wanted Arthur to succeed only far enough to force the barbarians to combine against him."

"I understand that. Then Arthur is to be killed."

"Thanks to you, Arthur is trouncing the barbarians, shattering their power. Aten wants him stopped. So does Morganna."

"He doesn't deserve to be murdered."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Hades mused. "Aten has been after me to join his side in this. But you...you and your ridiculous insistence on defying him...I wonder how far you can carry it out?"

"Help me, then," I blurted. "With your help Arthur can make Britain a beacon of civilization."

He laughed. "Aten would be furious."

"What of it? Is he more powerful than you?"

His laughter cut off. "I'll go this far, Orion. I will not help Aten. Neither will I join the other side. I will watch how far you can go. It will be an amusing game."

That's all that mortal misery and death meant to these Creators. We were a game to amuse them.

Then I recalled what he had said earlier. "Arthur will meet Morganna again?"

"Yes, and soon. You are on the edge of her domain now."

"Berenicia."

"Already she is laying her plans for him."

"What plans?" I asked eagerly.

Instead of answering, Hades disappeared. The torch-lit columned hall

vanished. I was back in the cold, dripping monk's cell again. Alone.

*

"I dreamed of Merlin last night," Arthur told me when I met him the following morning.

I suppressed a smile and replied, "So did I, my lord."

The rain had stopped at last. The clouds had cleared away. A pale northern sun shone out of a crisp blue sky. It wasn't warm, but compared to the miserable weather of the past few days, it seemed like midsummer to us.

The long summer's fighting had toughened Arthur, matured him. To the casual eye he was still a very young man in his early twenties, broad of shoulder and strongly muscled. His sandy light brown hair fell to his shoulders; his beard was neatly trimmed. His light blue eyes were clear and sparkling with energy.

We were breaking camp that morning. Arthur had decided to take his knights across Hadrian's Wall into the land of the Scots, not so much to fight the tattered remains of their army as to show them that they had no refuge from his power. Ambrosius' power, actually. Ambrosius was the High King, Arthur's aging uncle, and Arthur fought beneath his banner. Arthur was the old king's dux bellorum, battle leader.

"It was a troubling dream," he said as we walked slowly toward the makeshift corral where our horses awaited. Unfortunately, the wind was in our faces.

If the smell and the flies bothered Arthur, however, he gave no sign of it. He talked about his dream.

"It was very strange, Orion. Merlin appeared to me with a very lovely young girl at his side. An enchantress, it seemed to me."

"Morganna?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, not her, thank God." He crossed himself.

"Then who was she?"

"I don't know. But she certainly seemed to have Merlin in her spell. He told me he was going away with her and I wouldn't see him anymore."

I could see that Arthur was clearly perplexed.

"You don't think that Merlin would leave me, do you? He's been like a father to me. I can't remember a time when he wasn't there, helping me, showing me what I should do."

"Perhaps," I said, "you are old enough now to make your own decisions. Perhaps you no longer need Merlin."

He looked alarmed at that thought. "I've sent a messenger to Cadbury castle. I want to make certain that Merlin is still there. That he's all right. Perhaps this dream was a warning that he's sick. He's very old, you know."

Older than you can understand, I replied silently.

We rode that day through one of the gates in the wall built by the Romans nearly four centuries earlier. Even though Arthur's knights numbered scarcely two hundred, it took all day for them and their squires and the footmen and churls and camp followers to get through that single unguarded gate.

On the far side of the Wall the land stretched out before us in rolling hills that led to misty blue mountains in the distance. We rode slowly along a broad grassy dale, with the footmen trudging behind us. Thick forest climbed up the hillsides on either side of us.

Sir Bors rode up to Arthur's side, a rare smile on his doughty, battle-scarred face.

"North of the Wall," he said proudly. "No civilized troops have been on this side of the Wall since the legions left."

Arthur smiled back at him, but said, "Detail some of the knights to ride ahead and along our flanks. Those woods could hide an army of ambushers easily."

Bors nodded. Thick forests were poor territory for mounted knights. We dealt best with our enemies in open ground, where we could charge them.

Young Lancelot, who always rode within earshot of Arthur, eagerly volunteered for the picket duty. Bors distrusted Lancelot's ardent quest for glory; he thought the young knight's fearless courage was little short of foolhardy. But on this day even tough old Bors nodded laughingly and sent Lancelot on his way.

It must be the good weather, I thought.

Then Bors turned back to Arthur. "We'll be in the enchantress' domain

soon."

Arthur nodded and muttered, "Morganna."

He had been truly enchanted by Morganna, back at Cadbury castle a year ago. Aphrodite had besotted him, and then tried to assassinate him. Only Anya's interference had saved Arthur's life.

"My uncle Ambrosius wants an alliance with Berenicia. It could be an effective buffer against the Scots and Picts."

"An alliance with the witch?" Bors grumbled.

Arthur smiled at the older knight, but it was cheerless, bitter. "The High King wants it."

