

A way with Dragons

By Nick Creech

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For the dragon lovers of this world

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THE AUTHOR

Nick Creech is a former newspaper journalist. He has two sons, both now successful and more-or-less responsible adults who still deign to talk to him from time to time in tones of kindly condescension. He has a wife who does the same, mostly.

Since leaving journalism, he has written extensively for children, young adults and people of all ages who just enjoy a story.

Chapter One

The icy breeze trickled out of the woods, flowed down towards the River Usk and then on towards the small town of Abergavenny. The solitary old farm-house in its desolate winter garden shivered and huddled deeper into itself. An owl, hungry, cold and thoroughly disgruntled, hooted mournfully. It was the witching hour.

Inside, in her attic bedroom, Cary snuggled deeper under the covers. She was dreaming. It was summer and she and Cash were cooling off in the shallows at the bottom of the garden. The sun was hot, the sky blue, the puffy clouds purest white and it was altogether delightful. A waft of warm air tickled her nose. She brushed at it absently, refusing to open her eyes.

"Go away, Cash," she murmured. "I just want to be quiet for a moment."

The waft came again, and this time Cary sneezed. Still she refused to open her eyes.

"Stop it," she said crossly, and again: "Do stop it."

"Not until you wake up," a voice said, a voice that shouldn't be in her dream, a strange voice, one that she didn't know, speaking a language she could barely understand.

"Who's that?" she said, beginning to wake up properly. She opened her eyes, expecting the familiar darkness of her familiar bedroom. Instead, there was a faint glow. She lifted her head slightly and gasped. The glow was coming from something sitting on her chest. She craned to see and then gasped again with utter astonishment.

There, nestled comfortably into the eiderdown and gazing at her with lively interest, was the strangest thing she had ever seen, a creature from another age, another world. It was a dragon, a miniature dragon, tiny but complete and perfect in every detail, right down to the fire flickering from time to time deep in his throat and to his colour, which Cary would ever afterwards think of as shimmer, tending to green or to gold depending on the light. He appeared comfortably at home and even had his front legs crossed rather like Ichabod when he was hoping for a walk. And that thought made Cary wonder how the dragon had ever got past him in the first place. Ichabod would be asleep in his basket on the landing, faithfully guarding the door. She was quite sure that Ichabod, a very large Newfoundland, enormous really, and a fully paid-up member of the Canine Society for the Preservation of Young Humans, would never allow truck with dragons.

She struggled to sit up and the dragon calmly rose into the air, the fiery glow increasing slightly. When Cary had stopped thrashing about and was still again he alighted on her knee.

"Who are you?" Cary demanded, her surprise giving way to delight. A dragon! How wonderful, how absolutely amazing. Dragons had always seemed to Cary the most

fascinating of creatures, quirky, cranky, dangerous, exciting, magnificent, marvellous. And here one was.

"Who are you?" she said again. "What are you doing here?"

"I," the dragon said, "am Pythagoras von Drachenstein of the House of Hydra. And I have come to seek your aid." He spoke in an archaic sort of Welsh with considerable flourish and ignored the rather unfortunate fact that the voice of so small a creature must perforce sound decidedly tinny. Cary, whose own modern Welsh was not nearly as proficient as her teacher said it should be, had to struggle hard to understand.

"My aid?" she said blankly.

"Indeed," Pythagoras said. "We have urgent need, I might say desperate need, of a maiden who believes in dragons. You are a maiden, aren't you?" he added anxiously.

"I think so," Cary said, not absolutely sure what he meant. She found that as though by magic, the words were coming more and more easily.

"You'd know if you weren't," Pythagoras said with relief. "And I know you believe in dragons or we would never be able to talk like this."

"Aid to do what?" Cary said. She was a straightforward young lady with a strong streak of common sense, quite unlike her twin brother, Cassian, pronounced Kashan, or Cash for short.

"To recover the Amulet of Annwfn," Pythagoras said.

"The Amulet of Annwfn? What's that?" Cary asked, her eyes widening.

"Ah," Pythagoras said. "It is a huge golden torq set with the Jewels of Destiny. It is the... the symbol of the nation."

"And you've lost it?"

"We've lost it," Pythagoras said sadly.

"Well, that was pretty careless of you," Cary said tartly.

"Not lost lost," Pythagoras said. "It was stolen. By Morgan le Fay."

"Who...?"

"A sorceress. An evil sorceress. She has stolen the Amulet of Annwfn, and without it the Britons, that is to say the Welsh, that is to say your people, are imprisoned in apathy and ruled by despair, that is to say by Morgan le Fay and her Saxons."

"Saxons?" Cary asked. "Who are Saxons?"

"Cruel invaders from Europe," Pythagoras said. "Will you help? Please say you'll help. Or the Britons are doomed."

"Now just a minute," Cary said crisply, her Welsh improving miraculously with this totally unexpected stimulus. "I might believe in dragons but I'm not the sort of person to go rushing off with one who hasn't even been properly introduced. You might be wicked for all I know. Most dragons are, you know. And how do you even know who I am?"

"You're Carys Cadwagan..."

"I am not," Cary said indignantly. "You're quite wrong. My last name is Cadogan."

"Oh phht," the dragon said crossly, a small spurt of flame erupting from his mouth. "In proper Welsh, Cadogan is Cadwagan and for your information, that means glory in battle."

"Really?" Cary said.

"And you were recommended by my good friend, Y Ddraig Goch."

"I don't believe you. Not the real Red Dragon?"

"Indeed the real Red Dragon. The Red Dragon of Wales."

"Oh," Cary said. "Well that's different. He's my favourite dragon of all."

"Wounding," Pythagoras said. "So wounding." He sniffed and another tongue of flame shot out.

"Well, except for you of course," Cary said hastily. "And do mind the bedspread. If it gets singed, Mother will never believe what happened."

"Oh phht," the dragon said again, with yet more flame. "I've got much more important fish to fry than your bedspread. Will you come? That is the question, Miss Glory in Battle. The only question. Will you come, or will you not?"

"Of course," Cary said without hesitation. "But..."

"No buts."

"But," Cary insisted. "Only if Cash can come too. My brother," she added.

Pythagoras cocked his head to one side and raised an eyebrow.

"We're only recruiting maidens," he said.

"No Cash, no Cary," Cary said firmly.

"This was not part of the plan, not part of the plan at all."

"Well, it is now," Cary said. "We do everything together."

"He probably doesn't even believe in dragons," Pythagoras said discontentedly. "He's a boy. Boys only believe in dinosaurs."

"I'm sure he believes in dragons," Cary said with her winningest smile, the one she used on her father when he was trying to be severe.

"Oh, very well," Pythagoras said. "I'm prepared to ask him, but it's a waste of time. He's a boy and boys are always a waste of time by definition."

And good as his word, the dragon waved his tail in a complicated pattern and the next second they had magicked across the landing and were inside Cash's room. Outside in his over-sized basket, Ichabod whimpered a little as the rabbit he was chasing in his sleep momentarily took on a very strange shape.

Cary knelt by Cash's bed and whispered in his ear:

"Wake up, Cash. Wake up. My dragon wants to talk to you."

Cash stirred and opened an eye. He made to speak but Cary put a finger to his lips.

"I said, my dragon wants to speak to you."

Cash's eyes went wide and Cary winked meaningly.

"What dragon?" Cash said. "There aren't any such..."

"You see?" Pythagoras said.

"That dragon," Cary said.

"And in point of fact," Pythagoras continued fussily. "I'm not your dragon. I'm not anybody's dragon..." Cary was rather too excited to register the fact that Pythagoras suddenly seemed to be bilingual.

"A real dragon?" Cash demanded.

"Of course a real dragon," Cary said. "And he wants our help."

"I don't see any dragon," Cash said. "Where? Where is it?"

"Oh Cash," Cary said. "You have to believe. Please believe. If you don't believe, you can't come."

"What dragon?" Cash said. "What does it look like?"

"Well, it's very small. Tiny." Cary stopped and switched to Welsh. "Are you always this small?" she said to Pythagoras, who was now perched on her hand.

"What do you mean, small?" Pythagoras bridled. "As it happens, I can assure you that while I may be small at this precise moment, I am nevertheless perfectly formed and I try always to adopt a size appropriate to the occasion."

"Who are you talking to?" Cash demanded. "Why are you talking to yourself? And why are you speaking Welsh?"

"The dragon," Cary said. "I'm talking to the dragon. Pythagoras von Drachenstein of the House of Hydra. You must be able to hear him at least?"

"Have you gone nuts?" Cash said.

"Oh stop it, Cash," Cary said, frustration welling up. "Stop being such... a boy."

"Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Cash," Cary said desperately. "Do you want to come on this adventure or not?"

"Not if I have to believe in dragons," Cash mumbled.

"Think of him as a pterodactyl."

"Oh puh-leese," Pythagoras said. "So humiliating. I refuse to be a pterodactyl. A quetzalcoatlus at least."

"All right," Cary said. "A quetzalcoatlus..."

"Quetzalcoatl was a proper dragon, after all," Pythagoras sniffed. "If a trifle primitive."

"All right!" Cary said.

"Why do you keep talking to your hand," Cash demanded, waking up a bit.

"Because there's a dragon sitting on it," Cary snapped. "Think of a quetzalcoatlus," she went on. "Can you do that?"

"Of course," Cash said.

"Now think of him breathing fire..."

For a moment, nothing happened, then Cash snapped bolt upright.

"Cary! Cary...!" he shouted. "There's a dragon sitting on your hand..."

"Oh for goodness sake," Cary said. "Haven't I been trying to tell you that for the last five minutes?"

"Quick," Cash said with great excitement. "Catch it. We'll put it in a shoebox and keep it. We can charge people to..."

Of a sudden there was great roar and the dragon swelled hugely until he seemed to be filling the whole room. Cash cowered into the bed and a tongue of flame licked out, doing dreadful things to his eyebrows. There was a distinct smell of brimstone and burning hair.

"Py!" Cary said sternly. "You stop that this instant or you'll wake Ichabod and he'll wake our parents and then..." The dragon shrank back down until he was again perched on her hand.

"...And then we'll never be able to go with you," Cary finished.

"Go with him where?" Cash said warily.

"So don't ever do that again," Cary added for good measure. "Not without warning anyway."

"And why's he called Pythagoras?" Cash demanded, regaining his courage as the dragon hung his head, just like Ichabod when Cary was using that particular tone of voice. "Pythagoras did theorems or something," Cash added.

"Excuse me!" the dragon retorted, suddenly recovering. "The Python, after whom I am honoured to be named, happens to be the earth-dragon who guarded Delphi, the navel of the earth, long before some jumped-up philosopher stole his name, our name. Really! Such ignorance. I told you boys are a waste of time."

"Now, look here," Cash said. "I've had just about enough..."

"Oh do shut up," Cary said. "Or you'll ruin everything. Again." Cash subsided, but very mutinously.

"Now," Cary continued. "Pythagoras, I apologise for my brother's rudeness and will you please tell us how we can help. What do we have to do?"

"You," Pythagoras said. "Not him. You have to recover the Amulet of Annwfn. Morgan le Fay has concealed it in the Labyrinth of Lamentation. Only a maiden, a small maiden, may enter the enchanted tunnels and confront the guardian."

"And what exactly is this guardian?" Cary asked, thoughtfully.

Pythagoras paused. "Think of your worst fear," he said at last, "And then double it."

"Oh dear," Cary said. "That does sound rather grim."

But Cash let out a hoot of laughter.

"Easy, peasy, Japanesy," he said. "Your worst fear is failing an exam."

Cary and Pythagoras looked at each other with exactly the same, long-suffering expression.

"Phht," Pythagoras said. Cash reared hastily back from the spurt of flame. "Are you sure you want him to come?" Pythagoras went on. "I could just send him back to sleep."

"Sorry," Cash muttered.

"Perhaps it would be best," Cary said austerely.

"I said I was sorry," Cash said. The others regarded him with strong disfavour.

"I'll behave," he said. "I promise. Really."

"All right," Cary said reluctantly. "So where do we have to go and what should I wear."

"A long way," Pythagoras said. "We have to go a long time from here. And I think we should consult your wardrobe."

"What about me?" Cash said. "What do I wear?"

"Clothes," Pythagoras said waspishly. "Whatever you like. It could scarcely make any difference. But the Lady Carys will be meeting a prince and should look her best."

In the end, practicality won and they settled on Cary's best pair of jeans, stout riding boots, a crisp white shirt, and navy-blue pullover to set off her short blonde hair. On being informed that it would still be early winter at their destination, Cary also insisted on taking her waterproof down parka. Pythagoras gave one last, longing look at her special party dress sitting lonely and unloved on a hanger right at the back and sighed. It was actually pretty enough in a most old-fashioned way, but as it happened Cary hated the frock, all frou-frou and frills wished on her by her great-grandmother, a lady so ancient and acid that Cary had decided she must live exclusively on lemon juice. She had worn the dress once under protest, after dire threats from her mother, and had no intention of ever wearing it again.

"Oh do be sensible, Py," Cary said. "I'm not crawling through any Labyrinth of Lamentation in that, prince or no prince. Besides, it would look even more stupid with riding boots."

"But..."

"No."

"It's so..."

"No."

"I could pack it..."

"No. And what sort of a dragon is so interested in clothes, anyway?"

"A refined, civilised dragon with a classical Greek education," Pythagoras smirked.

"Well then, you ought to have more taste," Cary shot back.

"So cruel," Pythagoras said.

"Can we go?" Cary demanded. "Can we please just get Cash and go?"

Pythagoras made a moue, which Cary thought, all things considered, was downright alarming. However, the dragon sketched another pattern with his tail and an instant later, Cash had joined them, rather breathless and dishevelled. He was dressed much the same as Cary and bundled up in their thick jackets it was hard to tell them apart. But unlike Cary, Cash had thought to put a few useful items in his pockets, or at least items he thought might be useful: the excellent pocket knife his father had given him for his

birthday, the length of cord and the small can of waterproof matches that his father had also taught him always to carry, half a packet of chewing gum and his favourite, all-time champion cats-eye that had never lost a game of marbles and never would even if he had to cheat, as he had no intention of ever surrendering it to anyone.

"Right," Pythagoras said, suddenly all business. "Pay attention. What's about to happen is not without danger." He allowed himself to expand until he was about the same size as the twins.

"Each of you stand behind me and take hold of one of my wings down at the shoulder, and whatever you do, don't let go. Are we clear on that?" He looked sternly at Cash. "Are we very clear on that?"

"What happens if we do let go?" Cash said with interest.

"You will be lost forever in the mists of time," Pythagoras replied with satisfaction and Cash was instantly very serious.

"So," Pythagoras continued. "Hold on for your lives."

This time he put his tail through a very elaborate dance indeed, and a second or two later they were engulfed in thick, swirling fog that jerked and tore at them. From time to time they would catch glimpses of strange places and events. Once a squadron of mounted riders with muskets and half-armor came cantering out of the mist to vanish an instant later. At another moment they seemed to be in the middle of battle between fleets of antiquated, square-rigged ships popping at each other with ineffectual cannon. Then, finally, the fog cleared and they found themselves hovering above an army on the march. It was a Roman legion in full battle order swinging along a Roman road.

"Whoops," Pythagoras said. "A bit too far, but close."

The fog descended again and this time when it cleared, they found themselves in a dank, dripping forest.

"Where on earth are we?" Cary asked, recovering her breath. A drop of water ran down her neck and she hurriedly put up her hood as the rain came on again.

"Home," Pythagoras said.

"Oh no," Cash said. "I knew I never should never have believed in dragons."

"Phht," Pythagoras snapped, flame gushing. "Feel free to cease any time you like."

"Stop it both of you," Cary said, and then: "Where exactly is home?"

"Temporary home," Pythagoras said. "We are in the forest near Isca Silurum. You might know it as Caerleon."

"Where they have King Arthur's round table?" Cary said.

"Rubbish," Cash said. "It's not the round table, just an old Roman amphitheatre. For the fort. They just call it the round table." He looked to Pythagoras.

"That's all it is, isn't it?" he demanded. "Just an amphitheatre... We went to the museum there. With the school."

The dragon cocked his head.

At last they heard a sound that didn't belong in the wilderness. A distant axe-blow rang through the forest, and again.

Pythagoras zoomed out from Cary's hood and expanded to the size of a swallow. He perched on the top of her head, using a wing as an umbrella. He listened a moment longer and then let out a satisfied puff of smoke.

"That's them," he said.

"Who?" Cash said. "And I don't suppose you could dry off my jeans a bit? Breathe a bit of fire my way?"

"Nothing I'd like better," Pythagoras snarled and Cash very quickly dropped back to what he conceived to be a safe distance.

"Who are we talking about?" he asked again. But Pythagoras made no reply and Cary just ploughed on, trying to ignore the saturated undergrowth that whipped and tore at her.

They emerged finally into a clearing that had been recently carved from the woods. There were numbers of stumps still sticking out of the ground and smaller logs set about them for stools. It rather had the look of a very down-at-heel al fresco café, Cary thought. A group of men were gathered in the centre listlessly watching what was apparently meant to be a fire as it grudgingly leaked forth a faint tendril of smoke and steam.

"Phht," Pythagoras said, flame sparking. "Calls himself a wizard and he can't light a fire to save his life."

Men turned at the sound of his voice, and the bent figure crouching before the pile of wet wood making cabbalistic gestures looked up.

"About time," he said. "Do something about this, will you?"

From his perch on Cary's head, the dragon let loose a jet of fire that sent the wizard tumbling hastily backwards on to the soaking ground. The pile of wood began to crackle and flame.

The wizard picked himself up and shook his robes fretfully.

"That was quite uncalled for," he said. "Downright uncouth."

"My dear sir," Pythagoras retorted. "You are quite the last person to call anyone uncouth..."

"All dragons should be drowned at birth," the wizard snapped back.

"And then who would ever light your fires for you..."

Cary listened with amusement. The wizard she could see, now that he was no longer crouching, was tall and skinny but also twisted and gnarled like an old tree. He waved his arms around distractedly, branches thrashing in the wind, and his straggly beard and sparse grey hair might have been wisps of mistletoe if only they had been green. His robes resembled nothing so much as bark, very crusty, lived-in bark, and it was clear that he and the dragon were long accustomed to bickering with each other.

The wizard eventually stopped fussing over his muddy robes and began to inspect Cary. As an afterthought he also paid some passing attention to Cash.

"Introduce me," he said at last.

"Immediately, your wisdom," the dragon said sarcastically. "Lady Carys, may I present the Wizard Myrddin Wylt. Wizard, I present the Lady Carys Cadwagan."

The wizard stepped forward and offered his hand. His eyes, unlike the rest of him, were clean, sharp and of a blue so piercing that one expected to find an eagle circling there in the vault of the midday sky.

"So," Myrddin said. "You're the young lady sent to save us all from perdition. Think you're up to it then?"

Cary's mouth opened foolishly and she groped for a reply. Then she heard her mother saying as she had once before when Cary had suffered a particularly bad day at school: "Little flower, when all else fails, attack."

"I have no idea," Cary said. "But by the look of it, I could hardly do a worse job than you."

There was a guffaw from the men standing round the fire and the dragon let out an appreciative spurt of flame. Myrddin said nothing, just continued to gaze at her. Cary felt herself beginning to flush but she refused to drop her eyes.

At last the wizard spoke.

"Good," he said. "And who is this?" He indicated Cash.

"My brother," Cary said. "Cash, that is Cassian..."

"And precisely why is he here? We don't need him. We don't want him."

"I want him," Cary said. "Besides, he'd never forgive me if I had an adventure like this without him."

Now that the conversation had turned to him, Cash could contain himself no longer.

"If you're who I think you are," he said to the wizard. "Shouldn't you be called Merlin?"

The wizard spluttered angrily and raised his hand threateningly above his head as though to cast a deadly spell. Pythagoras laughed.

"Merde, Myrddin," he said. "You can't blame the boy for Geoffrey of Monmouth..."

"That charlatan!" the wizard roared. "Liar! Hack!"

"Geoffrey who?" Cary said.

"Journalist!" Myrddin sneered.

"A chronicler," Pythagoras said. "A long time in the future. He decided that Myrddin sounded too much like a very rude French word, so he changed it to Merlin..."

"Without so much as a by-your-leave," Myrddin added. "Typical journalist. They never, ever get names right."

"Oh," Cash said politely. "I'm sorry you have a rude name..."

Pythagoras spluttered. The men by the fire spluttered. Myrddin spluttered but in a different key altogether, his eyes sparked dangerously and he raised his hand again threateningly on high.

A striking young man stepped forward, tall, well-built and every inch a warrior, though like everyone else his clothing was dirty and ragged.

"Enough," he said. "These people brave unknown dangers and risk their lives to help us. They are our guests. And we will treat them as such," he added, with a meaning glance towards the wizard.

"I am Arthur," he went on. "Which is Bear-man in the old language. A lot of people still call me Bear for short."

"You're not King Arthur?" Cary asked, wonderingly. "Merlin... sorry, Myrddin... Arthur... You must be...?"

"Not yet," Pythagoras said.

"And not likely to be," Myrddin said morosely.

"At least, not without your help," Arthur said. "At the moment, I am merely a prince. A prince without a throne or even many subjects. Just these few." He gestured at the men standing behind him.

The rain had stopped, Cary realised, without her noticing it and the now roaring fire was at least giving the illusion of heat. The light of the flames danced and flickered about the clearing as the night drew in. From somewhere, men had dragged out the flayed carcass of a deer and were setting up a spit to roast it. Cash eyed it hungrily.

"Come," Arthur said. "Come Lady Carys." He gestured to the stools about the tree stumps. "We will sit and eat and talk. And you shall hear, if you will, how it may be that you can help us."

"Phht," Pythagoras muttered with a subdued spark but loud enough for everyone to hear. "Another night at the round tables."

Cash chuckled. Despite himself, he was beginning to like the dragon. And he must remember to find out why his name had suddenly been changed to Cadwagan. What did it mean, he wondered?

Chapter Two

With ceremony that seemed to conjure a whole court of lords and ladies from the dank clearing in the forest, Arthur escorted Cary and Cash to a tree stump table near the fire and its grateful warmth. A warrior pulled up seats for them and Cary was suddenly concerned to arrange herself as gracefully as possible. Cash, quite unabashed, slumped down in his usual careless fashion. Myrddin joined them and Pythagoras, again about the size of a swallow, came to sit on Cary's shoulder. Unthinkingly, she reached up to stroke his chest. His skin, despite the scales, felt surprisingly smooth and silky. He let out a small sound of pleasure which, if he had been a cat, might have been a purr. Dragons would not often find someone to stroke them, Cary thought. It must be a rather lonely life.

"So," Arthur said. "I expect there are matters you wish to discuss."

"No need to bother their heads," Myrddin snapped. "Send the girl in to get the amulet and then send them home. Let's get on and be done with it."

"What amulet?" Cash demanded. "What's Annwfn? Why can't you use your own maidens? I don't understand any of this." Cary looked superior but as usual was grateful for Cash asking the awkward questions. It was her most irritating habit.

Arthur looked at Myrddin, who shrugged.

"Too tedious," he said. "You tell them."

Cash was about to make an angry retort but Arthur put a hand on his shoulder.

"Gently, young squire," he said. "Wizards are best not provoked, unless perhaps you happen to be a dragon with magic of your own." He paused.

"Annwfn, we believe, is the world beyond this. A place of delights and eternal youth, where there is no disease or war and where there is all the food you can eat for the taking."

"You mean heaven," Cary said.

"If that is what you call it," Arthur said. "We believe the gateway is to be found at Ynys Witrin, which some call Avalon. And we believe that on a chosen day of the year the gateway would open and that all who were near would be invited within to feast and drink and dance, on condition that no one would return to the real world bearing anything that belonged to Annwfn. All was well until one year a maid put a flower in her hair, a white orchid, a star, and in the joy of all that took place, forgot to remove it before returning. The gateway never opened again."

"Oh dear," Cary said. "But what happened?"

"The orchid was taken by a magus and set by enchantment within a diamond of great size. He called it the Star of Hope, our hope of again reaching Annwfn. And he set the diamond within a great golden torq, together with a great ruby he called the Flame of Courage, a great emerald he called the Clear Green Pool of Knowledge and a great

pearl, the Pearl of Wisdom. And the torq, the Amulet of Annwfn, he presented to my forebears as the pride of the nation and the symbol of all we hold dear." Arthur paused again.

"It has been stolen," he said.

"A certain party," Pythagoras chimed in. "A certain party, naming no names, was not quite so clever with his warding spell as he might have been."

"That wretched woman," Myrddin said angrily. "How was I to know she'd stolen my recipe book...?"

"The one that just miraculously fell out of your sleeve..." Pythagoras said.

"It could happen to anyone," Myrddin said.

"Anyway," Arthur said. "Morgan le Fay now has the amulet."

"But what does that matter?" Cash said. "I mean, I understand that having someone nick your best jewels would make you pretty cross but...?"

"Ignorant boy," Myrddin snapped. "Why is he here?"

"Phht," Pythagoras said with what the twins already recognised was his signature spurt of flame. "To keep you honest, of course." Cash looked at him sharply. The dragon winked.

"It matters," Arthur said, "Because my Britons are bereft. Without the magic amulet of their fathers, which also happens to be the mark of the king, they have lost their hope and they have lost their courage and without hope, without courage, without knowledge and wisdom there is no changing your fate. These few brave men who follow me are no match for Brogan and his Saxons. They are no match for Morgan le Fay. Without the people we are just a tiny band of rebels, we are doomed, but the people have no more stomach to fight and never will without the amulet to give them heart."

"Which," Pythagoras said to Cary, "Is where you come in."

"But what about your own maidens?" Cash insisted.

"Alas," Arthur said. "Of those who had the courage to try, when my people still had their courage, none has returned."

"Whoa," Cash said, his voice rising. "You want my sister to risk her life...?"

He leaped to his feet. Cary flashed him a look of gratitude. Whatever his faults, Cash could always be relied on to spring to her defence.

"She doesn't really have a choice," Myrddin said quietly, unusually quietly for him. "See that tall man by the fire. He is Cai Hir. He will be known as Kay in years to come. He is your ancestor. Without the amulet he too is doomed, as are you in turn. You will never exist. Y Ddraig Goch has seen it."

