

THE QUEST FOR STEEL
Ben Bova

"A Sarmatian, you say?" Sir Bors looked me up and down, sour disbelief plain on his scarred, bearded face. "And what is your name?"

"Orion," I replied. It was the one thing I was certain of. How I came to this time and place I knew not.

"And why are you here?" asked Sir Bors.

We were standing in the dingy courtyard of a hilltop fort named Amesbury, its walls nothing more than a rickety palisade of timber staves. These Britons had tried to build their forts in the way the Roman legions had, but their engineering skills were poor. They stared at the ruins of Roman aqueducts and monuments and thought that the stonework had been done by giants or magicians.

A few dozen men milled about the bare dirt courtyard, some leading horses, a few practicing swordplay with one another. The place smelled of dung and sweat. And fear.

"I came to serve King Arthur against the Saxons," I said.

Bors' eyes widened. "King Arthur? You've made him your king, have you?"

I felt confused. "I thought -- "

Bors planted both fists on his hips and pushed his scarred face so close to mine that I could smell the stale wine on his breath.

"Ambrosius is our king, Sarmatian! Young Arthur may be his nephew, but the pup's still wet behind the ears. King indeed!"

I said nothing.

Bors grumbled, "His uncle's put him in charge of Amesbury fort here and sent Merlin to watch over him, but that doesn't make him anything more than an inexperienced babe in the woods."

"I...I'm sorry," I stammered. "I meant to say King Ambrosius."

Bors snorted with disdain.

My mind was spinning. I remembered Artorius as a skinny, pimply-faced boy, a captive of the Danes when I served Beowulf. I had saved him then, I dimly recalled.

Somewhere in my mind I knew he was to be king of the Britons. But first he would become *dux bellorum*, battle leader of these island people who had been abandoned by the Roman Empire and left open to invasion by the barbarian Angles and Saxons.

I am Orion. I serve the Creators, those godlike creatures from the far future who send me through spacetime on missions of war and murder. My master is Aten, the golden one, sneering and superior. I have died many times, in many strange and distant places, but always he brings me back, revives me to send me on still another task of pain and danger.

"You are my creature, Orion," he has told me often. "My hunter. I built you and you will do as I command."

I hate Aten and his mad dreams of controlling all of spacetime to suit his whims. There are other Creators, as well, haughty and demanding, toying with human history like children playing with dolls. Cruel gods and goddesses, all of them.

Except for Anya.

Anya of the gray eyes and supernal beauty. Anya is the only one among those Creators who care at all for their creatures. Who cares for me. I love Anya and she loves me. Aten knows this and, vicious with implacable jealousy, sends me far from her, to serve him and die over and over again.

"Well, you're big enough," said Sir Bors, snapping me back to the moment. "Can you fight?"

I smiled tightly. I had led Odysseos' men over the high stone wall of

Troy. I had made Mongol warriors gape at my battle prowess. I had helped Beowulf kill Grendel and its mate.

"I can fight," I said.

Sir Bors was wearing only a cracked and stained leather jerkin over his tattered knee-length tunic. But he had a long Celtic broadsword belted at his hip. I was in chain mail and linen tunic, my sword strapped to my back.

Drawing his sword from its leather scabbard, Bors said, "Let me see what you can do."

"Wait!" a young voice cried from behind me. "Let me test him."

I turned and saw a handsome tall nobleman walking toward us, so young that his beard hardly darkened his chin. His eyes were light and clear, his shoulder-length hair almost blond. He was smiling broadly.

"My lord," Bors said, his tone several notches softer than it had been, "this Sarmatian -- "

So this was Arthur. He had grown into a strong young man.

"He's got good shoulders, Bors," said Arthur. Then, to me, he added, "Let's see if you know how to use your sword."

Bors objected, "But my lord, you shouldn't engage yourself with a stranger. He might be an assassin, sent to kill you!"