That ended Bors' smiles for the rest of the day.

*

The next morning we reached castle Berenicia. It was an impressive citadel, standing high on a crag by the relentless sea, three of its sides protected by the sheer cliff. The only way to approach it was by the winding uphill path we rode. Unlike most of the fortresses I had seen, which were little more than grimy stockades with wooden palisades around them, Berenicia was protected by stone walls with turrets at each corner. A steep ditch ran in front of the main gate. Its drawbridge was pulled up.

Sir Gawain, freshly washed and his long dark locks shining with oil, whistled with appreciation as he looked over the battlements.

"No wonder the barbarians have never been able to take this castle," he said.

"What are you so prettied up for?" Bors jibed at him.

Gawain flashed his bright smile. "Where there's a castle there are wenches." He turned to Arthur. "You may have the princess, my lord, but you can't have all the women."

We stopped before the ditch and leather lunged Bors hailed the castle.

"Who goes there?" came the timehonored challenge from the battlements above the main gate.

"Sir Arthur, dux bellorum of Ambrosius Aurelianus, High King of all the Celts, has come to see the Princess Morganna."

Morganna's father had died some years ago, we knew, and she ruled Berenicia. By witchcraft, according to the fearful tales told of her. By the powers of the Creators, I knew. It amounted to almost the same thing.

"Queen Morganna will decide if she wishes to receive you," the sentinel responded.

"She styles herself a queen now," Bors said to Arthur.

"Perhaps she's married," Gawain suggested.

Arthur looked relieved at that thought. Then he wondered, "If she has married, it must be to a king. Who could it be?"

"Who would have her?" Bors muttered.

At length, the drawbridge came clattering down and we rode over it into the courtyard, our horses' hooves booming on the stout timbers, the footmen following close behind. The courtyard was a large square of packed dirt; all the exits out of it were firmly shut with spiked iron gates. Men-at-arms stood up on the rooftops all around us. I felt uneasy. We could be slaughtered here, penned like cattle.

Then one of the gates screeched open and Morganna stepped into the sunlight to greet Arthur. She was truly Aphrodite, the most incredibly beautiful woman on earth: hair as dark and lustrous as polished ebony, skin as white as alabaster. Her richly embroidered gown clung to every curve of her body. I glanced at Gawain; his eyes were popping. We all stared at her. I myself felt the desire she raised in every man: powerful, alluring.

At her side stood a tall, broad shouldered man with long white hair falling past his shoulders. His beard was white also, and his face was lined and spider webbed with age, yet he stood straight as a forest pine, unbent by his years.

At Arthur's command we dismounted from our steeds. He walked slowly toward her and her husband. The rest of us stood stock-still. I saw Bors, beside me, nervously eying the rooftops and the men posted there.

"Arthur," said Morganna, smiling. "How good to see you again."

"Queen Morganna," Arthur replied, bowing somewhat stiffly. "I bring you greetings from Ambrosius Aurelianus."

Still smiling, she turned slightly and said, "This is my husband, King Ogier."

"Ogier the Dane," Bors whispered, shocked. "She's sold out to the barbarians."

*

Arthur accompanied Morganna and her husband, while the rest of us were led to the quarters she had allotted to us. The knights were taken to one of the towers, while we squires were sent to the stables, of course. The footmen and churls were told to find corners of the courtyard where they could spread their blankets.

I didn't see Arthur again until dinner, in the castle's main hall. It wasn't big enough to hold all of Arthur's knights; only a picked dozen were invited to sit at the long feasting table by the huge fireplace. Their squires sat on mean planks down on the packed earth floor.

The dinner was pleasant enough, although very little laughter issued from the head table. Afterward, Arthur motioned for me to accompany him to his quarters in the tower.

When I stepped into his room, I saw that Bors and Gawain were already there, looking very gloomy indeed. Lancelot slipped in behind me, before I could shut the heavy oaken door. Bors frowned at the young knight, but Arthur merely smiled and waved him to one of the beautifully carved chairs by the bedstead.

"Ogier the Dane," Bors said bitterly. "She's sold her kingdom to a barbarian king."

Arthur spoke more softly. "It must be very difficult for a woman to rule a kingdom. Especially here in the northlands, with the wild tribes constantly raiding."

"It's said she rules through witchcraft," Gawain offered. "Why then would she need a barbarian warrior to be her husband?"

I saw the expression on Arthur's face. He had witnessed Morganna's witchcraft with his own eyes. He had been seduced by her charms, and then nearly murdered by her.

"She bears you no good will," Bors said. "That much is clear, despite her royal reception."

"We are as much her prisoners as her guests," Lancelot said. "I fear that we have stepped into a trap."

Bors looked surprised and impressed with Lancelot's sound sense.

"Why has she married the Dane?" Arthur wondered aloud. "Does Ogier intend to bring his people across the sea to settle here? Must we add the Danes to our list of enemies?"

I decided to find out for myself.