"Who?" Cash said mystified.

"The Red Dragon," Cary said. "The Welsh dragon. The one on our flag."

"So where is he if he knows so much?" Cash demanded, still standing, his jaw thrust out belligerently.

"In the Cavern of Cold Despair," Pythagoras said. "He was lured into a trap."

Myrddin snorted.

"Drank himself into a stupor, you mean."

Cash and Cary both looked to Arthur. He sighed.

"Things have not being going well," he said. Myrddin snorted again.

"It was Morgan le Fay," Arthur continued. "She had Brogan and his men dig a great pit where she knew Y Ddraig Goch would pass. They filled it with mead."

"And the great fool of a dragon drank the lot," Myrddin said gloomily. "Can you credit that, my young wide-eyes?"

"What happened?" Cary asked.

"Morgan le Fay happened," Pythagoras said. "Y Ddraig Goch fell into drunken sleep and she enchanted him into the cavern. He can't get out. He's too big for the entrance."

"But can't he change...? Like you...?" Cary said.

"Phht," Pythagoras said. "He's a rough, northern dragon. All sturm and drang. No subtlety. I tried to show him but he's stuck. At least until that... wizard gets back his recipe book. The best Y Ddraig Goch could do was to send me to look for you." And Pythagoras shot Myrddin a withering glance.

"He can see the future?" Cary asked.

"The Welsh future. The future of the Celts, the true Britons."

"Hang on," Cash said. "If we're there in the future then everything must have turned out all right here without us. We can just go back. Right now. Come on, Cary..."

"But," Arthur said. "I'm afraid you're not in the future yet, that you won't be, unless somehow things do turn out all right here."

"Oh," Cash said and then: "It still doesn't make sense. If things haven't turned out, then we're not in the future, and you can't bring us back..."

"Unless you're figments of our imagination," Myrddin said. "Which I'm beginning to think would be infinitely preferable."

Cash looked at Cary in despair.

"My head hurts," he said.

"I think I understand," she said. "Things turned out because they did bring us back and wouldn't have if they hadn't. Or something. Anyway, don't you want to find out what happens...?"

"Not if you have to risk your life."

"But if we don't exist, if I'm just a... figment, then it doesn't matter."

Cash suddenly reached out and pinched her.

"Ouch!" Cary said crossly. "Why did you do that?"

"Did it hurt?" Cash demanded.

"You know it did."

"Then it matters," Cash said. "It matters very much."

"Phht," Pythagoras said with his regulation squirt of flame. "There might actually be some hope for the boy, after all."

The aroma from the roasting venison had been growing steadily more irresistible and just when Cash thought he might faint with hunger, men began to hand around rough clay platters of bread and meat.

"You are fortunate," Arthur said to Cash and Cary, pulling his knife from the scabbard on his hip and cutting their food for them. "We eat well tonight."

Cash looked at him, his mouth full.

"We often don't eat at all," Arthur said. "But Peredur brought down a deer this morning."

Myrddin inspected his plate with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

"I asked for well done," he said discontentedly. "This is still half-raw. Lend me the dragon, girl."

Pythagoras huffed up on Cary's shoulder.

"No," he said. "I won't do it. I categorically will not."

"You will if you know what's good for you," Myrddin said.

"It's so undignified," Pythagoras sniffed, but nevertheless allowed Myrddin to pick him up. A moment later he was breathing fire on the wizard's plate like a miniature blowtorch. Smoke began to rise.

"Turn it down," Myrddin said. "I said well done, not burnt to a crisp."

The dragon abruptly stopped.

"Do it yourself then, if you're so fussy," he said.

Cary remembered the question she'd been meaning to ask almost from the first.

"So Py..." she said.

"Py," Myrddin snorted. "Dragon pie, and it might be better than this at that," he said, surveying his now charred venison.

"Py," Cary said again. "What are you doing here? How do you fit into all this?"

"I," Pythagoras said with aplomb, "am on a quest."

Myrddin tittered rather nastily.

"For what?" Cary asked.

"That is my secret and my burden," Pythagoras said. He returned to Cary's shoulder and again she stroked his chest. If anyone had been paying proper attention they might have realised that the dragon had quickly closed his eyes to hide the look of bliss sparking deep with them.

"And there's another question," Cash said. "The most important of all. That nobody wants to talk about. What is this guardian exactly? The one you want my sister to pass."

The people about them dropped their eyes and Arthur looked extremely guilty. Pythagoras shifted uncomfortably on Cary's shoulder and abruptly stopped purring.

"We are not sure," Arthur said. "We are not sure," he said again, after a long pause.

"But..." Cash prompted. Cary watched her brother with surprise. She was suddenly seeing a side of him that she had never dreamed existed. No longer was he the klutzy boy everybody dismissed out of hand but serious and determined and apparently not the least bit afraid of these strange adults, strange in every sense of the word. She had always loved Cash dearly and looked to him for fun and mischief, but now she found that she was also proud of him, and grateful.

"But..." Cash insisted.

"But we think it's a Donestre," Arthur said at last.

The twins looked at each other blankly.

"Head of a lion, body of a man," Myrddin said abruptly. "And charming habits."

"And you expect Cary..." Cash was suddenly shouting with indignation.

"Gently, young squire," Arthur said.

"Deal with it yourselves," Cash fumed.

"We would if we could," Arthur said.

"The labyrinth is enchanted," Pythagoras said. "Even I can't enter. Only a maiden, a small maiden..."

"And Myrddin's lost his recipe book," Arthur said quietly. For once, the wizard had the grace to look uncomfortable. There was a long silence.

"What do Donestres do?" Cary asked at last in a small voice. This adventure in which they had somehow become entangled suddenly seemed altogether too real.

"It might be better if you don't know," Arthur said.

"What do they do?" Cash demanded doggedly.

"You tell them, Pythagoras," Myrddin said. "You've actually met some."

"I'd rather not," Pythagoras said.

"Tell them," Myrddin said.

"Donestres come from an island in the Red Sea," Pythagoras said at last, most reluctantly. "They are suave and charming, they have second sight and they speak every language ever known which makes it easy for them... to gain the confidence of and then to prey on travellers."

"What do they do to travellers?" Cary asked, her voice now the merest whisper.

"They eat them," Pythagoras said sadly. "Everything but the heads. Then they weep. Inconsolably. From remorse."

"But that's just a story," Cash said after a long moment. "It has to be. Just a stupid story."

"We call it the Labyrinth of Lamentation," Arthur said. "Because if you wait at the entrance, sometimes you may hear the sound of weeping. Weeping to freeze the blood."

"And you expect Cary...?" Cash shouted. He was furious. "How...?"

"We don't know," Arthur said.

"We only know she must," Myrddin said. "Somehow."

"She can't," Cash said. "I won't let her."

"But I must," Cary said. "They're right. Or we won't exist."

It was an easy enough thing to say, but later in a rough bough shelter trying to huddle between the drips, Cary felt very small and alone. She had never thought about whether she was brave or not, she had never really needed to. She had certainly never needed to think about risking her life in cold blood and she was not at all sure whether she would be able to go through with it, whether when the time came she would ever be able to walk up to the entrance of the labyrinth and then bring herself to head down the narrow, twisting tunnels towards the Donestre.

Somehow the other girls had faced the fear and marched in to their doom and Cary felt a tear or two gathering as she thought about how courageous they had been and how much they must have loved their families and their way of life to volunteer for such a dreadful fate. What had they been thinking? What plans had they made to try to defeat the Donestre and recover the amulet? What could she do? How could she avoid becoming just another useless sacrifice?

Cash stirred. The twins were lying back to back, still in all their clothes on a layer of pine branches. It was freezing, even colder now they were deep into the night.

"Are you awake?" Cash whispered.

"Shsh," Cary whispered back. He sat up and lent over her.

"This is crazy," he said. "They can't make you do it."

"They're not making me," Cary said. "I have to do it or we won't exist."

"I don't want to exist," Cash said. "Not if you have to go into those tunnel things." Cary groped for his hand and gave it a squeeze. It was icy cold, she noticed.

"It's all right," she said. "It will be all right."

"It's not all right," Cash whispered fiercely. "It's all that stupid wizard's fault, losing his recipe book..."

"He couldn't help it. Accidents happen."

"And that dumb dragon. Why did he ever have to come and get us?"

"I love Pythagoras," Cary said, and realised as she said it that she was speaking the literal truth. Pythagoras was the most marvellous thing that had ever happened to her.

"It's not all right," Cash said again and then had a sudden idea.

"I could go," he said. "If we muss our hair the same way, they'll never tell the difference."

Cary squeezed his hand again.

"I love you too," she said, touched beyond measure. "But even if they don't notice, I think the enchantment might. You have to be a girl to get through."

"We could try," Cash said and then, "I have to do something."

"Well help me think how to beat the Donestre."

They fell silent, a silence that became gloomier by the second.

"A challenge?" Cash said at last. "A riddle game, maybe?"

Cary laughed despite herself.

"You might win a riddle game but I never would."

"A spelling contest?"

"They know every language and have second sight."

"Well then," Cash said. "Just a spell?"

"A spell?"

"Magic. Can they teach you magic? Wake up the dragon. How can he sleep at a time like this anyway?"

Cary reached inside her parka to where a tiny Pythagoras was snuggled up in the hollow of her collar bone, which was lovely for him but a touch prickly for her. Nor was he best pleased at being woken, but Cash was in no mood to apologise as the dragon expanded himself to a reasonable size.

"You got her into this," Cash said bluntly. "So you've got to get her out of it."

"Or at least help, please," Cary added as diplomatically as she could.

"How?" Pythagoras said grumpily.

"You can't send her in there with no way to defend herself," Cash said. "She'll just get eaten alive like all the others and you'll be no better off. What's the point?"

"Y Ddraig Goch said she would be able to find a way."

"Ridiculous," Cash said.

"He has faith in her," Pythagoras said. "And so do I."

"So how would you fight the Donestre if you were Cary?"

"I... I... I would..." Pythagoras came to a stop.

"See?" Cash said.

"Py," Cary said. "Could you teach me some magic?"

"If we had 20 years to spare..."

"Or give her a potion or something?" Cash said.

"What do you mean a potion?" Cary said.

"I don't know," Cash said. "Poison or..."

"A potion?" Pythagoras said. "I don't do potions, far too smelly, but Myrddin..."

"Has lost his stupid recipe book," Cash said.

"Then maybe we should get it back," Cary said.

"Phht," Pythagoras said with the usual spark of flame.

"Sounds like a plan," Cash said.

He and Cary lay down again, pressed against each other for warmth, and Pythagoras sneaked back inside the girl's jacket. Already Cary was very dear to him. He was grateful the boy was so determined to help her and reproached himself for not seeing

the necessity himself. It was all very well for Y Ddraig Goch to express confidence in her native wit, but Pythagoras of anyone knew that a Donestre was no light adversary.

The morning was distinguished from the night before only by a slight shifting of the black to grey. If anything it was even more miserable.

The twins were handed bowls of gluey oatmeal and rough wooden spoons.

"Hurry up," one of Arthur's band said to them. "We don't have enough spoons to go round."

Cash took a tentative taste and almost retched.

"I don't think I'm hungry," he said. "I'll just have some water... please," he added as an afterthought. Cary, watching his face, handed back her bowl without a word. Arthur grimaced.

"I'm sorry," he said sympathetically. "It's all we have. You should try to eat some."

"Maybe later," Cary said.

"But only if we're actually starving," Cash added without thinking.

"Cash!" Cary said.

"Sorry," he muttered. Arthur laughed.

"Let us hope things don't get quite that bad then," he said.

Pythagoras came up. At the moment he was about the size of a large Shetland pony, which was as big as he could make himself.

"Where is the wizard?" he said.

"Here," Myrddin said. He was huddled morosely by the smoking fire. "Do something about this, will you?"

Pythagoras lashed at the wet wood with a jet of flame until it was blazing.

"So what do you and Arthur intend?" he said at last.

"Take the maiden to the labyrinth," Myrddin said shortly. "Send her in. What else?"

"Not good enough," Pythagoras retorted.

"None of your business," Myrddin snapped back.

"On the contrary, the Lady Carys is under my protection."

"Since when?" Myrddin demanded. "Have you gone soft on the girl?"

"Since it became clear to me that you're an old fool and he's a young fool," Pythagoras said, indicating Arthur. "You're just sending another maiden to a pointless death."

"Y Ddraig Goch said..."

"Y Ddraig Goch is a bigger fool than both of you. A drunken fool."

"He prophesied," Arthur said. "He has seen. She is the one. You brought her."

"How would you, O mighty princeling, confront the Donestre?" Pythagoras demanded, picking up on the point Cash had made. It was clear the dragon was working

himself into a temper. "How would you, a maiden, fight a creature half man, half lion, and four times your size for your life?"

Arthur said nothing, but his face grew thoughtful. It was Myrddin who was unwise enough to answer.

"What's that got to do with it," he said testily. "The prophecy is clear. She's the one."

"Is that all you can say, old man?" Pythagoras roared. Abruptly, he reared up on his hind legs, lashing his tail, and another jet of flame shot from his mouth, close enough for Myrddin to step back hastily.

"Do you dare to threaten me?" Myrddin roared back. He raised his hand high above his head.

Cary stepped between them quickly and hurried to the dragon.

"Py," she said. "Please." She came only a little above his waist now and could be swatted aside effortlessly should the dragon choose.

"Pythagoras," she insisted. "Down, sir! I'm very grateful but this isn't helping." There was a long, tense pause and then the dragon allowed himself to subside.

"Thank you, Py," Cary said. "Dear Py..." Something glowed deep in the dragon's eyes and no one in the clearing was in the least doubt that henceforward they would deal with Cary at their peril. Myrddin huffed to himself for a moment and then had enough sense to sit down again.

"What do you suggest?" Arthur said at last.

"That we give the Lady Carys means to defend herself," Pythagoras said.

"How?" Arthur said. "We tried weapons with the others. They could not pass into the labyrinth until the swords were discarded."

"A petrification potion," Pythagoras said. "The wizard shall provide."

"I can't," Myrddin said tiredly. "You know that."

"Phht," the dragon said. "Then it's time we recovered your book."

Arthur scratched a rough map into the floor of the clearing.

"Here," he said, "is the old Roman fort and the city of Isca Silurum, which we call Caerleon, by the Afon Wysg..."

"That's our Usk," Cary said. "The River Usk... I'm sure it is. And where we live must be way up here..."

"As may come to pass," Arthur over-rode him. "And this is the side-stream, the Afon Llwyd and there the Sor Brook. Now here on the south bank of the Wysg, where the water has cut deep into the hillside, is a precipice and the entrance to the labyrinth. We are here, to the north, hidden in the hills and the forest. Morgan le Fay and the Saxons now hold the city and have enslaved my people."

"Where is Y Ddraig Goch?" Cary asked.

"Dragons," Myrddin muttered. "With this girl, always dragons..."

"Many leagues distant," Arthur said. "Many, many leagues. He is held captive beneath Yr Wyddfa, which the Saxons call Snaw-dun, or Snow Hill."

"That must be Mount Snowdon," Cash said.

"Mayhap," Arthur said. "But it is too far for all but Pythagoras."

"And Morgan le Fay?" Cary asked. "Where is she?"

"She rules from the tower of the fortress," Arthur said. "It is stone, built in time before memory by the Romans. It is surrounded by stone walls and impregnable without an army."

"So Myrddin's book...?" Cash said.

"It may be in the tower," Myrddin said. "It may be in the dungeon beneath where the witch does her darkest magic. Or it may be who knows where?"

"And if it's not a rude question," Cash persisted, "and even if it is, why haven't you tried to get it back?"

"Impertinent boy!" Myrddin exploded. "That's an extremely rude question..."

"But a good one," Cary said. This new Cash was a constant surprise and she was beginning to feel increasing respect for her brother where before had only been affection, usually exasperated.

The twins looked searchingly at the wizard who, at last, was forced to drop his gaze.

"Tell them," he said to no one in particular.

"Without the book he is defenceless," Arthur said. "Morgan le Fay would use it to defeat and enslave him were he ever to come near."

"Haven't you heard of codes?" Cash demanded. "Or secret ink...?"

Myrddin spluttered.

"The book is blank, of course," Pythagoras said, not unkindly for once. "But she has power to read some of it and the more she reads the more powerful she becomes, and the more magic she has to protect it. While without the book, Myrddin has none."

"Then we should get it back in a hurry," Cary said.

"Which is all very well," Arthur said. "The question is how? You have now arrived at the point where we have languished for many months. And there's one other thing you should know. As well as magic, Caerleon is guarded by the White Dragon of the Saxons."

"I've just thought of something," Cash said. The others all swung towards him expectantly.

"Caerleon must be Camelot." There was a groan.

"Think of something better," Cary said. "Like how to get Myrddin's book back."

Cary frowned.

"What if...?" she said. "Just supposing...?"

"What if what?" Cash said.

"Well, Pythagoras has brought us back in time..."

"To 492 AD. So?"

"Supposing we went back a bit further..."

"And...?"

"Grabbed Myrddin's book when it falls out of his sleeve before Morgan le Fay can get hold of it."

"Brilliant," Cash said, but Pythagoras and the others shook their heads.

"I'm sorry," Pythagoras said. "But that's already happened and can't be changed."

Cash and Cary looked at each other, mystified, and then as they sometimes did, spoke with the exact same thought.

"Then what are we doing here?" they demanded.

"If it can't be changed?" Cary added.

"I told you we should go straight home," Cash said.

"But this hasn't happened yet," Pythagoras said.

"And it must happen," Myrddin added. "Or the future will be entirely different..."

"And we won't exist?" Cary said.

"Exactly."

"It still makes no sense," Cash said crossly.

They all fell silent.

"Py," Cary said at last. "What other magic can you do?"

"How do you mean?" Pythagoras asked.

"Well, you brought us back through time, and you can take us through walls..."

"Yes," Pythagoras said. "I can. Up to a point."

"Up to a point?"

"Well, you're easy. You have great empathy with the aura. Your brother is far more difficult. He would still much prefer me to be a dinosaur. His belief in dragons is, how shall I put it...?"

"Wobbly," Cash said.

"Precisely."

"Could you make us really small, too, like you?" Cary asked.

"I could try," Pythagoras said. "But to what purpose?"

"If we were tiny then we might be able to sneak into the fortress and hunt for Myrddin's book..."

The others all looked at her with gathering excitement.

"It would be very dangerous," Arthur said. "I'm not sure I could allow it."

"Right," Cash said. "But allowing her to be thrown to the Donestre is no problem..."

"Quite," Myrddin said and then: "The wise man doesn't argue when the fool is right."

"You just want your book back," Pythagoras said.

"Indeed," Myrddin said. "I do. But it's to everybody's advantage, wouldn't you say?"

"And what does this book look like?" Cash asked.

Myrddin shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a book," he said testily. "A book's a book."

"A blank book," Cary said. "Remember? Py, can you try making us small, please?"

Pythagoras looked at the twins doubtfully.

"Watch out for feet," he said at last. "And everyone else stand very still."

Chapter Three

The great eagle came plummeting out of the darkening sky, talons braced to strike. Some instinct made Cary glance over her shoulder.

"Py!" she screamed. "Behind...!"

The dragon, now the size of a magpie with the twins about the size of mice riding his back, reacted instantly.

"Hang on," he called, and timing his move to perfection executed a smooth barrel-roll. The eagle, caught by surprise, hesitated and was hit by a spurt of flame right in the midriff. The bird gave an outraged squawk, a most undignified squawk, and spiralled down, trailing smoke and feathers and heading desperately for water. The dragon rolled back, right way up, and Cary reached forward to rub his ears.

"Well done, Py," she said.

"Good one," Cash said.

Ahead, they could now see the Afon Wysg, glinting dully between the thick forest overhanging it on either bank. Then the town came into view, surrounded by the powerful stone walls and turrets of the old Roman fort with a multitude of ant-like figures busy within. It looked just like a castle, Cary thought, or at least what she rather hazily imagined a castle ought to look like. The huge compound seemed to be filled with low buildings in orderly rows and various states of disrepair and in the centre loomed the squat tower of the old Roman principia, once the fort's headquarters and which now served as the castle keep.

"The Saxons," Cash said aloud. Cary shivered involuntarily. She couldn't help wondering what might happen if they were caught and Pythagoras were unable to save them. A thought struck her.

"The White Dragon," Cary said. "What about the White Dragon? What do we do about him? Can you fight him, Py?"

There was silence except for the rush of the wind, a long silence.

"Py?" Cary said.

"I can try," Pythagoras said at last.

"I don't understand," Cary said.

"The White Dragon..." Pythagoras began.

"Is what?" Cary insisted.

"Very big," Pythagoras said unhappily. "And very powerful."

"But can't you make yourself big, too?" Cary asked.

"Bigger," Pythagoras said. "As big as you saw this morning. But not nearly as big as him."

"But you're smarter," Cary said loyally. "Much smarter..."

"Unfortunately," Pythagoras said, "there are times when brute force and ignorance..."

"Are you afraid of him?" Cash demanded.

There was another lengthy silence.

"Yes," Pythagoras said at last.

The twins looked at each other across his back, eyes wide. The White Dragon must be truly terrifying if Pythagoras were frightened of him. Nothing more was said until Pythagoras brought them down, landing high in a beech tree that surveyed the river and the cleared land before the city. Away in the distance a party of workers was hewing at the forest and, as they watched, a tree came crashing down. Another party was harnessing oxen to stumps and striving to haul them out of the ground. A third party was levering rocks out of the soil and using them to build dry-stone walls.

"Are they the Saxons?" Cary asked.

"Slaves," Pythagoras said. "The guards are Saxon. Hear that?"

There was the sound of a whip cracking. A man bearing a boulder had fallen to his knees and was struggling to rise. Another man stood over him, lashing at his back.

"Welsh slaves," Pythagoras said.

Cary watched as another of the slaves went to help the fallen man but was beaten back.

"That's awful," she said. "We have to do something."

"It's why I came for you," Pythagoras said. "It's why you're here."

The fallen slave eventually managed to struggle to his feet and stagger to the wall with his rock. Another man surreptitiously helped him to heave it into place.

The afternoon was drawing in rapidly now. One of the guards gave a bellow and pointed back to the town. The slaves dropped their burdens, mustered into a straggly, dispirited line and were herded off. In the distance they could also see the people outside the walls of the city beginning to disappear inside.

"How much longer do we have to wait?" Cash demanded. The flight over the forest and the fight with the eagle had been entertaining, but the twins had spent most of the day killing time and he was rapidly getting bored again. And cold, not to mention hungry, starving hungry...

"Do you know what Morgan le Fay will do to you if she catches you?" Pythagoras replied.

"No," Cash said incautiously. "And I don't care. I'm cold and I'm famished and I'm..."

"What will she do?" Cary asked.

"Grind you up to make a rejuvenating face cream..." Pythagoras began.

"Yuk," Cash interrupted.

"Or..." Pythagoras tried to continue, but Cary wouldn't let him finish.

"That's horrible," she said.

"If you're lucky," Pythagoras said. "Things are horrible here..."

"So let's do something about it," Cash said. "Please..."

"Wait," Pythagoras said, and it was only when night had properly fallen that he allowed them to mount up.

"We'll start with the tower and work down," he said. The twins climbed on his back and they flitted off across the fields. Pythagoras approached the castle with circling caution doing his best to look like a bat, but the tower was quite unguarded. A moment later they were safe on the rampart behind the battlements. A large black hole in the floor yawned before them.

Cary shivered. Now that they were actually at the point of invading the enemy lair she couldn't help but feel afraid.

"No lookout, no sentry," Cash whispered in her ear. "Shows what they think of Arthur."

"Shsh," Pythagoras hissed and then: "Come on."

He led the way to the hole which proved to be the beginning of a stairway that wound around the inside of the turret. Tiny as they were, it looked like a mountainside of descending precipices. Pythagoras weaved his tail and the twins returned to their proper size, while he made himself about the same height.

"Can you make us bigger than we really are?" Cash asked.

"No," Pythagoras said shortly. "Only smaller. Come on."

A little way down, they came to a landing and a thick, nailed door. The three stood there, ears pressed to the wood, straining to hear. Whatever was on the other side appeared to be empty. Pythagoras gestured and the twins took hold of him again. He weaved a spell with his tail and moment later they were on the other side, not daring to breathe.

After the longest time, Pythagoras allowed a little glow to show and it became clear that the bed chamber, for bed chamber it proved to be, really was empty. A brazier stood in the centre, waiting to be lit, and away in one corner was a curtained bed. There were coffers, a chair or two, a table empty except for a candle-stick, tapestries on the walls to cut down the draughts and rushes on the floor, but otherwise, nothing. It was plain that whatever Morgan le Fay chose to do here, it was not necromancy or even alchemy.

"What about those box things?" Cash said, pointing to the coffers.

"Unlikely," Pythagoras said.

"Better check," Cash said, and began to rootle through the chests. He found only clothes and a casket of jewels, which he examined with interest.

"Don't you dare," Cary said. "Put them back this instant."

As they crept down the rest of the staircase, what started as the merest rumour of sound within the thick stone walls became more and more raucous until at the bottom,

they were hit by a great wash of noise. They had arrived at the hall where the Saxons were already deep into the evening feast. Cautiously they peered around the open archway and froze. The huge chamber was filled with people, hundreds it seemed, looming large in the light of the flickering torches and from the blazing fire at the far end. Their shadows danced and gestured all about and everyone seemed to be shouting at each other, trying to be heard over the general roar. But most assailing of all was the stench, a mixture of roasting meats and burning fat, unwashed bodies and spilled drink, smoking torches and bad drains. It came at them in stinking waves, nauseating, unbearable. Cary found herself longing for the clean scents of the forest.

About half way down one side of the hall was a second, open archway through which scullions were entering and leaving, bearing platters of food and great pitchers of mead and ale. Opposite the archway there was a closed door. Pythagoras pointed.

"It must go to the dungeons," he said. He had to shout almost into the twins' ears to make himself heard.

"Where's Morgan le Fay?" Cary shouted. Pythagoras shrugged.

