

# KNIGHTS OF THE FLAMING DEATH

by  
Steve Kaye

*Strange terrors await Anne and her crew as they race to England to save King Arthur 31<sup>st</sup> from a band of marauding knights that shoot flames of death from their hellish visors. Armies amass, dragons char the countryside as all eyes turn toward the adventuress as she tries to fathom the mystery behind the strange talismans, the mystery that might return the warped, enchanted world back to normal!*



## CHAPTER ONE: THE BLOODY LIGHTNING

The summer air sparkled under a bright yellow sun and endless blue sky.

A hint of saltwater and seaweed drifted in across Jamaica Bay, Brooklyn, New York, at the Floyd Bennett Airfield. Its tangy scent mixed with the bitter odor of aviation fuel.

A shimmer of darkness clouded a perfectly wonderful late summer afternoon.

The cloud appeared suddenly, a

nebulous undulating blob, viscous and transparent. It hung mere inches above the concrete pavement beside a small, closed hangar. It was twice as wide as a man and nearly twice as tall. Planes passed unconcernedly behind it, the pilots more intent on their instruments and other light plane traffic than on the odd atmospheric disturbance.

If one were to look it would appear that these planes simply grew dim for a moment as they passed behind the weird, translucent thing. An optical illusion, no doubt, or a strange shadow cast by something overhead.

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The dark thing was neither of those.

At the far end of the field stood an enormous dirigible hangar. Inside the giant metal structure repairs to the airship *Novus* were well underway. The *Novus* was the fantastic craft used by Anne Robson, known the world over as Amazon Anne, an adventurer extraordinaire, in her travels about the globe. The ship was piloted, and often mothered by Captain Albert, a man near as gigantic as his craft. The man stood six feet tall and seemed nearly that wide, with a flaming red beard and burnished, jolly features. His eyes were black as night. His bulk came less from fat and more from well-fed muscle.

Captain Albert supervised his regular crew of two airmen and another dozen workmen as they set about reworking the airplane gondola. This small structure sticking out of the rear bottom of the airship had been designed to accommodate two biplanes. Heavy steel hooks had been affixed beneath the gondola and from these the biplanes had hung. In the past few weeks, things had been drastically changed.

The docking gondola was now deeper and taller. The back end rolled up and a section of the floor folded down. Heavy benches were placed length-wise along the open section of the floor. Thus arranged in flight, a fixed wing plane could fly into the back of the gondola and land, wheels dangling, wings on the benches. Hydraulically operated, the benches could tip

forward to stabilize a plane or tip backward to launch one.

Stepping out of the hangar, stretching, Captain Albert noticed that a gleaming new Lockheed 5B Vega was just now taxiing in from the runway. The plane had been making a test run after its delivery from the East Coast factory. At its controls was the café au lait-haired Anne Robson. She halted the ship a hundred feet from the hangar then climbed down from the raised cockpit and into the plane's four-seat cabin. She stepped out of the plane and stretched.

Anne Robson was a stunning young woman. Many had tried to guess her age and all had failed. She could have been mistaken for twenty-three but had facial maturity of a woman twenty years older. Her skin was sun-bronzed and a shade darker than the long gleaming hair, with its hint of red highlights, which swooped down over one eye. She had a leggy figure although she wasn't a particularly tall girl. Her face was pretty and symmetrical with small features. Except for her eyes. These were large and round and ice blue in color, and they sparkled with flecks of silver.

The captain waved at the girl, then turned to re-enter the hangar. That's when he noticed some movement at the far end of the field.

The shadowy cloud, nearly invisible before, began to grow and throb. The center of it pinched in on itself, forming a vertical slit which grew and widened. Beyond was blackness so deep it

seemed to go on for miles. Then, from the depths of this slit came a horse.

It was a black horse, a giant of a beast, something that might even be able to carry the captain himself, galloping full tilt out of the cloud.

Atop the shining brute, a man clung for dear life. He screamed in a strange tongue and his voice had a desperate, pleading quality to it. The animal raced toward the dirigible hangar, its rider helpless and terrified. As it neared, a stunned Captain Albert could see the rider was dressed in a green jerkin and brown leggings.

He passed Captain Albert in a blur, the horse's hooves booming and shaking the tarmac. Dust billowed up in great clouds.

A small leather packet slapped at Captain Albert's feet as the charging beast passed.

Then out of a clear blue sky a crash of thunder rumbled and a bolt of lightning shattered the senses. A blood red flame shot down at an angle and swept across the top of the horse. The man clinging there burst into flame and then ash in almost the same instant. Captain Albert ran to the man but it was far too late. He looked up and saw that the stallion had disappeared. It was nowhere to be seen on that flat, vast expanse. Behind him the throbbing black cloud was also gone.

He returned to the hangar to find Anne with the leather packet open in her hand. Its contents surprised the dirigible pilot. He looked expectantly at the woman.

"Hurry, Captain Albert. There is great danger. We haven't a moment to lose!"

Anne's yellow roadster was parked just inside the hangar, its convertible top down. She gave instructions to Captain Albert as she hopped into the car to have the dirigible ready in three hours. If the docking gondola could not be made ready they would leave the Vega behind. The captain promised all would be completed in time.

Putting the machine in gear, Anne raced out of the hangar and over to Flatbush Avenue. The trip across Brooklyn to the Manhattan Bridge was made at top speed but even this seemed to take hours. Once in the city she cut cross-town on Canal Street to the Westside Expressway and up to the Middle Seventies where she, as proprietor, owned a shop catering to wealthy clientele interested in odd pieces of artwork. Her inventory, though, was more artifact than art, all of the pieces she had herself acquired in her adventures. In the back rooms of the shop she maintained a small library of reference material about the treasures of the world which she used to identify pieces she had collected.

She parked down the street from her shop on Seventy-fifth Street and ran back the two blocks. The bell above the door crashed as she burst into the shop.

An older woman behind the counter yelped and threw a hand to her chest. She was perhaps in her late fifties,

gray-haired, plump.

“Oh! Anne!” she cried, seeing the girl. Her eyes began to swim in their sockets.

“Sorry, Aunt Beth.” Anne ran to the woman and held her elbow. “I had to come and get something from the back room.”

A wiry man in his sixties came into the shop from the back room. His face lit at the site of Anne.

“Hello, Uncle Phil,” said Anne. “I need some things.” She motioned with her head toward Beth, who was still a little wobbly on her feet. Phil came over and put an arm around her.

“You won’t have to go on another trip, will you dear?” Beth asked.

“I think so, Aunt Beth. I’ll be going to England.”

Alone in the back room, Anne searched the haphazardly filed library, pulling dozens of volumes and searching briefly through each. Finally she found the desired book and set it on a clear spot of the table in the middle of the room. Dozens of small artifacts and objets d’art littered the table.

Anne removed the small leather packet from her shirt pocket, unfolded it, and placed it on the table. Inside was a short stick, like a miniature staff. It was slightly uneven with a tapered tip, and out of the shaft grew a dozen or more thorns. Its appearance reminded Anne of a prickly baton or wand.

Quickly she riffled through the pages of the book she had chosen, stop-

ping finally and smoothing the light velum. On the page was a drawing of the stick and a paragraph describing its importance to another object, a talisman of some power. Anne turned the page to find another drawing, this one of a rust-colored stone carved into a trapezoid shape with a narrower bottom and a wider top, both of which formed into arcs, the lower concave, the upper convex. It looked like a slice of pie with the tip bitten off.

An image had been carved onto the stone and glazed over. It was a dragon, coiled in slumber with a willow tree above it. The dragon was trapped and the willow’s trunk was gnarled and twisted with shoots growing around the base. The roots of the willow draped over the sleeping dragon, imprisoning it.

This was one of the forms on a stone plate Anne and her crew had recovered in Buda-Pest as they sought another fetish of great power, the Black Scarab. These were two talismans of fourteen that comprised the images on the plate: the Scarab along with a third charm which Anne had earlier obtained formed the center, and the dragon stone was one of an outer ring of twelve. She had no idea the mystery behind these things but knew they contained great power.

The Scarab had somehow been connected with the fabulous change the world had experienced several months ago, as a series of mystical waves rolled across the Earth. Left to its own devices, it might well have erased hu-

mankind from the planet. But encased in a magical binding spell by an Enchantra it managed only massive upheaval. Societies changed overnight. What was once modern was ancient again, and in some parts of the world what was ancient became futuristic. The planet had been turned on its ear yet virtually no one remembered things as they had been. It was as if Time had restarted on a thousand thousand Earths then brought them all together on one planet. It was nothing to leave Anne's New York of the 1930s and travel to ancient Egypt or to Nineteenth Century Europe or to a realm of dinosaurs. Such things were not strange in this new world.

Yet Anne remembered what had happened before The Change. For some reason her mind was able to recall her life before and her current life in this new plane of existence. She was not alone in this. A man had been drawn to her who also recalled his modern world. His name was Travis Dade, a reporter for the New York Evening Post. He had joined Anne in her adventures, ostensibly to write stories about her for his newspaper, but in fact to help in finding a way to revert the timeline. Of late they both had wondered if such a thing were even possible.

The telephone at the end of the table jangled, startling Anne. Lifting the receiver she said, "Anne Robson."

"There you are!" Travis Dade exclaimed through the telephone. His voice was strident with stress. "I've

been looking for you for hours. Will you do me a favor and invent the cell phone some time. Keeping up with you is a full-time job."

"I have been driving back from the airfield. What is wrong?"

"We've got visitors at the manor."

"I may have to leave town soon. Something has happened."

"That's what I figured," Dade said. His voice was strained as if he were containing excitement. "I can get Chesterfield and me ready in minutes. Except ...."

"You needn't interrupt your lives, Travis."

"Are you kidding? Things have been dead the past few weeks. And you are a guaranteed live wire."

"You said 'except' a moment ago."

"Yeah ... except we've got a visitor wanting to see you. A tall visitor."

Anne thought for a moment. "Unusually tall?"

"Downright freakish."

"I'm on my way."

She cradled the telephone, wrapped the stick up in the leather packet, and slipped out the back door. At the end of the building she cut through a narrow alley to the street and her car. She turned the car around from Amsterdam Avenue onto Seventy-sixth Street, drove two blocks cross-town, and was about to turn onto Columbus Avenue when something black shimmered in the air in front of her. A tear appeared, opening a black endless void. She jammed the brakes and skidded to a stop just as a stream of fire and smoke

shot out of the tear straight for her head.

CHAPTER TWO:  
THE ORDER OF ST. GLAUVER

Anne ducked below the windscreen as the jet of flame shot over her head and blistered the bright yellow paint on the auto's hood.

She threw the car into reverse and, stamping on the gas pedal, spun away from the yawning abyss in front of her. When she looked up, the shimmering blackness was gone. Car horns honked at her until she put her machine in gear and entered the avenue.

Cautiously, she drove down Columbus Avenue then picked up Broadway to cut across town. She maneuvered around Times Square and turned east onto Forty-second Street. The Chrysler Building rose up above its neighbors, the upper floors of the spire glistening in the sunshine.

Anne pulled into the underground garage and continued down until it dead-ended at a concrete wall, and kept driving as the wall parted to reveal a secret garage. Inside were various forms of transportation, plain and armored. She hopped out of the roadster and rushed into the private elevator that whisked her up to her headquarters above the Cloud Club.

They were remarkable apartments. Within the multi-storied complex were several offices, an experimental labo-

ratory, an extensive library, and living quarters. On the wide, open main floor were tables strewn with artifacts from around the world. Large triangular windows provided a spectacular view of the city below. The ceiling over half of this room stretched several stories high. The other half of the room was sheltered by the first of two balconies that stretched the entire length. Within the balcony's shadow were doors leading to various rooms. A metal winding staircase joined the main level to the upper floors.

Anne stepped out of the elevator, small leather packet in hand, warily looking for Dade. He was at the top of the winding staircase at the second floor balcony. He tossed his head toward the eclectic collection of chairs below near the windows. She followed the movement and saw a dark figure rise up.

"Miss Robson, I do hope you don't mind that I waited for you."

The figure moved forward out of the shadows. He was smiling but his eyes were dark and cruel. The man was unnaturally tall, nearly eight feet in height, and a thin specimen, but not emaciated. Oddly, his face was soft and round, and there was a small mustache above his lip that was nearly invisible. His name was Jackson Crafter, a mysterious man who had introduced himself as a businessman but had not elaborated. He had known about the Black Scarab and other things mystical. His presence here was not a surprise to Anne.

"You seem to be able to make your-

self comfortable.”

“Yes.”

Dade came down the stairs carrying several items, including Anne’s holster and broomhandle Mauser pistol. The movement attracted another’s attention. This figure stepped out from behind the stairs and stood with wrists crossed at his waist in front of him. He was dressed in black with a black hood over his head. He moved to a position to protect Crafter.

Dade froze seeing the man. He had not known the man was there.

“Forgive me,” Crafter said. “Mr. Lappert is quite custodial where I am concerned. It’s quite all right, Mr. Lappert. Mr. Dade meant no threat.”

“Me?”

Crafter motioned with his head, like a giraffe, at the gun in Dade’s hand.

“You see, Mr. Lappert, Miss Robson and her man are about to leave. We’ve interrupted them.”

“What did you want, Mr. Crafter?”

“Ever the practical conversationalist. I envy you that, Miss Robson. So direct. Would that life were that way.”

Anne took the proffered gunbelt and other items from Dade. She placed these on a table and motioned toward the chairs. “Shall we sit? Travis, I wonder if you could find us some coffee.”

“You mean, like, go out of the room?”

She smiled with a lopsided grin. “Only to the kitchen.”

Dade nodded then turned to glare a warning at Crafter and Lappert.

When he had left the room Anne

said, “I see you have replaced Bruno.”

“Bruno?” Crafter said, registering true surprise. “No, dear lady. He is not replacing Bruno.”

Anne let a moment of awkward silence fall then said, “Would you like to see the Scarab?”

“No. I’m certain it is safe. After all, it is in your hands.”

Dade hurried back into the room carrying a tray with a pot and cups. He set this down and poured quickly, thrusting cups into their hands.

“Coffee,” he said.

“How gallant.”

“What do you want, Crafter?”

Looking at Dade, the giant’s lips curled up in with a jerk, as if his mouth had had a spasm. Then he turned to Anne and said, “I heard that there was some excitement at the airfield. You were there today, weren’t you? Something about a burning man, a disappearing horse, and a ... trinket ... dropped by this man.”

“You’re always so well informed.”

“Well, there happened to be a newspaperman at the field. I read his account of it in an extra edition of the Gazette.” He turned to Dade and added, “Forgive me, but the Evening Post doesn’t have a late morning edition, does it? And, of course, you weren’t there.”

Anne put a restraining hand on Dade’s arm.

“May I see it?” Crafter asked.

She stood and went to the table where she had placed the leather packet along with her pistol and other

items. Returning with it, she handed it to Crafter. Dade's eyes were wide and his face taugth with warning. Anne ignored him.