*

Late that night, long after our meeting in Arthur's quarters had broken up in just as much puzzlement and uncertainty as it had begun, I got up from my pallet of straw in the stables. The other squires were asleep, snoring and muttering in their dreams. We had posted two guards, and they stood dutifully if drowsily by the stable doors.

I told them I couldn't sleep, and walked past them out into the courtyard before they could ask me to take the guard duty and let them rest. It was a cold, clear night. The stars were hard, sharp pinpoints in the black moonless sky. I saw a meteor streak across, silently hurrying as if it had an appointment to keep in the heavens.

Dressed only in my thin linen tunic, wearing no sword nor any weapon except the dagger that Odysseos had given me, strapped to my thigh, I walked along the shadow of the wall, stepping carefully over the sleeping bodies of Arthur's footmen and camp workers.

Morganna and her husband slept high in the castle's keep, a solid tower that rose at the rear of the courtyard, next to the wall that overlooked the sea. I knew the guards would not grant me entrance; I had no intention of asking them to let me pass.

Keeping to the deep shadow of the wall, I climbed the rough stones of the tower, maneuvering slowly to the seaward side once I got up above the level of the castle wall. There were no guards patrolling the wall on this side, with nothing below except the rocky crag and the restless, heaving sea far below. The wind tugged at me and my fingers grew numb with cold despite my conscious

efforts to control my body's internal heat. Still I climbed.

Just below the timbers of the tower's roof was a single window. Not a skinny arrow slit, as would be on the other towers facing potential enemy approaches, but a square window open to the beautiful view of the sea. I hauled myself across its ledge, pushing aside the thick drapes that covered it.

My eyes had long since adapted to the moonless night, but the interior of the room was even darker. I crouched by the window, peering into the shadows. This seemed to be a sitting room, well furnished but empty of people. Rich tapestries hung on its cold stone walls. Its fireplace, across the straw-covered floor, stood empty and dark.

A door led to a bedroom. I pushed it open slowly, slowly, so that it would not creak. The sullen red embers of a dying fire glowed in the fireplace. I could make out a bulky white headed body asleep in the bed, one sizable foot sticking out from the blankets: Ogier, alone. Morganna was nowhere in sight.

I concentrated all my willpower on Ogier's sleeping form, praying silently for Anya to help me. Whether she heard me or whether I did it for myself I could not know, but I felt a flash of infinite cold and suddenly I was standing on a grassy hillside in bright warm sunshine, the golden city of the Creators standing beneath its protective bubble of energy down where the hill melted into the sandy beach that fringed the wide, placid, glittering sea.

Ogier was lying on the grass, looking slightly ridiculous in a nightshirt that had ridden up on his rump, exposing his skinny, bony shanks. He sat up abruptly, wide awake, eyes staring with shock and fright.

"Where am I?" he shouted. "Who are you? What has happened to me?"

"No need to fear, my lord," I said calmly. "You are perfectly safe."

He scrambled to his feet, towering over me. "Witchcraft!" he squealed, his voice high with terror.

"You are no stranger to witchcraft," I replied. "You married an enchantress."

Ogier stared at me, his chest heaving. He spun around, then fixed his gaze on me again. Seeing that I was apparently unarmed, he seemed to calm himself somewhat.

"Who are you? What have you done?"

"I want to know why a Danish king has married a British sorceress," I said.

"You're going to break the spell?"

"What spell?"

"She..." He hesitated, eyes darting back and forth as if he expected to see someone nearby.

"Morganna?" I prompted.

Suddenly he leaped at me, hands reaching for my throat. He was a big man, and quite strong despite his years. Yet I was stronger. I had been built for violence, designed not merely to fight but to take joy in fighting. A surge of malevolent pleasure raced through me as I ripped his hands from my throat and twisted his arms until he was forced to kneel.

"The witch can't protect you from me," I said sharply. "Now tell me why you have come to Berenicia."

He collapsed, sobbing, onto the grass. I waited for him to gain control of himself.

At last he said, haltingly, "I am old...older than you know. I saw the face of death. He warned me that he would come for me soon. Then Morganna came to me...she told me she would give me the gift of life...she said I could live forever."

"So do the Christians say," I told him.

He grimaced. "Nay, they offer eternity after death, in another world. I mistrust those who say you can live forever, but only after you die."

He was a man who believed only what he could see with his own eyes.

"Morganna told me I could live forever, here, on Earth. And I could be become master of all Britain."

That perked up my ears.

"What did she ask of you in return?" I demanded.

"That I marry her and come to Berenicia. That I bring my Danes with me and conquer this island."

"And what of Arthur?"

He looked embarrassed and turned away from me. Staring at the ground, he mumbled, "She said that Arthur would come to castle Berenicia, but he would not leave it. Not alive."

"You dare to interfere, Orion?"

I turned at the sound of her voice. It was Aphrodite, no longer pretending to be a mortal, dressed in a softly draped robe so sheer that she might as well have been naked. She was magnificent, physically perfect, utterly desirable. Even though I yearned for Anya, the presence of Aphrodite was enough to make me forget my lost love, almost.

