

PAX MORGANA

Bill Coffin

Pax Morgana

Copyright ©2009 Bill Coffin

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Reliquary Press books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

Reliquary Press
1301 Hightower Trail
Suite 100
Atlanta, GA 30350
www.reliquarypress.com

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any Web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher, and the publisher hereby disclaims any responsibility for them.

ISBN: 978-0-9841833-0-2

Printed in the United States of America

Reliquary Press rev. date: 8/10/2009

DEDICATIONS

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

Jay Pascale and my brothers Tom and Frank have always been tireless sounding boards for me, and their imprint runs deeper on this and all things I write than they realize.

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

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

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

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

But no king rules forever...

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 Lords of Camelot	11
CHAPTER 2 A Thousand Days	52
CHAPTER 3 Far Country	91
CHAPTER 4 Seven Years On	131
CHAPTER 5 Something Wicked	165
CHAPTER 6 Tainted Savior	204
CHAPTER 7 Feats of Strength	238
CHAPTER 8 Sword of Swords	272

CHAPTER 1

LORDS OF CAMELOT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't come any further!"

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

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

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

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

"You know who I am?" Bors said.

They both nodded.

"Then you know what I can do."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I did."

"How many from Camelot were here?"

"No more than thirty, I think."

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

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

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

Bors grunted. "And Morgana?"

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

"No doubt. And what of her son?"

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

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

"Ghyslain, sire."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arcadia.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the Round Table.

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

"How many are left, Kay?"

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

"No. I meant of us."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But he has. Go see for yourself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The fellowship, Bors thought. The fellowship.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Better the king need no bodyguard at all."

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

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

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

"Aye. Kay told me."

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

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

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

"They vexed you, then?" Bors said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course not, my lord..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

moral of this story, of your Mellican?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then I neither shall I have any."

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

"The purest...what?"

"Just that. The purest."

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

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

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

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

"No, sire."

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

"My lord jests with me."

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

"There is still hope."

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

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

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

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

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

"And in the morning?" Bors asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to dream.

To dream...

...dream...

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

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

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

The vines around him had thickened into thin branches, their

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

After you, Bors thought back.

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

Darkness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It won't last long, Bors thought.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lord Arthur said you would say that."

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

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

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

Ghyslain nodded and hefted Bors' chest plate.

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

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

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

"Uncomfortable?" Bors asked.

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

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

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

"Are you any good with that thing?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sandalin nodded in approval.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where is your father?" Bors asked.

"Camlann," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And victory?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let me come with you!" Bors said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Show yourself!" Arthur commanded.

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

And like that, all hell broke loose.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The boy had an energy crackling across his arm that Bors

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not yet."

"But..."

"But nothing, Boudicea. Trust me."

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

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

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

The thralls were at the bridge...

"Hold."

...crossing it...

"Hold!"

...entering the gate...

"NOW!"

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

"NOW!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bors, listen to me..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ghyslain stepped over the thralls and defenders littering the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What should I do?" said Bedevere.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Go to him, she said in his mind.

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

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

"What of the others!"

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

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

That was when Bors noticed she was shaking.

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

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

"Then what?"

"Then he came."

"Mordred?" Bors asked.

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

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

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

"The darkness of the world," Boudicea answered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not taking it for myself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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