Arthur laughed aloud. He had no fear of an assassin. He did not know that I had murdered men in other eras, at Aten's behest.

A squire, not much younger than Arthur himself, trudged up and handed the battle leader his helmet and shield with the blood-red dragon painted on it. I drew my own sword, heard its steel tongue hiss as it came out into the sunlight. My fingers tightened on its leather-wrapped hilt.

"Where is your helmet, your shield?" Arthur asked as he stood before me. His iron helmet covered his cheeks and had a nose-piece shaped like an upside-down cross.

"I won't need them," I said.

His smile turned down a little. "Pride goes before a fall, Sarmatian."

"Then I will fall," I replied.

Arthur shrugged, then put his shield up and advanced toward me, sword cocked in his right hand.

My senses went into overdrive, as they always do when I face battle. The world around me seemed to slow down, as if everything was happening in a dream. I could see Arthur's bright blue eyes blinking slowly over the rim of his shield. And Sir Bors stepping sideways to keep at my side. His sword was still in his hand, ready to strike me down if I endangered Arthur. I thought he was more worried that Arthur did not have the skill or experience to face a true fighting man, than fearful that I was an assassin.

Arthur swung at me in languid slow motion, a powerful overhand cut that would have sliced me down to the navel if I hadn't danced lightly out of harm's way. He grunted, frowned, and advanced upon me in sluggish slow motion.

I fainted once to the left, then slashed at his shield, splitting it in two with a loud cracking sound. My blade would have taken Arthur's arm off if I hadn't pulled back in time.

Arthur's eyes went wide with surprise. After only a moment's hesitation, he tossed away the broken shield and came at me again. He smashed another mighty overhand slash at me. I parried it easily and his blade shattered into several pieces with a brittle snap.

"Hold!" Bors shouted, sticking his sword between us.

I stepped back.

If Arthur had feared that I would kill him he gave no sign of it. Instead, he tossed away the broken stub of his sword and then reached out for mine.

"That's a fine piece of steel," he said admiringly as I handed the sword to him.

Without thinking of why, I answered, "I know where you can get one that's even better, my lord."

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It took an hour and more of talking, but at last Arthur and I set out for the distant lake in search of the sword I promised him. Sir Bors and the other knights were dead set against the king's nephew travelling alone with a stranger from a distant land. Bors complained that the fort might be attacked by Saxon raiders at any time, and Arthur's place was where his uncle had put him. But wizened old Merlin was on my side.

"The Sarmatian brings good fortune to Arthur," the old wizard said, stroking his long gray beard as he spoke. The beard was knotted and filthy, his homespun robe even dirtier, but all the knights and squires stared at him with wide-eyed awe. They would not step closer than five paces to him; Merlin walked through the little fort's dung-dotted courtyard as if protected by a magical aura.

In truth, I saw a burning intelligence in the old man's narrowed eyes, a keen awareness that belied his wrinkled, ragged appearance. Beneath those shaggy gray brows his eyes were shrewd, sharp, penetrating. Was he one of the Creators in disguise?

To satisfy the suspicious knights, Merlin cast a spell to protect Arthur, nothing but hand-waving and muttering as far as I could see. But it seemed to satisfy Sir Bors and the others, at least enough to allow their young leader to leave the fort with me and no one else.

For two days we rode, and I got to know Arthur a little. He was burning for fame and glory. His highest hope was to one day be named *dux bellorum*: battle leader of his uncle's forces.

Yet, like many an untried youth, he doubted his own abilities.

"I can see it in the faces of Bors and the others," he told me as we camped for the night in a dark, dank forest. The huge, broad-boled trees grew so thickly that much of the day we had been forced to lead our horses afoot. "They would never follow someone so young."

"They will," I said, "once you prove yourself in battle."

He shook his head mournfully. "The curse of the Britons, friend Orion, is that they will not follow anyone for long."

"They will follow you, my lord. I'm sure of it."