Ogier got slowly to his feet, gazing at her. "Morganna, he forced me to tell "

Aphrodite raised one hand and pointed a finger at him. He fell into silence, frozen like a statue, his mouth still open to form words that could not issue from his throat.

"He won't bother us now," she said, a cruel smile twisting her perfect lips. "And neither will you, anymore."

"You used Hades to frighten him, didn't you?" I accused.

Her smile widened slightly. "Hades put the fear of death into the old man. I offered him the gift of life. He took it willingly."

"Eternal life? For a mortal?"

Now she actually laughed. "Hardly eternal, Orion. He'll live long enough to conquer Britain. That's enough."

"I'll stop you," I said.

"You? Pitiful little creature, stop me? Remember that Aten is on my side in this."

"I'll stop you both."

Suddenly a star seemed to blaze out of the clear blue sky. Brighter and brighter it shone, turning the whole sky into molten copper, hotter and hotter until its glare forced me to throw my arms over my eyes and sink to my knees in agony.

"That's the proper attitude for my creature," said a voice I knew only too well. "You may look upon me, Orion."

I looked up, my eyes watering painfully. There stood Aten, in a splendid gold uniform, his thick mane of golden hair shining like a halo, his tawny eyes gazing down at me in amusement.

"You believe that you can stop me, Orion. Me, who created you? Who built you from atoms of dust and molecules of slime? Every bit of knowledge in your brain was put there by me. Every breath you take is taken only because I allow it."

Slowly I got to my feet, hatred burning deep within me at his sneering, haughty demeanor.

"Yet I fight against you," I said.

He smirked at me. "Not very well, I'm afraid. You've stepped into this trap easily enough."

"Trap?"

"Of course. How else do you think you were able to transport yourself and this mortal here? I brought you here, into the trap I've prepared for you."

"You're lying."

"You'll find out that I'm telling the truth. And once I've put you out of the way, I'll get the other Creators to join me in eliminating Arthur."

"Hades has agreed to stand aside and be neutral," I said hotly. "Anya and others of the Creators oppose you."

"Your precious Anya is far from here," Aten replied. "As for Hades, I don't need him for the moment. He'll return to my side soon enough."

"Destroy this one," Aphrodite hissed. "Eliminate him for all time."

Aten nodded. "I'm afraid she's right, Orion. You've become too difficult to control. It's sad to destroy the work of one's own hands, but..." He sighed. "Goodbye, Orion."

I was plunged into darkness, falling, falling in a black pit of doom, hurtling through a void where not even starlight could appear. I felt the cold of interstellar space seeping into my body, pain so deep it was like a thousand sharp blades flaying the flesh from my bones, a cryogenic cold freezing my limbs, my body, my mind. This is the end, I thought, my mind spinning. This is the final oblivion.

My last thought was of Anya. I would never see her, never again hold her. Death did not matter. Pain was meaningless. But being without her, not even able to say a final farewell, that was the ultimate torture.

My body died. The pain overwhelmed me. My bones were snapping, crumbling to dust. The last spark of my being flickered as it was engulfed by the darkness.

Yet I lived. Like an out-of-body experience, I somehow looked back and saw the poor suffering entity that was me being torn into bloody gobbets of flesh, crushed between invisible hands, torn apart as if on a merciless rack.

Your mind still lives, I heard somehow. The information that is you still flows through the cosmic spacetime, Orion.

Is this what death truly is? A bodiless, nonphysical existence, a shadow world of memories and desires, the same dreams and terrors endlessly repeating, echoing across the universes? Yet even as I wondered such thoughts, I could feel my bodiless mind fading, dwindling, dissolving into the final nothingness of ultimate oblivion.

"Focus," a voice said urgently. "Focus before your information pattern thins so much that it is drowned in the meaningless noise of the stars."

Anya's voice! I was certain of it. Perhaps I was insane, grasping at the last shred of hope like a drowning man thrashing for a piece of flotsam to buoy him up. But I was certain that it was Anya speaking to me.

"As long as the energy is there, matter can be formed. The pattern exists, and the body can be shaped from it."

"Anya!" I cried out into the lightless void.

"I am with you, my darling," she answered. "Even from the other side of the universe, from so distant in space and time that numbers lose all meaning, I am with you."

"I love you," I said. With all my being, I meant it.

"There's little I can do to help you, Orion," she said, "except to tell you what must be done. You must save yourself, you must find the strength to overcome the doom that faces you."

"Tell me," I said. "Tell me and I'll do it."

"The pattern of your consciousness is fading, Orion, wafting into the cosmic void like smoke drifting from a snuffed candle. You must focus that pattern, focus your consciousness, your being. You must use your energy to spark the candle into new flame."

I tried, but nothing happened. I concentrated, sought with every scrap of my remaining being to focus the dying pattern of energy that was my being. But nothing happened. I could feel myself growing weaker.