Crafter untied the bundle with great care, folding back the leather to reveal the spiny stick. He lay the package on his lap and sat back. Anticipation had made his face tense. Now his features drooped with disappointment.

"I had hoped it was ... more." He sighed, then looked over to Anne, who had again taken her seat. "You know what it is?"

She nodded. "I believe so."

Crafter saw that she was not about to give away any information. He smiled indulgently and sipped his coffee.

"It is a symbol of strife or conflict," she said.

"Oh it's much more than that, dear lady. It's called a Straif. It is the eleventh tree of the Ogham, the Druidic hierarchy. A Blackthorn. The fruit of this plant will make a potent alcohol and is often used in pagan ceremonies. The thorns as you've no doubt discovered are quite painful.

"There are spiritual and physical meanings associated with the plant. In effect the discovery or wielding of the blackthorn means that there will be or have been unexpected changes in your life. To not accept these changes is to fight against Fate. You are taken down a path far different than expected. It is unavoidable, inevitable. You must understand this and accept the change and become reborn."

Anne was frozen in place. Out of the corner of her eye she sensed that Dade was looking at her, eyes goggled and mouth open. He understood the significance of this story as it related to their lives since the Earth's strange transformation.

"Go on," she said stiffly.

"The Blackthorn has been used for many thousands of years, but this particular branch with its bark peeled away and its tapered tip has a very special purpose. It is a minor talisman, of some small power, and is used in conjunction with another. The power of these two talismans together is quite potent. A great evil is held in check by these, and the separation of the two suggests that evil may break free."

"What is this evil?"

Crafter smiled. "A dragon."

"What?" Dade exclaimed. "Like Puff?"

Startled, Crafter said, "I do not know of a Puff."

"Would this dragon breathe fire?" Anne asked seriously. She remembered the horseman at the airfield and the jet of flame that burned him to ashes.

"Yes. That is the legend."

"You know," Dade said, "I think this is a little too much."

"After what you've seen, Mr. Dade? I assure you the belief in this is quite strong." He returned his attention to Anne. "There was an English monastery centuries ago charged by Pope St. Leo I in the last years of his reign with stamping out all pagan and magical

practices. St. Leo was a strong advocate for basic church values in a very turbulent time when paganism was growing, especially in the west. The monastery acted rather heavy handed and was set upon by pagan armies and all but wiped out. The few survivors scattered but remained in contact. They formed a secret society led by Eustice Glauver.

“From his original band of six monks, Glauver expanded his influence by recruiting more than 10,000 brothers, priests, deacons, bishops, and holy commoners into the cause. They claimed to have purged all of Britain, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales of pagan worshippers, but of course that was not true. Those activities became themselves secret, but continued to flourish.

“Glauver’s army crossed the Channel and continued on with their work in France and in Spain in what one might call a preview of the Crusades to come. They were beaten back to Dover, their numbers crushed. They returned to secret ways and maintained their vigil down through the centuries with their dwindled numbers. Despite his defeat, Pope Urban II – himself an inspiration for the Crusades of the Eleventh Century – ultimately conferred sainthood on Glauver. The society takes his name and is supposedly still active.”

“In England?” asked Anne. Crafter nodded. “And they want this thing back?”

“It would seem likely considering the fate of the man at the airfield. But

should they acquire it, they could have great powers at their disposal that they did not have before.”

“Perhaps you should hold onto it,” Anne suggested.

“I think not.” Crafter smiled cannily. “As with the Scarab, such things are better left to those less tempted. You should keep it safe.”

Anne shrugged. “Then it’s over. I’ve got this piece and without it the other piece is useless. Stalemate.” She started to get out of her chair.

“Of course,” Crafter said, “they might send someone to retrieve it. They are tenacious – and reputed to have some powers of their own. Perhaps they have already made a second attempt?”

“Confront them?” Anne’s voice was laced with bitter irony.

Crafter smiled. “Such is the lesson of the Blackthorn. That is if one believes in such things.” He stood, laboriously lifting his ungainly height out of the chair. “I’ve taken up too much of your time today. You were about to leave on some important business, weren’t you? Thank you for seeing me.”

With a nod, the man in the black robe and hood moved to the elevator at the back of the room.

“You wouldn’t know how to contact Omani Dahla, Mr. Crafter, would you?” asked Anne.

Dade stiffened at the sound of that name.

“No. Dahla and I do not ... communicate ... of late. However, a bit of ad-

visé. He would not be welcome in the Isles. Enchantras are persona non grata.”

“Why is that?” Dade asked.

Crafter shrugged his bony shoulders. “Such is the way with ancient cultures. Ever the mystery.” He paused, then turned and looked up to the third floor balcony and waved. “Goodbye, Mr. Chesterfield,” he called, grinning snakily.

Still grinning, Crafter stepped into the elevator, nearly doubling himself over. The doors closed on his cold smile.

Edwin Bartholomew Chesterfield the Third stepped out of a third floor room, a carbine rifle gripped in his hand. His long face showed dejection.

“He knew I was there all along, didn’t he?”

“He did,” said Anne. “But thank you anyway.”

Chesterfield was a thin man, a bit taller than Dade. In addition to being long, his face was thinner than Dade’s, too. But he had large bright green eyes and the look of an innocent child about him. He cut a dapper figure in a well-tailored gray suit. Chesterfield was Anne’s accountant, but in recent months had proven himself valuable as much more. The man had kept his skills as a marksman secret until dire circumstances had forced him to reveal himself. He had also been a valuable aid to Anne in her adventures over the past months. She trusted him implicitly.

“We are going to England, then?” asked Chesterfield.

“Yes. Let’s pack.”

### CHAPTER THREE: TRAIL TO CAMULOD

The airship Novus rose majestically above the sunlit Atlantic Ocean and climbed to its cruising altitude of just over 20,000 feet. With a jolt, the dirigible caught a low riding jet stream that propelled it at nearly 80 knots per hour and kept Captain Albert struggling at the wheel of the huge craft for long hours.

Anne spent the time with Dade and Chesterfield preparing for their travels once landing in England.

“We’ll set down in Exeter,” she told them, packing a small duffel bag. On the table in the dining salon were several such bags, as well as saddlebags, backpacks, and her pouch belt. “It will be cold and wet. It seems always to be. So we need warm clothing and rain gear and boots. We’ll buy horses at the landing and set out for Cadbyri and Camulod. It’s only about ten miles by horse. We will make ourselves known to Arthur and get his blessing.”

Dade stared. “King Arthur?”

“Yes, Travis,” Anne said, smiling. “You’ll need papers and an introduction. Presentation to a king requires a certain bona fides.”

“King Arthur? Like the guy with the sword Excalibur?”

“Yes, Travis.”

“Except the sword is really named Caliburn,” Chesterfield said matter-of-

factly.

"I don't believe it."

"Arthur," Anne explained, "is actually the thirtieth king to take that name. It's ceremonial. His real name is Edmond. He's quite old now. His son will take his place soon and continue the tradition."

They ate heartily that night and slept well. Dade found a book about England and its Forever King in the library. He fell asleep with it open on his chest.

The next morning they slid through another of the energy barriers that separated the different regions of this changed world. Almost invisible to the naked eye, these barriers kept the disparate time periods and physical realities apart. Passing through the barrier the sunlit skies vanished and were replaced by high black clouds.

Winds buffeted the great ship's envelope as Captain Albert sent the dirigible into a descent. Anne and Dade and Chesterfield stood in the pilothouse looking out the large, floor to ceiling windows that formed a semicircle at the front of the gondola. Roiling blackness beat violently against the thick panes.

"What's that?" Chesterfield asked.

Two balls of yellow-green light rolled through the clouds ahead of the ship and disappeared. A dull red rumble shook behind the veil of one cloud then the lights reappeared and lifted above their field of vision.

Anne did not answer. Instead, a high-pitched, soft hum filled the pres-

surized cabin. Anne stared intently out the window, waiting for the lights to return. Her throat bobbed up and down lightly.

Again the lights appeared, now closer and not quite as round. There was something dark behind the lights, the edges of it just visible through the black mists. Something heavy and flat slapped against the panes then slipped beneath the gondola.

"I don't like this," Dade said.

"Get us down, Captain."

"We're dropping as fast as we dare, lass."

For a third time the yellow-green lights appeared. They swept across the prow of the ship leading a long black figure. The thing was sleek and pointed on both ends and seemed to flow across the sky like some sea creature swimming in the ocean. It moved away from the gondola, the lights flattening and growing dim. At the last moment before it faded away, the light became round again and flared. Another rumble of thunder shook the clouds and lit them the color of blood.

Captain Albert sent the Novus down below the clouds. After a few moments they crossed over the green and gray seawashed coastline of England. The airship dropped lower and flew up a narrow quay. Ahead was the small town of Exeter with its muddy streets and roughhewn log huts. To the east of town was a flat grassy pasture that butted up to the quay which Anne identified as the Exeter landing, a fusion of seaport and airport. Ancient log

docks lined the harbor half-filled with wooden sailing ships. Dade could make out only one steel ship. It was small and looked as if it were steam powered. A smaller vessel was tied behind it, heaped with coal. It reminded Dade of old steam locomotives that had to tow their own tenders.

The airport portion of the landing was as primitive. Flame pots lined a single trampled grass and mud runway. There were three pylons for dirigibles, each more than twenty feet high and a dozen feet wide.

Captain Albert settled the ship expertly while his crew tossed mooring lines to the landing crew on the ground. Within an hour the ship was secure.

On the ground, Anne made arrangements for horses. They were taken on a rough cart a mile beyond the landing to a corral. A log hut sat at one end of the corral, smoke pouring from a stone chimney. A rumped old man strode out of the hut, pipe in his mouth, and smoke billowing just as thick as the chimney smoke.

His face brightened at the site of the visitors.

"Lady Anne!" he cried and pulled the long pipe from his mouth. "A great pleasure to see you again!"

"Claudem," she replied. "All of England is on your ancient countenance."

"Aye, lass," he said, sadly, taking her hands as she offered them. "But for how long? Will I live to see you return to your lands?"

Dade marveled at how she could call on the memories of some other life

so easily. Since The Change, both she and Dade had discovered they each had two sets of memories: the remembrances of their normal life in a modern world, and the memories of their lives in this patchwork quilt of a world. It was as if they lived two lives at the same time, and now this one was dominant. Dade had not told her, though, that he had memories of more than two lives. That sometimes he saw images of himself living dozens of disparate lives. And then there was the voice that had spoken to him, beckoned him. He had not told her about that, either, nor would he until he understood it better.

"She has an estate here?" Dade asked.

"An estate? Aye, my boy, you could say that. An ancestral home is more like it. Nestled in the hills of Clwyd in Wales. As fine a place to see as ever was in the Isles. I've seen it myself a time or two."

"So you have. Claudem, we need horses."

"And so you shall have them. And I'll buy them back from you when you're done at a fair price. All except for his'n," Claudem added, pointing at the huge Captain Albert. "His won't be good for anything but glue by the time he gets done with 'em."

Captain Albert laughed, his whole belly shaking, and Claudem joined him.

Claudem cut out eight horses, two each for the four of them. Captain Albert's were appropriately large beasts that stood eighteen hands high. The

others got spirited animals that behaved well enough. Dade found he could not only sit a horse but also ride one, after a fashion. Chesterfield clung to the pommel of his saddle with tight, white knuckles.

The extra horses were loaded with their gear. Anne had taken several weapons from ship's stores and handed them out to everyone. Each had a pistol and a saddlegun which fitted into hide boots lashed to their saddles. Anne wore riding boots and jodhpurs, a heavy Shetland sweater, a pea coat, and a floppy hat. The others were similarly bundled against the damp cold as they climbed aboard.

Snorting frosty blasts from their noses, the horses were turned out of the corral and pointed northeast. Set free of the pen, each animal stretched its legs into long loping strides. After a brief run Anne slowed their pace.

South England rolled out for them like an endless green carpet draped softly over low hills. As the rode into the lowlands, a mealy mist dampened them. On the road they passed few travelers. A horse-drawn cart, an old man with a cudgel. Cresting hills brought them out of the mist and into slightly warmer air.

They made good time. After an hour they rested the horses and Anne took her bearings. The clouds began to part and shafts of butter yellow sun poured down like spotlights. Toward the end of the second hour Anne had them pause again. They had crested

yet another hill. Below them was a long, low valley partitioned into farmland. At the end of the valley rose a tree-shrouded escarpment.

"Cadbyri," she said, meaning the farmlands below.

"Not much of a town," said Dade.

"To the right of that hill is the village."

"And where's Camelot?"

She pointed to the escarpment. "Camulod."

There seemed to be little to the legendary place. There was no castle. Dade could make out several low wooden buildings atop the escarpment on a wide plateau. Behind those were two walls of stone, one shorter than the other, which looked to be in poor repair. The hill was terraced with two pathways that circled up from the valley floor. Trees encircled the bottom of the hill and several clumps of trees were strategically placed along the side. Other timber had been cleared for a better view of the Somerset Levels.

"Not exactly the gleaming castle of legend."

"Legends rarely gleam in the light of reality."

Leading the group down onto the Levels, Anne found a road through the farmlands. Within minutes of reaching the flatlands, a squad of knights in full regalia rode down from the castlemount and out to meet them.

"Ho!" cried a silvery knight at the front of the column. He had a long sword out of its sheath and across his saddle. Dade made to reach for the rifle

in the scabbard on his saddle, but Anne put a hand out to stop him. The other knights – six of them – fanned out, surrounding the group.

“Ho, Brave Knight,” Anne said. To Dade she sounded quite demur. Suddenly he realized that she was no longer sitting astride her horse but was instead sitting sidesaddle, with one knee curled around the pommel.

“What business have you in Camulod?”

“We come to beg an audience of King Arthur. I am Lady Anne of Clwyd, Wales.”

The silvery knight jolted slightly, his armor squeaking. He lifted his helmet’s visor and peered out, squinting.

“Well, I’ll be ...! All right you sardines!” he bellowed at the other knights. “Put up your arms! You’re in the presence of a real lady, like unto Gwenhwyvar, Lord keep her well.”

“Hello, Gayain,” Anne said, smiling warmly. “Ever guardian of the king’s realm, I see.”

“That I am. And well for it. Though times be not what they were. Arthur has grown old. And there is devilment afoot in the land.”

“Isn’t there always?” Anne asked with amusement, although she sensed a tension in Gayain she had never seen.

“Not like this. The king and his son are not happy men. There are dragons about again, and that’s never a good sign.”

Dade and Chesterfield shared a

worried look. They hadn’t wanted to put a name to what they had seen flying by the dirigible, but privately each had thought the word dragon.

“Then hurry me to him, please. Perhaps I can offer some counsel.”

“He’s gone, m’lady. It is time.”

Gayain said it with such solemnity that the others found themselves feeling worried, even though they had no idea what the man meant.

“Then he’s in Glestingaburh?”

“Not half way there yet. He left two days ago, and they travel slow.”