In the darkness of the forest night I heard him make a sound that might have been a sigh. "No, Orion. Look at us! Ambrosius calls himself high king, but who follows him? A handful, that's all. You travel for two days in any direction and you pass through two or three different kingdoms. We have kings every few miles, each of them jealous of all the others."

"No wonder the Saxons can raid and plunder as they wish."

"Yes," he said grimly. "Our people shatter like the sword I used against you. One blow and they break."

He was silent for a moment. Then, "If I *could* bring all the Britons together, unite all these petty kingdoms..."

"You could clear the land of the barbarian invaders," I finished his thought.

This time he sighed unmistakably. "It's a pretty dream, Orion. But only a dream."

The ambition was there. He had the dream. But he needed the courage to

make it come true. I could sense that he was longing for the daring, the tenacity, the strength to become the true leader of all the Britons.

Again Arthur fell silent, this time for many moments. At length, he spoke up again.

"That sword of yours," he said, changing the subject because it was too painful for him to continue, "a sword such as that is a rare treasure, Orion. A man would travel to the ends of the earth to get such fine steel for himself."

Like so much else, the art of steel had been lost when the Romans departed.

"You could have taken my sword from me," I said.

He laughed softly as he lay in his blankets. "I'd have to kill you for it, I wager."

Lying on the ground a few feet from him, with the dying embers of our tiny fire between us, I replied, "Not so, my lord; I would give it to you willingly."

It was too dark to see the expression on his face. The night wind keened above us like an evil spirit, cold and harsh, setting the trees to moaning.

"No," Arthur said at last. "If I am meant to drive the Saxons out of our island, I will not do it with another man's steel. I must have my own. Merlin prophesied that I would, when I was just a lad."

He was hardly more than a lad now, yet this young man wanted to drive off the Saxons and other barbarians who had seized most of the coast of what would one day be England.

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I dreamed that night, but it was not a dream.

I found myself in an emptiness, a broad featureless plain without hill or tree or even a horizon: nothing but an endless flat plain covered with a softly rolling golden mist stretching out in every direction to infinity.

Vaguely I remembered being there before, in other lives, other eras. And, just as I expected, I saw a tiny golden glow far off in the distance, like a candle's warm beckoning light, but steady, constant, without a flicker.

I began to walk toward it. I was clad as I had been when awake, in a simple tunic and chain mail. But my sword was gone. Except for the little dagger that Odysseus had given me during our siege of Troy, I was unarmed.

Something drew me to that beacon of light. Despite myself, I began to run toward it. Faster and faster I raced, legs churning through the ground mist, arms pumping, my lungs sucking in air. After what seemed like hours I was gasping, my throat raw, my legs aching from exertion. But I could not stop. I wanted to rest, but I was unable to stop. I was drawn to the light, like an insect obeying an inbuilt command.

The tiny distant glow became a golden sphere, a miniature sun, so bright and hot that I could not look directly at it. I raised my arms to shield my eyes from its glare, yet still I ran, raced toward it as if it were an oasis in a world-covering desert, a magnet pulling me with irresistible force.

At last I could run no more. Soaked with sweat, exhausted, panting as if my lungs would burst, I collapsed onto the strangely yielding ground, still blanketed with the perfumed golden mist.

"Are you tired, Orion?" a mocking voice asked. I knew who it was: Aten, the golden one. My creator.

The blazing bright golden sphere slowly dissolved to reveal him. He stood over me, strong and handsome: thick golden mane of hair, gold flecks

in his tawny eyes, perfectly proportioned body encased in a form-fitting suit of golden mail.

He sneered down at me. "What is this madness you are engaged in, Orion? Where are you leading that young pup?"

I blinked up at him. His radiance was so brilliant it made my eyes water. "I thought you wanted me to -- "

Angrily, Aten snapped, "You are not supposed to think, creature! Your purpose is to do what I instruct you to do. Nothing more. And nothing less."