"You're fading!" Anya's voice warned. "Dying."

Her voice. Her being. She was reaching across a universe of spacetime to try to save me, to try to bring me back from final death. She loved me that much. Enough to defy Aten and the other Creators. Enough to risk her own existence in an effort to save me.

I would not let her strive in vain. "I love you, Anya," I called across the lightyears. "I will never stop loving you."

The vision of her, her courage, her loveliness, her love for me, brought new strength to my resolve. I could feel energy sharpening my consciousness, as if the streams of spacetime were flowing into me. I became a nexus, a protostar, pulling in energy and matter, growing, gaining strength.

"You're doing it!" Anya called from faraway. "You're succeeding!"

Orion the hunter, I thought. Orion the warrior. All those abilities that Aten had built into me, all those powers of stamina and tenacity I used now to bring myself back from the oblivion into which he had thrown me.

I am not a toy, not a puppet to be tossed aside when it no longer pleases its master. I am Orion, and I live to do as I will, as I must. I live to find Anya and be with her for eternity.

I blinked my eyes and found myself in the stable at castle Berenicia, alive and whole. I laughed aloud and actually savored the stinks and snores that surrounded me. I was alive, and it felt sweet to be so.

*

"Where have you been, Orion?" Arthur demanded.

He looked more worried than angry. I had risen with the dawn and washed in nearly frozen horse trough in the castle courtyard. Arthur, Bors and Gawain came

out of the tower where they had slept as I finished donning my tunic.

Bors' left arm was cradled in a rude sling. He limped noticeably. Gawain's head was wrapped in a bloodstained bandage.

"Orion's been wenching, I'll wager," Gawain said. His usual bright smile was gone. He seemed to wince at the sunlight, as if his head ached terribly.

"When you should be here, with your master," snarled the wounded Bors.

Before I could reply, Arthur said tiredly, "Orion, as my squire you must be at my call always. If you want to go away for a day or two, you must ask me first."

I had been missing for three days, they told me. That surprised me a little, but I was truly shocked to see how battered Bors and Gawain were.

Arthur seemed more relieved to see me again than angry that I had disappeared. He didn't really want an explanation; he wanted to make certain that I wouldn't disappear again unless I first asked his leave. Worse, though, he seemed tired, dispirited, exhausted as though he hadn't slept for days.

I apologized profusely, then asked, "My lord, are you ill? You seem...not well."

Arthur shook his head wearily. "How could I be, with all that's happened these past three dark days."

"Witchcraft," Bors muttered darkly. "There's evil afoot in this castle."

"Is that what happened to you, Sir Bors?" I asked. "And to you, Sir Gawain?"

"No," said Arthur. "What you see is the devilish handwork of King Ogier." I gaped at the two wounded knights. "The Dane did this to you?"

Bors gave me a look that would have curdled cream. Gawain looked downright embarrassed.

Arthur explained, "I've been trying to find a way to get Ogier to join us. I invited him to become an ally of the High King. I told him that Ambrosius would support him in battles against the Scots and Picts."

Ogier had laughed in Arthur's face, he told me, and declared that he had no need of help from Ambrosius or anyone else. He intended to bring his own Danes from across the sea and march south to take as much of Britain as he wished.

Arthur had patiently explained that such a move would make them enemies, forcing his knights to go to war against the invading Danish army.

"We have beaten every foe we have faced, from the Saxons in the south to the Picts and Scots here north of the Wall," Arthur had told him. "We will defeat your Danes, as well."

"Conquer my Danes!" Ogier roared with laughter and offered a challenge to Arthur.

"Pick three of your finest, strongest knights. Old man that I am, I will fight them, I myself. If any one of them bests me, I will leave this land and return to Denmark forever."

Arthur immediately accepted the challenge himself, but Ogier declined to fight him.

"Nay, you are too young, little more than a callow youth. Pick three of your best knights. I will fight each of them. After I have defeated them, if you still dare to accept my challenge, then I will fight you and your enchanted sword. It won't protect you against me," Ogier boasted.

So it was agreed: King Ogier the Dane would face three of Arthur's finest knights, on foot in the castle courtyard. If he defeated all three of them, then Arthur would face the Dane.

Sir Bors had been the first, and tough old Ogier had drubbed him thoroughly. After he was helped off the field of contest, Bors complained of feeling slow, weary, as if sick.

"You certainly looked it," Gawain had quipped as he helped carry the bleeding Bors.

It was Gawain's turn next. The next morning they met in the courtyard again. Gawain looked pale, unsure of himself.

"In a lesser man I would have thought he was frightened," Arthur said as we climbed the tower stairs to the room Morganna had given to young Lancelot.

"I wasn't frightened," Gawain maintained stoutly. "I felt sick. Weak. Feverish, almost."

Still, Gawain put on his helmet and went out to meet Ogier, sword in hand.

The Dane, swift and powerful as a man half his years, cracked Gawain's head so hard that Arthur thought he would die.