Dade asked, “King Arthur is dead?”

“No,” said Gayain, “that’s scheduled for Thursday. Maybe Friday if the weather doesn’t hold.”

“Huh?”

Ignoring Dade, Anne said, “We’d best hurry, then, Gayain. Sorry we cannot stay and share happier times.”

“Aye, m’lady. Ride well and safe.”

With a wave, Anne turned her horse and headed east. The others followed. Anne threw her leg back over the saddle and kicked the horse into a gallop.

They stopped that night by a small stream. Captain Albert caught a dozen fish and broiled them on a spit. A lean-to had been erected and it kept them dry. The captain paid special attention to his horses, both of which had carried him without complaint, even at a full gallop.

Anne did not speak that night. Even Dade could see she had slipped into her contemplative mood.

The following morning they started

early and rode hard, resting the horses every hour or so. The weather had not improved. Heavy clouds rolled low overhead and thick, soupy mists lay in the valleys. By mid-day the mists had lifted from the low areas and they were able to spot a short column of riders in a grassy field below them.

Knights with banners rode at the head of the column, and behind. A heavy carriage, covered on the top and sides to keep out the weather, bounced along the rutted road behind a team of six black stallions. A squad of armed knights rode close to the carriage. Behind the fortified part of the column were more than a dozen other carriages and carts, along with two dozen or more riders, each towing a banner representing the great houses of England. Far off the road were other, poorer travelers, their carts pulled by oxen while others walked or led mules.

Anne stopped her horse at the crest of the hill. She seemed about to pause when, seeing a black spot form on the horizon, she spurred her animal into an instant gallop.

"Hurry," she cried. "The king is attacked!"

#### CHAPTER FOUR: THE BEAST ATTACKS

**F**or a heartbeat, Dade and the others were too stunned to follow.

The low clouds made the horizon close and after a moment they saw the

same black spot Anne had. The thing was growing rapidly. They watched it as it turned from a spot into something elongated and undulating.

"Is that what we saw in the sky before landing," Chesterfield asked, his voice quivering slightly.

Anne had reached the bottom of the hill and she had her horse charging for the king's retinue. A phalanx of knights broke off and, swords drawn, rode to intercept Anne.

"Whatever it is, Anne's going to be in trouble," Dade said, pointing down into the valley.

As one, Dade, Chesterfield, and Captain Albert spurred their mounts forward and rumbled down the hill. Chesterfield rode lightly and the captain's weight kept him well seated. But Dade bounced around in his saddle violently. He wanted to draw his rifle from its scabbard but was afraid he would drop it.

The lines of the thing in the sky became sharper. It was a gigantic creature, at least one hundred feet from its head to its forked tail, with a wingspan nearly as long. Its body was round and rough, muddy green in color like it was made of moss covered rocks. Its craggy head was shaped like an arrowhead, the snout pointed and sharp. The thing had an overbite and large nostrils and incisors that protruded from the mouth. Some on the ground now saw the creature. They pointed and screamed. The caravan halted.

Anne was well ahead of the others and almost upon the approaching

knights. Fully suited, their metal pauldrons and greaves and faulds rattled noisily like pots and pans, leaving them deaf to the world around them. Their long swords were now held out in front of them against their lance rests as they prepared to make a passing cut.

Pulling up, Anne pointed into the sky.

The lead knight halted as well and turned just in time to see the talons of the dragon pierce his armor like a pin-cushion.

Anne tugged at the reins and dragged her horse to the ground as a sharp, scalloped wing flapped overhead with a gush of wind.

The other two knights broke off and spurred their horses into a full gallop back toward the king.

On the ground, Anne drew her rifle and began firing at the creature. It had something in its claw, stuck on the long curving talons, and shook it viciously. The thing popped off and flew back and landed inches from Anne. It was the knight's head still encased in its helmet.

"Set up around the king," Anne commanded as the others rode up to her. Then she nudged her horse to its feet and leapt into a gallop.

The neat line of the royal caravan had broken, horses and carts and men running off in all directions. The travelers not on the road scattered screaming.

The king's knights had formed a circle around Arthur's carriage. Two

jerkin-clad pages pulled at a white-haired, stooped old man, trying to get him to relative safety under the carriage. It was Arthur and, despite his slower movements and crooked figure, the man's kingly bearing was unmistakable even at this distance.

Anne cried out as the dragon finished its aerial turn and swept back toward the king. But now the creature made a noise and drowned out her voice.

The dragon swooped down and swatted at three knights, knocking two over and grabbing one in its bloody craw. The knight's scream cut above the screeching of the beast.

Again the dragon rose up and shook off its prey, and the knight plunged to earth with a loud crack. Sweeping around, it opened its mouth and belched a bubble of flame that roiled forward and down toward the fleeing travelers. Canvass-topped carts blazed and a dozen small brush fires erupted.

Anne gained the king's carriage and jumped from the horse to the roof of the conveyance, rifle in hand. She knelt and lined up her sites on the circling beast.

Dade and Chesterfield and Captain Albert arrived moments behind her.

"Fan out!" she ordered. "Shoot as it passes!"

The three men dismounted and slapped their horses away then separated to different sides of the carriage.

The dragon put its nose down and compressed its narrow shoulders as it began a new dive. The yellow green

eyes sparkled and the beast almost seemed to smile as it saw Anne and the others waiting for it.

The creature opened its mouth and the low rumble of a fireball rising from its gullet echoed over the flat valley. At that instant Anne and the others opened fire. A hail of bullets streaked into the beast, half a dozen of them punching into the dragon's throat. The creature choked on the tiny slugs, lost its balance, then flapped angrily to control its flight.

Anne and the others continued to fire. Now the dragon was on top of them. A streaking talon just missed Anne as she jumped from the top of the carriage. A gash was ripped into the soft wood, sending shattered splinters in all directions. In an instant, Anne was back up on the carriage roof straddling the mutilated wood and reloading her rifle.

The dragon sped low along the road, swatting at the animals and people in its way.

"We drew blood," Dade said, reloading his own rifle.

"Not enough. At this pace, we'll run out of ammunition before we can kill the thing."

Ahead on the road, the dragon had flown higher into the air and was beginning to circle around again.

"Well, did you bring any dynamite?" Dade asked.

Anne did not answer. A thought had come to her. She put the rifle down and began fishing through the pouches on her heavy belt. A short time ago

she had realized that her adventures could require many different types of weapons or scientific equipment. She had put together this canvass belt with more than a dozen roomy pouches in which she could keep handy a large variety of devises.

Now she removed five round white balls, none of them more than an inch across. She got down off the carriage and went to Dade.

"What are you doing? It's coming back around!"

"Take these," she said. "Stand at the back of the carriage. Keep low. Your timing must be perfect."

"No pressure there!"

"Just as it reaches us, toss these into the air high enough so they will break on the dragon's face. Do not try to shoot the creature."

"It was too high before. I don't think I can throw that high."

"I'll make it come lower. Hurry."

Anne stepped up onto the driver's bench and reached up for her rifle. Then she crouched low using the footboard for what little protection it would offer.

Dade abandoned his rifle and took up a position behind the carriage.

The dragon had completed its circle and was streaking back toward the carriage. A fireball erupted from its mouth and blasted the road. The creature screamed in anger and pain. Chesterfield and Captain Albert continued to fire rounds at the beast, but it ignored them. It had eyes for Anne.

Swooping down, the dragon curled

itself up so that its heavy legs and thick razor-sharp talons were aimed forward. Its head was low and its curving back arched and its wings beat furiously. The sound of them was like tiny explosions and the backwash of wind sent smaller carts tumbling off the road.

The creature was lower to the ground so the knights closed in, swords drawn. Anne called for them to move away but they couldn't hear.

In an instant the dragon was on top of the carriage, screeching madly. Anne threw herself from driver's bench, tossing the rifle at the beast. The creature's momentum carried it past the carriage even as it began to turn its flaring eyes to follow Anne.

Then the air crackled and a puff of pale pink gas mushroomed up in the air and as quickly dissipated.

The dragon roared and blindly spat out another fireball and was suddenly away from the carriage.

"Reload!" Anne yelled as she reached for her rifle, which had tumbled to the muddy road.

The dragon flapped heavily, beating swirling torrents of wind around it. But the ground was wet so little dust rose. It had curled up even further, bending head and body almost into a circle so its short arms could reach its face.

Sparkling pink crystals lay like dust all over the creature's head. Its eyes were closed and it rubbed them furiously with rough knuckles as it screamed. Pain fused with anger in

its horrendous shrieks. It hovered inches above the dewy grass.

Anne and the others began firing rounds into the thing. It screamed and jerked and waved its arms as if trying to swat annoying insects. But it was too much for the creature. Tormented by pain and the endless attack, the dragon beat its gigantic wings and soared straight into the air. It let out one last shriek as it blindly undulated up into the sky seeking escape.

The caravan lay strewn across the road. With the creature gone, the survivors began to reorder their lives.

Several knights ran forward in search of the king. Arthur had been dragged beneath the carriage, unconscious but clutching a tarnished and ancient sword. A knight wearing a helmet with a long snout lumbered up to the carriage, pushing the others away.

"My king!" he cried, whipping off his helmet. He was a round-faced man, in his forties, with black hair spotted with white. He wore a tunic with the king's dragon crest embroidered in the center. But beneath the tunic, painted on his armor was the crest of his house, an eagle clutching a dragon by the throat. Fear and anger washed over his face and he pulled away debris to find Arthur.

"Here, Bedwyr," the king said, awaking. The knight and several pages helped Arthur out from under the carriage and gave him a stool to sit on. He was an ancient man, with

wrinkled, translucent skin. His eyes were as misty as the moors, and so very tired. But a spark of light brightened them as he saw Anne.

“Lady Anne! Oh what joy it brings these tired old eyes to see you again. Would it were happier times.”

Anne fell to one knee, her head bent low. Beside her Dade felt conscious of still standing on his feet so he knelt, too.

“Rise, child,” Arthur said. “Once again you come to my rescue. Tradition be damned. The realm is secure if you be in it.”

Anne did not rise, but she did look up.

Anger boiled in Bedwyr. “Such a brazen stroke, m’lord! Pray tell me you are well.”

“Well enough to reach the end, faithful one.”

“M’lord,” Anne said, “on such a solemn occasion what could make the dragons risk an attack and the wrath of Pendragon?”

“Do they fear a quest?” Arthur asked bitterly. “Not with the knights I have.” Arthur quickly looked up at Bedwyr. “Save for a faithful few – Bedwyr and Gayain. The beasts are safe enough from all my kingdom might bring to bear. Ah, Lady Anne, these are troubled times. The portents have been there for any to see. My reign is cursed and I fear my son will fair no better.” Anger had breathed a little life back into Arthur. He turned to look at the man kneeling beside Anne.

“And who be this brave soul who

fought a dragon with naught but toys?”

“You saw, m’lord?” Anne asked.

“I saw enough.”

Dade was introduced to the king. Anne made a flowery speech about Dade’s bravery and valor and his loyalty to the crown. She recounted their recent adventures and his part in them. The king looked deeply into Dade’s eyes and nodded profoundly.

When Anne had finished, Arthur pulled himself to his feet and called for his sword. A page brought it, dragging it by the hilt.

“From whence do thee hail, Travis Dade?”

“Um, Secaucus. It’s in New Jersey.”

Arthur lifted the sword above his head then lightly brought the flat of it down on Dade’s right shoulder. He spoke and moved the sword from shoulder to shoulder.

“In the name of God, St. Michael, and St. George, I grant you the right to bear arms and the power to mete justice. By these Holy words, I name thee Sir Travis, Earl of Secaucus.”

Arthur waited, the sword poised in front of him. Dade realized there was more and in a flash a thought occurred to him. Still kneeling he reached for his rifle and laid it out in front of King Arthur.

“A duty I will solemnly obey,” Dade stuttered awkwardly. “This is the only weapon I have, m’lord. But I place it your disposal.”

A corner of Arthur’s mouth curled into a smile. “Take thy weapon and rise, Sir Knight of the Round Table. I

fear you will need it ere long.”

CHAPTER FIVE:  
LE MORTE D' ARTUR

The few dead knights were brought to Arthur's carriage and laid out solemnly. Bedwyr helped the king up onto a horse and rode close beside him. Arthur fidgeted uncomfortably but sat the animal well enough, old habits and skills returning.

“Two days in the saddle should just about finish me,” he said, smiling. “My son Vortigern should have no trouble vanquishing me now.”

Riding beside Arthur Anne said, “Perhaps you might postpone the ceremony.”

Arthur shook his head gravely. “No. These things are ordained. It is for the good of England, and we shall not ill treat her so near our end.”

The caravan had reformed, but the line was a more ragged, less perfect. Arthur invited the poorer travelers onto the road under the dubious protection of the knights. The few injured were treated and they stared in awe of the king as he passed among them asking after their health and comfort. Dade noticed a lovely young woman riding a horse. She had come in among the poorer travelers and her rough clothing marked her as one of them. But she sat her horse with an almost regal bearing. Her face was expressionless, perhaps just the wisp of a smile at the

end of her lips. Her eyes, though, were intense and black, black as the roiling curls of her long black hair. She was a stunning beauty and she watched Arthur gravely. After a few moments she noticed Dade staring at her. She turned to face him, still expressionless, but the wisp of a smile was gone from her full lips.

Dade turned away and found Anne.

“Those little white balls came in handy back there,” Dade said with a grin.

“Well, I do have a laboratory, you know,” said Anne, trying to sound light. But her brow was lined with worry.

“Say, what's with the spectators? Looks like the gallery at a golf tournament.”

“There'll be more as we go. The ceremony is important to the kingdom and people come from around the world to watch it.”

“Yeah, well, that dragon should scare away the tourists.”

“Nonsense,” Arthur said, calling back over his shoulder. “It shall only add to the lore.” The thought clearly did not please him.

Anne spurred her horse forward to rejoin the king.

“I am not so blind an old fool to think you made this trip for me alone.” There was a sadness in his words that belied the soft smile in his eyes. “The days are long since past when a pretty face turned in my direction. Why have you come, Lady Anne?”

Anne removed the small leather

pouch from her belt and showed the king blackthorn stick. Arthur ducked his head and nodded gravely.

"You seek the Order of St. Glauver, then?"

"Yes, m'lord. There is another talisman."

"Yes. The Orner. I have heard of it, but the legends are lost in time. I know almost nothing of them."

They rode in silence for long minutes.

"There are places of power where you might find this ... thing," Arthur said, finally.

"Like Stonehenge?"

The king's laughter was immediate and loud and full of life. His cheeks reddened and for a moment he seemed to shed years from his back.

"Ye, gods, stay away from the Valley of Barrows, dear woman! If ever there was a place in all the realm less true I could not name it. Henge is but a clock, Lady Anne, no more, no less. And the smaller henges not even that. Ancient prayer halls to the pagans."

Bedwyr dropped back beside the king. "We should rest, sire."

Arthur looked worn and now that the energy of his laughter had waned his skin had lost almost all color.