"But Arthur needs -- "

"I will decide what Arthur needs, not you!" Aten snarled. "I want you to help him win a few battles, not take him on a foolish excursion through such dangerous territory."

I bowed my head, my eyes burning at the radiance streaming from him.

"Arthur's only purpose is to resist the Angles and Saxons well enough to force them to unite against him. Then they will drive the Britons into the western sea and take the island for themselves."

"But what will happen to Arthur?"

"He will be killed."

"No!"

Aten's voice hardened. "All men die, Orion. Only my own creatures, such as yourself, are revived to serve me again."

"But Arthur..."

"He could make a nuisance of himself," Aten said. "He could become too powerful. For the time being, I allow him to live. But that time will end soon enough."

"And then?"

"Then the Angles and Saxons and other barbarian tribes will create a mighty empire, Orion. An empire that spans the globe and begins to reach out into space."

"But can't Arthur be permitted -- "

"Stop pleading for him, Orion! Obey my commands. That is your destiny. Arthur's destiny is death and obscurity."

I wanted to argue with him. I wanted to tell him that I would not obey his commands, that I would help Arthur and save him.

But suddenly I was sitting on the ground at our forest camp again, soaked with sweat, breathing heavily. The first milky light of the coming dawn was just starting to filter through the tall trees. Arthur slept across the dead campfire from me, as blissfully as a man without a care in the universe.

Should I turn back to Amesbury fort? Abandon this quest for a sword for young Arthur?

His eyes snapped open, bright and as blue as the sea on a cloudless day. He was awake instantly.

"How far are we from my sword, Orion?" he asked as he sat up, all youthful eagerness.

"Not far, my lord," I replied. "We will reach the lake today."

I couldn't turn back now. I couldn't disappoint Arthur. He trusted me, and I would not betray him, not even for Aten and all his haughty demands.

Yet I should have known that Aten would not willingly allow us to reach our goal.

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The forest was like a maze of giant trees, their boles as massive as the pillars of a mighty cathedral, their thick leafy canopies so high above us that they were like a dark green roof that blotted out the sun. We had

to walk our horses most of the morning, picking through the sturdy trees while birds whistled far overhead and tiny furred creatures chattered at us.

The ground sloped gradually downhill. We were nearing the lake, I realized, although how I knew about the lake and its location were beyond me. Something in my mind told me that we would find the sword for Arthur there; but just how and why -- I had no idea.

The forest thinned out as we led the horses, but the underbrush became thicker between the trees. I saw a clearing up ahead, strong morning sunlight slanting through it, and smelled smoke. It was rising from a tiny thatched farmhouse.

Too much smoke. The farmhouse was afire.

"Saxons!" Arthur whispered, dropping to one knee as we peered through the underbrush at the scene in the clearing. I crouched down beside him.

A dozen men in long blond braids and steel-studded leather jerkins were laughing and whooping as two of their compatriots dragged a pair of screaming, struggling teenaged girls across the clearing toward them. A trio of bodies lay in their own blood before the burning farmhouse door: husband, wife, and baby.

Arthur stared, barely breathing.

"We've got to stop them," I whispered.

"Two against fourteen?"

"They'll murder those girls when they've finished with them."

Arthur wet his lips and shook his head. "Too many of them, Orion. It's useless."

Arthur was no fool. Young he may be, but he was not rash. He was loathe to charge in against hopeless odds.

"Perhaps we can at least divert their attention," I whispered hastily, "long enough for the girls to get away."

Without waiting for his reply, I pushed through the screening foliage and stepped out into the clearing, keeping my sword in its scabbard upon my back. Although the Saxons' attention was centered on the struggling, pleading girls, one of them noticed me approaching and pointed toward me.

"What clan are you?" I called out in the Saxon tongue. It never occurred to me to wonder how I knew their language. Aten built such knowledge into me.

"Who are you?" demanded the biggest of the barbarians. They were armed with axes and short stabbing swords, I saw. A few steel-tipped spears lay on the ground at their feet.