"Not so," said Gawain as we entered Lancelot's room. "My skull's too thick, even for Ogier's great strength."

Lancelot was Arthur's last hope. If the challenge of facing Ogier worried the youngster, he didn't show it as he dressed for the contest.

"I won't fail you, Arthur," Lancelot said, smiling eagerly. He actually seemed to be looking forward to the fight as he draped his chain mail over his tunic.

His shield with the golden eagle emblem rested by the table in the center of the room. Atop the table lay Lancelot's sword and his helmet, a steel cylinder that covered the entire head, padded along its bottom rim where it rested on his shoulders.

"How do you feel?" Arthur asked.

Lancelot tried to smile, but it was shaky. "Butterflies in my stomach," he said lightly.

Arthur frowned worriedly. "Both Gawain and Bors felt sick when they faced Ogier."

"Witchcraft," Bors muttered again. "I tell you the witch has put a spell on us all."

Arthur did not contradict him. "I haven't felt all that well myself these past few days," he admitted.

Lancelot took a deep breath. "I feel good enough to face the Dane," he said. Yet I thought that some of his usual vigor and enthusiasm was lacking.

I went to the window and looked down at the courtyard. Ogier was already there, bareheaded, taking practice swings with a mighty broadsword.

Someone knocked at the door. I hurried to open it.

Morganna stood there, midnight dark hair tumbling past her shoulders, a warm disarming smile on her lustrous lips. She bore a silver tray of apples and roasted chestnuts in her hands.

If she was surprised to see that I still lived, she gave no sign of it. Stepping past me as if I didn't really exist, she carried the laden tray straight to Arthur.

"To show that I bear no ill will toward you, Arthur," she said sweetly, handing him the tray.

He had been totally infatuated with her, a year earlier. It was clear to see that she still held a powerful attraction for him.

Arthur had to swallow before he could find his voice. "Thank you, Morganna."

She looked up at him. "I'm sorry that it's come to this, Arthur. Once my husband bests your boy, there, you'll have to face him. He might kill you, Arthur."

"That's in God's hands, Morganna," said Arthur quietly.

"Is it?" she replied.

Gawain chuckled. "Suppose Ogier gets himself killed, my lady? Then you'd be a widow."

She looked at Gawain the way a snake looks at a baby rabbit. "Would you come to console me, then?"

"Aye, I would," said Gawain, reaching for one of the shining apples on the tray. He crunched into it with his strong white teeth. "I would indeed."

Morganna smiled at him. "Very well then. Should I put on a widow's black weeds, you may come to beguile me of my grief."

With that she turned and swept out of the room, leaving Arthur holding the tray of fruit and Gawain munching thoughtfully on the apple.

Lancelot picked up one of the apples. "A bite or two might help calm my stomach," he said.

Bors stared hard at the closed door. "Witch," he growled. "She put a spell on me. On us all."

"No," said Arthur, putting the fruit tray on the table. "But she might win Gawain's heart."

Gawain said, "It's not my heart that "

He stopped, his face going pale. His legs buckled. I raced to him and caught him before he collapsed to the floor.

"I'm...sick..." Gawain moaned.

Lancelot suddenly clutched at his stomach and lurched toward the window. He made it only as far as the corner of the bed, then collapsed and puked up his guts onto the floor.

"The apples!" said Arthur. "They're poisoned."

Without an instant's hesitation I pried Gawain's mouth open and stuck two fingers down his throat. He gagged, then retched. It was a mess, but it probably saved his life. The remains of the apple came up, together with the breakfast Gawain had gobbled earlier.

We laid the two of them sidebyside on Lancelot's bed while his squire ran for a maid or two to clean up the vomit.

Gawain groaned, but the color came back to his face. "The witch...poisoned me."

"It was meant for me," Arthur said. "She still hates me, despite her smiles."

Lancelot was unconscious, pale as death.

"Lancelot's in no shape to fight Ogier," Bors said. "And if he doesn't show up, the Dane will claim a forfeit."

"Then he'll demand to face me," Arthur said. He too looked pale, unwell.

I knew what was racing through Arthur's mind: If Ogier wins his challenge he will bring his army of Danes to Berenicia. From there they will invade southward, bringing a whole new flood of enemies to spread fire and death across Britain.

But I saw a different scene. Morganna had been subtly poisoning the knights' food for days now. Bors and Gawain had both been too ill to fight well. Morganna's poisoned apples were meant to make certain that Lancelot could not even make it to the field of contest. Arthur would be forced to fight Ogier and the Dane was going to kill him. Morganna/Aphrodite had hatched this scheme to assassinate Arthur.

I looked into Arthur's eyes. "I'll go in Lancelot's place, my lord."

"You?" Bors snapped. "You're only a squire. That Dane out there will cleave you in half."

"I can fight him," I insisted. "In Lancelot's armor, so no one will know that Lancelot didn't show up."

"It would never work," Bors grumbled.

But Arthur said, "Can you best Ogier, do you think?"