"We press on, sir knight," replied the king, "for there will be more than enough time to rest at journey's end." He tossed his head, signaling for Bedwyr ride ahead. The knight frowned but spurred his horse gently and pulled ahead several lengths.

"But there are places of true power,"

Arthur continued. "There is a barrow north of Bristol, just before Avonmouth, close to the bay. Set inside it is a small fane, mostly ruins now, said to be the birthplace of St. Glauver's order. Ask about it in the surrounding villages. They all have stories to tell."

"Thank you, m'lord."

"If I thought you came for this thing for money or power or glory I would tell you nothing. But I think I know you well enough. It is important for you to find?" Anne said it was. The king shook his head slowly. "I do you no favor, sweet lady. But perhaps you can do one for me."

"Anything," she said.

"Stay with me. Until Glestingaburh, at least. Stay with me 'til my end."

Travis Dade found his attention diverted by the black-haired beauty riding several wagons ahead of him. Riding sidesaddle she had occasion to look back along the train toward the king's entourage. Their eyes met once or twice and Dade found himself growing self-conscious. She was stunningly beautiful, so much so that he could barely take his eyes from her.

"Clear up something for me, will you, Mr. Dade?" Chesterfield asked. He had ridden up to the reporter and had been trying to get his attention for several moments.

"What's that?"

"Well, Sir Travis, do you get lands with your title?" Chesterfield's syrupy

voice laced with sarcasm cut through Dade's reverie.

"What are you talking about?"

"You're a knight of the realm now, aren't you?"

"Oh, that was just ...."

"Then you should get lands. Secaucus you said. Perhaps, your lordship, that is your new ... earldom? But isn't that a pig farm?"

"Holy mackerel, Chesterfield, cut it out."

"Now that you are a knight you might consider knighting me and Captain Albert. We were there, too, you know. Fighting the dragon."

Dade had had enough needling. His neck was getting red and the color was inching up into his face.

"Sure you were, peasant," he said warming to Chesterfield's game. "But were you kneeling before the king?"

"Well, no ..."

Dade shrugged using his whole body in an exaggerated gesture and making a comical expression with his face. Then he kned his horse and shot forward. Now Chesterfield was angry. He dropped back a few paces to ride beside Captain Albert.

"You know, I think things went along a lot smoother before that man showed up."

"Perhaps, lad. And perhaps not."

They made camp that evening before sundown. Arthur retired to his tent as soon as it was erected. He ate nothing, drank nothing. Anne looked in on him as the sun went down and

heard him lightly snoring. Sir Bedwyr stood in the tent, just inside the doorway, sword drawn and held before him. He was an imposing figure, and not unattractive with close cropped curls of red hair and a red-black beard shot through with silver, trimmed and neatly combed. His eyes were heavy, deep things that placed the weight of the world upon everything they touched. That weight was on Anne now as she stood facing him. She squared her shoulders a little, nodded, then stepped from the tent.

"Hold, Lady Anne," Bedwyr said, just coming out of the tent behind her. The baritone of his voice was as deep as his eyes, almost hypnotic.

"Sir Bedwyr?" Anne said, turning to face him.

She had met him before, years ago, but did not recall that he had had such intensity.

He took two muted clanking steps toward her, his armor rattling some. Firelight caught his face and sharpened his already angular features, which suddenly softened.

"It is well that you are here, good lady. The king is the better for it."

Anne grinned. "I am glad." She glanced almost wistfully at the tent. "After all, he is the first man I ever fell in love with."

"And you all of eight years old," Bedwyr said with a laugh. "And a helion, to boot. Aye, but he loved you, Lady Anne. Oh, these are troubled times. The kingdom is in need of a leader and Arthur ...."

“Vortigern will take on the mantle come the day of Samhain.”

“Aye, not long now. But is it enough?”

“With you at his side, the present and the future Arthur will rule well.”

“Ever,” Bedwyr echoed blandly, “at his side.”

Anne bid Bedwyr good night but again he called out to her.

“You brought a gift for the king?”

“I beg your pardon.”

“I saw you earlier show Arthur something on the road. In a leather pouch. A gift?”

Anne hesitated. “No.”

“As his protector, Lady Anne, you can understand my desire to safeguard the king from any misfortune.” Bedwyr had chosen his words carefully and this surprised her. “Ill-chosen or ill-timed gifts might upset him.”

Anne bristled and struggled to keep sharpness from her voice. “I would not harm the king.”

“Of course not. Not knowingly. But he was upset upon seeing your ... gift.”

“Which is why I have kept it. For now.”

Bedwyr nodded. “Very wise. Sleep well, Lady Anne.”

The next morning the caravan lumbered to its feet and began the final leg of the journey over green rolling hills. By mid-day the clouds broke and golden sunshine shot through onto flat grassy plains dotted with bushy green trees. They had reached the top of a hill looking down into a valley divided into rough rectangles by lines of bushes

and low drystone walls. The road cut through these and crossed the valley where a lone hill towered above the plain. Atop the hill, barely visible in the haze of distance, a single straight object pointed into the sky.

Dade sneaked a glance at Arthur at that moment. The old king looked off toward the far hill and sighed. Then he pushed back his shoulders and with resignation flattening his face he spurred his horse down into the valley.

“The Tor of Glestingaburh,” Anne said, riding up to Dade. “Ynys Avallach. A mystical island surrounded by a lake.”

“That’s where we’re going?”

“Arthur will go there, alone, after the ceremony.”

“Uh-huh. Look, Anne, I thought we’re supposed to be looking for this other talisman.”

“We are. Arthur knows something about it. He has given me some information that will be helpful.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Tonight. It will all be finished tonight, and then we can go.”

After Anne loped off to ride beside the king, Captain Albert and Chesterfield trotted up to Dade.

“Leave her be, lad,” the pilot said. “There’s time enough for our quest.”

“Well, you know how knights are, Captain. All action, action, action. Isn’t that right, Sir Travis?”

“Holy mackerel! Will you give it up!?”

Dusk settled over the valley in hues

of gold and black. A tower took shape atop the Tor as they approached, nearly square with a wide arch running it through it. In the top floor of the tower were several arched windows and crowning it was an encircling parapet. The tower stood alone, with no castle beside it or any other building anywhere visible on the Tor. Despite the rising mist there was nothing else to be seen for miles around.

Below the Tor was a lake, perhaps three hundred feet across. Standing at the edge of the shore it was easy to see that the lake was little more than water trapped in a large trough like a moat around a castle.

The tents were erected and fires were lighted. Weapons racks were set out with swords and shields and halberds and maces. The caravan had picked up a hundred more spectators and these were ushered away from the Tor to a small hill and placed behind a cloth line barricade.

Night fell and everyone ate. Arthur's camp had been set up beside a large stone that stood at the gently lapping shore of the lake. It was strangely shaped, slightly round at the top, squared below that, and then tapering into the ground. On the stone were carved four Hebrew letters. Beside the stone grew a stunted and bare thorny tree. The moon growing full passed through the night. No one slept.

"Yod He Waw He," the king said, noticing Chesterfield was studying the stone.

"Yes," said Chesterfield. "Yahweh.

The name of God."

In the firelight, with the damp mists rising around them, the king took on a strange glow.

"'Tis an old story, but we have some time," Arthur said, looking over to Bedwyr. The knight nodded. "It is said that Christ himself marked this stone. After his resurrection, the Lord met many of his friends and disciples in various places as proof that He had risen. Peter at the sea of Tiberius, the women on the road to Emmaus, and Paul and the others at Bethany. He instructed them to meet at Galilee, and there He left them to ascend to Heaven.

"Ah, but the ascension did not take place at Galilee. Christ traveled out of Jerusalem to the far end of the Roman world and came to rest here. He brought with him Peter, sometimes called Simon Peter, and His mother and Mary Magdalene, and eight other women He found along the way. He was mistaken for Joseph of Arimethaea, or perhaps He claimed that name for anonymity's sake. He brought a few personal possessions, including the Grail, which He dropped into that well over there."

A small fire burned beside a hole in the ground that was circled by flat reddish bricks. Water poured out of the well into a small pool, also surrounded by bricks.

"The time was nigh for Christ's ascension but Peter was not with him, and thus the Lord waited. Along the way, Peter had left Christ to proselytize among the pagans. He spent years

spreading the gospel, slowing making his way to Roman-held Britain. He found Christ beside these waters, looking up at the Tor, and the Lord was angry. Christ had wanted Peter to leave preaching to the others in Jerusalem and to stay by his side. Peter believed that as the mortal leader of the disciples it was his duty to stand beside the word of God, follow in Christ's footsteps as He himself had commanded, and to preach to others. But now that he had arrived he would stay with Christ and guard him forever.

"Christ grew tired, for He had waited many years. And the Tor beckoned. A barge was built and He was lifted upon it and sailed across the lake to the distant shore, along with His mother, Mary Magdalene, and the other women. Peter stood alone on guard by the shore. Those whom Peter had converted found him some time later, changed into an unmovable stone at the foot of the Tor, sword still in hand. They consecrated the ground as holy and built a monastery over that nearby hill. One night a monk happened along and saw a barge run aground and a woman come ashore. She took the sword from Peter's stone hands and got back on the barge and floated off into the mists."

"The sword Caliburn," Chesterfield said.

"Given to the first true Christian king of the Britons, and then to his descendants as they assume the office."

"And the Virgin Mary?" asked Cap-

tain Albert.

"Le Dame du Lac," Arthur said, the glow fading around him. "All the kings of Britain climb the Tor and enter the gates of Heaven to be with Christ eternal. Or so the legend goes."

The sky began to lighten the mist around them to a steely gray. A mile from camp small lights began to flicker on a low hill. The number of lights grew to many hundreds, and they began inching their way toward camp.

Rising to his feet Arthur said, "It is time. Vortigern, my son, has arrived."

Attendants came forward and dressed the king in light armor, and a mail headpiece. He refused the helmet.

"Nothing shall obscure my last sight of these beautiful lands."

Bedwyr came forward and handed him Caliburn. The sword had been polished and buffed, but it was still dull and scratched and worn. Arthur hefted it easily enough, though, and sliced the air with it. It was part of him and he moved effortlessly with it despite his age.

The lights from the hill had come closer and they could tell these were torches held aloft by the strong arms of many soldiers. At the head of their column was a young man dressed in armor, also without his helmet. The resemblance to Arthur was unmistakable.

Bedwyr called out his soldiers and they formed a skirmish line a hundred feet from the new arrivals. There was a grimness about the men, and a pro-

found sadness as well.

"Are they going to fight?" Dade asked.

"Yes," Anne replied.

"And what are we going to do?"

"Fight."

The armorer brought a long sword to Anne, who spun it in her hands, testing the weapon's weight. Then he passed out tunics, swords, and halberts to Dade, Chesterfield, and Captain Albert. Dade fingered his sword and found the edge of it dull. The halbert's tip was blunted too.

"Hey, what's the idea? There's no edge to this thing."

"Good God, man!" said the armorer. "You don't want to kill anyone!"

Arthur stepped forward into the space between skirmish lines, halting suddenly, looking up at a rocky hill behind the opposing army. A woman draped in a white gown and hood stood in the first rays of the morning sun. She lowered her hood and the sunlight captured the golden gleam of her hair. At the sight, Arthur winced as if he had been struck, then he moved forward again. The young man in the opposing line matched him step for step until they met.

"I claim the name Medraut!" said the youth. "The eternal enemy of Arthur ... my father!" He spoke the words woodenly with tears in his eyes.

"Good lad, Vortigern," Arthur whispered. Then he raised his sword and cried out, "My bastard son, the enemy of all England, traitor to the realm, defiler of the virtuous, you shall not

defeat what the Lord Himself hath blessed."

Dade noticed flashes on the hill where the spectators had been quarantined. These were tiny bursts of light that popped endlessly.

"Enjoin me!" Arthur cried, and then swung his sword down at Vortigern, who lifted his sword to block the thrust.

The battle began slowly, with the soldiers meeting tentatively, carefully. They crowded close to the shore leaving Arthur and Vortigern to fight away from the throng. Dade and the others jumped in and began swatting at the enemy. Captain Albert found the exercise exhilarating and, bellowing madly, cut a deep swath through the opposing army as they backed away from his vicious thrusts with the halbert.

Father and son sliced at each other in well-rehearsed strokes. The clang of their swords echoed against the Tor. A distant cheer from the spectators went up with each crack.

Holding Vortigern close, Arthur whispered, "A better son a man has never had!"

"Father!" Tears filled his eyes.

"You are ready to be king, my son. This is our way. Strike me down now before I grow too tired to lift my burden."

His voice cracking, Vortigern shoved Arthur back and yelled, "For God and for England I strike thee down."

At the sound of the boy's voice, Dade turned to see Vortigern thrust his sword into Arthur.

"No!" Dade screamed as the king collapsed to the mud.

Instantly the battle stopped.

Clanking in his armor, Bedwyr ran forward and knelt beside Arthur. When he looked up again tears were streaming down his face.

"He is gone," he yelled, and his voice echoed in the silence. "King Arthur is dead!"

### CHAPTER SIX: THE LEGEND CONTINUES

A great burst of applause and cheering rose up from the distant spectators. Several of the soldiers from both armies waved sheepishly.

Arthur lay in the mud, the sword held to his side, uninjured but clearly uncomfortable. His breathing was labored and he closed his eyes.

"Hurry, Bedwyr," he whispered.

A barge was brought to shore and the king was carried to it, and placed on a silken bed. Several young women in flowing robes attended the king. Anne went to the barge and, kneeling beside Arthur's bed, wiped the grime from his face.

"Thank you for staying," he said.

"How could I leave you?"

"And now it is I who must depart." His eyes misted over and he looked out to the rocky hill where the sunlight was making the mist glow. The woman with the golden hair was still there, motionless. "So many betrayals. And

all with people we love. That's the worst part in the perpetuation of legend. The lies we tell. Is there nothing but betrayal in life? How deeply God's first children have damned us."

"Rest. I shall come see you before I leave England."

Several soldiers came to the barge and shoved it out onto the water. With long poles the barge women pushed the tiny craft toward the Tor. Within moments, the tiny craft was swallowed in the mist. Bedwyr stood at the edge of the lake, holding Arthur's sword. The others had moved away from him sensing his seething anger. After a time he took a deep breath and with a heavy grunt threw the sword out into the lake. Vortigern, who had taken the name Medraut knelt where his father had fallen, his head bowed, sobbing.

"What happens now?" Dade asked.

"We go," said Anne.

"I mean with the kid. He just killed his father. You know, symbolically."

"On the day of Samhain he will claim his father's name and be crowned Arthur the 31st, King of all the Britons. The legend will continue."

Anne started to go for their horses but stopped and looked out toward the sunlit rocky hill. The woman in the white robe was gone.

Anne and the others, now astride their horses, circled the Tor and rode at a trot out onto flat grassy plain away from the muddy mess of the battle. At noon they stopped to feed the horses and themselves. Anne had not said a

word all morning.