The men who were holding the sobbing, shaking girls threw them to the ground and drew weapons. I smiled and kept walking slowly toward them.

"How did you get so far inland?" I asked, still approaching them at a leisurely gait.

"We got lost in those damnable woods," one of the Saxons admitted. "Do you know which way leads to the sea?"

I raised my hand and pointed toward the rising sun. "That way, I think."

Quicker than they could follow I reached behind my head for my sword and cut the nearest man in two before he could blink an eye. As his blood fountained over me, the others roared with rage and ran toward me. I saw their charge in slow motion, languid as a dream, as my senses speeded into overdrive.

Even so, thirteen against one could end only one way. One of them threw his axe at me; I dodged it easily as it spun lazily toward my head.

The first two that came within arm's reach of me I cut down like a

scythe mows wheat. The others skidded to a stop and began to encircle me.

Then I heard the furious bellow of young Arthur as he charged on horseback into the fray. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him, helmeted and crouched in the saddle behind his red dragon shield, sword upraised, glinting in the morning sun.

Arthur had cleverly maneuvered to my right, so that his charge forced the Saxons to turn away from me to face him. I drove into their midst, slashing bone and sinew, shattering the blades they tried to use to protect themselves. Arthur cut a swath through them, then turned his steed and came back at them even while his first victims were sinking to the ground.

The remaining few broke and ran, screaming for their lives. Arthur galloped after them and cut them down before they could reach the trees. All except the one who dashed in the opposite direction. I hefted his discarded axe and threw it. Its sharp edge caught him between the shoulder blades and he went down face-first with a final shriek of death.

And then it was over. All fourteen Saxons lay dead or dying, and the two terrified girls knelt in the midst of the bloody carnage, clutching each other in trembling fear.

Arthur sheathed his red-stained sword and lifted off his helmet, tossing his long sandy hair.

"Don't be afraid," he said softly to the girls. "No one will harm you."

They gaped up at him and the elaborate red dragon on his shield.

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The girls led us to a village by the lake's edge, where they told everyone how Arthur had saved them from the Saxon raiders. I was taken to be Arthur's squire, a nonentity compared to the handsome young nobleman.

The whole village knelt at his feet and blessed him, but Arthur did not allow the villagers' adoration to affect him. When the village elders begged him to stay the night and take his pick of their women, Arthur replied gently:

"I cannot. I am on a quest that must not be delayed."

I wondered what would become of the two teenaged girls we had rescued. They were orphaned now, with no family to care for them.

But Arthur had already considered that. As he swung up onto his saddle, he pointed to them and pronounced solemnly, "Those maidens are under the protection of the High King. Send them to Cadbury fort in the spring and I will see that Ambrosius finds noble husbands for them."

The girls nearly swooned. The villagers raised a chorus of blessings. Yes, I thought, Arthur will make an excellent king -- if he lives long enough.

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As we rode slowly along the lake's edge that afternoon, Arthur grew somber.

"I've never seen Saxons this far inland before," he told me. "If we don't stop them soon, they will overrun all of Britain."

What could I answer? My Creator wanted the Saxons and their barbarian cousins to conquer Britain; to drive out the Britons and create an empire of their own.

"Well," I said, finding my tongue at last, "at least there are fourteen of them whose only part of this island is the ground they are buried in."

He grinned boyishly at me.

I thought that the Saxon raiders were Aten's attempt to turn me back from this quest for a sword for Arthur. Perhaps they were. My mistake was

to believe that they would be Aten's *only* attempt to stop us.

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We plodded along the lake's shore until nearly sunset, with Arthur asking every few minutes where his sword was, like an impatient boy.

There was a strange mixture of elements in him. He had been cautious about attacking the Saxon raiders, lacking in self-confidence. But once he saw me fighting alone against them he attacked with a wild frenzy rather than see me cut down. Then he showed the villagers the nobility of a truly great monarch. And now he was as impatient as a lad yearning to open his Christmas presents.