I realized that Morganna had given the old Dane more than an extended lifespan. Aphrodite and Aten must have enhanced his body, augmented his muscular strength, amplified his reflexes. I recalled fighting for Odysseus before the walls of Epeiros, a thousand years before Alexander the Great conquered the Persian empire. I faced Aten himself, in mortal guise, swifter and stronger than any mere human could be. The best I could do was a draw: we killed each other.

"I will beat him, my lord," I said firmly. Then I had to add, "Or die trying."

Arthur nodded, his mouth a grim tight line. "No one could ask you to do more."

So I put on Lancelot's coat of chain mail. It was a bit short for me, but we hoped no one would notice. I hefted his heavy shield with the golden eagle painted on it.

"I'll give you Excalibur..." Arthur began.

"No need, my lord," I said as Lancelot's squire buckled his sword around my waist. "Excalibur is meant for you alone."

We left Lancelot and Gawain in the tower room with their squires. Arthur commanded the youngsters to open the door to no one except himself. Down the long spiral of stone stairs we went, until we reached the ground level. Then I pulled Lancelot's helmet over my head. It covered my face completely. The world shrank to what I could see through the narrow eye slit in the steel helm.

Ogier stood waiting at the far end of the courtyard, tall, his shoulders as wide as two axe handles, twirling a two-handed broadsword in his right hand as if it were a toy. The courtyard was thronged with people who had come to watch the match, buzzing and chattering with excitement. Only the center of the packed earth courtyard was open for our contest. Almost everyone in the castle must have been there except, I noticed, for the men-at-arms stationed on the rooftops, armed with stout bows.

Morganna stood beside her husband. Even through the narrow eyeslits of the

helmet I could see that she was surprised that Lancelot had made it down to the courtyard. She stared hard at me, her incredibly beautiful face twisted into a puzzled frown.

Ogier wore a long coat of chain mail over his tunic, as did I. A squire stood beside him holding his long shield; it bore the emblem of a stag, in black. Its tapered bottom end rested on the dirt, its square top reached to the lad's eyes. Ogier handed his sword to another squire, and took his helmet from a third. The helmet bore steel prongs, like a stag's antlers, and a gold circlet of a crown affixed to it. Ogier would do battle with a king's crown on his head or at least, on his helmet.

"He is very fast and very strong," Arthur warned me. "Be on your guard."

I nodded inside my helmet. "Wish me luck, my lord."

"May the gods be with you," Arthur said, lapsing back to his Roman heritage. Probably he unconsciously thought that the Christian God was too meek to be of help in battle.

I stepped out into the open space as the crowd hushed expectantly. Ogier's helmet covered his cheeks and had a flat piece between the eyes to protect his nose. The bottom half of his face was uncovered; his snow-white beard fell halfway down his chest.

"So, lad, you too have come to feel the bite of my blade," he said in a loud, strong voice.

I said nothing as I advanced slowly, warily toward him.

"Come then," Ogier said cheerfully. "Let us see who is the better man."

My senses went into overdrive, as they always do in battle. Everything around me slowed down, as if time itself was stretching out into a languid, sluggish flow. A good thing, too, for Ogier was every bit as swift as a lightning bolt.

He swung a mighty overhand blow, meant to cleave my skull, helmet and all. I jumped backward and his swing cut empty air, instead. Without an instant's pause he swung backhand at me, advancing swiftly as I backed away.

"Stand and fight," he growled. "This isn't a dancing contest."

I was content to dance, at least until I could gauge the speed of his reflexes. I circled around the courtyard, Ogier pursuing me, as the crowd shifted and melted away from us. For several minutes the only sounds were the hissing swishes of his blade cutting through the air and the crowd's gasps as I back-peddled lithely. Not once did our swords clash.

He showed no signs of slowing, only a growing impatience with my retreating tactic.

"Coward!" he snapped. "Face me like a man, you spineless cur."

I had no intention of walking into that buzzsaw he was wielding. Not until I was ready.

Around the courtyard we went, Ogier charging and me retreating. I nearly stumbled once, when I got close to where Morganna was standing. Did she somehow trip me? I couldn't tell. But I could see Arthur's face as he watched the match. He looked aghast, ashamed of what I was doing. Better to wade in manfully and be chopped to bloody bits, in his eyes, than to appear to be afraid of your enemy.

Ogier showed no sign of slowing down or becoming winded. If anything, he pursued me harder, swinging his blade so fast it was a blur against the clear blue sky even to my hyper-sensitized eyes.

After three times around the courtyard I thought I had his swing timed well enough. I suddenly stopped my retreat, and lunged toward Ogier, raising my shield to take his thrust while I swung at his midsection.

His blow shattered my shield. It simply cracked apart, half of it flying off into the crowd, the other half hanging useless from my arm. The force of the blow staggered me; my whole arm went numb. My own swing bounced harmlessly off his shield.

"Ha!" he roared, rushing toward me as I stumbled back.