Now she pointed to a line of hills rising in the east.

"The Mendip Hills. We will find a gorge over there that will take us toward Bristol." She recounted what the king had told her.

"As full of tradition and lore as this place is," Dade said, "you'd think he would know more about this dingus, or at least the Order of St. Glauver."

Anne did not reply.

By evening they were at the mouth of the gorge, but decided to camp until the next morning. Anne had insisted that they make camp behind several large boulders that backed up to the hills. There was barely enough room for all of them and the small fire Captain Albert had built. The horses were picketed in the mouth of the gorge.

Rolling under her blanket Anne said, "These hills are filled with caves and false paths. We must stick close tomorrow."

"That's right," Chesterfield said, "it's in these hills that Myrddin, the sorcerer, was imprisoned. That's why we didn't see him with Arthur."

"That is the legend," Anne said. "Legend also says that the caves are home to dragons."

"More dragons?" Dade croaked.

"Well I for one feel safe," Chesterfield snorted sarcastically. "After all, we have a knight riding with us."

"Why you ..."

"Get some rest," Anne ordered. "We have another long ride ahead of us tomorrow."

They breakfasted on salted meats and dried fruit and drank water from their canteens before saddling the horses. There was little light that cut through the morning mist so they let the horses find the way in the twisting, narrow confines of the gorge. Anne stopped often to get her bearings. By mid-day the sun had burned off the mist and it shone like a lantern beam down onto their canyon path. Escarpments of ragged limestone, stretching hundreds of feet above them, were punctuated here and there by tufts of green grass or bushes. Natural gardens of red and yellow flowers filled level areas and cracks in the rock.

Soon the gorge ended, opening into a wide valley filled with grazing sheep. At the far end of the valley the ground rose again to a forest of white birch. They entered, walking their cavvy of horses onto an ancient and well-worn step road that curved through the forest and a glade thick with bluebells.

Out of the forest, limestone bluffs rose again but these were smoother and shorter. Ahead of them, the road cut around a field of boulders. They mounted again and trotted off down the road. Taking the turn, Anne skidded to a stop forcing the others to rein up as well. Not a twenty feet from them stood a mounted army of two hundred men.

"Holy mackerel!"

The leader of the army, a tall handsome fellow dressed in a green jerkin and leggings, and wearing a neatly trimmed goatee, reined his horse

sharply as well and gasped. A fat rider beside him pointed at them, eyes wide and voice trembling. Anne realized that she and her friends were still wearing the tunics handed out prior to the battle at the Tor.

"We're discovered! The king's men! They wear his crest," quivered the fat man.

The handsome leader seemed less sure. "If that one is a man I'll eat your sword."

But it was too late. In a panic, the riders drew their swords and, jostling each other violently, tried to launch into a charge. Captain Albert wasted no time either. Disappointed with the battle at the Tor he took hold of his halbert and spurred his heavy beast to action. Dade and Chesterfield reluctantly followed, swinging long swords as if the weapons could actually cut.

"Wait!" Anne and the other leader cried simultaneously.

The battle was joined. In the melee the mounted army could barely move let alone land any damaging blows against Anne's men.

The goateed leader's horse spun wildly, whinnying in terror.

"Retreat!" he cried. "Damn you all, retreat!"

"Captain Albert," Anne yelled, "withdraw now!"

It took more long minutes of yelling and pushing of horses but eventually the two sides separated. Dade had a thin cut over his right eye and Captain Albert was winded but clearly ex-

hilarated. Several of the others were nursing bruised arms and heads.

Separated, Anne and the other leader approached each other.

"Your pardon, m'lady," he said. "My men were startled. It's not like we thought the king we be on this road or nothing, is it?"

"You would attack the king?"

"O' course," he said guilelessly. His accent was strange. A little Cockney, a little Welsh, and something else Anne could not place.

"You are the king's enemy?" Anne reached down for her own sword.

"No-no! Please," he begged, doffing his pointed cap, "allow me to introduce myself. I'm Rabyert Hobbhod and these are my loyal and jolly band of men. We be Picts."

"It's an invasion!" Chesterfield cried.

"After a fashion," Hobbhod said, shifting in his saddle uncomfortably.

"You had better explain yourself."

"Right, well, we come down, we do, a couple of times a decade to do a bit 'o pillaging and mayhem an' such, just to keep 'em all on their toes, you know. Then when the old Arthur goes out an' the new one comes in, well, we come down for a right good battle an' mixes it up. Nothing too bloody, mind you, what with the spectators and all. It's a fine line we walk, and that's the truth of it. Quite the art. O' course, we do have our expenses. So the boys do the odd shenanigans with the crowd. A wallet here, a purse there. Them's that gots, and all that, right?"

"You rob them," Anne translated.

“Right, well, a redistribution of wealth, shall we say.”

“Where were you heading?”

“The new king will be crowned in days. Samhain is coming up, and we’ve got to get in position. Big day for us. Most profitable of the year, you know, even after travel expenses are figured into it. Say, now, you look familiar.”

Anne introduced herself.

“Well, knock me down. That’s something altogether different. But what are you doing out here?”

“We are looking for a barrows north of Bristol. It has an ancient fane set in the middle of it.”

“Druid nonsense, is it?”

One of the men behind Hobbegod, a thin fellow with wavy blond hair and a smooth face, lifted a lyre and began strumming, then sang:

Dark are the little men chanting  
their songs,  
of dank hearts and black  
thoughts,  
morose all the night long.  
Reading sticks of wood their  
creed is a farce,  
their magicks are false and  
they’ve splinters up their arse.

Raising a hand to silence the laughter of his men, Hobbegod said, “Make your way to Dingle, north and a bit west of Bristol. Folks in Bristol’s too uppity to know much. But them’s in Dingle is just the sort to direct you right.”

“And you ride to Camulod?” Anne asked.

“No. We’ll sit tight for a couple of weeks. Give the new Arthur a chance to settle in before we come a-callin’.”

Before Anne and her aides could make their good-byes, Hobbegod insisted they abandon their blunt arms and take some his more practical weapons. Each of the men was outfitted with a small Roman-style shield and a long sword sharp enough to shave with. Anne kept her dull blade but accepted a shield.

They traveled at a quick pace for nearly an hour then rested the horses, leading them at a fast walk. Just before nightfall they spotted a handful of dim, buttery lights shining in a small glen. The mist had grown thick, obscuring much of the village, but they could make out a large inn called The Red Boar in the middle of the street. The sound of laughter and singing and argument poured out into the night. Down the way from it was a livery stable and blacksmith shop.

Anne dismounted and called into the stable. A boy no more than fourteen ran out and gathered up their horses and took several coins in payment for oats, water, and grooming of all eight animals.

“Will our kits be safe here?” she asked.

The boy looked over her shoulder at the frowning countenance of Captain Albert and stuttered that, yes, their things would be safe. Anne tossed the

boy another coin and walked away down the street toward the inn, saddlebags over her shoulder and sword in hand.

A shadow moved through the mist causing Anne to stop short. Reflexively she held the shield in front of her. A blur of movement along the wall of a low house caught her eye, but when she looked it was gone. Now a figure stood beneath the Red Boar's sign, flickering lanterns casting long shadows over it.

"The woman from Arthur's caravan," Anne said to Dade. "The one you were staring at for so long."

"I wasn't staring!"

It was the black-haired woman and she paused only long enough for them to see her. She was dressed in a heavy gingham dress, dark brown and low cut. Her hair was not as dark now, and not so curly as before, and was pulled back tight against her head. But her eyes were unmistakable: deep and dark, almost black. After a moment, she slipped into the inn and closed the door behind her. Dade ran toward the hostelry.

"Dade! Wait!"

The reporter had not heard Anne's warning. He had grown warm and there was a rushing sound in his ears. He felt compelled to enter the tavern and find the mysterious woman.

He mounted the three wooden steps and thrust open the front door. The woman was there, her back to him, pushing her way through the crowd. He had taken but a single step into the

tavern when a dozen swords shot up before him, all of their points leveled at his throat.

### CHAPTER SEVEN: ATTACK OF THE FIRE KNIGHTS

Behind the swords were dark faces with grizzled beards, scarred cheeks, and toothless, growling grins. They were clothed in rags that had not been washed in many days. The smell of the place was rank with odors of old food and old drink and old, sweaty men.

The points of the swords pushed into Dade's throat painfully.

"I guess this isn't happy hour," he said without moving his chin.

"We do not abide strangers so late at night," one of the growling mob said.

"And chasing our fair Igraine," said another.

"Hold, good men of Dingle!"

Anne stood in the doorway, her sword sheathed. To a man they all turned to stare at her, lantern light casting a rich glow over her sun-bronzed skin and hair. Dade sneaked a glance at her. In that light she seemed almost to have a golden aura about her.

"We come for food, and a place to sleep for the night," she told them. "Not to insult your women."

"Here now!" came a booming voice. Head a shoulders above the rest, a round and voluptuous woman pushed her way toward the front door. She

was so tall she had to duck her gigantic head to keep from hitting the ceiling beams. Her face was as rough as any of the men's faces, and her smile was gap-toothed, but she had gentle eyes.

"Come along, dear, and bring your friends. I've a table for you with mead and bread and mutton, if you're hungry, and beds for all when you want to sleep." Her eyes darkened and narrowed suddenly and she added, "If you have the coin, that is."

Anne held up a pouch and let it jingle in her hands.

They were shown to a table and brought food and drink. Anne set out coins for the proprietor who introduced herself as Isolde, a widow whose husband had left her with the inn, too many debts, and too much work. Captain Albert was transfixed by the giantess. Never had he seen a woman larger than himself.

"She is a widow," Chesterfield teased. "Perhaps she's in the market for a new husband."

"Aye, and to serve this rabble every night? I think not."

Dade asked about Igraine and was ignored. He could see the woman across the room, serving others. She coyly cast glances toward Dade and smiled.

"I'll be back," Dade said, and started to rise. Anne put a hand on his arm.

"It might do to question her, Travis. But for now we have other business."

Anne got up from the table, a slab of mutton in one hand and a goblet of

wine in the other and crossed the room to a giant hearth with a roaring fire. A dozen men sat in front of it, chattering like squirrels. She found a spot on a bench and lifted her foot to it casually and took a drink from her cup.

The men became instantly quiet. None of them looked at her.

"I'm looking for a place supposed to be nearby. A barrow, and in it an ancient fane."

No one answered. Anne offered payment for the information, but got no response.

"You'll not get what you want here, little one," said a large man with heavily muscled arms. "Eat, sleep, and then leave."

"Now, Guiffard, sit down and drink your drink," Isolde scolded, shooing the man away. "Come back to your table, girl. Now, that's better." She dropped another plate of mutton and bread and another smaller plate with greens. "'Tis a bad time to be going looking for such magical places, with dragons about and the land in decay."

"It is to stop something evil that we seek this place," said Anne, making a sandwich. "We come from the king."

"I see your tunics. Everyone here does. It doesn't matter. The king is weak and his son weaker. Things are bad. Do not make it worse. You don't know. You've never seen the land when the fire knights are about. Villages disappear, farmlands are scorched. They've not been around for two hundred years and no one has the desire to stir them up again. Stay

away." Isolde turned to leave but stopped. "I'll not turn out anyone if I have the room. Not in this country. You may breakfast tomorrow, but then you must away."

Anne drank the last from her goblet and set it down heavily. Dade was staring across the room at the Igraine who was serving drinks to several boisterous men.

"We'll have to do it the hard way and search on horseback. We'll split up in the morning."

"Maybe," Dade said drowsily. "I'll be back."

He scooped up all of the mugs and nudged his way through the crowded inn. At the far end he found Igraine with a pitcher in hand and a sweet, shy smile on her lips.

"My friends would like more drink," he said. Without looking at him she poured. "Do you know where this fane is that we seek?"

Her eyes darted about the room. "I can tell you later," she whispered.

"Where?"

"My house is down the street. It has a red door. The blue window on the second floor is mine. Come to me after all are abed."

Igraine took her pitcher and left the room.

"Good as got," Dade said after he returned to the table. Anne's eyes narrowed with curiosity. Chesterfield grumbled and swallowed his gobletful in one pull.

They were shown rooms upstairs,

one for Anne and another for the men. The men were given tick mattresses which they placed on the hardwood floor. Two hours passed before the raucous noise in the tavern below died down, and another before there was utter silence.

Dade raised the window sash and listened to the night. Heavy mist muffled cricket noises. The light breeze rustling a banner somewhere made the only other sound. Helped by Chesterfield and the captain, Dade was lowered out the window to the muddy street below.

Anne came into the room at that moment, sword in hand. She saw that Dade was gone and said, "Be ready."

The mist was heavy and Dade had to feel his way down the street. He found the house Igraine had mentioned then moved around to the side looking for a blue window. No lights were on in the house and the heavy mist outside made it almost impossible to see the window let alone its color. Risking discovery, Dade scooped up a pebble and tossed it at a dark depression on the wall. He was rewarded by the sharp tac! sound of rock hitting glass. He threw another pebble and was about to throw a third when a dim light flared in a room above him. There was just enough glow to tell that the window frame and sill had been painted blue.

The window slid open. A thrill rushed through Dade. He had no ladder but the uneven stones of the house offered enough of a foothold for him to

climb. Grunting, he pulled himself into the room and closed the window.

"Igraine?" he whispered.

"Here, Sir Travis." Her voice was distant and soft and seemed to echo just a little. He followed the voice with his eyes to a large bed. Igraine was there, lying in shadow, the sheets barely covering the swell her round breasts. He could not see her face, but just then he didn't want to look at her face.

"You know of me?" he asked.

"Word has spread of your deeds, of your battle with the dragon."

"That's nice," he said, trying to pull his mind back to the business at hand. "And I can tell you about it all later. But you said you knew about the barrows and that fane."

"Yes." Her voice was like velvet. "Leave the village due north, tomorrow, and ride for six miles. You will find a cropping of rock in the road. Turn east and circle around Screaming Man Hill. The road will turn north again and cut through Bleeding Gorge. When you come out there will be a flat plain. You will see the barrow and the fane after two more miles."

Dade repeated the instructions dreamily, a foolish grin on his face as he looked at her. He wanted to see her face, hidden in shadows, kiss those lips.

"Thank you," he said, stepping close to the bed.

"You want more, Sir Travis?" she asked, but did not move.

Travis sat beside her, his own shadow falling across her face. "Yes,"

he breathed, then leaned down and kissed her.

The shadows faded from his eyes as he sat back. The girl in the bed was not the black-haired Igraine. Awakening, she screamed.

Dade jumped back and knocked over a chair. The girl in bed, a pretty young blonde, screamed again and grabbed at her covers.

"Who are you?" he cried just as the bedroom door burst open and a man in nightclothes and fumbling with a sword tumbled in.

"Fiend!" the man screamed.

Dade threw open the window and slipped a leg out over the sill.

"No look, friend, this is a mistake," Dade said, groping for purchase on the window frame.