At last we had circled the lake completely. I reined my mount to a halt and stared out across the water, turned blood-red by the setting sun.

"Well?" asked Arthur impatiently.

There was nothing I could say except, "Now we must wait, my lord."

We dismounted and tethered the horses loosely after removing the saddles and packs, so that they could graze for themselves.

"Wait for what?" Arthur asked. His impatience was beginning to show an edge of doubt.

"For the lady of the lake," I replied, without knowing the words until I heard them myself.

We ate a bit of the hard bread we had brought. No fire for cooking, although I could have eaten a rabbit raw, I was so hungry.

Surprisingly, Arthur stretched out on the ground. "I'm sleepy," he said, through a big yawn.

"Sleep then, my lord. I will stand watch."

"Just a little nap," he muttered. "Don't know...why I'm...so...sleepy..." His voice faded into a gentle snore.

The instant Arthur closed his eyes a soft silver glow began to surround me, as if I was bathed in moonlight. It was cool and glittering like the light of a million jewels twinkling all around me. And then, standing before me, beautiful Anya appeared.

She was in her warrior's suit of gleaming metallic silver, fitted snugly over her supple body. Her lustrous midnight dark hair tumbled past her strong shoulders. Her silver-gray eyes regarded me solemnly. I could not move, could hardly speak, she was so exquisite and I yearned for her so.

"Orion," she said softly, "you play a dangerous game here."

"All I want is to be with you," I whispered, afraid to speak louder, afraid of breaking the spell of her appearance before me. Arthur lay soundly on the ground beside me, his eyes closed in sleep or a trance.

"Aten is furious that you are defying his command. He wants you to return Arthur to Amesbury. There is to be a Saxon attack near Amesbury fort and he must be there to lead the garrison."

"To be killed, you mean," I replied.

Anya said nothing.

"Arthur needs a sword that will bring him victory," I said.

She smiled, a little sadly. "Do you really believe that a sword could make any difference?"

"It will give him the confidence he needs to fight against hopeless odds. And win."

"Aten does not want him to win," she said.

"But I do. I want -- "

She silenced me with a finger upon my lips. "It's not that easy, my love. Aten controls this timeline. I can only interfere indirectly. You must do the hard work."

"What does Aten want?"

"Rome has collapsed," she answered. "He wants to build a new empire that stretches from the steppes beyond Muscovy to these British isles."

"An empire of the barbarians," I growled.

"An empire that he can control and manipulate," Anya said.

"But why? To what end?"

She shrugged. "Who knows what plans are in his mind? He looks centuries ahead, millennia."

"He's crazy. No one can control all the forces of spacetime."

"He believes he can." Then she smiled again. "But he can't control you, can he?"

I felt an answering smile curve my lips. "He doesn't control you, either, does he?"

"But I have the power to work against him when I must. I can even get some of the other Creators to help resist his demands. I'm Aten's equal, not..." She stopped short.

"Not a mere creature," I finished for her.

"He could kill you horribly," Anya warned. "Final death, with no revival."

I remembered being crushed in the jaws of a cave bear, back in the age of ice. I recalled being flayed alive by the fireball of an exploding starship.

"Death is nothing new to me. If we can't be together, what is life except an endless wheel of pain?"

"I'm trying, Orion. I want to be with you too, my dearest. But there are forces beyond your ken, forces that keep us apart."

"Forces manipulated by Aten," I said flatly.

She shook her head. "Forces that not even he can control, my darling."

I glanced down at the sleeping young Arthur. "And that young warlord plays a role in these forces."

"He might. I think there could be greatness in him. But Aten wants to remove him."

"Kill him, you mean."

"Yes."

"Then I want to protect him."

Anya said nothing. She merely regarded me with those somber gray eyes, eyes that held the depths of infinity in them.