I ducked beneath his swing and wedged my sword against the inside of his shield. Then I jabbed the point of the blade into his ribs. There was little force in my thrust, and the blade slid harmlessly against his chain mail.

But for the first time in our fight, Ogier backed up. The crowd went "Ooh!"

For a moment we stood facing each other, chests heaving, arms heavy. I tossed away the remnant of my shield. Past Ogier's imposing form I could see

Morganna smiling.

"So you're ready to fight now?" he taunted me.

I said nothing, waiting for his next attack.

He sprang at me with another powerful overhand swing. I gripped my sword in both hands and parried his blade with a mighty clang that rang off the courtyard walls. The force of his blow buckled my knees, but I managed to back away and regain my balance.

Ogier came forward with still another overhand cut. This time I dodged it and swung two-handed at the haft of his blade, close to the hilt. My blow ripped the sword from his hand.

The courtyard fell absolutely silent. Ogier stood for an instant, staring down at his sword on the dusty ground. Then he looked at me. I saw what was in his eyes. He realized that I could have just as easily taken off his hand, severed it at the wrist.

I stepped back and allowed him to pick up his sword. He hefted it, as if testing to see if it were still whole and sharp. Then he advanced upon me again, but not so wildly this time. Now he was grimly determined to finish me off.

Holding his shield before him, Ogier moved warily toward me, swishing his sword in swift circles over his head. The shield covered him from knees to eyes. He was taking no chances against me now.

I backed away for several steps, thinking rapidly, trying to find a weakness, an opening. From another life I remembered a martial arts instructor urging me, "Your enemy cannot strike without exposing himself to a counterstrike. Be alert. Be prepared. Use your enemy's strength to conquer him."

Suddenly Ogier roared like a bull and charged at me, ready to use his shield as a battering ram. I dropped to the ground and took his legs out from under him with a rolling block. He fell like a giant oak tree, landing face down on his shield.

I planted one foot on his sword arm and knelt my other leg on the small of his back. Ripping off his golden-crowned helmet, I pointed my sword at the nape of his neck.

"Yield, my lord," I shouted, "or I shall have to cut off your head."

Ogier had no desire to lose his head. "I yield," he said, his voice quavering.

*

We were not completely out of danger. That night Ogier feasted us, and Lancelot had to accept the plaudits of one and all as an invincible champion. He looked embarrassed, which everyone took to be humility, the kind of modesty that becomes a true knight.

We dared not eat anything except the sizzling meat of the boar that we saw being roasted on a huge spit in the great hall's fireplace. Nor would any of Arthur's men drink anything except water, by his command. He'd had enough of poison.

Ogier ate and drank mightily, but he seemed to have aged twenty years since the morning. He looked thinner, slower, his eyes red-rimmed and watery. Have Aten and Aphrodite already removed whatever it was that made the old Dane so youthful? I wondered.

He agreed goodnaturedly that he would return to Denmark and never darken Britain's shores again.

"If you have knights like young Lancelot in your service," he said to Arthur as they sat sidebyside at the long dining table, "then I will keep my army in Denmark and harry the Frisians and Saxons there."

Arthur smiled graciously. I thought that Ogier's harrying would only lead to more Frisians and Saxons crossing the sea to Britain, but I was satisfied that the Danes would not invade.

Morganna sat at Ogier's other side, smiling mysteriously through the entire evening. That worried me. She did not appear to be angry or frustrated that her plot to kill Arthur had failed. She smiled like the Sphinx, like someone who is willing to wait for long ages to accomplish her goal.

The next morning, as we were ready to saddle up and leave Berenicia for the long trek back to Cadbury castle, Morganna came into the sundrenched courtyard to say farewell to Arthur. Several of her ladies accompanied her.

"Will you go to Denmark with your husband?" Arthur asked bluntly.

Again that Sphinxlike smile. "No, I will stay here. This is my home, not

some rude swamp across the sea."

"But what of Ogier, then?"

"What of him?" she replied carelessly. "He is old and will die soon. He serves me no purpose any more."

Arthur shook his head. Then he fixed Morganna with a hard stare. "You wanted to see me killed."

"I will dance on your grave one day, Arthur."

He seemed more saddened than alarmed. "What have I done to earn such hatred?"

Morganna smiled again and beckoned to one of her waiting ladies. The woman bore an infant, asleep in a bundle of swaddling clothes.

"This is what you've done," said Morganna, taking the baby in her arms.

Arthur gaped at the child.

"He is your son, Arthur. I will raise him to hate you as much as I do."

"But Morganna," he pleaded, "you mustn't "

"I will, Arthur. He will know that you are his father and he will hate you with every fiber of his being."

Arthur simply stared at her, uncomprehending, bewildered.

"I've named him Modred," she said, her smile turning truly evil. "He will be the instrument of your doom."

Yes, I thought. Aphrodite and Aten and the other Creators would not rest until they had destroyed Arthur. They had all the time they needed to put their hateful plans into action. Could I protect Arthur all through those long years? I vowed that I would.