The girl had calmed now and was looking appreciatively at Dade. She let the covers fall a bit to unveil her young but ample décolletage.

"Daddy, don't," she said.

"Yes! You see ... oh, isn't that lovely ... what I mean is, this is a mistake. I'm in the wrong house."

The father had his ire and his sword up and sliced the air as he approached Dade.

"Defouler!" he cried as he thrust the rusted weapon at Dade.

Half out the window, Dade slipped as the blade nipped his tunic and tore a hole in it. He tumbled backwards and managed to get his boots under him just as he slammed into the soft mud. Rough hands grabbed him and hauled him to his feet. Frantically, the reporter

slapped at his attackers.

"Damn it, Dade," Captain Albert bellowed. "We're trying to save you!"

"Some knight you are," Chesterfield crowed.

Anne's voice cut through the shroud of mist. "Get onto your horse."

A lantern was on the ground and cast a small circle of illumination around them. Dade saw his horse and threw himself into the saddle. At a gallop they all left town.

"North!" Dade told them as they disappeared into the night-blackened mist.

Morning came cold and early and they were on their way before sun up. Following Igraine's instructions they found a hill with a rock face uncannily shaped like that of a man screaming. The road led them to a gorge that had jagged limestone walls that were stained red from rusting iron ore deposits.

Dade had been frightened by the sudden change in Igraine and had not wanted to follow her instructions for fear of a trap. Anne insisted.

"You were bewitched," she told him. "But the information will prove to be true."

"How do you know that?" But Anne rode on ignoring the question.

They rode out onto the grassy plain, the sun now shining through large breaks in the clouds. The path was dotted with cherry and beech trees and shrubs. Bluebells and small yellow daisies were splashed across the fields to the left and right of the road. But

there was no sign of animal or bird. No singing, no chirping. And after a mile the gentle breeze died completely.

Anne's horse balked suddenly, snorting. The other horses whinnied and shied away from something unseen.

"The country is crisscrossed with leylines," Chesterfield offered tentatively. "Lines of power and magnetism. Perhaps that's what the animals sense."

No one replied.

Urging their horses on they quickly came to the barrow. It was nearly a perfect circle, a thousand feet across, and formed a depression in the earth like an empty pond or a bowl. As they rode up to the edge of it they saw that ten feet below the inward sweep of the bowl rose up a few feet then leveled off into a plateau. At the center of the barrow was an ancient stone structure, crumbling and disused. The main section was a short tower with empty windows and an open doorway. Beside this was a shorter building, also crumbling. The roof was gone and only three walls remained.

"What will we find here, Miss Anne?" Captain Albert asked.

"I don't know. We search for another talisman, a companion to the one I showed you on the trip over. The Orner. It will have the image I described to you, that of a dragon imprisoned by a willow. This is a powerful devise, like the Black Scarab we found. We must keep it from those who would misuse it, presumably the Order of St.

Glauver.”

“And in the meantime,” Dade said, “they want what you have. That prickly little stick.”

“Yes.”

A beaten path, overgrown with tufts of grass and wildflowers, led down into the barrow and up to the ruins. Cautiously they followed it. Overhead, the clouds had darkened and closed off the blue sky. The scent of rain was in the air.

They dismounted at the ruins and let the horses loose to crop grass. Anne drew her sword and tentatively investigated the tower. A stone staircase, crumbling and broken, rose up the inside of the tower, circling the empty interior.

“You think the Orner is here?” Chesterfield asked.

“No. Nothing is where we first look for it. But we may find a clue. The king would not have sent us here for no reason.”

Captain Albert lit torches and brought them into the tower to look for writing or images on the walls. There were several very worn symbols written in the Ogham alphabet of the Druids. There were also several Christian crosses etched into the stone, even older. Over the centuries, many disparate people had used the tower.

“We’ve got company!” Chesterfield called from outside.

Anne and the others rushed to him. Marching down the barrow walls with purposeful strides were a dozen knights in dark forest green armor, swords in

hand. The muffled clank of their armor wafted in across the barrow.

“Looks like they mean business,” Dade offered, pulling his own sword free of its scabbard.

Anne agreed. “They do. Get to your horses.”

“We’re running?” Captain Albert sounded disappointed, already flexing his large arms and hefting his own sword.

“Yes. The fight will not be a fair one. They will win. Let’s go.”

The men did not hesitate. They ran with Anne toward the horses but stopped short as they discovered another dozen knights waiting for them. Over their green armor they all wore similar tunics, red and silver, with intricately embroidered shield crests. Anne noted a dragon was part of the crest.

“You trespass on holy ground,” one of the knights said from behind his armored visor.

Anne glanced to her right. The horses were twenty yards away, fidgeting nervously. They had to move now, or lose their chance.

“We seek enlightenment ....”

“You lie! You defile the Lord and covet unholy magicks. Return to us the ungodly relic and renounce its dark claim on you.”

“I think I speak for all of us,” Dade said: “Huh?”

“To the tower!” Anne cried, and swung out with her sword, clipping the lead knight in the head with the flat of her blade.

The others turned and ran for the tower as a crash of thunder blasted overhead. Anne pressed forward, slapping at the armored men with her heavy, blunt sword. These were not playactors. None of them panicked. They drew their swords and pressed forward forcing Anne to retreat.

The two phalanxes of knights converged and, pivoting with great precision turned toward the tower opening.

"Cover the doors!" she commanded. "Keep them out, but stand clear of the openings."

"We've got more troubles," Chesterfield cried, pointing into the sky. A dragon circled the barrows, head down, watching the blossoming battle.

The knights had not tried to force their way into the tower yet. Instead they had lined up outside, eleven behind their leader who stood just outside the tower door.

"Upstairs, everyone!" Anne said, just as the lead knight lifted his visor and a blast of hot, red flame shot out and into the tower.

### CHAPTER EIGHT: THE SECRET ARMY

The fire lanced into the darkened tower sending a flash of sulphurous flame dancing up toward the roof.

"What was that?"

"The wrath of God," Anne said in all seriousness. She was looking toward the roof where the flame had mush-

roomed then dissipated. "We have more problems. There are gasses in this fane. We must get out."

Another jet of fire stabbed into the tower then was sucked up into a ball and burst up toward the roof.

"This place could go at any minute!"

"Ah, hell," Dade said, "French fried or fricasseed! Let's go!"

He charged out of the tower and threw himself on the ground as another burst of flame shot over his head. Rolling to his feet he thrust his sword between the lead knight's helmet and gorget. The knight dropped with a gurgling scream.

The others came out of the tower and joined in the fight. They were hopelessly outnumbered despite Captain Albert's spirited attack.

Anne saw they had no chance with their ancient weapons. She fought her way through a group of knights, engaging them closely so they could not safely open their visors. Breaking free of the group, she ran to her horse and retrieved the carbine strapped to the saddle.

A knight fell on her, slicing at the air around her with his sword. He swung again, a cross cut that threatened to decapitate her, but she held the rifle up to block the blow. He had never meant to kill her, only distract her long enough to reach toward her belt and grab for the leather pouch tied there.

Anne saw this and swung the rifle butt, slamming it into the knight's metal encrusted head. The force of the blow unbalanced him. He staggered

then, regaining his feet, and swung the sword around for a killing blow. Anne fired the rifle striking the knight's breastplate. She fired again, and the knight collapsed.

Overhead, the dragon left its circular flight. It lowered its head and pushed back its heavy, scalloped wings and dove toward the battlefield.

Anne had retrieved two more rifles and carried these to her men as they fought close hand battles. Anne fired several shots, dropping two more knights. She tossed a rifle to Dade. He spun and fired into the mass of green armor. Chesterfield also took a gun, but Captain Albert continued to swing with his long sword.

The dragon swooped over the battlefield, inches off the ground, scattering everyone, its black eyes filled with fury.

"We have to go."

A knight raised his visor and aimed at Anne. Dade swung the rifle to his shoulder, levered a round, and fired in the span of an instant. The knight dropped without letting loose his bolt of flame.

Above, the dragon circled around in a narrow arc, hung in the air, and then belched flame. The fireball crashed into the mass of green armored knights with explosive force.

"Now it's helping us?"

"A different dragon," Anne said, as she turned for the horses. "Hurry."

Aboard their horses, Anne and her crew spurred the animals into a gallop. Several bolts of flame shot past them as they rode up the trail and out

of the barrow. Dade and Chesterfield fired wildly over their shoulders until they were at the lip of the barrow, back on the grassy plain.

Down in the barrow the surviving knights projected fire up at the circling dragon. The giant beast flapped its great wings to beat back the flames. A thousand feet in the air, the creature paused in its flight and arched its back.

"Ride!" Anne commanded, and they all spurred their horses into a gallop again.

Behind them the dragon belched another ball of fire. The flame coursed down past the knights and crashed into the fane. Instantly, the sky lit with a white-hot blast as gas in the tower ignited. A concussive bubble swelled over the fane like some distended beast, shoving before it hot wind and shards of stone and wood.

They raced the blast, riding low against their saddles and hanging for dear life. The road curved around a low hill and they ducked behind it, throwing themselves and their horses to the ground as the deadly gale passed over them.

For long moments they lay there, with dust and pebbles settling around them. The horses were too frightened to panic and did not move. Finally Anne stood up and helped her animals to their feet. No one had been injured.

Overhead, the dragon wheeled, its back scraping the underbelly of the clouds. It hung in the sky for a minute then turned south and flew away.

"There goes any clue to that talis-

man," Dade said dejectedly.

"There was no clue to be had at the fane," Anne told him. "Except perhaps the dragon." For a few moments they could hear a soft, high-pitched hum rise up around them. Then Anne said, "We must follow that dragon."

The creature hung in the air on cool currents, dipped low, then rose up again, slowly making its way south by southeast. Anne and the others had no trouble following the thing. They skirted the foothills of the Mendips and circled around the town of Fromme. The dragon was taking great care to avoid being seen by anyone other than Anne and her men.

Again the dragon turned, this time east by southeast, and sailed up over some low hills. On the other side was a river, its waters low in an ancient riverbed. They rested their horses and watered them. All the while the dragon wheeled overhead.

"So, have we trained that thing to heel," Dade said, "or has it trained us to follow?"

"It wants to show us something."

While the eight horses rested or cropped the tender river grass, Dade and the others reloaded their weapons and polished their swords. Each realized the fighting was not yet done.

"Impatient, isn't it?" Chesterfield commented, noticing the dragon begin to fly off.

They mounted again after shifting saddles to their spare horses and followed the dragon. The sun was begin-

ning its slide into the horizon when Anne crested a rocky slope to find an army waiting in a valley far below.

Quickly she pulled back and got her horse below the hill summit. She led the others to the bottom of the hill and picketed the horses before climbing again to the top, crawling the last few feet on her stomach. The valley was filled with soldiers and knights. They numbered a legion of men. A command tent had been set up at the far end of the valley, its yellowed leather drape shining in the sunset. Atop a pole outside the tent a banner flew. Although small, the crest was unmistakable, an eagle with its talons wrapped around the neck of a dragon.

The valley was alive with activity. Armorers were setting weapons out on hundreds of racks. There were four circles of men practicing fighting with wooden swords. The rows of troop tents were empty, flaps open, and the soldiers were divided into units, exercising and mending shields and polishing armor.

Out of one tent came a small man wearing a white robe and a white mitered cap. He walked solemnly carrying a small box in his hands before him. It glistened gold in the setting sun. Four extraordinarily large soldiers in shoulder, breast, codpiece, and head armor and holding long lances kept pace with him, surrounding him. All others scattered out of the way as this group cut through the camp to the command tent. The man with the white miter cap paused at the tent and then,

beckoned to, entered.

Pounding hooves echoed and several riders passed close by Anne and the others on their way over the hill and into the valley.

"We're wearing the wrong clothes if we get spotted up here," Dade said.

They slid back down the hill until they could stand without being seen from the other side. At the horses, Anne paused before mounting.

"Is that who I think it is?" Chesterfield asked.

Deep in thought, Anne did not answer.

"Well," Dade said, "I can tell you that army shouldn't be there."

"You heard Rabyert Hobbehod. He's coming down to fight the new Arthur. Maybe that army is getting ready for that."

"Rabyert is playing at war, lad," Captain Albert said. "Them down on that plain mean to make war."

"Against who?"

"The king," Anne said. "It's a coup. That army will strike when Vortigern is at his weakest: before Samhain and his coronation; before he can retrieve the sword Caliburn."

"Okay, then any idea what's in that box?"

A dark cloud of concern passed over Anne's face. "Something that gives him power. A lot of power."

In the distance a trumpet blared, echoing almost mournfully. The sound seemed to galvanize Anne.

"We must split up. You three ride back into the Mendip Hills. Find

Rabyert Hobbehod. Ride hard as you can. Stop for nothing. You must get Rabyert's army to Glestingaburh to reinforce Arthur's army."

"That band couldn't cut open a paper bag with those swords," Dade snorted.

"They'll fight when they have to. I'm going to Ynys Avallach to rouse the king and prepare his men. Hurry, now, the enemy is on the move!"

#### CHAPTER NINE:

#### THE MYSTERY OF MYRDDIN

So far south, Anne avoided the need to go through the Mendips to return to Glestingaburh. But this added miles to her ride and forced her to push her animals hard day and night. She took solace in the knowledge that a full legion of armed men, near six thousand troops, would not make good time – unless their leader suspected they had been discovered. Then such an army could move very quickly indeed.

That night, Anne found shelter in the lee of a large crop of rocks, giant boulders that looked as if they had been dropped from above centuries ago. She let the horses crop grass and led them to drink in one of the many small streams that crisscrossed the countryside. For an hour she let them rest as she paced.

Again in the saddle she rode hard. The moon lingered in the sky, nearly full and bright as a spotlight.

As morning neared, she climbed the misty hills surrounding the Glestingaburh flats. The distant Tor, rising out of the mist-enshrouded valley below, caught a glint of waning moonlight and shone like a lighthouse in the still dark morning.

A swirl of mist parted to her right and a figure in white emerged, ghostly and pale. Surprised, Anne reined to a halt. The figure stood motionless in the rolling mist, head bowed, waiting. Anne dismounted and knelt beside the figure.

"Your highness," she said.

"No," said a soft voice. "No longer Queen. No longer Gwenthwyvar. Please, Lady Anne, my heart breaks so to have you this way before me."

Slowly, Anne stood. Gwenthwyvar had not looked up, her face still shrouded by a large white hood. The dim light of morning was just starting to lighten the mist around them. Anne could see several dark figures standing off down the hill by a dozen paces, like Death waiting.

"I go to Arthur," Anne said. "An army approaches to steal the crown."

Gwenthwyvar turned away, her shoulders hunched, and she began sobbing. "How I know! How I've dreaded this day. The kingdom will be lost because of me. Damn the legend! Why must it come true? Generations of play acting, and now it will truly happen." The Queen turned to face Anne and, after a moment's hesitation, lowered her hood. "I have betrayed Arthur."