"Will you help me?" I asked.

"Orion, you have no idea of the damage you do to the spacetime fabric whenever you defy Aten."

"Will you help?" I repeated.

She regarded me gravely. "I love you too much to allow Aten to destroy you."

"Then you must help Arthur, too."

She sighed. "Your young friend must help himself. Neither you nor I can put courage into his heart."

"It's not courage he needs, it's..."

But she was gone, vanished as if she had never been there at all, leaving me standing on the shore of the lake as the sky darkened and the moon rose, silver and cool and too far away for me to dream of touching.

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Arthur awoke, sat up, and rubbed his eyes. "I had a dream," he said, his voice soft and puzzled. "About my sword."

As he climbed to his feet I looked out across the lake, silvered now by the rising full moon. It was as calm and flat as a mirror of polished

steel. In its middle was an island that hadn't been there earlier. I realized that it was not an island at all, but an artifact, a structure of metal and glass still dripping because it had risen from the lake's depths only moments earlier.

Arthur followed my gaze. "Look!" he whispered. "A boat approaches!"

"The Lady of the Lake," I murmured. Anya was going to help us, after all.

Wordlessly we stepped down to the sandy edge of the shore, Arthur's eyes fixed on the boat that glided noiselessly across the placid waters.

It was Anya, of course, alone in the self-propelled boat. But now she was dressed in a flowing robe and garlanded with flowers. In the moonlight she seemed to glow with an inner radiance. Her hair flowed long and smooth as a river of onyx down her back. Her face was calm, serene, utterly beautiful.

In her arms she cradled a broadsword in a jewelled scabbard. I recognized that scabbard.

The boat nudged its prow onto the sand before us and stopped. Anya rose to her feet and held the sword out in her two hands.

Arthur seemed frozen, transfixed by her appearance. His eyes were so wide I could see the white all around them, his breathing so heavy he was almost gasping.

"Take the sword," I coached him in a low whisper. "She's offering it to you."

Arthur swallowed hard, then summoned up his courage and stepped into the gently lapping wavelets to the side of the boat. His boots sank into the soft sand.

"Wield this sword for right and justice," Anya intoned, handing it to Arthur's trembling hands.

"I will, my lady," he said breathlessly. "Just as you command."

"Do so, and the others will follow you."

"I will, my lady," he repeated.

Without another word Anya sat on the boat's only bench once more and the vessel backed off the sand, made a stately, silent turn and glided back to the "island" in the middle of the lake. We watched, Arthur dumbfounded and trembling, as the boat disappeared into an opening in the structure and then the entire mass slowly sank beneath the surface of the water.

It was not until the "island" was completely gone that Arthur blinked and shook himself, like a man coming out of a trance.

Then he pulled the sword out of its jewelled scabbard. I recognized the word *Excalibur* incised on its fine steel blade. It was the sword I had taken from Grendel's cave, the night Beowulf and I killed the monster's mate. Anya had held it all these years, protected it from Aten's knowledge, held it for the moment when Arthur needed it.

Arthur swished the blade through the night air, his grin bright enough to rival the full moon.

Then we heard the roar of the dragon.

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It was a dinosaur, of course; a giant raptor fetched by Aten from its own time and translated across millions of years to kill Arthur.

It came crashing out of the woods, roaring like a steam locomotive, stepping nimbly on its two hind legs. Three times my own height, the teeth that lined its massive jaw were the size of butcher's knives, sharp and serrated. The claws on its hind feet were the length of my forearm, curved like scimitars. Its forelegs were smaller, almost weak-looking compared to the hind, but they too bore slashing claws.

I pulled my sword out as the monster's beady little eyes focused on us. Arthur turned and ran.

But only as far as our impromptu camp. The horses were bucking and neighing with terror. He slashed their tethers with one stroke of Excalibur, and they bolted away, galloping toward safety. Arthur picked up his shield and came back to stand at my side.