"Come on," he yelled. "Hang on."

"Wait," Cash shouted. "She might be down there." The others looked at him questioningly.

"If she calls for help," he went on. "We could be trapped by this lot."

"They'll never hear..." Cary shouted.

"I've got an idea," Cash yelled. "Make us small again."

Pythagoras regarded him quizzically.

"Why?" he said.

"To give us some breathing space, just in case," Cash said. Pythagoras shrugged and weaved his tail. Instantly, Cash was again the size of a mouse and without waiting for Cary to nag him about being careful, he had slipped through the archway and was making his way around the wall, quite invisible unless you happened to look directly at him.

Cary frowned at Pythagoras, who for his part wondered yet again why he had ever allowed himself to be persuaded to bring the dratted boy in the first place.

Cash was gone for what seemed like hours, so long that they feared he must have been stepped on and crushed to death, but at last they spotted him slipping across the open floor from under a trestle, back to the safety of the shadows round the wall. A moment later he was with them.

"What have you done?" Pythagoras demanded, weaving his tail.

"Nothing much," Cash shouted innocently, his face at its most open and candid. It was a look Cary had long ago learned to distrust and fear. "Come on," Cash added.

"We're wasting time."

"*We're* wasting time..." Pythagoras began but Cary interrupted.

"Please, Py," she yelled. "The longer we stay here the more likely we are to be spotted." She took hold of his wing and gestured to Cash, who grabbed the other. Pythagoras snarled wordlessly but worked his tail and in an instant they were safe on the other side of the door to the dungeons. Muffled by the tight-fitting wood, inches thick, the Saxon debauch faded to a dull mutter. They were standing in pitch blackness and after listening intently Pythagoras allowed a faint glow to penetrate the gloom. Before them, stone steps descended away into the depths. Pythagoras weaved his tail and the twins were once again their proper size. The dragon perched himself on Cary's shoulder and moving with the greatest caution, they began to make their way down.

The stairway seemed to descend forever and they felt themselves deep in the bowels of the earth by the time it finally it came to an end. Before them, a dank passage stretched away into the darkness. On either side were studded doors set with small barred apertures. From one there came muted moaning, the sound of someone in severe pain. Cash tried to peer inside but could see nothing in the blackness.

They crept on, leaving the haunting sound behind. Slowly they began to realise that Pythagoras was not providing the only illumination. The tunnel ahead was definitely lightening. They tip-toed on until, as they rounded a corner, the light flared. They crept to the edge of an archway cut in the naked rock and before them was a natural cavern. Light from a blazing fire beneath a cauldron leaped about the walls and disappeared into the blackness above. Scattered around were workbenches loaded with strange-looking retorts and alembics, pincers and clamps. Against one wall there was a huge brass gong hanging in a heavy frame and next to it, holding the mallet, there stood a skeleton. A woman, her back towards them, was seated on a stool by the fire. She was dressed in an elaborate necromancer's robe, figured with strange beasts and signs. Her long dark hair hung free and unadorned and she appeared to be reading a scroll.

Pythagoras drew the twins back into the shadows beyond the arch.

"Morgan le Fay?" Cary breathed.

Pythagoras nodded. "And she's got Myrddin's book," he whispered.

"So let's go get it," Cash said. "It's what we're here for."

"We can't just..." Cary began.

"...Or she'll turn us into toadstools," Pythagoras finished.

They fell silent, Cary and Pythagoras staring at each other worriedly. Cash wore an abstracted look and then all at once he began to grin. Cary and Pythagoras glanced at each other with exactly the same expression – alarm.

"Listen," Cash whispered. "Here's the plan..." He drew them in close and began to speak. A moment later, Pythagoras reared back.

"I will not," he said.

"Shsh!" Cary said.

"Well think of another plan, then," Cash snapped. There was silence.

"I won't do it," Pythagoras said again.

"For Cary," Cash said. "It's not for me, it's for Cary."

There was another long silence.

"I won't," Pythagoras said.

"Please, Py," Cary said, but already he was weaving his tail and all at once he was the size of a small rat. The twins knelt down to him.

"Be ready," Pythagoras said. "And try not to let her see you."

"Be careful, Py," Cary said and again a spark glowed deep in the dragon's eyes. A moment later he was scuttling across the floor of the cavern, ducking from shadow to shadow. The twins held their breath but Morgan le Fay never stirred. And then Pythagoras was right behind her. He glanced back over his shoulder...

"Get ready," Cary said and Cash dropped into a sprinter's crouch.

Pythagoras hesitated a moment longer, cursing Cash and his crazy ideas, and then ducked beneath the hem of Morgan le Fay's robe. A moment later pandemonium broke loose. Morgan le Fay screamed, leaped to her feet and began to dance dementedly, tearing at her clothes. The scroll snapped closed about its spindle and for a moment it looked like it would go flying who knew where. Then Morgan le Fay began to use it as a flail, beating at herself and shrieking with horror.

Cary spared a moment to wonder what it would feel like to have a mouse up your skirts, never mind a rat, never mind a dragon, nipping and clawing and breathing fire and then she pushed at Cash.

"We'll have to take it from her," she said.

"The cloak," Cash said. "The cloak... Come on."

The twins rushed forward and threw the cloak over Morgan le Fay's head. At this new threat the witch dropped the scroll and began to fight, but she was too late. A second later, the twins had her bundled up and held fast in voluminous folds of cloth and Cash was winding it tight with the piece of cord he whipped from his pocket.

"Quick Py," Cary called as Cash scooped up the scroll. The dragon allowed himself one last belch of flame, bringing another muffled shriek from Morgan le Fay, slipped out from under her robe, weaved his tail and then all three were dashing for the archway.

"Can't you just take us straight outside?" Cash panted, but Pythagoras shook his head.

"Too dangerous," he puffed. "I might get it wrong. We might end up buried alive. Then I couldn't use my tail..."

They raced on down the passage but as they passed the cell where they had heard the moaning, Cary stopped.

"Help me," she demanded, tugging at the great bolt that locked it. Cash tried to pull her away.

"Help me," she spat. After a moment of astonishment, Cash added his weight and the bolt shot free. Cary heaved at the door.

"You're free," she called inside. "Take your chance when you can."

"Come on," Cash yelled in an agony of impatience, and on they went.

They came to the stairs and began to hurtle up, two at a time. Cary slipped and almost fell but Cash grabbed her arm and hauled her up.

"Quick, quick," Pythagoras called. He was already at the door to the hall. The noise had grown in their absence and even through the massive planks it now beat and throbbed.

"Take hold," Pythagoras said. "And put Myrddin's book somewhere safe." Cash stuffed the scroll up his jumper, tucked the bottom of the jumper into his jeans and zipped his jacket. Pythagoras barely waited for him to finish before he was at work with his tail and they were standing on the other side of the hall at the entrance to the tower. They glanced through the arch and were gaping in amazement at the scene before them when what seemed like the end of the world crashed about them.

The great booming roar swept all before it, tore at them like a huge wave on a beach, drowned them in its reverberations, hurled them about like a shark shakes a body. It went on and on, a torrent of sound that became a giant waterfall in flood beating down on their heads. It was impossible to think, to move.

Pythagoras knew what it was: the magic gong used to summon the White Dragon, a gong that when struck by the skeleton could be heard for 50 leagues. Morgan le Fay had freed herself and was causing the tocsin to sound. Pythagoras struggled to break the spell, to force movement into his limbs. They had to flee. Now. Right now. Abruptly there was silence. It seemed to last an eternity. Then all at once, every Saxon warrior in the hall was shouting war cries and reaching for weapons.

"Quick," Pythagoras had time to say and pulled at Cash, but the dratted boy was standing in the doorway, fully exposed, watching with interest. A moment later there was a monumental crash as benches and trestles went flying, to be followed by a storm of confused, angry shouting. Pythagoras and Cary peered over Cash's shoulder. The Saxons were all in struggling masses on the floor fighting each other to get free, pulling each other back down, howling in fury and hacking at their legs. It was chaos, a chaos of wrecked furniture, spilled food, and drunken, dazed men roaring, brawling and wrestling with each other. Quickly they began to forget what they were supposed to be doing and to enjoy the riot there on the floor for its own sake.

"It worked," Cash said happily. "Come on."

"What worked?" Cary demanded as they ran for the top of the tower.

"Those thong things they bind their leggings with," Cash said. "I tied them all together."

Pythagoras gave a spurt of flame in approval. Clever! The boy might have some good points, after all. One or two. Now all they had to do was to get past the White Dragon.

A ragged moon was showing when they reached the top of the tower, gasping for breath. Pythagoras quickly scanned the sky. Away in the distance what seemed to be a large thunder cloud shooting bolts of lightening was rushing towards them. The dragon shivered and then raised his head and flared his nostrils.

"No Py," Cary said. "He's too big."

"I have to," Pythagoras said. "No choice. To the death."

"But we'll be trapped here, with Myrddin's book... He's too big, Py. He's too big."

"So make us small again," Cash said calmly. "And we need a diversion."

"What sort of diversion?" Cary said.

"Something to distract the White Dragon..."

"The rooks..." Pythagoras said working his tail, hope flooding his voice. "Come on."

The White Dragon was very close now and let out a bellow as he saw the small shape launch over the rampart and dive towards the forest. He clawed round in a long, banking turn and dived after them, letting out a searing jet of flame that gave a whole new meaning to hot pursuit.

"Faster, Py!" Cary screamed. "Faster!" But she knew it was too late. The White Dragon was gaining by the second and the next burst of fire must surely incinerate them, leaving them flecks of ash floating down on the trees below. The trees. They were very close now, the bare winter branches stark and jagged. But there was no shelter there. The White Dragon could set the whole wood ablaze if he chose. Cary dared not look behind but she could feel the looming presence. Closer. Closer. What was he waiting for. They were skimming the tree-tops now. Surely he must blast them out of the sky, any second... Now...

But instead of a great tongue of flame shooting down from behind, the trees just beneath them seemed to explode upwards as the rook colony took fright all at once and hundreds of birds clawed into the air in desperate panic. Instantly Pythagoras and the twins were lost in the flock and baffled, the White Dragon reared up, angrily searching for the prey that had so nearly been his. He began to shoot out random jets of flame and birds screamed as they flared into nothingness.

Pythagoras needed no urging. Using the thickest of the birds as cover, he slipped down through the tree tops and landed on the forest floor.

"We can't stay here long," he said. "They'll be coming from the castle as soon as Morgan le Fay scares them into some sort of order. Someone will have been watching the White Dragon. They'll know where to look. They'll put a cordon around the rookery and search till they find us."

"Will they try to burn us out?" Cary asked.

"Morgan le Fay won't risk the scroll," Cash said. "At least, I hope not..."

Overhead, the desperate birds were still wheeling about the night sky, chased by the giant shadow belching fire and determined to destroy every last one of them. It wasn't

much of a choice. Brave the dragon, or brave Morgan le Fay and her Saxons, who no doubt would all be in a fine temper thanks to Cash and his mischief-making.

The three of them huddled together in the deeper gloom of a tree trunk.

"You could make us all really, really small," Cary said at last. "Like ants. They'd never find us then."

"Shsh!" Cash said. "What's that?" They strained to hear and in a moment there was no doubt. There was the noise of shouting, coming rapidly nearer.

"Morgan le Fay will be in a rage at losing Myrddin's book," Pythagoras said. "She'll do anything to get that back."

"So we'd better hide," Cary repeated. "High up the tree, like mosquitoes."

Pythagoras looked doubtful but as the shouting was approaching very fast now and he had no better ideas, he gave in and weaved his tail and then with the twins holding fast, he began to rise up between the branches, much slower now because they were so tiny.

Morgan le Fay was indeed furious, seething. The indignity of having a miniature dragon rend and scorch her best silk hose – and she was in no doubt that it had been a dragon up her skirts – not to mention being bundled up in her own cloak and left to suffocate, not to mention having Brogan and his fool Saxons made to look complete idiots, not to mention the outrageous theft, next to the Amulet of Annwfn, of the most precious thing she had ever possessed, The Book of Myrddin Wylt, Wizard Extraordinaire, High Druid and Court Conjuror, all of this was not to be borne. The perpetrators would pay. They would pay most dearly. It only remained to apprehend them.

Mounted on her palfrey, she led the Saxons, lashed by her tongue and subdued now, in a race to the rookery, the White Dragon wheeling overhead. She was sure that if only she could surround the wood quickly enough, there could be no escape. Giving orders as she rode to the men pounding along beside her, she sent parties of warriors peeling off to seal the area.

Soon, with the White Dragon watching from on high, not a bird left in the sky, she gave the order to close in and the warriors began to beat their way forward in a giant circle, driving everything left in the wood before them.

Cary, Cash and Pythagoras heard them begin the drive but could do nothing about it. All three were stuck fast in a spider's web strung high in the tree, a web which Pythagoras had quite failed to spot in the dark. The first they had known of it was the awful, sticky threads seizing them and holding them fast. And the more they struggled the worse they became entangled.

"Be still," Pythagoras hissed at last. "They won't see us. We'll stay here till they've gone. Let's just hope..."

"What?" Cash demanded suspiciously.

"That this is an old web, that the spider has gone..."

Cary wanted to scream. The thick, revolting strands of web across her face felt as if they would strangle her at any moment and the thought of a spider, bigger than them, was altogether terrifying. Somehow she managed to channel her panic into a deep breath, and then another. Already the noise of the Saxon drive was becoming louder and louder. Cary managed to turn her head to look for Cash and a comforting wink, but he had no eyes for her. He was straining to get a hand to his pocket and gazing fixedly off to the side where a large spider had emerged from a hollow in the branch. It was nearest to Cash and stared at them balefully, wondering just what it might be that her web had captured this time.

Cary bit off the shriek that came flooding into her throat and turned it into a gasp.

"Py," she whispered. "Look..."

"I am looking," Pythagoras said.

"Do something," Cary said.

"I can't," Pythagoras said. "My tail is stuck fast. We're trapped."

"Scorch it," Cary said.

"I can't do that either," Pythagoras said. "If I breathe fire, even a spark, the White Dragon will see and they'll have us. I'll take the spider to Morgan le Fay any day."

"But we have to do something," Cary said desperately. "Look out, it's coming." And indeed the spider, which seemed absolutely monstrous compared to their own tiny stature, had put a tentative foot on the web.

"Py," Cary whispered, hoarse with tension and fear. "You have to flame it." But as if in answer, they felt a cold wind as the White Dragon swooped by, so close that his claws seemed to be tearing at the tree tops. At the same time, the clashing of sword on shield, the shouting and the crashing through the undergrowth had reached the base of their tree.

"I can't," Pythagoras said. The spider seemed to make up its mind and took another step towards them.

With a last supreme effort, Cash succeeded in bringing his hand to his pocket and groped for his folding-knife. It was razor sharp and best of all had a thumb-hole in the blade so that it could be opened one-handed. He brought it out and began to slash at the strands of web between him and the spider. The more he cut, the freer his arm became and the more he could reach. The spider took another step and then as if finally convinced that these new creatures might well be tasty, began to run towards them. Cash worked more and more frantically, swinging about and tearing at the tough fibres of the web, which relatively were more like rope, his knife now being so small. The spider was clashing its fangs in anticipation and drops of venom were flying like spittle. It stretched to seize Cash, who gave one, last desperate lunge. Another strand parted and then suddenly the web could no longer support their combined weight and shredded of its own accord. The spider went swinging down one way, crashing into a branch hard

enough to daze it, and the twins and Pythagoras went swinging down the other way, until jerking and bouncing they found themselves hanging, suspended in mid-air.

The spider shook itself angrily and glared at them across the gulf. It would be quite easy, Cary realised, for it to make its way around the branches and renew the attack, but abruptly it seemed to decide that it had had enough. It retreated to its lair and disappeared. She breathed a sigh of relief and then a prayer of thanks for Cash and his quick thinking. She had been so right to insist that he be allowed to come on the adventure, though adventure was not quite the word she would choose to describe their present predicament. The spider might have gone, but their situation, which had left them dangling there in the breeze, was precarious enough. There was no telling how much longer the web might hold.

"Thank you, Cash, thank you," she said, still whispering, though the Saxon beaters had moved on and were no longer right beneath them. "But what do we do now?"

"Stay quiet," Cash said.

"But what about the web?" Cary whispered. "It might break again."

"Nah," Cash said. "Spider web, weight for weight, is stronger than steel. We'll be all right. Let's try swinging. See if we can reach that branch. Altogether, one, two, three..."

Dawn came at last, but still the Saxons prowled about the rookery and now that there was light, they were paying particular attention to the tree tops, bare against the pale wash of the sky. Huddled into the crotch of a branch, the twins and Pythagoras were invisible from the ground but nevertheless felt dreadfully exposed. They were also freezing cold, seriously famished and more miserable than they had ever been in their lives, which in Pythagoras's case, at least, had been long and chequered with strange experience. Overhead, the White Dragon still circled, his vigilance unimpaired and the three were beginning to think it must only be a matter of time before he spotted them, even tiny as they were. On the edge of the grove they could see Morgan le Fay sitting motionless on her white palfrey, her eyes darting intently as she combed the copse, alert for the slightest sign.

She was young, they could see, perhaps older than Arthur but still in the first flowering of her beauty, her hair raven, her eyes a brilliant green, her skin translucent ivory, flawless. Cary found herself wondering how it could be that someone so enchanting could be such a witch. It was almost impossible to accept that a creature so essentially lovely could also be purest evil, which, of course, would make her all the more dangerous. For some reason, Cary began to ask herself whether Arthur had ever met her and what would happen if he did. Smite her down with one blow of his sword, she hoped.

The watery sun rose higher in the sky and still Morgan le Fay sat motionless, still the Saxons searched, still the White Dragon circled overhead, sometimes skimming the tree-tops so close that they couldn't believe he still failed to see them. At last a huge,

burly man who appeared to be the leader of the Saxons dared to approach Morgan le Fay.

"Brogan," Pythagoras hissed.

They could hear the murmur of distant words and then Morgan le Fay gestured angrily. Brogan trudged back to his men and the hunt went on, though with markedly less enthusiasm. Time passed and the Saxons' efforts became token at best. Even the White Dragon seemed to be losing interest. At last, Morgan le Fay seemed to accept that she was beaten. She called to Brogan, who posted reluctant sentries around the rookery and then led the rest of his warriors back to the castle. The White Dragon made one last circuit and then he, too, headed off, rapidly disappearing into the distance.

But still Morgan le Fay sat motionless on her palfrey, the intensity of her gaze never wavering.

"What shall we do?" Cary said at last.

"Wait," Pythagoras said. "If I make us bigger, they'll spot us. If we try to fly like this, it'll take hours to get anywhere."

"Couldn't we sneak off small and then get bigger?" Cash asked.

Cary and Pythagoras looked at each other.

"We could just leave him," Pythagoras said.

"Which is another thing," Cash said. "If you did happen to leave us, or if anything happened to you, then we would be stuck like this. And stuck in the wrong time."

"Hmmm," Pythagoras said. "So tempting."

"He doesn't mean that," Cary said hastily, but aware that Cash was absolutely correct. Without Pythagoras they would be in dire straits indeed.

"So, I vote that we try to get out of here," Cash insisted. "Before we all die of starvation. Or freeze to death."

Cary and Pythagoras looked at each other again, and nodded.

Chapter Four

In the event, they had not the slightest difficulty. They worked their way through the tree-tops directly away from Morgan le Fay and, waiting till the nearest Saxon was looking the other way, slipped across the boundary of the rookery. Deeper into the forest, Pythagoras changed back to the size of a magpie and then they headed northwards along the Afon Wysg. An hour later they struck off to Arthur's camp.

"And I do hope they've got some decent food," Cash said as they circled overhead and came into land.

"Always the stomach," Pythagoras grouched, but then had the good grace to add: "But if anyone's earned a decent meal it's us, and particularly you."

A moment later they had landed by the fire, Pythagoras had restored them to their proper size and excited figures were racing towards them, led by Myrddin and Arthur. Suddenly everyone stopped and after a moment Myrddin stepped forward. On his face there was a look of naked hunger, terrible hunger, far worse than anything Cash might be feeling.

"Well?" he said at last, almost whispering as though not daring to hope. For answer, Cash unzipped his jacket, already much the worse for wear, and pulled the scroll out from under his sweater. A deep sigh ran around the assembled band as Cash handed it to its rightful owner.

Myrddin was speechless. He took the scroll on its spindle, caressing it gently and searching it for signs of damage. Then, wielding it by the handle at one end like a sword, he raised it on high and with a strange flourish stabbed it at the logs smouldering lethargically in the fireplace. Immediately, they burst into roaring flame and Myrddin's face broke into a smile that shone almost as brightly.

"So that's all right," Arthur said comfortably. "Well done, you three. Well done indeed."

Cary and Pythagoras looked at each other and then the dragon scuffed awkwardly at the ground.

"It was mostly the boy," Pythagoras said in a low voice. Then he repeated himself more strongly. The crowd looked at him in surprise.

"Not really," Cash said. "It was all of us. It took all of us. We were a team. But..." He paused and his voice became plaintive. "Is there anything to eat? Please say there's something to eat."

Even Myrddin laughed.

"Can I ask a question, please?" Cash said. He was feeling acceptably full again. Peredur, the hunter, had brought down another deer and Cash had decided that venison beat a hamburger any old day. The wait while it cooked had been agonising and he had

sat silent, watching it roast, as the others told the story of their adventures. Had he been less interested in the food he might have noticed the increasingly respectful looks that were coming his way as the tale unfolded, but he had eyes for only one thing. In due course, when the meat was done, he was the first to be served but by then he was so busy swallowing the saliva flooding his mouth in anticipation that he failed to notice even that.

"Can I ask a question," Cash said again, this time managing to make himself heard over the hubbub.

"But of course," Arthur said. "That is if I may inspect this wondrous knife that you are able to keep in that strange pouch in your trousers. Cash hauled it out and demonstrated opening the blade and then how to unlock it to close it again. Arthur took it and worked the mechanism several times with open admiration. He then marvelled at the serrated blade and tested the edge. It was still sharp enough to shave the hair on his forearm. He picked up a tuft, held it up for his men to see and then let it drift into the flames. There was a sigh from the audience and then a brief smell of burning hair.

"Would that we could have blades like this," Arthur said, closing the knife and handing it back. "And now, your question, young squire?"

"When we came," Cash said, "Myrddin couldn't make a fire for toffee..." The wizard shifted angrily but Arthur held up a restraining hand.

"Now," Cash went on, unabashed, "he just waves that scroll about and there's no problem at all. But he didn't read anything. He didn't even look at it. It doesn't make sense."

Arthur gestured to Myrddin invitingly.

"Impertinent boy," Myrddin snapped.

"Yet a boy who has returned you your book," Arthur said warningly.

Myrddin snorted.

"I did not study for the best part of 15 years at the Isle of Anglesey, learning the span of Druidic knowledge by rote, to need to read a spell to make fire," he said. "This scroll is where my powers reside, that is all."

"You mean like a wand?" Cash said.

"I mean what I mean, young man. Nothing more and nothing less."

"But what's at the Isle of Anglesey?" Cary asked, intrigued.

"What's at the Isle of Anglesey?" Myrddin repeated disdainfully. "Why nothing except the finest Druid university there's ever been, that's all."

"Druid university?" Cash said wonderingly.

"Certainly a Druid university," Myrddin said. "We're not savages, you know. At least some of us aren't."

"Phht," Pythagoras said, flame flaring.

"Don't start," Myrddin warned.

"Don't start what?" Cary said incautiously, but Arthur headed her off.

"The dragon has views about the relative merits of Greek and Druidic education," he said. "Which we needn't go into, again."

"Athens," Pythagoras said. "Socrates. Plato. Aristotle..."

"I said, don't start," Myrddin hissed.

"Or this, much as I'm loath to mention my upstart namesake," Pythagoras went on remorselessly. "The square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides... but I wouldn't expect your Druid so-called mathematicians to be able to comprehend..."

"About the petrification potion..." Cash said loudly. Arthur smiled to himself.

Myrddin glared at the dragon but allowed himself to be diverted.

"What about it?" he demanded.

"Can you make it?" Cash persisted.

"Of course I can make it."

"Well then," Cash said. "Shouldn't you start...? Morgan le Fay looked pretty furious to me. How long before she sends that other dragon hunting for us and they find us here?"

Arthur and Myrddin stared at him.

"In the future, it's called aerial reconnaissance," Cash said.

Arthur wasted no time.

"Douse that fire," he ordered sharply. "Strike camp. We move in half an hour. Cai, take half a dozen men and put a screen between us and Caerleon..."

Pythagoras gave a puff of smoke.

"What the boy said... aerial..."

"Reconnaissance," Cash supplied helpfully.

"I can do that too..."

Arthur nodded. Pythagoras made himself small again and spiralled up into the sky, straightening out and heading south.

Arthur regarded Cash thoughtfully.

"There is more to you than one would think," he said. Cary could only agree and felt a flush of pride.

"Err... thanks," Cash said.

"What would you say to becoming my personal squire?" Arthur continued. Cash blushed.

"You mean, train to be a warrior?" he said.

"Exactly," Arthur said.

"Now just a minute," Cary interrupted. "I don't think Mother would allow that at all. Warriors have to fight battles and I'm sure she would never..."

"Mother isn't here," Cash said. "And stop being such a... girl."

"But Cash..." Cary protested.

"If it's all right for you to go and fight that Donestre then it's all right for me to be a squire. Yes, please," he added to Arthur. "What do I do?"

"For the moment," Arthur said. "You will attend the Lady Carys in my stead." He strode off to supervise striking the camp. Cash made a face at his sister. Guarding her was not at all his idea of learning to be a warrior. However, very soon Arthur and his band, with Myrddin and the twins securely in the centre of the group, were slipping their way through the forest.

As dusk was falling they came to the great loop of the river. Pythagoras re-joined them having spotted nothing untoward, and Arthur placed pickets to guard against surprise by the Saxons as they crossed at the ford. Then they all vanished into the forest on the far bank. At last, they bivouacked for the night only half an hour from the labyrinth. Myrddin murmured for a moment to Arthur and then disappeared by himself back into the forest. Cash and Cary watched him go with open curiosity and then looked at each other.