"I know," said Anne, trying to hold

the Queen's gaze. A touch of disappointment had entered her voice; something she hadn't meant to do.

Gwenthwyvar nodded. "But you do not know the extent of it. You know only the legends. And if it were only that, it would be enough, for the sweet heart of my poor Arthur has been broken."

"Bedwyr marches on Camulod, Your Highness."

"Yes. Bedwyr," the Queen said, almost spitting the venomous name. "How ironic a name for the man for it was to his bed I went when Arthur was so busy with precious England. His most trusted and loyal friend. A great knight of the realm."

This surprised Anne. "Not Llenlleawc?"

Gwenthwyvar laughed. "Oh that pretty, pretty boy. Such a dupe." She hung her head and sobbed again. "Such tragedy for one so young. Oh, he was infatuated with me and I, well, a woman wants to know that she can still capture the attentions of a man. But he never had more than a kind word and a smile from me."

"Your highness, please, I must hurry. I cannot take your confession. An army approaches."

Gwenthwyvar shot forward and grabbed Anne's arms. "You must hear me. You must save my boy. My dear Vortigern. This army will destroy him."

"That is why I have to go."

"No. First you must understand. Please." Anne took a long slow breath then nodded. Gwenthwyvar turned

away. "Bedwyr cared nothing for me. Oh, he enjoyed his bed with me in it, but he had no love for me. He wanted something from Arthur, and not just his wife."

"The Orner," Anne said, the thought coming to her mind in a flash.

"Yes. A piece of stone."

"It has strong power, Your Highness."

"In the right hands, yes. But in most it is only a piece of stone."

"Does Bedwyr have the knowledge to use it?"

"No. He is in league with another."

"Morgaine!"

Gwenhwyvar looked up in surprise. "No, not Morgaine." She smiled. "Her love for the Arthurs is true."

"You gave Bedwyr the Orner?"

"Not directly. I dreamed of it and spoke its location while in bed with him, or so I thought. At that moment Arthur discovered us and banished me from the kingdom, as legend decrees. He would not look at me, would not speak to me. Nor would he hear my pleas. I have seen him only twice and from afar. He will not see my messengers. His hate is complete."

"I know Arthur, too, Your Highness. His disappointment may be complete, but he can never hate."

Gwenhwyvar sobbed again, wiping tears from her cheeks. Anne had not meant to hurt her.

"You speak as a daughter would for him. You've a cutting tongue, Lady Anne."

"Why does Arthur allow Bedwyr to

ride beside him? Why does he still trust him?"

"When Arthur burst in on us he discovered not Bedwyr, but poor deluded Llenlleawc lying naked and confused in my bedchamber. Arthur would have run him through right there if not for his dogged adherence to the law. They fought the next morning. Lances and swords and maces. It was a horrible battle. Arthur was gravely injured. An injury from which he has never fully recovered. Llenlleawc refused to kill the king and ran. He has been in exile ever since. His name, his property gone forever. Oh, how many men can a woman betray with one selfish act?"

"You were bewitched."

"Huh! Would that were true." The Queen again grasped Anne by the arms, a desperate pleading in her eyes. "Be a good daughter to him now. Save his son. My son. Please."

Anne took her leave of the Queen and plunged into the valley at a gallop. Her horses were well rested from the delay and enjoyed the hard run. The sun had already painted the sky a sherbet orange by the time Anne reached the rocky shore of Glestingaburh Tor. The soldiers and their camp had moved off to the foot of a low hill half a mile away. They awaited Vortigern's return to the Tor, renamed as Arthur the 31st, where he would reclaim the sword Caliburn from the lake. The commoners on spectator hill were long gone.

Several guards stood by at the small dock where the barge had moored to take Arthur to Ynys Avallach across the still misty lake. They came to attention as Anne skittered to a stop on the rocky beach.

"The barge!" she commanded. "I need to cross."

Dumbfounded, the guards said she could not go. "We cannot call the barge. It comes when needed."

"It is needed now," she said, pointing out at the lake. The barge appeared out of the mist, seemingly floating above the water. Six women with longpoles guided the craft to shore.

"He awaits," said one of them when they made their landing. Despite there being no breeze, the women's hair and white robes floated as if suspended in water. They smiled beneficently upon her.

Anne hopped onto the mist-shrouded barge and in moments was swallowed from view.

Long minutes later, the barge landed on a shore thick with reeds and rushes. Posts stuck out of the gently lapping water to hold the looped mooring lines. Stone steps rose out of the water and up the hill. The mist was thicker here and it was difficult to see the top of the Tor.

Anne climbed the steps with the sisters by her side, their robes still flowing with liquid fluidity. Atop the Tor was the tower and through its high-arched entranceway she saw only more mist beyond.

They passed into the tower, shad-

ows falling over them. The sisters began to chant in low voices, very quickly. Anne felt the ground tremble slightly.

Through the tower, the mist began to clear away as bright yellow sunlight poured down on them. Anne could see they were no longer on the gently sloping Tor.

She stood on a green, grassy sward that seemed to roll on forever in every direction cut only by streams and stands of tall, green trees. In the distance were several buildings, like Roman villas, with golden pillars and marble floors. Hundreds of creatures were at play in these fields and there seemed to be a natural music in the air. A gleaming, pure white stallion stood before them.

"Take this to him," one of the sisters said.

The instant Anne hopped onto the stallion it leapt into a gallop and ran for one of the bright buildings. In no time Anne had arrived. She was greeted by servants wrapped in simple stolas who showed Anne into a bright, roofless hall and then into an open room. Arthur lay abed. Color had returned to his cheeks but he was still old and his eyes showed the strain of years. Still, he brightened when he saw Anne.

"My dear, Heracles, you've crossed the River Styx for me," he said, and then laughed at his own joke.

Anne went to him and sat at the edge of his bed. He took her hands and held them.

"And now it is time for you to leave?"

he asked. "You said you would stop and say farewell."

"M'lord, there is great trouble in the land."

Arthur shook his head. "Worry yourself about it not."

"Arthur! An army approaches."

"Yes. More of the ceremonies," he said, forcing casualness into his voice. "We are so steeped in them."

"This army means to kill Vortigern. Bedwyr leads them."

Whatever strength Arthur had reserved to help maintain the pretense now fled him. His face fell. Slowly, he got out of bed and moved to a window.

"You knew?" she asked.

"Yes. My trusted friend and brave knight. I've known of all his betrayals. His more hurtful than even Gwenhwyvar's, for hers was ordained. Bedwyr chose this for himself."

"We must prepare your army."

"They are prepared. Oh, not that band by the Tor. Vortigern has the army ready near Camlann Hill, close at hand."

"I've sent my friends to find Rabyert Hobbhod and his Picts."

"Those leeches. Highwaymen they are, no more than brigands."

"Their hundreds of swords may help."

"Perhaps." Arthur found a chair and sat, lost in thought.

"It is time you tell me about Myrddin," Anne said.

The black-haired woman entered the room and said, "Yes, Arthur, it is time you told her."

Anne stood, her body tense, ready for action. "Morgaine, isn't it? Sorceress and trickster."

She smiled and looked to Arthur. "My legend precedes me."

"She is Morgaine," Arthur said, holding out a hand to the woman. Morgaine crossed the room and took the king's hand, holding it gently. "That is one of her names."

"And one of her appearances, too. She used another face to ... confuse ... my associate."

"It was necessary. I had to give you the information you needed and force you quickly out of town. There was little time."

"She did so against my wishes," Arthur said. "I lied to you, Lady Anne. I know about the Orner, as you no doubt by now have surmised, and I wanted you out of the way. I had hoped this business would be done and not involve you. But Morgaine, wise Morgaine, knew I would need your help."

"There was nothing to find at the fane," Anne said.

"No. That had to be gotten out of the way so you could find Bedwyr's army. I needed you to understand the danger."

"You say this is one of her names..."

"Never mind that. It is unimportant. You only need to know that she, like this island and her sisters, are eternal, magical."

"I have been Morgaine of old," she said. "I have done foul things in this kingdom. But times have changed. My

duties are clear and they make me happy.”

Anne thought for a moment. “I can’t fight a war for you, m’lord. This is about the Orner.”

“Yes. Let me explain. Myrddin and the original Arthur were friends. They sought to bring peace to England, unite her. And for a time they did. You know all of this. But after Arthur’s failure, after his entombment here in Ynys Avallach, Myrddin went a little mad. With each successive Arthur, a line through his sorceries he began, he pushed harder and harder for the king to remain virtuous and untroubled so that the dream of unity could be realized. He was foolish and, as I say, a little mad. With an iron hand he ruled the puppet Arthurs. He has powers, Lady Anne. He is eternal, a force of nature, really.

“Still, he could be bested. Arthur the 8th pretended friendship and compliance. He lived in such purity that Myrddin began to relax. In a moment of weakness, he allowed Arthur the secret of the Charm of Making. Arthur used this to imprison Myrddin and free England from its puppet master.

“Of course Arthur the 8th was not fit to rule. England plunged into two hundred years of darkness. The Arthurs who followed tried to uphold the dream and always failed, treachery and betrayal ever their ending. It wasn’t until Arthur the 19th that England began to rise up out of its own squalor and rebuild with peace.”

“And the Orner?”

“The talisman was created as a focal point to harness the magical energies that entomb Myrddin. The Blackthorn that you carry has Druid power. Combined with the stone there would be enough magicks to release Myrddin, who would, no doubt take vengeance on the Pendragons.”

“Bedwyr has it,” Anne said, “so he’s in league with Myrddin somehow. The sorcerer is accessible?”

“Bedwyr may have used magicks supplied by Myrddin to steal it – oh, yes, he is not completely powerless, even buried as he is – but I do not believe he is in the wizard’s thrall.”

“Still, if he goes to free Myrddin first he would have a powerful ally.”

“No. He will come here first. He wants to take the kingdom, and with a legion of men he believes he can do it. Lady Anne, I need you to capture the Orner, or at the very least keep it from getting to Myrddin. I believe the wizard may yet have enough power to steal the stone from under Bedwyr’s nose.”

“You’ll need every sword you can get, m’lord.”

Arthur smiled. “I have weapons of my own that Bedwyr knows nothing of.”

He looked over to Morgaine, who sighed and nodded. She stepped away out into the roofless hall and began to heave and twist. Then her body changed. It expanded and reshaped itself, her head rising up on a long, thick neck becoming angular like an arrowhead. Her arms and legs re-

formed and grew long black talons. Her torso elongated and swelled and grew heavy green scales. Only her eyes remained unchanged: black as obsidian.

Anne swallowed. "She's a dragon."

"That is one of her forms," Arthur said smiling. "She saved you at the fane from the Order of St. Glauver and led you to Bedwyr's army. Soon she will rise up over the Tor and smote my enemies with all the fires of hell."

#### CHAPTER TEN: THE STONEHENGE DRAGON

The procession down from the tower could be seen from all across the valley. It had a hypnotic effect on any that saw it; in awe they turned and ran to the lake around the Tor. By the time Arthur and Anne had arrived at the rocky beach and stepped from the barge, a crowd of thousands had formed there to welcome Arthur home.

At mid-day Anne's men returned with Rabyert Hobbehod and his mercenary band. Arthur greeted them like brothers, welcoming them to the fight. Looking around at the assembled army Hobbehod wondered just how short a fight it would be.

"Be of good cheer, young thief," Arthur said, "the day is won for all of us."

Like the Arthur of old, the king moved through his troops, passing pleasant words of encouragement and offering a hand to those who would take

it. No one refused. He ordered the men along several different skirmish lines, and it seemed to Anne that these were merely defensive. He expected Bedwyr to cut through Vortigern's forces.

By late afternoon, the sounds of battle echoed over the hill. Scouts rode out and back bringing word of the battle's progress. Vortigern was retreating. Although he had not lost many men he was being overwhelmed. Arthur sent a rider up and over the spectator hill to keep an eye on his flank.

He was calm throughout. Despite the dire news brought to him his stern, determined face and clear eyes never faltered. Everyone took strength from this.

The sound of battle came closer. Twice a soldier tried to give up his sword to the king, who had none. Arthur smiled and urged the men to return to their lines.

Finally, horses and men spilled over the hill, first the retreating forces of Vortigern and then the armored throng of Bedwyr.

Arthur's army moved forward with a bloodcurdling yell and charged into the lines. Thus reinforced, Vortigern's men turned to face the enemy. For long minutes it was a standoff with neither force able to advance.

Then Bedwyr's army swelled with a new phalanx of men and shoved their way down the hill, slashing and stabbing. Men screamed and fell dying in mud churned with blood.

Dade swallowed, standing beside

Anne. "Those tourists should be here for this. They wouldn't be cheering."

Arthur only smiled and nodded to a young aide beside him. The boy was off in an instant to raise a signal. In moments a great roar rose up behind everyone. Dade turned to see a sea of men splashing over the top of the spectator hill led by a knight in silver armor.

"All good men and true fight for England this day," Arthur said, his voice thick with emotion. "And my good friend Gayain to lead them."

The new army joined Vortigern's and Arthur's and began cutting through the enemy's lines.

Captain Albert chafed at inaction. Anne put a restraining hand to his arm and said, "We guard the king. We play our part in time."

The late summer sun cast a blood red glow over the sky as night descended. The men were tiring and there seemed no end to Bedwyr's army. Slowly the enemy pushed its way downhill until even Bedwyr and his entourage appeared. They stood at the top of the hill, the mitered man surrounded by the burly guards, and Bedwyr in plain armor and flanked by two more of the giants.

Arthur pushed in front of Anne to stand alone. Seeing this Bedwyr laughed and trod down the hill, his guards slicing a path for him through the battling throng.

"You stand against me, Arthur? To battle me? Where is your vaunted Caliburn, eh? At the bottom of the lake!

Surrender and I shall spare your son!"

Arthur strode away from Bedwyr, to the lake, and into the water. He stepped knee deep into it and beckoned into the pale mist clinging to the water's surface. Immediately the water began to churn and spit. A great beam of white light shot through and on into the sky. From the lake rose a woman, haloed in the blinding white light and carrying a sword before her. She floated toward Arthur, who knelt before her, bowing his head so that his lips touched the water. She raised the sword, a bright, gleaming thing of polished, honed metal, and brought it down lightly atop his head and then, with the flat of the blade, tapped his chin. Arthur lifted his eyes and smiled at the woman. He took the sword with a nod from her before she faded back into the beam of light and disappeared. The light vanished instantly and the water was calm again.

On the shore Vortigern stood watching.

"Father? It is true!"

Arthur put a heavy hand on Vortigern and smiled sadly. "All of the legends are true. To our everlasting sorrow."

The return of Caliburn had disturbed Bedwyr, but only for a moment.

"A shining sword will not save you, Arthur, the old! You die!"

Abandoning his men, Bedwyr drove forward, sword raised, screaming like a banshee. He was met by Arthur's Caliburn. Bedwyr's sword shattered

and the knight tumbled to the ground. Arthur turned and swung the big weapon in a killing arc but Bedwyr had found another sword and deflected the blow.