"We'll have a better chance if we can approach it from two sides," he said. His voice was calm and flat, as if he were discussing tactics over a map in the safety of his castle.

"We should do what the horses did," I said.

"Run?"

"As fast as we can," I replied fervently.

"No, Orion. If we don't kill this dragon it will ravage the countryside. It will kill the villagers and their livestock. We must protect them."

Two puny men armed only with swords against a twenty-ton killing machine.

But I nodded and edged off toward the water. Arthur sidled in the other direction, his eyes on the "dragon," his new sword held high in his right hand.

The dinosaur looked from him to me, swiveling its ponderous head slowly. It stepped toward me, hesitant, its tiny brain perhaps puzzled by the maneuvers of intelligent prey.

I dared not go so far out into the water that I could not move swiftly. I yelled at the dinosaur and waved my sword in the air, trying to hold its attention while Arthur moved stealthily behind it. It leaned down in my direction, as if to see me more clearly. I felt its breath, hot enough to make me almost think it could actually breathe fire.

I waited until those monstrous teeth were gaping just above me, then thrust my sword into the beast, into the base of its jaw, with all the power I could muster from both my arms.

The dinosaur howled and reared, lifting me completely off my feet. My sword was lodged in its jaw and I clung to the hilt with both hands, my legs dangling uselessly in midair.

Arthur dashed in and slashed at the beast's belly. Even in the pale moonlight I could see his blade redden.

The dinosaur bellowed and shook his head so viciously that I was dislodged and flung to the ground, my sword still wedged in its jaw. Stunned, I saw through a red haze of pain the dinosaur turn on Arthur, raking his shield with the powerful claws of one hind foot. Arthur tumbled onto his back and the beast bent over him, jaws gaping wide.

But Arthur still clutched Excalibur and slashed at the dinosaur's snout as he scrambled backward, trying to rise to his feet. The dinosaur yowled and tried to pin Arthur to the ground with one foot, but Arthur scrabbled out of the way once, twice...

I pulled myself to my feet and, avoiding the beast's heavy swinging tail, leaped upon its back. Like a monkey clambering up a tree I scaled along the dinosaur's spine, climbing toward its massive bony skull.

It must have felt me on its back, for it stopped trying to crush Arthur and reared up to its full height, nearly throwing me off. But I wrapped my legs around its neck and swiftly drew Odysseos's dagger. Plunging it into the back of its neck at the base of the thick skull, I hacksawed madly, searching for the spinal column.

Below me I saw Arthur, on his feet now, plunging Excalibur into the beast's exposed belly again and again, working madly, frenziedly, spattered

with the dinosaur's dark blood again and again.

My blade found the spinal cord at last and cut it. The monster collapsed, nearly crushing Arthur as it fell.

I slid off its back and tumbled to the grassy ground, exhausted, gasping.

Arthur stood blinking at the dead carcass for a few moments, then raised both arms over his head and screamed an exultant victory cry at the distant moon. It was an eerie sight: the young warrior bathed in the beast's blood, holding his sword and shield aloft and shrieking like a banshee. Beside him the dead "dragon" lay, a mountain of scaly flesh, teeth and claws.

"Did you see me, Orion?" he called triumphantly as he hurried over to where I lay. "Did you see me kill it?"

Slowly I pulled myself up to a sitting position. The dagger was still in my hand, but Arthur paid no notice to such a puny weapon.

He brandished Excalibur in the night air. "I must have struck its heart," he said, bubbling with excitement. "With this steel I can conquer anything!"

I smiled inwardly. Arthur had found his steel; not merely a sword, but the inner steel that would one day make him king of the Britons. If I could keep him alive that long.

I could sense Aten scowling angrily at me. He wanted Arthur removed from this timeline, and he would do all he could to work his will. And punish me for defying him.

All I really wanted was to spend the eternities with Anya. But for now, I was at Arthur's side, ready to battle men and gods to protect him.