"Wizard's business," Pythagoras said. "He won't be back till morning and let's hope he has the potion when he comes."

"How will he make it?" Cary asked. "What will he use?"

"Better don't ask," Pythagoras said. "You don't want to know."

"Oh," Cary said.

"Squire Cassian," Arthur called and beckoned. Cash hurried off. A moment later he was helping the men to build shelters.

"Py," Cary said. She had seated herself on a log and was staring at the ground.

"Milady?" Pythagoras replied.

"Do you really think I can beat the Donestre?"

The dragon suddenly made himself small and perched on her shoulder.

"I know you can," he said very quietly.

"But..."

"I know you can," he repeated.

"I'm frightened," she said. "What if the potion doesn't work? And however do I make him take it before he..."

"Milady, don't."

"Before he eats me...?" A tear slipped down Cary's cheek and she bent her head lower to hide it. Defeating the Donestre was easy enough for everyone else to talk about but now the confrontation was looming so close, the waves of fear were pulsing harder and harder, threatening to overwhelm her.

"Now look here," Pythagoras began. "You are Lady Carys Cadwagan..."

"Please, Py," Cary said. "No pep talks. Cash does those. And my father. And the teachers at school. Have you ever been afraid, Py? Really afraid? So that you can't breathe?"

"Yes," Pythagoras said. "It's terrible..."

"When?"

"I was afraid to come to search for you."

"Why?" Cary asked, surprised. She looked up.

"Because..."

"Because you thought you might get lost?"

"Oh please," Pythagoras said. "It's what I do. I'm a time and motion dragon, with shape-shifting and a bit of this and bit of that on the side." Cary smiled despite herself.

"Then why?" she asked. But Pythagoras shook his head.

"Another time," he said. "Would it help if I remind you that Y Ddraig Goch has seen all this? That it turns out all right."

"But do you believe him?" Cary said.

"Ah..." Pythagoras hesitated. "Up to a point..."

"Oh, thanks very much." Cary laughed.

"That's better," Pythagoras said. There was silence, but a more comfortable silence. At last, the dragon spoke again.

"Never doubt your courage, milady," he said seriously. "You are of the true blood. Only trust to your courage and fear shall never defeat you."

It rained again in the night and everyone was damp and gloomy in the morning. Mist trailed through the trees and the coming of the dawn had done nothing to lift the raw cold that sat heavy about them. Just the sort of day that one would choose to be eaten, Cary thought grimly. She had supposed that she wouldn't be able to sleep a wink but to her surprise had fallen asleep straight after supper, tired out with the events of the previous night and then the march through the forest. She had only woken when Cash had shaken her shoulder.

There was a crackle in the underbrush and Myrddin came striding into the camp, more than ever looking like a gnarled old tree. Arthur went to meet him.

"Well?" he said. Myrddin nodded but strode on, heading straight for Cary. She scrambled to her feet and stood waiting. Myrddin stopped and regarded her searchingly.

"Not down with a fit of the vapours then?" he said. His tone was brusque but for once there was an underlying tinge of something that might have been concern. Cary said nothing but was pleased she could stand straight and unwavering.

Myrddin searched in one of the capacious sleeves of his robe and brought forth a small vial.

"Here," he said. "One petrification potion to order. A drop or two will turn anything, anything at all, to stone."

"Except stone," a voice said. It was Cash. Of course, it was Cash. Cary smiled inwardly.

"And a practical test would not be out of order," Myrddin snapped, turning about and glaring. Cash strove to vanish behind somebody large.

"That means," Myrddin said, turning back to Cary. "You must never let the potion touch yourself or your clothes or you'll be turned to stone as well."

"Then how am I supposed to dose the Donestre?" Cary asked with considerable exasperation. Myrddin shrugged.

"That's for you to decide," he said. He held out the vial and Cary shrank back.

"Take it," he said impatiently. "It won't bite. The Donestre will do that for you."

"So comforting," Pythagoras said sarcastically. "So considerate of the lady's feelings."

"Pshaw!" Myrddin said. "What have feelings got to do with anything?"

Cary took the proffered object. It was made of smoky blue glass so that the contents were invisible and completely sealed. Greatly daring, Cash came forward to stand beside her.

"Well, I guess you could always toss it down the Donestre's throat," he said. "And hope it breaks on his teeth."

"That's not funny," Cary said.

"It wasn't meant to be," Cash said

Arthur coughed deferentially.

"When?" he asked.

"Cary..." Cash began.

"The sooner the better," Cary said.

"No, Cary," Cash said.

"Now," Cary said.

"No, Cary," Cash said again, but Cary offered her hand to Arthur.

"Please show me the way," she said.

Arthur gazed at her for a long moment and then knelt before her. He took her hand and kissed it solemnly.

"How shall we thank you?" he asked.

"Let's worry about that if I ever come back," Cary said, rather more tartly than she meant. Myrddin snorted and stroked his beard to hide his smile of approval.

"Lead on," he said to Arthur and Cary.

"We must be careful," Arthur said. "When we get to the labyrinth, Caerleon will be just across the river. The Saxons rarely cross to this side. They are too afraid of Morgan le Fay's magic and of the Donestre but we must not give them cause, we must be quiet and unseen. We will take only two guards. Fortunately, the forest stays thick along the bank."

They came to a sheer rock buttress a little way in from the water. It had been exposed from the hillside behind over thousands of years by the river in flood. Through the heavy growth they could just hear the quiet murmur of the water away to the right and the occasional sound from the city beyond.

"So where's this labyrinth," Cash demanded, gazing sceptically at the cliff.

"There," Arthur said. He pointed to a small cleft at the base, so small that a man could not hope to enter. He moved forward and knelt to listen. Cary and Cash joined him. At first there was nothing and then they began to distinguish the sound of distant sobbing. It was so faint they could barely hear it, nevertheless it was tinged with unbearable anguish, hopeless heart-break. Cary felt it lifting the hairs on the back of her neck. She shivered and then before she could change her mind, she wormed forward into the blackness.

"No, Cary!" Cash cried and tried to follow. He was brought up short by an invisible resistance, springy, elastic, but the more he strove forward the more impenetrable it became.

"Come back," he shouted, a frantic edge to his voice. "Come back, Cary. Please! You must come back."

Arthur put a hand on his shoulder and gently drew him away. Cary had quite disappeared. There was nothing to say. Cash was left with the despairing feeling that he would never see his sister again. Suddenly, the sense of loss was overwhelming. He turned blindly and stumbled off by himself.

Cary found that once she had rounded the first bend, the tunnel both broadened and gained height, allowing her to walk upright. The walls also seemed to give off a strange glow, so that once her eyes had become accustomed, she could see quite well. For the first 200 yards or so, the tunnel drilled straight into the hillside, angling down slightly, then it began to twist and turn until finally she came to the first of many choices. She was faced by three more or less identical openings.

She could still hear the sound of the Donestre weeping but try as she might, she quite failed to discern which of the openings it came from. The keening surrounded her. It came from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

Bother, she thought. It looked like being a long and irritating journey. In the end, she chose the right-hand passage as it appeared to trend downwards more than the others. It seemed logical that the Donestre would be found, finally, far down in the depths. Another thought occurred to her. In the unlikely event that she should succeed in winning back the amulet, she would need to be able to find her way out. She picked up a loose bit of rock from the floor, one with a jagged point, intending to scratch a large cross to mark the tunnel she was leaving. She stopped short when she realised there was already such a mark. It gave her considerable pause for thought.

The new passage also twisted and turned, heading always down. Cary moved cautiously at first but grew more confident the further she went, until, that is, this tunnel

came to a dead end. One minute she seemed to be making steady progress, the next she had rounded a cramped corner and found herself facing a blank wall of rock.

Glumly she turned about and laboured all the way back to the entrance up what was a deceptively steep slope, quite steep enough to have her breath coming uncomfortably fast and her calves aching by the end. At last she came to the junction with the cross on the wall and resolutely headed down the next tunnel. It, too, went on for what seemed like miles and then it, too, petered out in a dead end. Again, Cary turned and walked all the way back.

And if this next tunnel has a dead end, I'll scream, Cary promised herself. It did, and she did. Her frustration was extreme.

"What," she demanded aloud when she had had a good shout, "is the point of having a Donestre waiting to eat me alive if I'm never going to reach him? This is too, too stupid! Stupid witch! Stupid labyrinth! Stupid Donestre!"

She sat down, struggling to compose herself. It came to her at last that the labyrinth must be some sort of riddle designed to make her confused and miserable, even easier prey for the monster. And it's certainly working, she said to herself. Or maybe the witch is just being witchy.

Cary wished Cash were there. He actually enjoyed riddles. She racked her brains. Three tunnels, three dead ends, but if she could hear the Donestre still sobbing, as he was, then there must be a way of reaching him. What had happened to the other girls? They must have faced the same problem. They must have found the answer as they'd never come back and nor was there any sign of them in the tunnels. Even if they had just wandered around till they starved to death there would have to be bones, Cary thought, and yet she had seen nothing. So what was the answer?

In the end, she gave up. She could think of no possible solution. A dead end was a dead end, and there was an end to it. She made up her mind. She would just have to go all the way back to the entrance and admit defeat no matter how painful it would be to hear what Myrddin might have to say on the subject. She got to her feet and grimly set herself for the long walk.

She came again to her cross and turned down the passage from which she had originally emerged. She was thinking that she must be just about back at the cleft when she came round a corner to be greeted not by the expected daylight glimmering through the crack in the rock wall but by the openings to yet three more tunnels. But how could that be? Cary was sure, absolutely certain, that she had come the right way to reach the exit to the outside world, and yet it had now magically vanished. The labyrinth had somehow shifted and realigned itself. Cary groaned and stamped her foot. It was too much. Much too much. It was one thing to become a human sacrifice but to be put through this on the way was just downright unfair. She felt the tears beginning to come, that she was just about to give way completely. Instead she stamped her foot again. She would not... she would not...! give that witch the satisfaction.

So what exactly was going on, she asked herself? What was the message, the demoralising message? Simple enough, she supposed. Simple enough when you thought about it. There is no changing your mind. There is no going back. There is no way out. None. Doom awaits and there is no escape however much you might seek it. To enter the labyrinth was to face the Donestre and to face the Donestre was to die.

Or was it? There was only one way to find out.

Again, Cary chose the path that seemed to lead most downhill and this time instead of coming to a dead end, she finally came to another junction. Three more tunnels appeared in front of her, and then again. As more shafts kept opening up, Cary always chose the path that led most directly downwards. In time, it appeared that her method was finally working. The noise of weeping was not louder exactly, but certainly more intense, bitter, as though containing all the woes of all the world. It set Cary's teeth on edge. Grimly, she forged on, marking each tunnel as she left it for another.

It was a long, dreary business, tunnel after tunnel, and at the end of each, always the same three choices. All sense of time deserted her. She had no idea how long she had been in the labyrinth. Hours? Definitely hours. A day? Probably not. She wasn't hungry yet, at least not very, but thirst was another matter. Cary began to have visions of a large jug of lemon squash, icy beads of moisture sliding down the outside. Then it became a glass of milk, much as she disliked milk. Finally it was just a simple cup of plain water. She was so busy trying not to think about it that she failed to notice that what would prove the final tunnel was expanding until all at once it flared into a huge cavern. Cary stopped short, startled.

The scene before her was quite glorious, spectacular beyond imagining, a surreal natural cathedral of colossal roiling columns and scrolling stone curtains, of organ pipes and frozen streams, of stalagmites and stalactites, fantastical formations and gothic conceits, all of the most delicate colours. In the centre was a pool the hue of purest turquoise. Cary had heard of the spectacular caves at Penwylt to the north but had never dreamed anything could be so magnificent. And as she gazed about in awe, she wondered with part of her mind how the cavern, so far beneath the surface, had not come to be flooded long since. Magic, she supposed..

For a long time she was simply overwhelmed and then her mind began to take note again.

For one thing, the sobbing had stopped.

She brought her gaze down from the vaulting natural sculptures above and saw what she should have noticed immediately.

Standing beyond the pool, waiting patiently was the Donestre. He was tall, even taller than Arthur, his body muscled and strong, dressed only in a breech clout. And on his shoulders was the head of a full-grown lion. The mane was golden, tinged with black, the eyes pale green and penetrating, the teeth, when he curled a lip, terrifying. A large tear still glistened beneath one of his eyes. Arrayed behind him on the limestone

floor of the cave were the heads of six young girls, perfectly preserved, their eyes closed. They looked peaceful, almost as though they were asleep and would wake at any moment. There was no hint in their faces of the terror they must have endured. Before the Donestre on a large block of black marble, almost an altar, something gleamed and sparkled, so dazzling that it was impossible to make out. It could only be the Amulet of Annwn.

Cary began to tremble and her knees to give way. She reached into her pocket to clutch at the vial of potion, her one hope, and then heard her mother's voice, exasperated but loving:

"Little flower, when all else fails attack."

"Well, my goodness," Cary said after a moment, somehow managing to speak with crisp asperity. "If eating people upsets you so much, why don't you just stop? I've never heard such a carry-on."

The Donestre flinched, surprised, taken aback.

"If only it were so simple," he said at last. His voice was a pleasant rumble, ingratiating.

"But it is," Cary said firmly. "It is just that simple. I see no problem."

"And how *is* your dear mother?" the Donestre asked kindly. "Poor Gwendolyn must be so worried. You've been gone for days."

Cary was stabbed by guilt. The thought of her mother, and her father, frantically combing the countryside, harrying the police, calling out the army, was almost more than she could bear. And if they could see her now, about to become somebody's lunch... But then she remembered, though still not quite believing it, that if she were eaten, her parents would never come to exist, so it wouldn't matter anyway. None of it would matter, not in the slightest. At least, not once the actual eating part was done with.

Cary took a deep breath.

"Will you take me with mustard, or without?" she inquired coolly. "I should think I would definitely taste better with mustard. Though ketchup might be nice too."

"No, no," the Donestre said. "There's no hurry. First we converse, then I dine. I like to hear all about my fare before I partake. I find it adds to the savour. And as they say in Gaul, to begin with an amuse-bouche is infinitely more civilised than chomping right in. So do try to be amusing, won't you?"

"But if you know my mother's name," Cary said. "You know all about me already. So how can I...? Be amusing. And what's a bouche anyway?"

"A mouthful," the Donestre said. "At least, in this sense." He paused and regarded Cary with a degree of sorrow.

"You're right," he said. "I do know all about you and I had hoped that we could avoid, for the moment at least, the distasteful – and do, please, forgive the pun – the distasteful subject of that vial of petrification potion, that vile vial you hold out of sight, wrapped in your handkerchief."

Cary's heart sank. It plummeted down to her boots and hit the ground with a thud. She felt for a moment that she must faint, and then that would surely be the end of it. She would wake being munched. Better not to wake at all.

How could she ever have been so stupid as to think that the Donestre, gifted as he was with the second sight, would not instantly be aware of her secret weapon? How could any of them have been so stupid? Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Cary raged at herself. Fools, we're all such fools. Even Myrddin. Especially Myrddin. And why hadn't Pythagoras thought of it? He was supposed to care about her. And to know about Donestres. To know about the second sight. Worse, it was not just her life at stake. Thousands of lives, a whole nation, the future itself was at risk.

She found she had a choice. She could either sit down or fall down. Trying to preserve her composure she chose an outcrop nearer the pool and made a show of seating herself comfortably. If nothing else, it gained her a little time to think. She took the vial from her pocket, carefully removed it from her handkerchief and held it where the Donestre could see.

"I think it's called a stand-off," she said. "Touch me and I'll turn us both to stone."

The Donestre shook his mane angrily, and then lifting his muzzle gave a full-throated lion's roar.

It rang and echoed, crashed and boomed, rolled and reverberated, magnified and resonating in the void, bouncing backwards and forwards from the surfaces of the great chamber as though it would never end. It was utterly terrifying. Cary felt her blood freeze. She was paralysed, turned to stone herself yet still living, still warm, still edible. The Donestre began to approach, light-footed, menacing, ready to leap and rend. Desperately Cary strove to break the spell. She heard Pythagoras, dear Py. Trust your courage, he had said, but here she was, helpless, a lamb to the slaughter, surrendering without a fight, without even so much as a gesture.

No one would ever know what it cost her, she herself could not believe that somehow she had found the resolution, the resistance, the determination, but with an effort that wrenched and tore at her, she lifted her hand, the hand with the vial. Abruptly, on the point of springing, the Donestre stopped.

They remained there in tableau, a tableau every bit as frozen as the stone of the cathedral about them.

At last, Cary dared to breathe and when he saw her shoulders move, the Donestre released the snarl that gripped his massive jaws and stepped back.

"Congratulations," he said in his rich, deep voice. "I have never known anyone able to resist the call of my hunger before." He turned away and returned to the grim circle of his previous victims. It was a long time before Cary felt able to speak.

"I'm sorry you're hungry," she said at last.

"Starving," the Donestre said. "It has been long since the last maiden... And they were slim pickings, you might say."

"Then why do you stay?" Cary asked.

"Not from choice, I assure you."

"Then why?"

"Morgan le Fay," the Donestre said bitterly. "I am enchained by her magic. She has summoned me through the ether and here I must stay to guard the amulet until she consents to release me."

The beginnings of a thought began to nag at Cary, tantalising, teasing, just out of reach.

"Your home is an island?" she said, to gain time. "My friend, Pythagoras, said you come from an island in the Red Sea?"

"He is correct," the Donestre said wistfully. "An island at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. From there it is our delight to roam the deserts and mountains of the Sinai, the wild lands. It's a life of freedom and plenty, of pilgrims and wayfarers. Our fare, you might say."

"So you must loathe this cave?" Cary said. "Isn't it claustrophobic for you? After the deserts, the mountains."

"It's hateful," the Donestre spat.

"And you would leave if you could? Escape?" All at once, Cary's thought crystallised.

"It's not possible," the Donestre said flatly.

"It might be," Cary said.

"It is not possible," the Donestre repeated savagely. "The sorceress has decreed that I am bound to the amulet. There can be no escape."

"I don't think that's right," Cary said. "I think there's something she's sure not to have thought of, that's she missed."

The Donestre regarded her for a long, searching minute, his eyes blazing yellow, filled with longing. At last, he spoke.

"What has the witch not thought of?" he demanded.

"That you might give me the amulet of your own free will."

"*Give* you the amulet...?"

"It would break the spell. There would be nothing to keep you here any longer..."

"*Give* you the amulet?" the Donestre repeated.

"And even if it didn't break the spell," Cary said carefully. "You would still have defeated Morgan le Fay, wouldn't you, by going against her orders?"

"And then Morgan le Fay would leave me here to starve for all eternity."

"You'll starve anyway," Cary said. "After me, there will be no more maidens. I am the last one who will ever come here."

There was a long silence. Cary cast about for more arguments, for something finally to convince the Donestre, but there was nothing, or at least nothing she could think of. In desperation, she fell back on repeating herself.

"I'm sure it will break the spell," she said. "The spell is evil... and to give me the amulet would be a good thing, a powerful thing, more powerful than the evil. The spell will not stand if only you can bring yourself to do a good thing. The amulet is not Morgan le Fay's. It belongs to my people. Return it to them and they will be free. You will be free."

Abruptly the Donestre appeared to make up his mind. He bent to the glittering object on the altar and raising it high, paced towards Cary.

"You ask me to trust your intuition," the Donestre rumbled. "In return, you must trust me to place this about your neck."

Cary shivered where she sat. The temptation to flee was irresistible, overwhelming, but in the end, resist it she did. She weighed the vial of potion in her hand for a moment and then hurled it at the pool. It hit the edge and broke. A moment later the water had turned to solid turquoise. Then Cary stepped forward, her knees trembling, until finally she was within reach of the Donestre. She could feel his hot breath about her as she gazed at the fearsome jaws and any second she expected to be seized, to feel his fangs tearing at her flesh. She felt the hysteria rising, the scream. She wanted so much to scream, to scream and scream. And she wanted with every fibre of her being to turn and run. She prayed she might vanish, wake from this nightmare in her own warm bed, her safe bed, with Ichabod on guard outside the door and her parents and Cash asleep in their rooms, close by. But she was not dreaming, she knew. This was real. This was forever. She closed her eyes and surrendered to whatever would happen.

Standing tall, far above her, the Donestre sighed and then Cary sensed his arms descend. The torq was placed gently about her neck, fastened and allowed to rest, so heavy, on her shoulders. The Donestre lingered a moment and then withdrew his hands. On the instant, there was a blinding, green flash.

At the same instant, in the depths of her lair, Morgan le Fay rent the air with the most hideous shriek, a shriek of frustration, of piercing loss.

Chapter Five

One moment, Cash was staring at the cleft where Cary had disappeared, the next he was staring at Cary herself.

He had never been more wretched. For hours he had been standing there, hugging himself, gazing hopelessly at the cliff, berating himself for ever letting Cary out of his sight. She was a girl, pretty good for a girl, but a girl. How could she possibly be expected to cope by herself? Against a Donestre. And she was his sister, his beloved sister, even if he didn't much care to admit that last. He was supposed to look after her, protect her. And Cash couldn't begin to imagine what he could possibly say to their parents.

"You see, there was this dragon... And he took us hundreds and hundreds of years back into the past... To fight Saxons and a sorceress... For King Arthur and Merlin, except he calls himself Myrddin... And Cary had to find an amulet... But she was eaten by a man with a lion's head... Eaten alive..."

It was horrible. Absolutely, mind-numbingly horrible. Cary was dead. Cash knew she was dead. She was gone. Forever. And Cash wanted to die himself.

And then, in the blink of an eye with a strange sort of green flash, she was there. On the grass in front of him. Safe and sound. Or at least she appeared to be. She was wearing something huge about her neck that gleamed and danced, shooting fire and ice, iridescent rainbows. And strangest of all there were other people with her. Girls. But Cash had no eyes for them. He rushed forward, seized Cary and crushed her to him. Whatever the thing was about her neck it was hard, and painful where it jabbed into him but Cash didn't care, he didn't care at all.

"Oh Cary," he said. "I thought you were dead." A tear squeezed out and he brushed at it hastily.

"Silly," Cary said, hugging him back. "Of course not." But she, too, was infinitely glad to be back with Cash. In the way of twins, they both hated it whenever they were separated too long.

Cash at last let her go and stepped back to find himself immediately pushed aside by the triumvirate of Arthur, Myrddin and Pythagoras.

"So," Myrddin said waspishly. "About time."

"You have the amulet," Pythagoras stated numbly, for something to say. He had watched the twins' reunion, happy for them, and then in an instant, his heart had snapped shut, forced to a shocked realisation. He turned away and faded into the background.

"And you have our maidens, restored," Arthur added with tender admiration.

Cary fumbled behind her neck.

"Here," she said. "This is yours..."

"Yes," Arthur said. "Or rather, it belongs to the people. But you are our talisman and you shall be the bearer of the Amulet of Annwfn so long as you remain with us."

"Must I?" Cary said. "It's very heavy and uncomfortable..."

And they all gazed at the great gold torq. It was fashioned in the shape of four dragons, their tails twisting and twining about each other and surrounding Cary's neck, and in the mouth of each dragon was set one of the Jewels of Destiny. It was massive, a huge piece meant for the frame of a champion, a king, and it weighed on Cary dreadfully. Again she fumbled at the clasp behind her neck and this time Myrddin went to her assistance. When it was free, he raised it high before them and then reverently wrapped it in the folds of his cloak.

"Y Ddraig Goch spoke true," he said. "He foretold the Lady Carys would succeed where all had failed. For the moment," he added, "I shall be the keeper."

Arthur nodded assent and then turned to the six maidens behind Cary. They all appeared bemused, as though remembering nothing of their immediate past, but uncomprehending as they might be, they were also evidently quite unharmed.

"Welcome back," Arthur said. "We thought never to see you again, but here you are restored to us, heroines all. Our people owe you a debt such as may never be repaid."

A sentry who had been posted to give warning of anything untoward beyond the river, hurried up and whispered in Arthur's ear.

"Now," Arthur said after a moment to consider. "We must go. It would appear the Saxons are forewarned we have regained the amulet and are coming. In force."

Silently and in haste, the party retraced its footsteps along the bank behind the screen of vegetation and then made for the bivouac of the night before. As they neared the camp Myrddin drew Arthur and Pythagoras aside for a quick conference. Cash saw Arthur listen intently for a moment, then ask what appeared to be a difficult question. Myrddin began to wave his arms about in a passion, Arthur frowned and finally nodded assent. And what was that all about? Cash wondered. His emotion at Cary's return had passed during the rush back to camp and he was again intensely interested in all that went on about him.

With the Roman bridge across the river in ruins, to cross the Wysg in numbers the Saxons would have to race along the far bank till they came to the ford beyond the great loop. Arthur gathered his warriors and left at the run. Cash made to go with them but was arrested by an uncompromising hand on his shoulder. It felt like he had been seized by the branch of a tree.

"You, stay with me," Myrddin said. "Come."

"Where?" Cash demanded. "I'm a squire. I have to go with Arthur." And he began to struggle, but quite in vain.

"Less tongue, more brain would improve you greatly," Myrddin snapped. "And the tongue I can fix..." Cash suddenly found it expedient to clamp his mouth tight shut.

"The rest of you," Myrddin said. "Come with me." And rounding up Cary and the maidens she had rescued and with Pythagoras bringing up the rear, he led them off through the forest at a tangent to the direction Arthur had taken.

Ten minutes later, breathing hard, they had reached the top of the bluff overlooking the ford. Through the trees they could see Arthur and his men fan out on the flood plain and then as though by magic disappear. It took Cash a moment to realise that they had dropped flat in the rank, tussocky grass that they, themselves, had passed through yesterday.

Nothing happened for quite a long time. The Saxons had been slowed somewhat by first having to cross the Afon Llwyd and then the Sor Brook, the two local tributaries to the Wysg, before they could reach the river proper and the ford, but eventually half a dozen mounted outriders cantered into view. They surveyed the crossing carefully and then one of them turned and galloped back to report while the other five horsemen picked their way over the ford. They paused a moment on the bank and then moved on, through the tussocks, until all at once the riders seemingly vanished, unhorsed by Arthur's men who rose up silently from the ground like ghosts and instantly overwhelmed them. Quicker than seemed possible, the horses were rounded up and a man was leading them fast for the trees. They were safely out of sight when the Saxon army came into view.