On his feet again, Bedwyr pushed his attack. Arthur, though old and tired, appeared rejuvenated with Caliburn in his hands. He met each of Bedwyr's blows with one of his own and the two men fought, circling each other as if they were the only two combatants on the field.

"Guard the king," Anne commanded. She and her aides formed a circle around Arthur and Bedwyr and fought to keep the others away.

"You cannot win, old man," Bedwyr crowed. "I took your wife, your magicks, and now your kingdom."

"Loyal, faithful Bedwyr. Why? Your family has ever loved the king."

"Legends! Damned legends! Servants of the king, is more like it. While you were mired in your foolish history, my family sought to better England. You Pendragons are not fit to rule, Arthur. You haven't the stomach for it! We end this!"

With a signal from Bedwyr, a horn sounded followed by the ominous clank of heavy armor. Over the hill came lines of hundreds of knights of the Order of St. Glauver.

"Politics," Bedwyr told Arthur with a wry smile, "does indeed make strange bedfellows."

The knights marched forward on the armies of the king. They lifted their slotted visors and each shot forth a

blasting stream of fire. Men screamed and sizzled. The majordomos tried to order the retreat but the panic of dying men created nothing but chaos.

"Yes, Bedwyr," Arthur said softly. "Strange bedfellows indeed. And you're right. We end this now." Arthur turned his head to the now blackened sky and said, "Help us, holy one. Help us now."

From above the Tor a form took shape and swooped down, huge and black, over the battlefield. All eyes followed it, even the flame knights of St. Glauver. Great gusts of wind shook the combatants. Then a fireball erupted and streaked down into the center of the flame knights decimating their numbers.

Seeing this, Bedwyr became infuriated. He saw his victory slipping away. He swung down on Arthur with blind hatred. His sword smashed. Arthur cut the air as Bedwyr threw himself backward to grab up a long sword and a flail.

On his feet again, Bedwyr thrust with sword and twirled the flail. For long minutes the two men fought. Arthur landed several blows, none of them fatal. Bedwyr's sword cut open Arthur's tunic, slicing through the mail.

Sensing victory, Bedwyr pressed forward, backing Arthur to the lake. Each horrific blow beat the king down further until Arthur was on one knee, Caliburn held protectively over his head, sparks flying with every crash of the metal. Bedwyr's eyes glowed red and his mouth curled into an evil grin.

Arthur did not wait for the knight to strike again. With a mighty heave he thrust Caliburn to arms' length and shattered Bedwyr's sword. Shock froze the knight. Arthur swung the gleaming sword down in a killing arc, cutting through Bedwyr's armor and deep into his chest.

Bedwyr let go a shuddering gasp and collapsed to his knees. His eyes were already dead. He tried to take a breath, to say something, then tumbled to the pebbly shore.

Arthur wrenched Caliburn free and held it aloft. The armies, seeing Bedwyr fall, put up their arms and stared at Arthur. The moon had risen near full and its bright whiteness shone down on the battlefield glinting off Arthur's sword to form a glowing aura around him.

Anne turned to look up the hill where Bedwyr's entourage had been. The mitered man was gone and the four burly guards had been slain, their bodies slumped beside the charred remains of the flame knights of St. Glauver.

Arthur fell to his knees beside Bedwyr and laid Caliburn aside.

"Once, dear Bedwyr, how badly thy love hath failed me."

Vortigern and Anne ran to the king. There was a gash in his side and it bled heavily.

"Father! I did not see him land a blow."

"An old injury, my son," Arthur said, breathlessly. "Some wounds never really heal."

"The Orner is gone, m'lord. We have to find the thing's guardian before he reaches Myrddin."

Arthur nodded heavily. "The wizard is at Stonehenge. Yes, yes, I know. Yet another lie I spoke to you. He is there. Enter tomorrow. It is Samhain. Start from the east at the Slaughter Stone and enter through the northernmost of the minor moonstones. Walk in a straight line. You must pass through both of the outer stone rings before you enter through the Saracen stones. Enter when the moon rises. It shall not light your way. It will be in the wrong position for that. A shadow will be cast. Into this shadow you must go. There you will find Myrddin. Do not tarry. He has guardians, those who do his bidding, and they are powerful. If you are not intercepted this guardian, that is where you will find the Orner."

Vortigern held his father, crying. The king's armies now had the battlefield under control. Weapons had been taken, but no one had dared move as they watched a reborn Arthur die.

"So many betrayals, son. Is there no respite from them? Learn from your father's mistakes, lad. Swear it."

"I swear."

"Good. Now return Caliburn to the Lady. She will give it to you when it is your time."

"No, father!"

"Do not argue. It is our way."

Vortigern gently lifted his father and brought him to the small dock at the water's edge. The barge was wait-

ing in the mist. He placed Arthur on the silken bed. Morgaine, herself again, had appeared draped in flowing robes and began washing Arthur's wounds.

Anne brought Caliburn to the prince. Tears still in his eyes he took it, felt its weight in his hands, and twirled it. It moved with a life of its own. Then without a pause he whirled and threw it high into the air and out over the lake. The sword seemed to float down, tumbling tip over hilt, until a woman's hand slipped out of the water and caught it by the grip. The hand, too, brandished the sword for a moment, slicing the air with it. Then it sunk beneath the surface without stirring a ripple.

Again the mist rolled over the lake. Arthur, lying still on the barge as it sailed across the Tor, seemed to dissolve until there was nothing left of him to see.

Anne and the others gathered fresh horses and weapons and rode off the battlefield at a dead run. They raced all night across the rolling Somerset plains. By morning they still had not caught up with the mitered man.

"He took a different route?" Chesterfield asked.

"The straightest path is the quickest," said Anne.

"Yeah," Dade groaned, "well, I think there's something magic about this."

"We've no time to wonder. We have to be at the henge by moonrise."

Even though each rider had two

horses, and they switched off frequently, all of the animals were nearly spent by the time Anne and the others reached the Druid monument.

"Take swords with you," Anne commanded, "nothing mechanical."

Armed with shields and pikes and swords they swatted their horses away and ran for the Slaughter Stone at the edge of the avenue that formed the eastern entrance into Stonehenge. The sun had set and its glow was fading in the west. An hour later the moon rose, bright and full, and it cast its spotlight down onto the plain.

The monument was a complex of raised stones formed in concentric circles and set in a large barrows. There was an outer layer of small gray stones about three feet high and a foot wide. Twenty-eight paces in from this was another circle comprised of similar stones. These were on a direct line with the main circle of large Saracen stones, each about six feet wide and twenty feet tall. A lintel of flat Saracen stones formed a connective cap to the ring. Inside, they could see the small blue-stones that formed an inner ring not more than two feet from the main ring of Saracen stones. In the middle of this arena were more Saracen stones standing in pairs with a lintel top to each pair. There were five of these groups arranged in a horseshoe shape. Another large stone, an altar, was at the center of this configuration.

With so many upright stones, there were shadows everywhere.

Anne instructed Captain Albert to

stay behind and stand on the Slaughter Stone to give the others a clean line of sight in order for them to walk in a straight line. Then Anne took her bearings and found, as the king had instructed, the correct Saracen stone, and began walking toward the henge. She stopped several times and turned around to look at Captain Albert and gauge the straightness of her course. She passed between two of the outer stones and through two more of the second ring. Dade and Chesterfield followed in her footsteps, ducking whenever she turned to check her progress.

Before entering main ring of stones Anne paused.

"Do not follow. If I am not back by sunrise, I won't be coming back. Do what you can to help the new Arthur. He will need it."

Dade was about to argue when Anne stepped into the blackness between two stones and vanished.

There was a swirl of light and then a giant cavern opened before her. It was lined with gold and jewels, and the tinkle of water could be heard from a stream that emptied into a small pool below her.

"Welcome, little ones," an echoing voice called out.

Anne spun around to see Dade and Chesterfield behind her. They both grinned at her and shrugged.

"I have waited long for this day. Centuries. Millennia. And now one so fair brings me my prize."

At the back of the cave was a wide

dais and an altar. The man in the mitered cap and white robes stepped up onto the dais and placed the golden box on the altar. He opened the box and stepped aside. His movements were mechanical, empty of life.

"Weak minds are so pliable, don't you think?"

The back wall of the cave began to shift and bubble. A hole blinked open and then another. A serpentine figure took shape in the wall and then, with a sigh and a shrug it came loose and fell to the dais.

Now it stretched and rose up on legs, towering over the mitered man. Great wings unfurled and a triangular head swelled up out of a long neck.

"Great," Dade said. "More dragons."

"We cannot let you do this, Myrddin."

The dragon laughed, throwing back its head and shaking in great spasms.

"You have already delivered to me my salvation, dear one," he said, extending a taloned claw. "Bring me the Blackthorn so I may escape my double prison, this form and this cave."

Even before Anne could refuse, a smaller dragon swept into the cave spitting fire.

"Careful, Edlywynr," the dragon Myrddin scolded. "They carry wood which we do not want to burn."

"Keep the dragon busy," Anne said to Dade and Chesterfield. "I'll see to Myrddin."

Anne descended a flight of golden steps and crossed the cave to an arched bridge that spanned the pool. She came

with sword drawn, which amused Myrddin. Dade and Chesterfield meanwhile climbed to a ledge above the cave and skirted along toward Edlywynr, who had perched in a shallow recess in the wall. The smaller dragon sensed a fight coming and took flight, circling around to hover within feet of the two men.

"They carry no wood," the dragon hissed.

"How true," Myrddin replied with a shrug. "Remove them."

"Are you so sure they don't have the Blackthorn?" Anne asked.

"Show me. Or I burn them."

Anne hesitated only a moment before she sheathed her sword and removed the leather pouch from her belt.

"Place it on the altar. Beside the stone."

Anne unfolded the leather and placed it on the altar with the blackthorn exposed. Still in its box was the Orner. The stone had been coated in a thin rust-colored ceramic glaze. Tiny chips in the porcelain revealed the pale gray stone beneath. The imprisoned dragon pictured on the stone was more vivid than it appeared in the pages of the book. It seemed almost alive, and full of hate.

Myrddin leaned low to look at his prizes. A great grin spread across his face.

"Lovely. Edlywynr, kill them."

The dragon swelled as he prepared a ball of flame. Dade flung himself off the ledge and landed on the beast's neck. Jolted, the fireball he spat shot

away from Chesterfield up toward the roof of the cave. Dade swung his sword in an arc and plunged the tip into the belly of the creature.

Chesterfield thrust with his sword as the dragon faltered and fell toward the ledge. He struck again and the creature screamed in terror and pain. Fading, it fluttered to the ground, flapping its legs and wings as it tried to reach Dade.

Myrddin watched the battle for a moment, unmoved, then said, "No matter." He reached for the blackthorn and the stone. "All will be as death when I have escaped!"

Anne jumped forward suddenly and grabbed the blackthorn away from Myrddin. The man in the mitered cap, frozen until now, lunged mechanically for Anne but missed and fell into the pool where unseen horrors devoured him in a violent, roiling froth.

Myrddin reached out for her, but he was slow, weak. Imprisoned, he had lost almost all power. Anne scooped up her sword and plunged it into the belly of the beast.

"You think a sword could end me," Myrddin laughed sadly. "If so, I would have been dead 'lo these many years. Give me that which I seek!"

Again the wizard dragon lunged for her but Anne hopped over the altar, ducking below the beast's searching arms. Then she jumped up, kicked off the altar, and threw herself at Myrddin. Still holding the blackthorn, she plunged it into the beast's thick hide.

Myrddin shook violently and

screamed. He fell backwards with a thud that jarred the cave and shook rocks of gold from the ceiling.

Anne leapt away from Myrddin and snatched up the box with the Orner and ran. She cleared the arched bridge just as a stone, jarred loose from the ceiling, fell and shattered it.

"Let's go!" she yelled. The cave was shaking and rumbling. The ceiling threatened to collapse at any moment, and a blustery wind had kicked up, swirling dust and rocks about the cave.

Myrddin's voice rose mournfully above the din. "All my plans, my machinations for nothing. The flesh is so weak."

Dade and Chesterfield abandoned the dying dragon and their weapons and ran for the top of the staircase. Anne was steps behind them, dodging flying debris. The cave wall was solid, though, and there was no door.

"How do we get out?"

A shadow fell across the rock in front of them. Anne put a tentative hand forward only to have it disappear into the rock. She shoved the two men into the shadow and they vanished. Anne followed.

There was another flash of light and she was back outside Stonehenge. But the doorway did not close completely behind her. A black vortex formed and reached a narrow finger out to grab hold of the golden box with the Orner. Anne struggled against it but the box slipped from her fingers and disappeared into the black void.

The night was suddenly silent

again, and dark. The moon had already set.

"Myrddin won!" Dade groaned. "He got the talisman."

Anne smiled. "I guess Crafter was right. Confrontation was the best course of action." She flipped something into the air and caught it, holding it up for the others to see. It was the Orner. The others smiled with great relief.

Half a world away, on West Thirty-fifth Street, just a block east of the Ninth Avenue El, sat in its dilapidated glory the Third Citizens Bank of New York City.

There were few customers inside the bank at the teller windows. The place echoed from emptiness. When these few patrons had gone, there was only one man left, a nondescript fellow of average height and weight standing at one of the deposit slip tables. He wore a plain brown suit and brown hat and brown shoes. They were old clothes, even for the times, and they looked worn hanging off his body. He walked to a teller window with dull steps. He looked on the man inside the teller cage with dull brown eyes set in a shockingly pale face.

"Stick 'em up," he said.

The teller, an older man who wore old-fashioned green eyeshades and a black armband, looked up sharply.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Stick 'em up," the brown man said with leaden dullness.

"Here now, are you joking?" The

teller's voice lifted slightly but he attracted no attention from the sleepy guard by the door.

"Put all the money," the brown man said, lifting a brown Gladstone onto the counter, "in this bag. And make it snappy."

The teller stood and shook violently, a deep blush rushing into his face.

"I will not!"

The brown man shrugged and for a moment the teller thought he would leave. Instead he looked the teller straight in the eye and said, "Never mind. I will get it myself," and reached into the teller's cage putting his hands right through the bars. Then the brown man moved forward, stepping through the solid counter as if it was not there.

Without opening the Gladstone or the teller's drawer, the brown man reached in and pulled out wads of money and dropped them into the bag. He then moved from cage to cage, removing all the money without opening the drawers.

"Help! Robbery!" the teller cried, triggering the alarm. Bells began clanging.

At the main entrance to the bank the uniformed guard jumped off his stool and pulled out his service revolver. He ran to the teller.

"Where?"

"There!"

The teller pointed to the brown man who had just taken the last of the money and was now walking back through the counter to the lobby.

"Thank you," said the brown man, who crossed the floor and exited through a solid wall out onto the street.

At that moment two patrolmen ran in, revolvers drawn, and looked about the sleepy lobby.

"We've been robbed," the teller told them, "by a ghost!"

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