Cash felt a great surge of emotion. There seemed to be hundreds of them and the sun sparking and flaring off their weapons made a brave sight. He wanted nothing so much as to be with Arthur, to face them, and he actually began to start forward. He was stopped by a hand clamped to his shoulder, an admonitory hand, an immovable hand. Cash wriggled and fought but might just as well have been a fish on a spear.

"Quiet," Myrddin hissed. "They must not dream we are here."

Why, Cash was desperate to ask, but managed to bite his tongue rather than lose it altogether, as Myrddin had threatened.

The Saxon advance guard waded out into the river, the water coming to mid-thigh, crossed the bank and came on into the tussocks. Again, Arthur and his men rose up out of the ground, and falling on the wind like the sound of distant birds there came the clash of weapons and the shrieks of men in mortal combat.

The main body of Saxons roared and surged forward to the fray as their comrades began to fall. Arthur, judging it to a nicety, waited until they were fully committed to their charge across the ford then called the retreat. His men broke away from the few of the advance party who were left and raced for the trees, apparently in complete disarray. A knowledgeable observer would have noted, however, that rather than men in rout, in fear of their lives, the Britons were holding perfect discipline. As they reached the treeline there was a faint flicker through the leaves, and then they were gone, the Saxons baying in distant pursuit.

"So what happens now?" Cash demanded as the Saxons in turn vanished into the forest.

"We wait," Myrddin snapped.

"How long?" Cash dared to ask.

"Until it's safe."

"And then what?"

"The tongue," Myrddin said with menace. "Too much tongue. It requires to be shortened."

Cash fell to mutinous silence. Twice he opened his mouth. Twice he managed to stop himself. He was saved by Cary.

"I want to know too," she said. "What is going to happen?"

Myrddin looked at her severely but Cary's standing was now infinitely higher than her brother's.

"Arthur is leading the Saxons away from us," he said. "When it's safe to cross the river, we shall go to Caerleon. Arthur and the others will follow in due course." The girls, the maidens, fell to whispering excitedly among themselves.

"You see?" Myrddin hissed at Cash. "You see what you've started. Now we'll never have quiet."

Cary looked to Pythagoras, thinking to exchange a grin, but the dragon ignored her. It was hurtful, deeply hurtful. Cary realised then that ever since her return he had addressed her just the once and that after that somehow there always seemed to be people between them. She marched determinedly across to him and stood there until he was forced to look at her. She raised an eyebrow in query but after the merest glance, Pythagoras turned away again.

What on earth is wrong? Cary wondered, now more puzzled than hurt. Whatever could be the matter? She stood there, deep in thought, until at last, Myrddin led them to the path down from the bluff, through the grass and across the river.

They came to Caerleon as the winter sun was setting, fiery against the clouds. The dusk was drawing in quickly and there was no one outside the walls. The city appeared to be locked down tight in the absence of the army. By the time Myrddin had marched them up to the gates, shut and barred, night had descended. The wizard placed Cary on his right hand with the heroines rescued from the labyrinth lined up in a row on his left, all still damp and uncomfortable from crossing the ford and then the streams. Cash and Pythagoras were directed to stay out of sight in the background.

Myrddin glanced about and, satisfied that all was as he would have it, began.

In one hand, he raised the amulet high, in the other his scroll, and then as though a switch had been thrown, an unearthly radiance began to play about the group, dancing, flickering, making them appear twice their normal size. Heads and blazing torches began to appear between the battlements of the gate tower and along the walls, and then there began to come to them the sounds of shouting, which suddenly turned to commotion, a commotion that grew louder and more raucous as the minutes passed.

Still Myrddin stood. Still the radiance danced about them.

The staring heads in the tower vanished to be replaced by that of a solitary figure, a woman with what seemed to be a flag streaming behind her. It was her hair, the long, flowing, raven hair, the banner that marked her indelibly. She gazed a long minute, her hands gripping the stone, then retreated.

Still Myrddin stood, untiring beneath the weight of the amulet raised like a standard. Still the commotion grew. They could hear screaming now and the clash of weapons. Then all at once, two things happened.

The gates were thrown open and the remaining Saxons, the old and the unfit left behind by the army to guard the city, poured forth, driven by outraged townspeople who just minutes before had been their down-trodden slaves. And simultaneously, the great gong sounded to summon the White Dragon. As before, the brazen roar beat and tore at them for long seconds, stunning everyone to stillness.

Myrddin was the first to recover. He thrust the amulet beneath his cloak and calling for Pythagoras, began to fight his way through the press of people still blocking the gate, desperately striving to force his way to the castle tower.

He was too late. He and Pythagoras had still only reached the courtyard when a huge shape swept down from above, hovered a moment above the ramparts and finally disappeared rapidly to the north. Faintly, they could hear the fast-vanishing sound of laughter.

"Bodkins!" Myrddin swore. "Beeswax!"

"Phht," Pythagoras said beside him, flame spouting. "She's escaped."

"And thank you so much for stating the obvious," Myrddin said bitterly.

"She knew she would never be able to stand against you once you had the scroll back, and the amulet," Pythagoras said, unabashed. It was almost as though he was trying to be comforting.

"No," Myrddin said, still very angry. "But we should have made sure of her. That was our chance. We may never get another."

"It wasn't much of a chance," Pythagoras said. "Not without Y Ddraig Goch... Shall I take the news to Arthur?"

Myrddin rubbed his hand wearily across his forehead.

"Yes," he said, his voice equally weary. "Tell him that as we thought might happen..."

"As you, yourself, predicted..." Pythagoras interrupted.

Myrddin gestured impatiently.

"Tell him his people, when they saw the amulet and when they saw the maidens, rose up. The city is ours and will remain so as long as he gets here before the Saxon army in his wake. Tell him not to fail."

The twins, as now seemed unpleasantly normal, were again cold and hungry but even though there was warmth and food below, they were determined to wait. They had climbed to the top of the castle tower past Morgan le Fay's abandoned chamber and were watching away to the north-east, where they expected, where they hoped, Arthur would emerge from the forest.

The first sign was the arrival of Pythagoras. The dragon chased his shadow across the moonlit fields and landed beside them.

"Hi," Cash started to say but the dragon pushed past without a word and disappeared down the stairs to report to Myrddin.

"So what's eating him?" Cash demanded turning to Cary. She just shook her head.

"Have you two had a fight or something," Cash persisted.

"No," Cary said, shortly. "I don't know what's wrong. He hasn't spoken to me since I left the labyrinth."

"Oh well," Cash said bracingly and much to Cary's irritation. "He'll get over it, I expect, whatever it is. Burnt his tongue, I shouldn't wonder. Or maybe he's broody."

"Oh shut up," Cary said and then: "Is that a torch? Look over there..."

She pointed at a spark of light waxing and waning in the distance. It was soon joined by another and another. All at once there were too many to tell apart.

"But is it Arthur?" Cash said. "Or is it the Saxons? That's the question... Maybe it is the Saxons. Maybe that's why Pythagoras wouldn't say anything... Come on, we have to get to the gate..."

However, when a much greater number of torches, flickering and flaming, burst from the forest and set off in pursuit of the first band it was instantly clear who was whom. Caerleon burst into frantic activity as men raced to man the walls, piling up spears and rocks and oil-soaked faggots on the earthen fighting ramparts behind the stone wall left by the Romans so long ago. Cash left Cary safe with Myrddin on top of the north-eastern gate tower and hurried down to assist.

And indeed, Cash was one of the many who slammed the gates shut again behind Arthur and his men, many grey with exhaustion, as they hurtled through.

Arthur took a moment to regain his breath and gather his thoughts. He noticed Cash in the throng about him, grinned and beckoned. Then he began to issue a stream of orders, dividing up his own, hardened warriors and posting them where they would best stiffen the townspeople. Cash he kept with him to act as runner, then both hurried up the gate tower.

The Saxons were close now and beginning to divide left and right along the city walls either side of the eastern gate, but staying beyond range. Arthur's captains automatically shuffled their men to defend against the greatest concentrations of the enemy.

"So," Arthur said to Myrddin. "If you were Brogan, what would you do?"

"He left in pursuit of you without time to provision for more than a day or two," Myrddin said. "He cannot possibly sustain a siege. Thus he must risk everything on all-out attack. If he can breach the walls he may save the situation. If not, then he must retreat and seek reinforcement from the other Saxon strongholds."

"And when will he attack?" Arthur said.

"Dawn, or soon after," Myrddin said. "His men are tired. They've been running all day, whereas your townspeople are fresh. Brogan must give his men time to rest."

In the event, Myrddin was half right.

When it became clear that nothing more would happen that night, food was brought and then the men on the walls, all but for a sentry every 10 paces, were stood down. Like everyone else, Cash and Cary tried to sleep, uneasily huddled in the scant shelter of the battlements. Fortunately, the rain seemed to have passed on, at least for the time being. Before settling down, Cary searched for Pythagoras, but the dragon had disappeared.

At the first hint of a lightening of the sky to the east, Arthur was up and about, rousing his captains who then went about rousing their divisions and manning the walls. The mood amongst the townspeople was as dour as the day. The wave of anger and elation that had carried them through the revolt of the night before had quite gone, to be replaced by a hangover of apprehension and fear. Most could not help wondering what sort of punishment the Saxons would visit upon them if they managed to retake the city. And as soon as they allowed the possibility that this might happen, then the Saxons were already three parts over the wall.

Arthur, surveying their closed faces, quietly set to work to raise morale, himself taking round bread with a sly joke here, a friendly grin there. His presence and charm were so engaging that there was a definite lightening of the mood wherever he went.

Myrddin watched sourly, and though quite aware of the need for Arthur's efforts made no attempt to help. It was the sort of thing that a leader worth the name must be able to do, but for which Myrddin himself had absolutely no gift. After a while, Pythagoras joined him and it was hard to tell who was the more morose. Myrddin wondered fleetingly why the dragon might be so glum and then dismissed it. Neither of them liked the early morning, particularly when it was as grey and miserable as this, which was quite enough to be going on with. He turned to gaze out the battlements. The Saxons had withdrawn their lines to well beyond long spear-cast and as the light improved, he could begin to make out a stirring within their ranks. It would be soon now. The Saxons had every reason to want to finish this quickly.

The stirring turned to bustle. A group left the main body and marched raggedly towards the gate. Half way across no-man's land, they stopped. Then came the sound of a ram's horn, blown three times. A lone man stepped forward, holding his sword reversed, the hilt clear against the sky in sign of parley.

Arthur had materialised at Myrddin's side at the first blast of the ram's horn.

"Will you talk?" Myrddin said in a low voice when it became clear what was afoot. "Or will you...?" He gestured to young man with a bow, waiting attentively. It was Peredur, the hunter. He had been raised in the forest by just his mother and of all Arthur's men was skilled with a bow.

"I will listen," Arthur said. He gestured to the archer, little more than a youth. "Not yet, Pierce," he said, using the young man's nickname. "Sound the carnyx," he added and a man raised the great bronze trumpet so that the mouth stood high above their heads and blew a long blast.

At the signal, the envoy came on and drew to a halt within easy shouting distance.

"A challenge," he roared. "King Brogan invites the rebel Arthur to trial by single combat. What say ye?"

"No," Myrddin said at once. "You must say no."

Arthur looked at him dispassionately.

"These men will not hold," he said in a voice so low only Myrddin could hear. "They are frightened at what they have done, taking the city. They are still too close to slavery. They fear the Saxon vengeance."

"No," Myrddin said again.

"You think I cannot win?"

"The risk is great, too great."

"I will fight," Arthur said.

"Oh you will, will you?" Myrddin hissed. "It's so easy for you. A quick death on the point of a sword and then you're out of it. Cowardice, I call it."

Arthur laughed, genuinely amused.

"If you put it like that, then I suppose it is," he said. "Nevertheless, fight I will."

Just then, the envoy chose to intervene.

"What say ye?" he roared again impatiently.

Arthur stepped to the wall.

"Yes," he called in a clear, strong voice. "In one hour. Where you stand now."

The envoy nodded with satisfaction, turned about with dignity and marched off.

Cary and Cash looked at each other with very wide eyes. They too had crept up the gate tower when the ram's horn had sounded.

"Does this mean what I think it means?" Cary asked.

"I don't know," Cash said. "But I don't see what else it can be."

"You're a fool," Myrddin said angrily to Arthur, no longer troubling to keep his voice down. "If Brogan kills you, we're right back where we started."

Arthur laughed again.

"If Brogan kills me," he said, "then as you so kindly pointed out, I won't care. Now, I wonder if the city can still provide a decent suit of armour and a sword that won't buckle at the first blow..." He caught sight of the twins and smiled.

"Well," he said. "Whatever else happens or doesn't happen, it's time for you two to go home to your own world."

"Oh no..." Cary began.

"That's not fair..." Cash interrupted. "You said I could be your squire..."

"But..." Arthur said.

"Surely another hour or two won't make any difference?" Cary said desperately. "We're already in so much trouble at home..."

"You can't make us go, not now..." Cash pleaded.

"But it may well be dangerous," Arthur said. "If I lose, the Saxons will come pouring back into the city... Who knows what may happen?"

"We don't care," Cary said.

"You can't make us go..." Cash said belligerently.

"Enough," Myrddin said loudly. "You're wasting time, Arthur. Come." And with one last, worried look at the twins, Arthur allowed himself to be led away.

Cary saw the dragon still standing listlessly in the angle of the wall and with a quick mutter to Cash, hurried to plant herself in front of him. Unless he trampled over the top of her or turned her to cinders, Pythagoras was now trapped.

"Milady," he said stiffly. "Please stand aside."

"No," Cary said. "I won't." She gestured angrily at Cash, who was staring at them with open curiosity. After a moment he took the hint and disappeared, intending to catch Arthur and, exercising the prerogatives of a squire, help to arm him.

"I want to talk to you," Cary said when Cash had gone.

"Why?" Pythagoras said.

"A better question is why not?" Cary shot back. "Why have you been avoiding me? Ever since I escaped from the labyrinth."

"I have not been avoiding you," the dragon said.

"Rubbish. One minute you're my best friend, the next you won't even speak to me."

"I was never your best friend," Pythagoras said carefully. "That much has been made very clear."

Cary gazed at him in astonishment. What on earth could the dragon mean? It made no sense. Then, slowly, she began to get an inkling.

"Cash is my brother," she said at last. Pythagoras was silent.

"You're jealous of Cash?" Cary pressed. Still Pythagoras said nothing.

"Aren't you?" Cary insisted.

"No," the dragon said. "I am not jealous."

"Then what?"

"I just want..."

"What?... What Py?"

"I just want someone to care about me the way the boy cares about you. The way you care about the boy."

"You are jealous," Cary said.

"Not jealous, lonely. And I know now that I always will be. Quest or no quest, there is nobody to love a dragon. Nobody. I know that now."

"But I love you," Cary said. "I do." She fixed her eyes on the dragon's and willed him to believe. It was absolutely true after all. She reached out a hand. Pythagoras flinched but then allowed her to touch him.

"Is that why you were afraid?" Cary asked. "When you came into the future to look for me?"

"The age of dragons is all but gone," Pythagoras said softly. "It was my last chance."

"To find...?"

"And then..."

"When you saw Cash and me, you thought I didn't...?"

"I thought... I couldn't not think..."

"Well, that's all right then," Cary said comfortably. "Because you were absolutely and totally wrong."

"Milady..." Pythagoras said with a catch in his voice.

"This will never do," Arthur said. He was standing in the great hall of the castle surveying the heap of rusty iron that had been brought for his inspection. The items before him might once have been recognisable as the tools of warfare, but now they were just pathetic.

"I would do better to go naked, armed with a club," Arthur added with disgust.

"You have your own sword at least," Myrddin said, whereupon Arthur drew it from the scabbard and held it out for inspection. Like his few warriors, Arthur had been left with little but the clothes he wore after their last and greatest defeat by the Saxons and while this present sword scavenged from the wreckage might have been all right, just, for hacking about in the forest, in a duel to the death it was a poor weapon to which to trust your life. It was short. The point had been broken off and never re-ground, and worst of all, at some time, probably when the point was lost, the blade had been bent and inadequately straightened.

The castle steward wrung his hands.

"I'm sorry, my lord," he said. "But the Saxons..."

"Gods damn the Saxons," Arthur said. "Somewhere in this city there must be a decent sword, somewhere there must be armour that isn't rotten with rust..."

"Sir, the Saxons have taken..."

"The armoury," Myrddin said. "Show us the way."

"Sir..."

"Now. Time is growing very short."

The city streets were all but deserted, and those few people not manning the walls or hiding turned their heads and scuttled off when they recognised Arthur.

"And they don't give a fig for your chances either," Myrddin remarked grumpily as they hurried in the wake of the steward, Cash almost running to keep up.

They came to a lane of workshops and the steward led them to the smithy. It too appeared to be deserted.

"Sirs, I tried to tell you..." the wretched steward began but stopped as a stooped, wizened figure wrapped in rags appeared from the shadows at the rear.

"Weapons," Myrddin demanded peremptorily. "Your king needs weapons."

The figure cackled. They could not tell whether it might be man or woman.

"My king, you say." A blackened forefinger with a long, curling nail pointed. "If you be my king, then there be your sword."

In a corner, an anvil had been set into a large block of stone. Lying across the anvil was a long Celtic sword, its chased blade of the classic, elongated leaf pattern, the bronze hilt richly jewelled and inlaid with gold. It was magnificent, just such a weapon as might befit a king. Arthur strode towards it, grasped the ornate hilt and lifted. Nothing happened. The steel of the blade had been welded indissolubly to the iron of the anvil, which was set immovably in the stone.

"What is this?" Arthur demanded of the bundle of rags.

"The sword, Caledfwlch, forged for a king long before you. A king who did not care to pay his servant for his labour." They all stared. They could see now the creature before them was an old man, twisted, bent nearly double with a lifetime spent at the forge.

"I will pay," Arthur said. "I will pay you triple."

Eyes gleamed with mirth through the rags.

"More than generous, my lord," the old man said. "And would that I could oblige but the sword is fixed to the stone for eternity. No skill of mine can free it now. No art can bring sufficient heat to the point of adhesion to break it loose. Brogan threw me in the dungeons for the entertainment of the witch when I failed. Seek your sword elsewhere."

Something clicked in Cash's mind.

"There is no time," Arthur said. "Surely you must have something else?"

The sword master shrugged.

"The Saxons, my lord. They did not care to leave valuable blades lying about for mere slaves to turn against them."

Myrddin had stepped to the anvil and was inspecting it closely.

"Take the hilt," he said to Arthur. "Shield your hand."

Arthur looked to the sword master.

"With your permission?" he said. The old man nodded and Arthur, reaching for a discarded leather apron, again seized the hilt.

Myrddin took his scroll from his sleeve and raising it high, pointed the free end at the anvil. There was a long pause as Myrddin mumbled under his breath and then a beam of light issued from the scroll and struck the line of the weld.

The blade of the sword began to smoke and then to turn red, dull at first and then brightening to yellow. Arthur grimaced as the heat rose to the handle and began to bite. The stink of burning hide rose about them. Cash, who had watched silently through the whole affair, could see that Arthur would be forced to let go before the blade could come loose, strain at it as he might. He glanced about desperately for something to help. There, by the door. The bucket still had water in it.

Cash raced to fetch it and poured it carefully over Arthur's hands, saturating the leather. Steam rose in clouds but Arthur could now maintain his grip and with a last effort, the sword came free.

"Quick," the sword master said. "We must look to the temper."

He hurried Arthur outside and directed him to plunge the blade, still white-hot, into a horse trough. When the blade was quenched, the old man took it back to the forge where holding it with tongs and directing Cash to pump the bellows, he reheated it. When the blade was again glowing red and he was satisfied with the exact colour, he set it aside to cool.

"Now, my lord," he said. "There be the matter of triple payment."

Arthur looked completely nonplussed.

"I have no gold," he said. "Nor will I unless I defeat Brogan. And I cannot defeat Brogan without the sword. I will pay you then."

"You will pay me now," the old sword master said sharply. "Or it will not be this blade that you use."

Myrddin snorted.

"We have no time for this nonsense," he snapped. "Give him the sword or I'll turn you into a frog."

"No," Arthur said. "Not that way. Never that way. I will not be as the Saxons..."

"Then what?" Myrddin said, his voice rising. "There is no more time."

Cash watched the argument with growing panic. Arthur had to have the sword, yet he would not take it by force and no one had any money or anything to trade. Cash had a sudden thought. But yes, he might, in fact, have something worth bartering.

He stepped forward, reaching into his pocket.

"Excuse me, sir," he said to the sword master. "You should know that it was my sister who freed you, three nights ago, the night the dragon came."

"Then I am in her debt," the sword master said. "But not yours."

"So would you take this in exchange?"

Cash brought out his excellent pocket knife and demonstrated how it worked. A covetous gleam came into the old man's eyes and he reached out a hand. Cash handed it over and watched as the serrated razor edge was tested and the mechanism put through its paces.

"Such steel," the old man said. "I have never seen the like, and the working of the blade... And what manner of metal is this?" He stroked the ridged alloy handle.

"Who made it," he added sharply. "I know the work of all the Celtic masters and none could make this. Even I could not make this."

"Do we have a deal?" Cash asked.

"But this is worth far more than the sword," the old man said. "This is a king's ransom. I could not..."

"Just take it," Cash said. "We have to go."

"Wait. Move the anvil..."

Arthur, Myrddin, Pierce and Cash sprang to the stone base and with great effort managed to slide it away, exposing a trap door in the floor. Pierce flung it open and plunged down into the hiding place. A moment later he was passing up armour, all part of the suit made for the miscreant king. There was a great helm, a chain-mail hauberk and padded gambeson to wear beneath it, an oblong, bronze-sheathed shield, a dagger to match the sword, and finally a wondrous scabbard, wrought with jewels and gold filigree.

"Now it is a fair exchange," the old man said.

Bearing the weapons between them, the sword still giving off waves of heat, Arthur and the others hurried for the gate tower.

"Thank you, Squire Cassian," Arthur said as they ran. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I will try to redeem your knife with gold, but I doubt the old man will agree to surrender it at any price."

"It doesn't matter," Cash panted. "When he gave it to me, my father said it would save a life one day. I hope it saves yours."

Chapter Six

Pythagoras had made himself small and was sitting on Cary's shoulder. As time passed with no sign of Arthur, they became more and more anxious. Behind them on the cleared ground between the castle wall and the Llwyd, the Saxons were forming up in battle array. Cary felt sure that if Arthur failed to appear in time then the Saxons would not hesitate to charge the walls and then who knew what would happen. So it was with great relief that she finally spotted him racing towards them. She could see Myrddin and Cash, and the young bowman they had nicknamed Pierce. She and Pythagoras hurried down from the tower to meet them.

"Quick," Arthur said, shrugging into the thickly padded gambeson and then the hauberk, which looked more like a rain coat than anything. The armour surprised Cary and Pythagoras whispered in her ear.

"It was actually the Celts who invented chain mail, hundreds of years ago. Then the Romans copied it."

"Oh," Cary said.

The sword together with the dagger was buckled about Arthur's middle, and as the great horned helm was set on his head, the Saxon challenge sounded on the other side of the wall.

"This is no way to go into battle," Myrddin said worriedly. "Ask for a delay, time to clear your head..."

"Time for the fear to grip?" Arthur said wryly. Cash looked at him, surprised. It had never occurred to him that Arthur might be afraid. But, of course, he must be. About to risk his life. How not? Cash stood there with the shield and was suddenly devoutly glad that he was not the one going out there to fight to the death.

Arthur nodded to his trumpeter who stood the carnyx to his lips and gave a great blast.

"Will you bear my shield, Squire Cassian?" Arthur said, looking gravely at Cash, who gulped. Not for one moment had he supposed that he would be leaving the safety of the walls for the exposed and dangerous battlefield. His knees felt weak but somehow he managed to nod.

"Then open the gates," Arthur said. "And Pierce, whatever Myrddin says you will not draw bow."

Peredur, a young man of transparent beauty, looked guiltily at the ground. Myrddin allowed himself a scowl of disapproval and Arthur with a touch to Cash's shoulder led the way out on to the open field beyond the castle.

As they emerged from the tunnel under the gate tower, the light struck bright. Far across the cleared ground Cash could see the ranks of the Saxons and glancing behind as they paced, the walls of Caerleon thick with spectators. There was no sound but the

crunch of their footsteps on the frozen ground, then low at first, but building to a thundering roar, the Saxons began to tap the butts of their spears on their shields and Brogan strode forth. He too was attended by a boy bearing his shield but such was the size and presence of the man, Cash failed to notice the other at first. He had seen Brogan once before, but at a distance through the treetops. Now, standing clear and proud, he was a sight to strike terror.

While not much taller than Arthur, he was perhaps twice as broad, his chest massive beneath the mail of his armour, his legs tree trunks and his visage utterly fearsome for being concealed behind the mask of his helmet. He was armed with sword and javelin and his shield, borne by the boy, was round with a central iron boss.

The two warriors halted some 20 paces apart and stood glaring at each other.

"To the death!" Brogan roared.

"To the death!" Arthur returned and turned to Cash, holding out his arm for the shield. Brogan, ignoring his own, swung into his throwing stance and hurled his spear. Cash caught the flicker of movement from the corner of his eye and somehow managed to swing the heavy piece of armour away from Arthur's reaching hand and up high enough to intercept the missile. The point of the anagon crashed through the bronze and the wood behind, sufficiently deep for the barb to catch. The heavy shaft bent the soft iron socket as it was designed to do and the spear sagged to the ground, rendering Arthur's shield quite useless. Lumbered with the cumbersome shaft it would be impossible to ply effectively, and there would be no removing it without tools and time.

Arthur spared it the merest glance and drew his sword, the great sword made for a king, the great sword he would now wield with both hands. Brogan, with a clear advantage, seized his own shield and rushed to the attack. The two warriors met with a crash that Cash could feel through the earth beneath him, and Brogan, using his shield more than his sword, began to batter at Arthur with his huge strength, forcing him first to circle defensively and then to give ground. Arthur fought like a man possessed, a berserker, but slowly, inexorably, a step at a time, he was driven backwards by Brogan's monstrous bulk. Time and again Arthur's superior sword-play opened Brogan to attack, time and again Brogan's brute power not only saved him but forced Arthur back on the defensive. Several times Cash found he had forgotten to breathe and sucked in air with desperate gasps. He was already exhausted, just watching, but on the two men battled, Arthur holding his own but at the cost of yet another step backward, then another.

Cash saw the trap open a moment before it was sprung. The Saxon boy, Brogan's shield-bearer, had dropped to the ground and was crouching, humped and lethal. It was obviously a planned move, well-rehearsed.

"Behind you!" Cash screamed and began to run. His warning came too late. Arthur was forced to retreat one final step. He lurched as he trod over the boy behind him, stumbled and fell hard, sprawling, defenceless. The boy scuttled away, his treachery all too successful, and Brogan lifted his sword high for the final blow, the executioner's stroke.

It never came.

Without a second's hesitation, Cash leaped with desperate strength, seized Brogan's arm and managed to hang on long enough to drag the giant off balance. Brogan roared in fury and hurled Cash to one side, as though brushing away a fly. Cash's head hit the ground with crushing force and then dimly, through his ringing ears, he heard Brogan roar again, but this time in outraged pain. Arthur, still prostrate, had swung his long, deadly sword and taken Brogan in the leg. By the time Cash's vision had cleared sufficiently for him to be able to focus, Brogan was dead. He lay there flat on his back, Arthur's great sword rising straight from his chest, the hilt, so it seemed to Cash, brushing the clouds.

It was over. It was finished. Cash let his head sink back and a moment later had lapsed into unconsciousness.

He surfaced to find Cary kneeling beside him, hand on his brow, looking worried. He could see Arthur staring down at him, also looking concerned, and Pythagoras. There seemed to be a lot of noise, as though they were surrounded by a great crowd of people. Arthur knelt.

"Squire Cassian," he said. "That was a brave, brave thing you did. I owe you my life. Twice. Twice you saved me. Well are you named Cadwagan."

"What?" Cash managed to whisper. "What does it mean? I forgot to ask."

"Cadwagan?" Arthur said. "It means glory in battle."

"Oh," Cash said. Thoughtlessly he made to nod his head and winced as pain lanced through it.

"Can you stand, do you think?" Arthur asked.

"What about the Saxons?" Cash mumbled as he was helped to his feet and stood swaying. Cary moved to support him, putting his arm about her shoulder and holding him around the waist. Pythagoras sniffed loudly and Cary glared at him.

"They kept faith," Arthur said. "They've gone. When Brogan fell, they waited for his shield-bearer to return, then they left."

"That rotten cheat..." Cash began loudly and winced again.

Arthur laughed.

"Thanks to you it is of no import," he said. "It couldn't matter less."

There was a stir as the crowd parted and Myrddin stood before them. He looked significantly at Arthur, who nodded slightly.

Myrddin turned to face the corpse of the slain Saxon king, a king now dust. Caledfwlch still protruded from the massive chest, stark, deadly. The wizard spread his arms wide and waited. Slowly, silence spread until finally even the outer reaches of the crowd were quiet.

"Let no man doubt," Myrddin began. His voice seemed magically amplified so that it rolled and rang about the bleak field of combat.

"Let no man doubt," he said again. "Let no man question. Whoso pulleth the sword, Caledfwlch, from the Saxon is rightwise King of Britain."

He stepped back. Arthur strode forward and with one foot on Brogan's chest withdrew the sword and brandished the bloody blade to the sky. The crowd roared and kept on roaring, released as they were from both the Saxon overlords and now their fear of Saxon vengeance.

"And won't the chroniclers and journalists have fun with that," Pythagoras sneered when eventually the cheering died down enough for him to be heard.

"Why?" Cary demanded. "Whatever do you mean, Py?"

"You heard Myrddin," Pythagoras said. "Pull the sword from the Saxon, he said. But guess what the idiots will write in their eternal quest for maximum inaccuracy. They will write in Latin, and Saxon will become saxum, which is Latin for stone..."

"You don't mean...?" Cary said.

"That's exactly what I mean," Pythagoras said.

"So the sword in the stone story is all nonsense...?" Cary laughed.

"Not exactly," Cash said. And on the way back to the castle, he told them about the sword master. And Cary was delighted when she discovered it was the same old man she had insisting on setting free the night they recovered Myrddin's scroll, that had he not been set free Arthur would never have been armed.

"But," Cash said. "What's this Caledfwlch business. I thought the sword was supposed to be called Excalibur."

"That Geoffrey of Monmouth again," Pythagoras said. "He couldn't spell Caledfwlch, so he changed it to Caliburn, and then someone changed that to Excalibur..."

Cash had sought the quiet of the castle yard. His head still pained him, but more than that, he was bothered by a strange feeling of emptiness. The death of Brogan ought to have been filling him with triumph, but all he could see was Arthur's body lying there, dead on the field of battle. He shivered. So nearly had it come to pass. Behind him in the great hall he could hear the sounds of revelry. The celebration feast was in full swing and if anyone had a right to be there, it was Cash, but somehow he could take no pleasure in the final triumph of expelling the Saxons from Caerleon.

The noise from the hall masked the sound of footsteps behind him and the first he knew of company was a strong hand falling on his shoulder. He started and swung round.

"Squire Cassian," Arthur said. "You do not join us?"

"I...I..."

"You are oppressed," Arthur said. "After battle. It is a thing all warriors know."

"Sir, do you...?"

"Feel the same? Yes. And you do not call me sir. To you, I am Arthur. Come with me. We will talk."

Arthur led him back to the castle, to the chamber he had taken for himself. It was sparsely furnished with just stools, a table and a pallet, but there were candles and a roaring fire and after the bleak wind of the castle yard, it was warm and cheerful.

"Sit," Arthur said. "And drink this." He poured from a jug on the table and handed a goblet to Cash, taking one himself.

"It is mead," Arthur said. "But a little will do you no harm. It will warm your heart." He raised his goblet in toast.

"To my squire," he said gravely. "Who won me this day."

Cash burst into tears. Arthur let him weep and when the spasm had eased, passed him a square of linen.

"It is not easy to be a hero," Arthur said as Cash mopped up his face, and then in a lighter voice, he said:

"Back in the forest you called Caerleon, Camelot. What did you mean?" A look of surprise crossed Cash's face.

"That's what your city is called," Cash said. "At least, that's what we call it."

"We?"

"Everybody. History."

"Then Camelot it shall be," Arthur said. "It shall be my first decree. We must not disappoint history. That would be a sad error." He smiled.

"What else does history say about me?"

"You have a round table," Cash said slowly, trying to remember what he knew. "And knights..."

"Knights?"

"On horseback. With armour and lances. Sort of cavalry."

"And the round table... is what?"

"I think it was to stop your knights from fighting each other. Getting bored in peacetime and jealous of each other, starting feuds. Because the table was round, they were all sort of equal..."

"I see," Arthur said softly. He began to stroke his chin, deep in thought. Cash sipped cautiously at his mead. The taste was dry, almost antiseptic, not at all what he was expecting of a drink he knew was made from honey.

All of a sudden, Arthur stood up as though he had come to a resolution.

"Food," he said. "Food will improve things for both of us."

He led the way to the hall and the high table where Cash found he was to be seated at Arthur's left hand. Cary was on the king's right.

"Where have you been?" she said anxiously, behind Arthur's back, shouting over the deafening noise. "I was going to come and look for you, but Arthur said he would. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Cash said and found to his surprise that it was true. Perhaps the delightful aroma of the roasting venison had something to do with it.

The boards were drawn, the trestles stacked and the company fell to wrestling, tumbling and then dancing. Finally a bard began to sing of the recent miraculous events. Unfortunately, he was not very good, his verses hastily composed, flowery and overblown. Myrddin, quickly bored and not disposed to be the least bit polite, marched across to the twins.

"What's this Pythagoras tells me?" he demanded of Cary in a loud voice. The dragon, still sitting on her shoulder as though fixed there permanently, glowered at him.

"I don't know," Cary said, trying to whisper in deference to the singer. "What did Pythagoras tell you?"

"He says that after all that fuss and bother, all the trouble I went to, you never even used my petrification potion."

"I did," Cary said. "I bargained with it."

"But you didn't use it," Myrddin insisted, still in the same loud voice. "Criminal waste. Absolutely criminal. Now I'll never know if it would have worked or not."

"What?" Cash howled. The bard twanged his harp disgustedly and gave up, his restless audience already lost to this much more interesting side-show.

"Do you mean?" Cash went on in outrage, jumping to his feet. "Do you mean you sent my sister into the labyrinth with a potion you weren't sure would even work. Is that what you're telling us?"

Myrddin, for once, had the grace to look a touch discomfited.

"It was a work in progress," he said defensively. "I was pretty sure it would be successful. But now I'll never know. All that effort wasted."

"Wasted...!" Cash shouted, quite beside himself.

"And it wasn't wasted anyway," Cary said quickly, desperate to head Cash off. "The idea for it meant you got your recipe book back, didn't it?"

"And phht to you, Wizard," Pythagoras said with a satisfied burp of flame.

"Anyway," Cary added, remembering her final moments in the cathedral. "It did work. It turned the water in the pool to stone. Turquoise. The pool became a giant turquoise."

Myrddin flushed with pleasure and Arthur laughed. He pressed Cash back to his stool.

"Never mind that," he said. "It's time we talked about sending you home. Your work here is done. Both of you. We owe you much and we must not keep you longer."

Cary and Cash stared at each other aghast.

"But we don't want to go," they said simultaneously.

"Not yet," Cary said.

"Not till we see what happens," Cash said.

"But your parents," Arthur said. "We cannot in conscience keep you longer. You've been gone days already. I cannot but quail at the thought of their distress."

"Well that's all right then," Cary said. Cash looked at her with sudden hope. Arthur raised his eyebrows.

"We can stay as long as you'll have us without them ever knowing we've even been gone," Cary went on. "Pythagoras says that however much time we spend here, when he takes us back, we'll only have been gone for seconds. It will be like we never went away at all."

"But still," Arthur said. "There's no telling what might happen to you here. It's not as though there hasn't been danger enough already."

"But that's not fair," Cash protested. "Not to let to let us stay and see how it all turns out. You know the Saxons won't give up this easily. They'll come back with reinforcements. You know they will."

"Nevertheless..." Arthur began.

"Please," the twins chorused in unison. "You owe us..."

Arthur gazed at their pleading faces and at last, reluctantly spread his hands wide.

"So be it," he said.

Chapter Seven

Then began an enchanting time for the twins, more magical than anything that had gone before. Once Arthur had given his word, they were absorbed into the life of Camelot as Caerleon instantly became known, but more, they were feted and spoiled wherever they went. People quickly came to know the parts that both of them had played in restoring pride to Britain and nowhere in the city was there a single person who wished them anything but the greatest kindness.

Word of the Saxon defeat spread like rain before the winter gales and people flocked to this new beginning. Soon the city was teeming with people who had managed to escape the Saxons returning and with new arrivals. The ruined parts of the ancient Roman fortress, now Arthur's, were quickly restored and the central keep expanded until it loomed, large and substantial. Vast as the area of the fortress was, so many people tried to cram inside the outer perimeter that the city quickly overflowed the walls and down past the Roman amphitheatre into the land running south-west to the river. The rotting timber stands on the stone foundations of the amphitheatre were themselves replaced. The bridge over the Wysg was repaired and also the roads in the immediate vicinity, which made it possible for even more people to hasten to Camelot. They came in their hundreds: blacksmiths and stonemasons, carpenters, carvers and potters, butchers and bakers, cooks, hunters, fowlers and fishermen, spinners and weavers, leather-workers, armourers, bow makers and fletchers, jewellers, furriers, tailors, herbalists... all manner of craftsmen, all hungry to work and succeed. And the city flourished accordingly.

There came too the warriors, drawn to the banner of the one warlord, the one chief, the one king who could challenge the Saxons, and not only challenge but defeat them. They flocked to Arthur not only from the surviving Celtic lands of Britain and Ireland but also from far across the water, from Brittany and parts beyond.

Samhain, the New Year feast, passed in a blur with everyone too busy to pay it proper attention. And on through the winter, they worked at frantic pace, knowing that the Saxons, too, would be mustering and preparing for the summer campaign when they would expect to regain what Arthur had taken from them.

Also from Brittany, there came at Arthur's behest shipload after shipload of horses, braving at no little cost in ships and men the severe winter crossing of the Narrow Sea and the voyage around Land's End. With each new group of mounts, Arthur set more and more of his foremost warriors to training as proper knights, skilled in the art of lance, sword, shield and horse together.

Arthur also set in train, at Myrddin's urging, plans to marry. It was not so much that Arthur needed a wife, but he did need the support of King Leodegrance and his men. Myrddin, despatched as envoy, had sent word that to cement the alliance, Arthur,

however reluctantly, must agree to marry Leodegrance's daughter, Gwenhwyfar. The arrangement was sealed without Arthur ever having set eyes on his future bride and he deputised the most promising of his new warriors, Llwh Llenlleawg, to lead the escort that would bring her, together with Myrddin, back to court. Arthur also charged Llwh Llenlleawg, who because of his passion for jousting was already becoming known as Lance-a-lot, to make a particular request of Leodegrance regarding Gwenhwyfar's dowry.

Cash and Cary were given their own chamber in the castle, but only went there to sleep. They spent the rest of their time delighting in the life around them.

"Do you know what the best thing of all is?" Cash said one morning.

"What?" Cary asked.

"No school," Cash said, grinning wickedly.

Cary had to laugh and Pythagoras snorted. He and Cary were now absolutely inseparable.

"But that's not really true," Cary said. "You go to squire training all the time. That's a sort of school."

"No it's not," Cash said. "It's fun. If it's fun it's not school."

"I like school," Cary said defensively.

"But you're allowed to," Cash said. "You're a girl."

Pythagoras snorted again.

Cash finished putting on his shoes and stood up.

"Where do you think you're going?" Cary demanded.

"I've got fencing," Cash said, opening the door.

"No you don't," Cary said. "Don't you remember? We have to go with Arthur."

"But..."

"Cash!"

"Oh all right," he said mutinously, but such was his respect for Arthur that he waited with them happily enough. Both he and Cary were now dressed in the height of Celtic fashion, Cash in brightly coloured tunic, trousers and cloak, Cary in equally bright gown and mantle, pinned with a brooch that Pythagoras had taken particular delight in discovering. The dragon was one of the great shoppers of the world and he and Cary could spend hours happily ferreting through goods on display in the market booths.

There was a knock at the door and Arthur appeared, smiling.

"Come," he said.

"But where are we going?" Cash demanded. "I'm supposed to be at sword practice and you wouldn't want a squire who couldn't..."

"Oh, I think this might be worth your while," Arthur interrupted mysteriously.

He led them through the streets until it was obvious that they must be heading for the armoury. Waiting outside was the sword master, now cleanish and more or less presentable, so much so that Cary had no idea who he might be.

The old man smiled.

"Welcome Sire," he said. "Welcome young master. And especially welcome to you Lady Carys. I am Trahaearn, the prisoner you freed the night of the White Dragon."

"Oh," Cary said and then, politely: "How do you do?"

"Extremely well," he said. "Thanks to you."

"Now," Arthur said. "As I promised, Squire Cassian, I have tried to redeem your wondrous knife from this obstinate old man, but not all the king's gold will induce him to part with it. Not for nothing does his name mean, 'like iron'. His whim is certainly that. However, Trahaearn, who is now my sword master, has agreed to an alternative that I hope will please you." He gestured and with a bow Trahaearn disappeared inside. He returned with a long package and Cash felt his heart skip. Slowly, agonisingly slowly, the sword master unwrapped the sheepskin to reveal at last lying on the fleece objects that made Cash catch his breath and go weak at the knees. It was, just as he had begun to hope, a sword sized for a twelve-year-old boy, but not just any sword. Sparkling before him was an exact replica of Arthur's own weapon, Caledfwlch, and with it a matching dagger.

Reverently he took it from the sword master and, hardly daring to breathe, drew the blade from the scabbard. The chased steel gleamed in the light and Cash felt it vibrate slightly as though becoming part of him, as though it too were alive. He turned to face Arthur, quite unable to speak, his eyes shining. Gravely, he saluted.

"Well that was really splendid of Arthur," Cary said as she and Pythagoras wended their way through the market. Pythagoras looked at her sharply. She was trying valiantly to hide it, but there was no doubt she was subdued.

"But...?" Pythagoras said.

"No buts," Cary said. "I'm really happy for Cash."

Pythagoras considered and then made a decision.

"But you feel a bit left out," he said. "After all, you did get the amulet back and without it, we'd all still be skulking in the forest."

Cary was silent.

"I think," Pythagoras went on carefully. "That a thing might happen... at some point... in the future... if someone could be a little bit patient."

Cary laughed.

"Am I so childish?" she demanded.

"We all are, caught unawares," Pythagoras said. "Come on. Let's go shopping. You feel the need for new under-tunics."

"I do not."

"Phht," Pythagoras said in his usual fiery fashion. "Indulge me then. That stall over there has wonderful embroidered linen imported from Galway. And it serves Arthur right if it's very expensive. So insensitive."

Cary laughed again.

Then, all of a sudden, it seemed that things started to happen very quickly.

Spring came, a kind spring, full of daffodils and bluebells, skipping lambs and bawling calves.

Then towards May, Myrddin came and with him Lancelot, his escort of warriors, and Gwenhwyfar, together with her attendants.

Their ships were spotted far out in the fairway, racing in on the flood tide. As they furled their sails, shipped their oars and turned into the Wysg, Arthur and it seemed the whole of Camelot made ready to meet them. The crowd around the landing stage by the bridge was so eager to catch a first glimpse of the new queen that more than a few ended up in the water. To protect the twins from being trampled, Pythagoras was not above using a touch of fiery breath from time to time and many a hard look came his way.

The lead ship nosed into the dock and the oars were tossed skyward in salute. As the lines were made fast and the plank lowered, Myrddin was the first ashore, followed by a glowering Lancelot. Arthur gripped each by the forearm, Lancelot failing to meet his eyes, and then turned again to the ship. From somewhere in the crowd a carnyx sounded a fanfare and a group of women disembarked. On shore, they parted to reveal a slight figure in their midst. She was richly dressed but heavily veiled.

She hesitated a moment, half-glanced towards Lancelot and then visibly trembling lifted the gauze which hid her features.

The crowd sighed with disappointment. The face that was revealed was wan and crumpled, the features plain, the hair lank. In fact, Cary thought, she looked exactly like someone who had been comprehensively seasick for rather too long.

Timidly, the girl-woman looked toward her future lord, hoping beyond hope that he might be pleased.

Arthur bowed deeply, to hide his expression, but wasn't quite quick enough. Gwenhwyfar dropped her eyes and stared fixedly at the ground.

"My lady," Arthur said, recovering. "It is with the greatest joy that we welcome you to Camelot. My steward will escort you to your quarters and when you are refreshed from your arduous journey, may we hope to greet you properly in the great hall?"

The steward stepped forward and together with a group of servants from the castle began to clear a way through the crowd. Lancelot came to offer Gwenhwyfar his arm, and the procession wound off.

Myrddin raised an eyebrow at Arthur.

"Nothing to say, then?"

Arthur shrugged.

"You just remember this," Myrddin said. "She might be a great deal worse and you make sure we don't offend her. We need Leodegrance more than ever."

"Why?" Arthur said quickly, drawing the wizard aside.

"Aelle of Sussex," Myrddin said cryptically.

"Is what?" Arthur demanded.

"Mustering."

"When will he come?"

"Soon. Very soon."

"Where?"

"Here, of course," Myrddin said irritably. "Have you gone soft in the head while I've been away?" Arthur grinned

"I meant how will he come? By what route?" He paused. "You have spies?"

"I have spies."

"So," Arthur said. "What do they think is likely to happen?"

Myrddin looked about.

"Not here," he said. "Too many people." He led Arthur down the bank. At a sandy spot he stopped and with a bit of stick drew a squiggle that was just recognisable as an outline of part of the coast of southern Britain.

"We're here," he said, marking Camelot on the north shore of the Bristol Channel. "King Aelle is here." He marked a spot in Sussex somewhat south and far to the east.

"Overland," Myrddin said. "It is a march of many days and who knows what dangers. By sea..." He traced a line down the Narrow Sea, round Land's End and back up to Camelot. "By sea, with the right weather, it is a swift journey."

They both contemplated the crude map.

"Aelle has enlisted Sarlic the seaman," Myrddin said at last. "And together they are gathering ships."

"Leodegrance?" Arthur asked.

"Will send his fleet. Providing you..."

"I heard you the first time," Arthur said. "But am I the only one who can see that Lancelot is smitten with this woman past reason? Though why that should be..."

"Is what?" Myrddin demanded.

"Hard to understand."

"She improves on acquaintance," Myrddin said sharply. "When she's not seasick."

"Or smitten with Lancelot." For once, Myrddin had nothing to say.

"Well," Arthur said bitterly. "This is an interesting situation."

There was a long silence. Finally Myrddin spoke again.

"One more thing. I have a personal message for you from Leodegrance. He will send the dowry you request when, and if, he deems you worthy."

As Myrddin had remarked, Gwenhwyfar did improve. That evening in the great hall she was revealed as a pale, wishy-washy blonde, still timid but insipidly pretty.

And would that my Lady Carys were of marriageable age, Arthur couldn't help thinking, and had a father with a fleet. The contrast between Cary and Gwenhwyfar could not have been more marked. Cary's strong but delicate features were as firm as her courage and her hair the colour of wind passing through ripe wheat on a summer's day.

Arthur sighed deeply to himself. Anyway, one thing was certain, the twins would have to be sent home to their own world directly after the various ceremonies which would culminate with Beltane. He would miss them, he realised, miss them greatly. Young Cassian had ingenuity and courage to match his sister and now showed all the makings of a fine warrior. And the two of them together brought sunshine with them wherever they went.

The first occasion in what was to be three full days of celebration was a ceremony of thanksgiving and investiture, thanksgiving for the deliverance of Caerleon, now Camelot, from Morgan le Fay and the Saxons, and the investiture of Arthur as king. Nobody had troubled to explain to Cary what form the ceremony might take and she supposed that it would be some sort of Druidic ritual that would drone on for hours, a ritual, that, stuck up the back, she wouldn't even be able to see properly. At least it was a lovely day. The early-morning sun was pouring in through the open shutters and the birds were singing.

There was a loud knock on the door.

"Too early," Cash shouted sleepily.

"Out!" came a voice. It was Pythagoras.

"What do you mean, out?" Cash demanded, outrage beginning to overtake drowsiness.

"You, out!" Pythagoras repeated. "I need the room."

"I will not," Cash shouted.

"You will. Or you'll be very warm about the posterior. I need the room!"

Cash looked at Cary, his eyebrows raised so high they were disappearing into his hair.

"He's your dragon," he said. "You tell him to go away."

"Didn't you want to go riding though?" Cary said.

"Not this early."

"Hurry up!" Pythagoras demanded.

"But it might be a good idea," Cary said. "All things considered..."

"Oh all right," Cash said grumpily. He threw on his clothes and carrying his boots opened the door.

"What...!" he began.

"Shut up," Pythagoras hissed. "And begone... milady," he continued. "May I enter?"

"Of course," Cary said. "But what on earth is going...?" She stopped, astonished, as Pythagoras came in. The dragon was walking upright and draped across his arms was the most exquisite gown Cary had ever seen. The shot silk shimmered and shifted in the clear light so that it was no colour and yet every colour. Cary gasped with delight.

"Py," she said, breathlessly. "It's gorgeous, absolutely beautiful. But why?"

"I told you," the dragon said with immense satisfaction. "I told you that if you were patient, a thing might happen. Well, it's happening. Right now."

Behind Pythagoras there was a line of female servants bearing the finest of lawn undergarments, silken hose and new slippers, a wooden tub, buckets of hot water, large linen towels, soap and perfumed oils.

"Now please, milady," Pythagoras said, delicately placing the miraculous gown on a coffer. "You should bathe. I will return when you've finished."

"But Py," Cary said. "Who...? Where...? This must have cost a fortune. I couldn't ask Arthur to..."

"Not Arthur," Py said. "The gown comes from a country far, far towards the rising sun. It is my gift to you. And it is my enormous pleasure. Phht. No point having a pile of dragon's gold if you can't splash out once in a while."

"Dear Py," Cary said. "How can I thank you."

"By wearing it and looking absolutely splendid," Pythagoras said.

He went away and returned when Cary was bathed and gowned, her hair dressed and shining like burnished gold. This time Pythagoras was bearing an over-robe in the same wondrous material but somehow of a slightly different shade, the lower hem heavily worked and embroidered. The motifs, Cary saw, were dragons, dragons twisting and twining, dragons to swirl and dance about her feet.

"Oh Py!" she said, lost for words. And then: "But aren't I hugely over-dressed? Aren't I just supposed to sit up the back and watch?"

"No," Pythagoras said. "Not quite." He held the robe for Cary to slip into and then stood back to admire.

"Oh," Cary said again. "How I wish I had a mirror."

Pythagoras gestured to the door and a servant marched in bearing a sheet of polished bronze. The image the mirror gave was a touch fuzzy and unfocused but Cary and Pythagoras stood there side by side contemplating their joint reflection with the greatest satisfaction.

"Oh Py," Cary said and then again was lost for words.

"Wherever could you find robes like these around here?" she asked at last.

"Not here," Pythagoras said complacently. "China."

"But..."

"Time and motion, remember? And they understand dragons in China. They understand us very well."

"How ever can I thank you?" Cary asked.

"You have already," Pythagoras said. "And now, milady, shall we go?"

Suddenly the castle was deserted. There was not a guard or servant anywhere in the corridors and the great hall when they arrived also appeared to be empty, until Cash stepped forward from the shadows. He too was now bathed and clean, relatively, and dressed formally as a squire in Arthur's livery. Buckled around his waist was the sword he had named Angharad, or Never Shamed. Cary had laughed at the time but Cash had just smiled. It was not an aspiration for which a man needed to apologise.

"Blimey!" Cash said, resorting to English and genuinely stunned. "Will you look at you!"

"Do you like?" Cary asked anxiously.

"You look amazing," he said.

"Amazing bad? Or amazing good?"

"Amazing terrific." Cary relaxed and smiled.

"It's all Py's doing," she said. "He went all the way to China to find the silk and then he had a master tailor make it to his design."

"What can I say?" Cash managed. Pythagoras looked at him sharply.

"But what are you doing here?" Cary asked.

"I'm to help escort you to the arena. Come on. They'll be waiting."

"What do you mean, waiting?" Cary said, beginning to feel the first stirrings of alarm.

"You'll see," Cash said.

Outside, the city was also deserted. Not a soul was to be seen as they made their way through the streets to the southern gate and then on to the amphitheatre. Even stranger was the fact that they were surrounded by silence. There was none of the normal bustle, the sounds from the workshops, the clack of looms, the buzz from the market. It was so quiet they could hear the bees working and the birds, but that was all. As they approached the arena, Cary grew more and more anxious.

"What on earth is going on?" she asked Cash in a whisper. "Are you playing some sort of trick on me?" But all Cash would do was to smile knowingly. It was quite infuriating and Cary was just about to lose her temper good and proper when they arrived at the principal tunnel leading under the stands and out to the actual arena. Cash stepped back to join Pythagoras and ushered her forward.

"In you go," he said. "Come on. Don't muck about."

Cary glared at him.

"I'll speak to you later," she hissed, and then back straight and head high, she marched angrily into the gloom. She emerged, blinded, into the glare on the other side and strode on, fuming. She stopped at last, confused, and stood for a moment as her sight came back gazing blankly up into the stands, packed with people. She was alone,

she suddenly realised, a single small figure, exposed in the middle of a vast, empty space, trapped before this multitude surrounding her. The silence lingered for an instant longer and then the whole of Camelot, from king to scullion, rose as one and began to cheer her to the echo. The noise was thunderous, deafening, paralysing, but more powerful still was the great tide of grateful emotion that came rolling down upon her. And on it went, on and on.

Cary stood there, quite frozen, and then without her being the least bit aware the tears began to flood down her face.

Eventually, Arthur appeared from somewhere and stood before her while the roar gradually subsided. At last there was silence again. He bowed deeply and then spreading his arms wide, lifted his voice.

"My Lady Carys," he intoned ringingly. "Your people welcome you and wish to show you their gratitude."

Again the stadium stood and roared.

At last Arthur gestured and the six girls Cary had rescued from the labyrinth, and now all her friends, came forward. They were dressed in simple white with flowers in their hair, and, walking between them, Arthur took Cary to a dais at the edge of the arena where Myrddin and the officers of the court were waiting.

Pythagoras, standing just inside the tunnel, sighed with pleasure. The ceremony he had choreographed so carefully was proceeding exactly as he had planned. More, Arthur and Cary, the one magnificent in his robes of investiture and the other ethereal in the glorious silk he had searched so hard to find, made a picture that people would take to their graves.

The dragon allowed himself a moue of self-congratulation and a small private jest. This was truly his crowning achievement.

Myrddin as High Druid, his voice rolling effortlessly to the farthest corners of the arena, administered the oaths of office and then raising aloft the Amulet of Annwfn so that the gold and the jewels flashed blinding in the sunlight, he set the great torq upon Arthur's shoulders, and made him king in name as well as fact. Again the crowd roared.

And that would be the end of it, Cary thought, but no. Arthur was turning to her.

Myrddin handed him something and Arthur raised it high in repeat of what had gone before. It was miniature replica of the torq he, himself, was wearing. He set it about Cary's shoulders and it sat there in splendour, the entwined dragons of the amulet completing and being perfectly complemented by the embroidered dragons swirling about her feet. Pythagoras had truly excelled himself.

Arthur looked at her wistfully.

"I wish..." he began to say and then stopped himself. .

"Wish what?" Cary asked.

Arthur smiled down at her.

"That things might be different," he said, and despite Cary's questions he would say no more.

Of all the people in the arena, only two were less than delighted. Seated among her ladies, Gwenhwyfar was silent throughout the ceremony and Lancelot's applause was perfunctory to the point of rudeness. Neither could contain their disgust when Arthur placed the torq about Cary's slender neck. Both regarded it as rightfully belonging to Gwenhwyfar, even if she had done nothing to deserve it nor was ever likely to. Moreover, the homage directed towards Cary when clearly it should have gone to the queen-to-be was a slight not to be borne. As they left in procession, both Myrddin and Arthur noted that Lancelot's glare would have cut glass and that Gwenhwyfar had disappeared behind her veil.

It was most curious, Arthur mused as he paced through the tunnel. On the one hand, Lancelot clearly desired Gwenhwyfar for himself and would give anything to prevent her becoming Arthur's queen, yet on the other he was angered because she was being treated less than he thought a queen was due. Perhaps, Arthur thought, he should have made more of an effort to involve Gwenhwyfar, but it was Cary's day. She had made all possible and she deserved the stage to herself. Meanwhile, here he was, a man straddling a saw, whether he went forwards or backwards or just stood still, it was all equally painful.

Myrddin regarded Arthur's abstraction with deepening concern, which became outright worry when half-way back to the city the king suddenly straightened as though he had come to a decision and strode forward with renewed purpose.

It was particularly noticeable that neither Lancelot nor Gwenhwyfar attended the banquet in the great hall that evening.

It was particularly noticeable that to all intents and purposes Arthur couldn't have cared less.

It was particularly noticeable that Myrddin was rapidly ascending to as yet undreamt of heights of irascibility.

The second day of the festival was devoted to Arthur and Gwenhwyfar's nuptials and to Gwenhwyfar's coronation. It was a disaster from beginning to end. The court and the town were scheduled to escort the happy couple to the oak grove by the river where Myrddin was to perform the ceremony, except that the town bar the usual ne'er do wells declined to attend. It seemed that the whole of Camelot claimed to be recovering from the excess of jubilation the day before and begged to be excused.

Myrddin gabbled his lines, Gwenhwyfar apparently had lost her voice so low were her whispered responses, and the twins, discussing it afterwards, were sure that Arthur's fingers had been firmly crossed behind his back every time he was required to make a promise or a vow. The question they couldn't answer was whether crossed fingers meant

the same now as in their own time. Pythagoras, when Cary consulted him, for once was most unhelpful and on being pressed took himself off in a huff.

The final indignity, whether by accident or design, was that Gwenhwyfar's crown, coronet really, was slightly too big and kept sliding down over her eyes.

The banquet that evening was even more dismal than the last time the twins had been required to have luncheon with their great grandmother, that is to say their father's mother's mother, she of the frou-frou frock. The cooks seemed to have caught the mood and the food was either half-raw, or the consistency of shoe leather. The bard quite failed to tune his harp and spent the evening favouring his audience with his interpretation of an alley cat out on the tiles. And the warriors, in general disgust, took to drinking, quarrelling and fighting in that order.

Gwenhwyfar, minus the troublesome crown, contrived to swoon as early as decently possible, retired and took no further part in proceedings. It was the first time, in Cary's estimation, that the new queen had showed anything like good sense and she wished she could do the same rather than feel obliged to stay and support Arthur. Lancelot sat huddled beneath his own dark cloud of despair and neither spoke, nor ate, nor drank.

Towards the end, Arthur beckoned to Cash and took him aside for a lengthy conference.

"And what was all that about?" Cary demanded when Cash slid back to his place next to her.

"I can't tell you," he said.

"Cash...!"

"I promised. He made me promise not to tell anyone. Especially not you and double especially not that dragon. And I didn't cross my fingers."

Pythagoras, who naturally had been watching everything with avid interest, forgot he wasn't talking to anyone and came to his usual spot on Cary's shoulder to hear the gossip. When she couldn't tell him what was going on, he too tried to worm it out of Cash, but the boy was adamant and impertinent with it. Pythagoras and Cary went into a mutual sulk and took themselves off to bed.

At last Arthur rose and, fending off all the usual drunken ribaldry, departed for the bridal chamber.

Cash waited till the room had returned to its drinking and then slipped around the edge until he could come to Lancelot.

"Please, sir," he said in a low voice. "The king asks that you come with me."

Lancelot continued to stare dully at the table. Cash waited and finally was about to try again when the warrior abruptly pushed himself to his feet.

"Where?" he demanded, but for answer Cash moved off and wormed his way to the entrance to the hall, pausing to make sure that Lancelot was following. Outside, Cash began to dart across the yard, keeping to the shadows, but in three strides, Lancelot had caught him by the shoulder.

"Who pays you?" the knight hissed. "Who pays you to lead me to my death?"

For a moment Cash struggled and then forced himself to be still.

"And if that were true," Cash said carefully, using the words Arthur had given him, "would you care?" Lancelot stared.

"Lead on," he said at last.

Cash followed the route he had memorised at Arthur's insistence and stopped at last in a dim passage. There was a small alcove and hidden in the angle, a narrow door. It opened to Cash's touch and he stood back.

"You are to bar the door behind you," Cash said. Lancelot stared at him again and then without another word, disappeared into what Cash could see appeared to be the start of a secret tunnel. He heard the sound of the bolt shooting home, checked the corridor outside was still empty and left.

Cary and Pythagoras were sitting by the light of a candle when he got back to their room. They looked up inquiringly as he came in.

"Don't ask," he said. "Just don't ask. Even if I knew, I couldn't tell you."

The third day of the festival marked the beginning of May and Beltane, one of the two great days of the year in the Celtic calendar when the cattle were released from their winter holding and turned out to pasture. Camelot now seemed to be one giant hawthorn bush, so many flowering boughs had been draped over doors and windows in decoration, and the air reeked with musky perfume. The highlight of the afternoon would be the battle between the forces of winter, armed with blackthorn sticks and shields stuck with wisps of fleece to signify the blizzard, and the forces of summer all garlanded with flowers and sporting green-leafed, willow switches. Winter, though better armed, must invariably lose in the end but usually not without delivering a few shrewd dunts.

Then would follow feasting and sport, dancing and song, with finally the lighting of the giant Beltane bonfires, between which the cattle would be driven to purify and protect them from disease for the coming year.

It was a time, the beginning of summer, that everyone enjoyed and looked forward to, and doubly so as Samhain had been so skimped.

The courier found Arthur just as he was leaving to officiate at the mock battle. The king listened with attention then sent his own messengers scurrying to find Myrddin and to summon a council of war.

Chapter Eight

Cash caught Cary and Pythagoras just as they were leaving for the fun at the arena.

"Quick," he said. "Something's happening. There's a council in the great hall. I think it's the Saxons. We'll sneak in..."

"Cash!," Cary said. "We will not!"

"I'll make us small..." Pythagoras said.

"Now just a minute!" Cary said.

"So don't come if you don't want to," Cash said. "But I'm going..."

"And I," Pythagoras said.

"But..." Cary began.

"Come on," Pythagoras and Cash said simultaneously. "Stop being a girl." The two looked at each other in surprise.

Cary, much against her better judgment, nodded.

The last of Arthur's captains were just arriving when the three, now the size of mice, crept in and darted around the walls until they were close enough to hear.

Arthur still waited and, at last, Myrddin strode in.

"Begin," he said abruptly, without greeting or preamble.

Arthur took up a spear and tapped the point at a rough map he'd scratched on the floor.

"The Saxon fleet is here," he said and tapped again for emphasis. "They have rounded Land's End and are waiting for the south-west wind to bring them north. My father-in-law, King Leodegrance, waits for the same south-west wind. When the Saxons are sighted, he will sail before them until he reaches this point here."

Arthur drew a line with his staff across the channel between Wales and Devon, where sea fought river and river fought sea, day by day depending on the tide.

"Aelle and Sarlic will then have a choice. They can risk all to sail on against Leodegrance, who will have the advantage of familiar waters and knowledge of the wind and the currents, or they can bypass him, sail north, then land and bring their whole army, intact, overland against the city." He paused.

"And if they land," he continued. "Then it must be here at Porthcawl, the Cove of the Sea-kale, as all else to the east almost to the mouth of the Wysg is cliff."

He paused again. "Comments?"

No one spoke.

"Lancelot?" Arthur said. The young knight stepped forward. He was almost unrecognisable from the dour, glum figure of past days, transformed, serious to match

the occasion but now open and pleasant. Myrddin looked at him sharply and appeared greatly displeased by the change.

"I concur," he said. "I found King Leodegrance to be a resolute man. He will do as he promises. His fleet will not match the Saxons for size, not nearly, but they cannot hope to pass him without severe mauling, enough to thwart any siege of Camelot before it begins. As you say, my lord, they will choose to land."

There was a general nodding of heads.

"That being the case," Arthur said after a moment, "because of the forest, there is only one way for them to come and we shall meet them here, as they march. Here at Mynydd Baedan."

He pointed to a spot 10 leagues or so west of Camelot. Again there was silence.

At last, Lancelot ventured to speak.

"Why there, my lord?" he said. "If one may be bold."

"I know the ground," Arthur said, and then: "Tonight the Beltane fires. At dawn, we march. See to your men."

There was a scraping of boots and the twins and Pythagoras scrambled for safety as the phalanx of captains stamped out.

A door slammed and there was silence.

Myrddin moved to stand directly in front of the king, angry, accusing.

"You're a purblind fool!" he shouted.

"Lancelot?" Arthur inquired mildly.

"Lancelot! What have you done?"

"Exercised a king's prerogative."

"Meaning?"

"I have told Lancelot, who no doubt has told Gwenhwyfar, that while I am king, I am bound to certain things, the appearance of certain things, the appearance of a certain marriage. I have told them that so long as the appearance is not challenged, by anyone, ever, no one need be hurt. Not Lancelot. Not Gwenhwyfar. And not myself."

Cary and Pythagoras stared at Cash, who shrugged.

"You're an unmitigated idiot," Myrddin said again. "No good, no good at all, can come of this. If it is ever discovered..."

"But until then," Arthur interrupted testily, "at least I won't suddenly find Lancelot's knife between my ribs, or my wife slipping poison in my cup. Nor must I suffer her endless tears."

The two men stood staring angrily at each other, until at last the wizard turned away.

"There is another thing," he said. Arthur took a deep breath.

"And...?" he asked, when he could trust himself to speak normally.

"I have had my own message."

"And...?"

"The witch..."

"Morgan le Fay...?"

"...Has found another way to summon the White Dragon at need..."

"But we still have her gong," Arthur said.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Myrddin snapped. "A new way. She doesn't need the gong any more... They're coming, too. So factor that into your brilliant battle plan."

Arthur pulled up a bench and sat.

"I'm sorry to displease you," he said. "But what I have done with Lancelot and Gwenhwyfar will buy time at least, and we agree that we need time, time for Camelot to bloom. And Myrddin, you know, none better, that I can't fight a dragon. Only you can do that."

"You're wrong about that too," Myrddin said sitting down beside Arthur and stretching his legs wearily in front of him. "Only Y Ddraig Goch can fight the White Dragon."

"Then we'd better do something about getting him out of that cavern," Arthur said. "And do it quickly, wouldn't you say? And now that I think about it, why on earth haven't you got around to doing it before this?"

"I... none of your business..." Myrddin said shortly, and then: "But if we are to send those children home to safety before the Saxons arrive, as we should, then Pythagoras must do it. Yet the only way I can get to Y Ddraig Goch in time to free him depends on Pythagoras taking me."

There was a long silence. Despite their concerns and despite their anger of moments before, Myrddin and Arthur, teacher and pupil, counsellor and king, were deeply attached to each other and comforted by each other's presence.

At last Arthur stirred.

"Well," he said. "There is no choice. We must send Lady Carys and young squire Cassian home to safety. We must take our chances with Morgan le Fay and the White Dragon. We cannot ask the children to risk their lives further."

Cash and Cary looked at each other in shock and then reacted simultaneously. They rushed out of hiding and Myrddin and Arthur suddenly found themselves staring down at two tiny creatures dancing about in front of them, both furious.

"You can't do it," Cary shouted with all her might.

"We won't let you," Cash added.

Their voices were angry squeaks. Pythagoras buried his head under a wing, knowing the wrath that would descend upon him, but then mustering his courage, he waved his tail and the twins instantly expanded to their proper size. As it happened, they were standing too close together at the wrong moment, over-balanced and sat down with a bump.

"So!" Myrddin said. "Eavesdropping!"

"For shame," Arthur added severely.

"We're sorry," Cash said, scrambling to his feet. "It was all my fault..."

"Of course it was..." Myrddin snapped.

"But you can't make us go..." Cary said, still plonked on the floor.

"Of course we can," Arthur said.

"Not unless Pythagoras takes us. And you won't, will you Py?" Cary looked about, but the dragon was still cowering behind the leg of a bench.

"He'll take you," Myrddin said. "You should be very sure of that. He should be very sure of that, wherever it is the coward is hiding."

Pythagoras made a sudden decision, manipulated his tail and appeared before them.

"How dare you?" Myrddin demanded, instantly on the attack. "How dare you bring these children into a private council? How dare you let them hear what never should have..."

"Phht," Pythagoras interrupted rudely and with heat. "Cai Hir!"

"What?"

"Kay as he will be called," Pythagoras said. Now that he was actually facing the music, he was starting to enjoy himself. Myrddin waved his twiggy hands in wordless anger.

"What about Kay?" Arthur asked quietly.

"Is he married?" Pythagoras demanded. "Has he children yet?"

Arthur and Myrddin just stared at him.

"Then the future is still at risk," Pythagoras said. "Lady Carys and Squire Cassian still do not exist. And until they do, they cannot return to restore Camelot to us."

The twins, Arthur and Myrddin all gazed at each other, bemused.

"But they already have," Arthur said at last.

"No," Pythagoras said. "They will only exist if Kay survives the White Dragon. And the only way to ensure that is to free Y Ddraig Goch. And the only way to do that is if I take Myrddin to Snaw-dun, which means I can't take the children back to their own time, where they may not exist anyway."

Everybody stared at each other all over again. And then everyone started speaking at once.

There was, naturally, a great deal of argument, all going in circles, but in the end, Pythagoras prevailed when even Myrddin quite failed to be able to prove that the dragon was categorically wrong. That neither Myrddin nor Arthur much fancied the idea of facing the White Dragon on their own without Y Ddraig Goch might also have had something to do with the fact that they eventually allowed themselves to be persuaded that the twins should stay. The debate then turned to where the twins might be hidden most safely.

Cash and Cary looked at each other.

"I'm going with Arthur," Cash said.

"And I'm going with Py," Cary said.

"No," Arthur and Myrddin said simultaneously.

"Yes," Pythagoras said unexpectedly. "Or I'm not going at all."

The twins shot him a grateful look but Myrddin rounded on him in a passion.

"Out of the question," he roared. "And what sort of irresponsible nonsense, what sort of mind-boggling stupidity, what sort of brainless lunacy has possessed you?"

"Without them," Pythagoras said conversationally, "none of us would be here. Or had you forgotten? If they want to, they've earned the right to see it through."

"Come what may?" Arthur demanded.

"Come what may," the twins said.

"Anyway," Cash said after a moment into the silence. "If anything does happen to us you never would have been able to come and get us in the future."

There was a great groan and Cash grinned innocently.

Like Samhain before it, Beltane was robbed of its moment. Word spread quickly through Camelot that the Saxon fleet was within a day's sail given the right wind and as a result nobody had much heart for the celebrations. The battle between summer and winter petered out very quickly, the combatants breaking off at inappropriate moments to discuss the situation with the opposition and the warriors and men-at-arms among them hurrying off as soon as vaguely decent to prepare to march.

Late that night the bonfires were lit and the livestock driven between the two flaming pyres, but even the cattle seemed subdued and distracted and there was none of the tendency to bolt and stampede that usually made the process somewhat risky and therefore thoroughly entertaining. Camelot, hurrying through the ritual, was far more interested in the morning to come than the spectacle right before it.

Like everyone else, Cash and Cary were preoccupied. The reality of what was before them, only hours away, was now looming very large. Apart from anything else, they would have to separate again. For once, in deference to their feelings, Pythagoras made himself scarce.

The twins rose before dawn, dressed and ate some of the bread they had put ready. Cash was wearing his livery with Angharad strapped to his waist, Cary had borrowed a pair of Cash's colourful trousers. When the time came, they gave each other a quick hug and parted silently. There was nothing they needed to say.

Cash hurried to the stables for his special pony, Taliesin, and then to the south gate, where Arthur's army was to muster.

Cary watched him go until he was out of sight and turned to find Pythagoras and Myrddin waiting.

"We shall watch from the gate tower," Myrddin said. "And then we, too, must leave."

"Look there," Pythagoras said, indicating the flagpole above them.

"What?" Myrddin said.

"Wind," Pythagoras said. The banner on the turret was shifting and stirring and as the light strengthened and with it the breeze, so the flag began to bend away to the north-east.

"Wind," Myrddin agreed. "South-west wind. If it holds, the battle will be tomorrow. Come."

Arthur's army made a brave sight, the warriors on their warhorses, pennants streaming, armour gleaming, the men-at-arms grim, determined. Myrddin, surveying the serried ranks from the top of the gate tower, shook his head.

"What?" Pythagoras said.

"This thing with the horses," Myrddin said. "It's new. It's radical. I don't like new and I especially don't like radical. I kept telling Arthur he would do better to keep his men on foot and the force concentrated as we've always done in the past, but no. From somewhere he has this idea that horse warriors are the weapon of the future and he will not be persuaded otherwise. Sometimes that boy is just plain pig-headed."

"He has to do something," Pythagoras said. "There will be at least several Saxons for every Celt who can still hold a sword."

"But horses," Myrddin said worriedly. "New-fangled nonsense. What good are horses in battle?"

Cary listened with half an ear, more interested in spotting Cash. She couldn't find him anywhere and she was beginning to worry. Then a carnyx sounded and out from underneath them trotted Arthur on his pure white stallion. At his side was Cash on Taliesin, bearing Arthur's personal banner. The carnyx sounded again, the army parted and then turned about as Arthur passed through, to follow him rank on rank out past the amphitheatre and on towards the west.

"Time for us to go, too," Myrddin said, discreetly failing to notice that Cary was dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"He'll be fine, milady," Pythagoras said. "Squires don't take part in battles."

Myrddin opened his mouth but shut it angrily when the dragon trod heavily on his foot.

"And so, to the Cavern of Cold Despair," Pythagoras went on. "Take hold, wizard, milady..."

As they were that much closer, the south-west wind had reached Leodegrance and his waiting fleet an hour before dawn. It was not long before they sighted the signal fire on a headland away to the south. The Saxons, who had received the breeze even sooner, were coming. Leodegrance put to sea and prepared to keep position between the Saxons and Arthur. If all went according to his new son-in-law's plan, Leodegrance would never have to come to battle, and while on the one hand he was pleased not to have to hazard his fleet against much superior numbers, on the other he couldn't help regretting that his was an inglorious role. Perhaps, he thought, the plan would fail and he would

have to fight after all, which left him even more out of sorts, not knowing at all what to hope for.

It was raining.

"Why must it always rain here?" Myrddin demanded. "Without doubt this is the wettest place in all the world, certainly in Britain."

He, Cary and Pythagoras were standing at the foot of the north-eastern face of Snawdun, staring up at the precipitous slopes, the jagged, riven cliffs, the great falls of tumbled scree, wreathed in mist.

"Where is the entrance?" Cary asked.

"There," Pythagoras said. "Where the raven sits."

Cary stared through the drizzle in the direction Pythagoras indicated and at last found the bird, perched above a dark crevice and sitting as though graven. It was so immobile it might have been stone, or dead.

"Bewitched," Myrddin said. "It is Morgan le Fay's sentinel. If you or Pythagoras seek to enter it will remain frozen. You can do nothing to free Y Ddraig Goch. You are no sort of threat. Indeed, Pythagoras has been inside before. If I were to try to pass, however, the raven would come to life immediately to seek out the witch, and she and the White Dragon would be here by the time I and Y Ddraig Goch could emerge and they would fall upon us with every advantage."

"But you can stop the raven, can't you?" Cary said. "That's the plan, isn't it?"

"No," Myrddin said.

"We should have brought Pierce and his bow," Cary said.

"It would make no difference," Myrddin said. "The raven is bewitched, invulnerable."

"So what?" Pythagoras demanded. "Or are we just here for the view?"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head," Myrddin snapped, and then walked some way down the slope until he reached the edge of the lake, Glaslyn, behind them.

"There is a second entrance," he called. "Here." And he threw a rock into the water. The ripples circled outwards on the glassy water. To Cary they somehow seemed deeply ominous.

"Oh, he shouldn't have done that," Pythagoras hissed worriedly, hurrying to join him.

"Why ever not?" Cary said, trotting beside him.

"He'll rouse Nimue."

"Who?" Cary asked.

"The lady of the lake," Pythagoras said in hushed tones. "No," he added, a note of alarm in his voice. "Don't!"

But he was too late. Myrddin took aim and let fly with another stone, this time skipping it across the mirror surface, as if determined to compound the sacrilege.

"Nimue can wake up and then mind her own business," Myrddin said shortly, not troubling to lower his voice in the least.

"As long as we don't become her business," Pythagoras said. He had forgotten to keep his voice down.

"But who is she?" Cary asked.

"Who knows?" Pythagoras said. "A nymph, a spirit, a witch fallen on hard times? But trouble, always trouble, which is why that... wizard would do well not to stir her up."

It was too late. The centre of the lake began to swirl like water running down a plug hole and then a wisp of mist rose from the centre and slowly assumed the shape of a diaphanous woman. It began to move towards them. To Cary, the apparition somehow seemed strangely familiar.

"Who dares...?" a voice started to demand and then broke off. "You!" it said disgustedly. The voice also was familiar, though Cary was quite unable to place it.

"Me," Myrddin agreed.

"Oh no," Pythagoras said.

"Oh no what?" Cary asked.

"It comes back to me," Pythagoras said. "There were stories, centuries ago, about Myrddin and Nimue being an item. But I couldn't believe it. When will I ever learn that gossip is always right."

"An item?"

"You know..." Pythagoras said.

"Oh," Cary said.

"And it explains why Myrddin was in no hurry to come here and free Y Ddraig Goch..."

"Why?" Cary asked.

"I'll wager he was frightened," Pythagoras whispered.

"So how are you, my dear?" Myrddin inquired unctuously.

"Don't you 'my dear' me, you... you wizard." The wraith was now standing with hands on hips and solidifying by the second into what appeared to be a young woman, a very beautiful, very angry, young woman.

"Now Nimue," Myrddin said. "I do think it's time to let bygones be bygones... and I can explain."

"Oh dear," Pythagoras said with a pleasurable wriggle. "This is getting better and better."

"Explain!" Nimue spat. "Explain walking out without a word and dumping me flat..."

"Not dumping..." Myrddin said, a thick oiliness seeping into his tone.

"Then what would you call it?"

"An interval in which to gather our thoughts, to reflect."

"An interval! Three hundred and seventeen years. An interval!"

"I had many thoughts to gather. And must we go on standing out here in the rain? Can't we discuss this in a reasonable fashion."

Nimue opened and shut her mouth as though lost for words. She was now completely corporeal but to Cary looked even stranger as she was standing on the surface of the water. There was a long, long pause, during which Nimue's eyes seemed to be looking through them, unfocused, to something beyond. At last she blinked.

"Well, you'd better come in then," she said with what might have been a faint smile.

Again the water began to swirl until the vortex had created a tunnel that led from the edge deep under the surface, following the contours of the bottom of the lake. Nimue stepped down and led the way underwater. Cary was astonished into immobility and Pythagoras had to go back for her. As she moved, she glanced back up at the mountain to where Nimue had been gazing a moment before, apparently lost in thought. Something was different but she had no time to discover what. Pythagoras was hustling her.

"Quick," he said. "Or we'll end up drowned. She's got a worse temper than Myrddin."

"Why did he leave her?" Cary whispered. Pythagoras shrugged.

"Fighting marriage and she was winning, I suppose."

"They were married?"

"There were whispers..." Pythagoras said and shrugged. "But shsh or she'll hear us. And I can't swim."

They followed Myrddin and Nimue down the twisting tunnel, which seemed to be spiralling around the bowl of the lake bed, deeper and deeper.

"Goodness," Cary said, looking up. The light was now showing only very dimly through the water above. "However far down does this go?"

"Legend says the lake is bottomless," Pythagoras said, but both he and legend were immediately proved wrong. They came to a steep face which appeared to be part of the roots of Snaw-dun and abruptly the walls of their tunnel changed from liquid to rock. On they went and behind them they heard the crash and boom of water filling the void through which they had just passed. Just so long as it doesn't come flooding in here, Cary thought, and wondered what on earth kept it out.

The rock tunnel eventually opened into what appeared to be a rough-hewn vault, almost a chamber. It was comfortably furnished, though in somewhat masculine style with weapons and trophy heads on the walls. Cary and Pythagoras couldn't help glancing at each other. The dragon raised an exaggerated eyebrow and Cary grinned.

Abruptly, Nimue turned to confront Myrddin, but somehow the long walk seemed to have allowed time for things to change subtly.

"So," Nimue said. Her voice no longer had the harsh edge. "You're back."

Myrddin shifted uncomfortably, causing Pythagoras to roll his eyes.

"I see you haven't changed anything," Myrddin said, looking about evasively.

"A shrine to your memory," Nimue said bitterly. "You are back...?"

"Err...yes," Myrddin said, pulling ferociously at an ear. "I'm back. Yes, I suppose I am back."

"To stay?" Nimue asked.

"Err...within... within reason."

Nimue moved to stand very close to Myrddin who, after a long moment, bent and kissed her on the brow.

"But there are matters afoot, my dear, that do require attention."

"The dragon, I suppose."

"The dragon. Things are coming to a head. I must free Y Ddraig Goch."

"And?"

"Deal with Morgan le Fay."

The blow was stunningly quick and Myrddin, having been sucked in so close, had not the slightest chance to avoid it. Nimue hauled off and unleashed a stinging slap right across his face before anybody could realise her intention. Pythagoras winced delightedly.

"Don't you dare mention that scheming hussy to me," she raged.

"Nimue..." Myrddin said anxiously. "There's nothing between..."

"Liar!"

"Nothing," Myrddin said desperately. "I swear it."

"Then how did she get your scroll?" Nimue shouted. "Just happened to fall out of your sleeve, I suppose?"

"That's exactly..."

"Liar!" Nimue said again. "You must think I'm an arrant fool. I know you've been chasing that witch all over Wales." Pythagoras and Cary glanced at each other with very raised eyebrows.

"My dear," Myrddin said rubbing his face ruefully. "I believe you're jealous."

"Jealous!" Nimue exclaimed. "Of you!"

Myrddin smiled complacently.

It came to Cary what had changed on the mountainside just before they had descended into the lake. The raven had gone.

"Myrddin!" she said urgently.

"And you, be silent!" Nimue snapped.

"Myrddin!" Cary repeated.

"What?" Myrddin and Nimue roared simultaneously.

"The raven has gone."

"What!" This time it was Myrddin alone.

"It wasn't there when we came under the lake."

Nimue stepped back as Myrddin rounded on her.

"What have you done?" he shouted, gesticulating wildly, a tree in a storm. "What have you done?"

Arthur saw his army well on the march, skirting the great, verdant vale of Morgan's forest, and then left the bulk of his men under Lancelot's command with a detailed plan of campaign, a most particular plan of campaign. At Pierce's direction and with a small escort, the king struck off on a faint trail through the thick woods, heading for the southern cliffs and a view of the Bristol Channel beyond. It was quiet and warm under the trees and as they cantered easily along over the rolling ground, hour after hour, stopping only to rest the horses from time to time, Cash had to struggle to stay awake. He grew drowsier and drowsier until finally he did fall off. He woke to laughter and to find himself a heap on the soft floor of the forest.

From time to time, Pierce would have to choose between paths but always seemed sure of their going. At last the trees began to thin and they emerged on to open ground which ended in the forbidding cliffs.

"And so we Pierce the vale," Arthur remarked with a smile. And it was a name that would stick for all time.

It was mid-afternoon with the sun dropping lower in the sky before them. The breeze was still from the south-west, with the sea starting to build so that the surf surged and seethed on the rocks below them. They set their horses to the west and for a time paced along the edge.

At last Pierce spoke hesitantly.

"There, sire," he said, pointing and squinting into the descending sun. "Is that a sail?" Far out, near the horizon, there was a flash of light that came and went, but more regularly than a breaking wave.

"Good eyes, Perceval," Arthur said. They stopped and watched. The flash became a definite sail then two and then 20, all rapidly diminishing the distance towards them.

"Leodegrance," Arthur said when he was sure.

"And sire," Perceval said. "More follow."

They waited and soon it was plain that the second flotilla was indeed the Saxon fleet, that thus far things were proceeding to plan.

Leodegrance came on until he was some two leagues distant and then he and his squadron formed line of battle across the channel and hove to. Another hour passed and as the sun sank lower and began to shine into their eyes, it became more and more difficult to make out the Saxon ships. Here was the first crisis. Would they forge on to give battle and inevitably break through Leodegrance's cordon? Could they then reach Camelot, and in sufficient numbers, before Arthur could send to turn his army and race back? Or would they gybe and bear north until the cliffs finally ended in the safe beaches of the Cove of the Sea-kale.

On the Saxons sailed, and on, until it seemed certain that Arthur had miscalculated, that he had hazarded his kingdom and Camelot, hazarded all their lives, on a single throw of the bones and had lost. Cash and the men with him seemed to stop breathing. Closer the Saxons came and closer. Then the watchers on the cliffs began to cheer. At a signal they could not discern at so great a distance, each helmsman in turn leant on his steerboard, the stern of each ship eased through the eye of the wind, the great yards with their straining sails swung athwartships to settle on the new gybe, and the fleet went streaming away to the north.

"Well," Cash said aloud without thinking. "That's a relief."

"You doubted me?" Arthur demanded in a severe voice. Cash hurriedly looked up but found Arthur grinning at him.

"A relief for all of us," the king added. "Come. I must see this Saxon army for myself."

Leodegrance watched the Saxons swing north with mixed emotions. On the one hand, he and his men would have been cut to pieces if it had come to a battle, on the other it would have been a glorious affair while it lasted, a saga to ring down the ages. He shook his head with deepening regret and then made a decision. His nearest warriors were looking at him, anticipating the order to head for home, but he shook his head again.

"No," he said. "Not yet."

Chapter Nine

The horses, contending with the rough going along the top of the cliffs, were easily outdistanced by the ships running north before the freshening wind. The sun was down and the twilight setting in when far in the distance the coast began to hook round to the west with the glint of surf breaking on sandy beaches. The king and his band more imagined than saw the Saxon ships, one by one, choose a wave and race in, grounding on the shore and then being heaved up beyond the tide.

Arthur kept Perceval and Cash and sent the rest of his men inland to find and report to Lancelot.

"Is this wise, sire?" Perceval ventured. "To keep so little protection?"

"Less is more, Percy," Arthur said. "The more men I keep, the more likely we are to be spotted. And I mean to get close. I must gauge the strength of the Saxons."

"Then sire, shouldn't Cassian also be sent away?"

"What do you say, squire?" Arthur asked. "Want to come?"

"Of course, Arth... sire."

"Excellent. But I told you once before, you call me Arthur."

"No sire," Cash said. "Not when I'm being your squire." Arthur looked at him appraisingly and nodded.

The three pressed on along the coast until the cliffs diminished into rocky outcrops and then gravel. Ahead they could see the mouth of a stream where it crossed the strand to empty itself into the sea. Beyond that was beach and the Saxon ships. Behind the beach was a desert of sand dunes carpeted in coarse grass and low scrub. Dismounting, they led the horses inland to a secluded dell by the stream.

"Stay with the horses," Arthur commanded Cash, who looked mutinous but managed to keep his mouth shut. Arthur stripped his armour and sword, motioning for Perceval to do the same, and then moving lightly and with no weapons but daggers, the two slipped off into the deepening dusk.

Cash stood there, the horses' reins over his arm, listening to the night, to the faint whisper of the stream. Time dragged on. Taliesin nuzzled at his neck hoping for a treat but Cash absently pushed him away. He grew tired of standing in the one spot, looped the reins over the branch of a tree and decided he would at least go to the bank of the river where he might get some warning if anyone were coming. More time passed and the night grew dark enough that Cash, hugging his knees at the base of a tree, was quite invisible. Twice his eyes closed and he jerked awake each time with a start. The third time, he was woken by voices, Saxon voices. Four or five men were coming along the opposite bank with torches, examining the ground. Tracks, Cash thought. They must be looking for tracks and that could only mean one thing. Arthur and Percy must have been caught. He was seized by a sudden rush of panic, an almost irresistible urge to flee,

wildly, whatever the consequences, but somehow he managed to fight it down, to stay frozen, expecting to be spotted any second, certain he would be seen if he tried to escape.

The men were now directly opposite. Cash held his breath, waiting for them to stop, to point and to dash towards him before he could run. He closed his eyes lest the gleam give him away in the torchlight. The voices passed on and Cash breathed a great sigh of relief. If Arthur and Percy had left any sign of their crossing, the Saxons had missed it, but what of Arthur and Percy themselves? Were they prisoners, were they being tortured, were they dead already? Cash felt a new wave of panic. What should he do? He had no idea. Should he try to find out what had happened, or he should he take the news to Lancelot, assuming he had any hope of finding him?

In the end, Cash waited until he was sure the searchers were gone and then quietly rose and crossed the stream himself. The sand dunes were hard going but the thick shadows welcome cover. With part of his mind Cash wondered if there would be a moon that night, but then dismissed the thought. There was nothing he could do about it either way. Another part of his mind noted that while the wind had dropped somewhat with the setting of the sun, there was still enough to tug at his clothes.

He could hear the raucous noise of the camp now despite the breeze rustling the scrub and the sound of a desultory surf. He crept to the crest of the last row of dunes and sliding under a bush peered down. The scene before him was astounding. Drawn up on the beach were scores of ships and before them bonfire after bonfire of driftwood with what looked like thousands of men grouped around them, laughing, singing, drinking, eating and in not a few instances, apparently fighting with intent. In the leaping light of the flames everything was larger, more threatening, oozing menace.

At the centre-point of the rank of ships ranged along the beach was the largest bonfire of all, with to one side a ring of men surrounding two lonely-looking figures. One was Arthur, the other Perceval. As Cash watched, a huge figure, almost as big as Brogan, stepped forward and without warning smashed Arthur across the jaw. The king rocked back, struggling for balance, and then stood straight again. His hands were bound, Cash realised, and the answer to the question just asked had obviously been deemed unsatisfactory. But how had they been captured in the first place? By what unlucky chance?

Cash felt the anger beginning to rise. How dare they treat Arthur like that? Arthur was a king and a hero, a man Cash admired above all others with the possible exception of his father. Arthur had made him a squire and had given him the sword at his hip.

Again the giant, who must be Aelle, Cash thought, struck Arthur across the face, this time bringing him to his knees. Perceval bent to offer token assistance and in turn was smashed down. Aelle said something to the men about him and they broke into a bustle of activity. Some went to the nearest ship and came back with oars. Three were lashed together and set up in the sand as a tripod, and then a second tripod was made. Arthur and Perceval were prodded to their feet and their arms stretched above their heads to be hauled tight to the lashed oars above them.

Aelle moved round in front of Arthur and spoke. Cash could see Arthur shake his head. Another man stepped up behind, slashed Arthur's tunic and ripped it down to his waist. He did the same to Perceval. A third man sauntered forward, trailing something in the sand. It was a whip, Cash saw. Lovingly, the man teased it across Arthur's back and Aelle spoke again. Again Arthur shook his head. Aelle nodded and the whip slashed down. Arthur jerked in agony and Cash could see his jaws clamp shut, his neck tendons strain as though they would break.

Cash found himself on his feet, Angharad in his hand, about to charge to the rescue, except... what could he, one boy, do against thousands? He was being stupid, and would be marked any second. He sank back down out of sight, tears of rage, of helplessness coursing unregarded down his face. He pounded at the sand and swore meaningless words over and over again. At last he began to think.

Cary had quickly grown bored. It seemed both Myrddin and particularly Nimue had more than three hundred years' worth of pent-up anger with which they needed to belabour each other before anyone would be able to talk sensibly. She found herself a chair and settled herself to wait it out. Pythagoras came to sit on her shoulder but remained an avid spectator. He might have been at a tennis match, applauding the good shots and groaning at the misses.

"Isn't it wonderful?" he whispered to Cary at one point.

"What?"

"That they still love each other so much."

"Love!" Cary exclaimed.

"Of course," Pythagoras said. "What else would you call it?"

Cary just shook her head in amazement. Sometimes the dragon made no sense at all.

At last, after Cary couldn't guess how many hours, there came a lull in the shouting, a lull that developed into actual silence.

Cary opened her eyes and looked up wearily.

Myrddin was standing with his arms crossed defensively across his chest, staring at one wall; Nimue with exactly the same posture was staring fixedly at another.

"Is everybody quite finished?" Cary demanded. "In which case, can we talk about how to free Y Ddraig Goch before Morgan le Fay arrives and turns us all into toast and mushrooms... for breakfast, as we seem to have completely missed lunch and dinner."

Myrddin and Nimue swung round simultaneously to stare at her.

"I think she's saying she's hungry," Myrddin observed.

"I'm saying that we're supposed to be here to rescue Y Ddraig Goch, except it's already probably too late, you've been enjoying yourself so much."

Myrddin continued to stare wordlessly at Cary, then all at once gathered his robes and swept off.

"And where does he think he's going?" Pythagoras said.

"Through to the other side of the mountain, I imagine," Nimue said tiredly. "To Y Ddraig Goch's cavern."

"Why did you send the raven?" Cary asked. "Why did you do that?"

"Myrddin..." Nimue said and paused. "Myrddin deserves to have his wish granted."

"What wish?"

"He wanted Morgan le Fay. Now he shall have her."

"And you kept him talking all this time to give her time to...?" Pythagoras said.

Nimue nodded.

"Couldn't you just forgive him?" Cary said. "Whatever he's done?"

"No," Nimue said, adamantly.

"Pythagoras says you still love each other," Cary insisted.

"It is not a question of love," Nimue said. "It's a question of honour."

"Oh dear," Pythagoras said. "That badly?"

"What do you mean?"

"Myrddin has hurt you that badly?"

"Have a care, dragon," Nimue snapped, but there was no disguising the tear slipping down her cheek.

"You must forgive Myrddin," Cary said. "Or you'll just be miserable for the rest of your... life."

"And what would you know about anything, at your age?" Nimue said.

"Phht," Pythagoras said with a flash of flame. "She is so right."

"I do know that if you don't forgive him, you'll go on feeling like this forever," Cary said. "And while I may not know much, I also know miserable when I see it." Another tear slid down Nimue's cheek as she spoke.

"You know she's right," Pythagoras said.

Nimue stood irresolute and finally turned to follow Myrddin.

"You'd better come," she said.

"I wish I'd brought something to eat," Cary muttered plaintively as she and Pythagoras trailed behind. "Don't wizards and witches or whatever they are ever get hungry?"

"Much too important to get hungry," Pythagoras whispered back. "Phht. So important..."

Cash gasped as another wave crashed over his head but kept ploughing grimly on. He had retraced his steps through the dunes, detoured far round the end of the beach and was now making his way back to the Saxon ships, wading along the line of the breaking surf, almost invisible even if someone had been watching. Choosing the second ship in the line, Cash slid shoreward, only his nose and eyes above the water. The nearer he came to the beach, the more he was hidden by the ships themselves and he was able to

worm his way into the shadow of the hull without raising the alarm. Choosing his moment, he stood up and quickly swung himself over the gunwale and down into the body of the vessel. If there was going to be a moon, it was not yet up but by the light of the stars and the reflection of the fires on the beach, Cash found what he wanted, the furled sail lashed to the yard and lying along the rowing thwarts.

Taking his dagger, Cash slit the lashings and started to drag the heavy flax cloth loose, piling the bunt on the floorboards. He was hoping for something to help it burn and by pure luck came upon a net hauled tight over a number of large clay jars. Cash freed one and eased the top off. It was filled with liquid that smelt oily, felt oily. Quickly he splashed the contents of all the jars over the sail and the ship itself, praying he had guessed right. Last, he felt in his pouch for the can of waterproof matches he had slipped into his pocket so long ago when Pythagoras had first come into their lives.

Hoping against hope they would still work, Cash fumbled the lid off and tried to strike a light. The first match broke, and the second, but the third caught and flickered weakly. Cash nursed it against the breeze and then touched it to the sail. In a moment it had caught and fire was licking along the puddled oil. Cash waited a moment to make sure it would keep on burning, then slid back over the gunwale and into the water.

The Saxons, thinking themselves secure and too interested in the night's drinking and the prospect of battle on the morrow to be followed by much more drinking, failed to notice Cash's fire until the ship was ablaze beyond saving. Worse, sparks and flaming bits of rigging were being blown along the line of beached vessels and already more fires were breaking out. The flaxen sails and the pitch used to caulk the planks ignited easily.

At last, someone shouted an alarm and instantly there was chaos as men already fuddled raced in all directions intent only on saving their own ships.

Aelle had given up on Arthur and Perceval, for the moment at least, when they both eventually lapsed into unconsciousness. He had returned to his own fire, leaving the two Britons still suspended from the makeshift tripods with only the one guard. When bedlam erupted Aelle and his thegns dashed off, intent on restoring some sort of order. The guard waited until they were lost to view and then with a glance at the captives still apparently unconscious and certainly helpless, he too rushed to help save his own ship. A moment later, Cash darted across the sand.

Arthur came to with someone whispering in his ear.

"Arthur...sire...Arthur..." It was Cash, he realised, Cash shinning up the oar to slash at the rope from which he hung. A moment later the pressure eased and Arthur was able to sink to his knees. Now here was Cash sawing at the bonds that bound his hands and he was free.

"Quick, sire," Cash said. "We don't have long." Arthur seized Cash's sword and cut Perceval down, and then helping the young knight, who was still dazed, all three went staggering up the beach.

They reached the cover of the dunes without being missed and as the two knights regained strength, Cash led them at a stumbling trot back across the river to the horses. They mounted in silence and Arthur took them fast along the bank, following the stream as it trended north.

"Well, young Cassian," Arthur said when they were safe from pursuit and he was somewhat recovered. "Again, I owe you my life."

"And I," Perceval said.

"Rescuing the knight is the squire's job, sire," Cash said.

"True," Arthur said. "But not, I think, from two and a half thousand enemy."

"Two and a half thousand?" Cash said. "That's... a lot."

"Sixty-three ships," Arthur said. "We counted 63, at 40 men to the ship."

"That's too many," Cash said. "Isn't it?"

"Odds of five to one," Arthur said. "What do you think?" Cash said nothing and Arthur reined in on the grassy bank.

"Come," he said to Perceval. "I will wash your back if you will wash mine. And I'm not looking forward to putting armour over these weals."

He and Perceval dismounted and Cash drew breath sharply. Both warriors were still naked to the waist and even in the dark, Cash could see the blood dripping steadily from the raw flesh on their backs.

It was a long, weary walk. Glaslyn was the back door to Nimue's residence, once shared with Myrddin. Llyn Llydaw, the long, skinny lake further down the mountain, was the front door. To get to the Cavern of Cold Despair, they had to strike north until they came under the razor ridge, Crib Goch, then east and south to finally reach the cavern in Snaw-dun's bedrock.

At last, Nimue paused.

"You'd better go in first," she said to Pythagoras. "No telling what sort of mood Myrddin has sparked in Y Ddraig Goch."

"Certainly, madam," Pythagoras said rather too suavely. Cary pulled a face at him.

The cavern lived up to its name entirely. It was quite the most dank and mournful place Cary could ever imagine, permeated with the overpowering stink of rotten-egg gas. There was light coming from up ahead and it was only as they were drawing near that she realised that what she had assumed was some sort of rock wall they were following was actually the scaly flank of a creature vast beyond imagining. The flank eventually became a neck, and the neck led to the head of the dragon, Y Ddraig Goch, chin resting on the ground lethargically but eyes smouldering and aware of everything that was happening. Myrddin was occupied in the open space beyond. He appeared to be standing in the middle of some sort of diagram he had drawn on the floor. His arms were raised, joined by his scroll, and he was muttering under his breath while turning infinitesimally.

Nimue put a hand on Pythagoras and drew him to a halt.

"Wait," she breathed. "If you disturb him now he'll have to start all over again."

Myrddin made nine full revolutions clockwise and then thirteen revolutions widdershins and it seemed to take forever. No wonder Y Ddraig Goch was already drooping with boredom, Cary thought, and worked out that at least Myrddin must have done four of the turns by the time they arrived.

At last Myrddin came to a final stop, facing the tiny crevice in the far wall. With an involuntary hiss of pain he lowered his aching arms, knelt and touched his forehead to the floor. Instantly, the cleft became two huge bronze doors, many times the height of a man and wide enough for several carts to pass through abreast. They were carved and embossed with every creature known to man, and a good many that weren't. They were also firmly shut. Myrddin rose, walked forward and tapped on the doors with the handle of his scroll. Nothing happened.

"Bravo," Nimue said sarcastically and clapped her hands slowly in ironic applause.

Myrddin turned, his face a mixture of anger and defeat.

"What have you done?" he demanded for the second time that day, except it was now well into the night.

"You might have made the doors, my dear," Nimue said, "but after Morgan le Fay found them so easy to open to deposit her detritus here, I thought it behoved me to make a key. This was our home, after all."

Myrddin's shoulders slumped and he raised his hands helplessly.

"Am I to beg?" he asked.

"Yes," Nimue said coldly.

"I am to beg that you release us, Y Ddraig Goch and myself, to face Morgan le Fay and the White Dragon in a duel to the death, even though that is what you want, even though that is your whole design?"

"You want to go to your fancy witch...? Beg."

Cary could contain herself no longer.

"That's unfair," she said in a ringing voice, stepping forward. Y Ddraig Goch raised his great head to inspect her and Cary had a sudden inkling of how a mouse might feel confronting a cat. A very small mouse confronting a very large cat.

"I am one of your greatest admirers," Cary said to the dragon. "And I'm sorry for being rude, but I must speak. Nimue is being... ridiculous. And I don't know why..."

"Phht," Pythagoras said. "Simple. She's in love."

There was a stunned silence.

"Are you?" Myrddin said eventually, his surprise patently genuine.

Nimue said nothing.

"Are you?" Myrddin insisted. "Are you still in love with me?"

There was a long silence until at last, Nimue could bear it no longer.

"Of course I am, you stupid, stupid wizard. Of course I am." And she broke into a storm of sobbing.

Myrddin hesitantly stepped towards her. He took her by the elbows and then all at once his arms were around her and she was weeping into his chest.

"So am I," he said. "So am I... In love with you, I mean."

Quite soon, the outrider trees of the great forest crossed the river and forced them to do the same. Arthur turned them north, skirting the treeline. The terrain began to rise gently.

"We must be getting close," Arthur was beginning to say when all at once men rose out of the ground and they were ringed by swords. There was a moment's hesitation and then one of them spoke.

"Is it you, my lord king?"

"It is," Arthur said. "Take me to Lancelot."

Running before them the sentry led them up the slope of a bald hill and through the ranks of Arthur's men-at-arms, drawn up across the brow. At the summit, they came to Arthur's standard and Lancelot with others of Arthur's captains. Dawn was beginning to break.

"Sire!" Lancelot exclaimed, unable to disguise a look of relief. "We had given you up for taken by the Saxons.

"I was," Arthur said. "And still would be but for Cassian."

Arthur walked on and surveyed the far side of the hill to the north. It descended gently, narrowing into a tongue of clear heath that ended in thick, impassable forest. It was bounded to the east by a steep-sided cwm and to the west by a lightly wooded ridge.

"Excellent," Arthur said. "It is as I remembered. And you are in position?"

"Yes, my lord," Lancelot said. "Just as you ordered."

Cash was struggling to stay awake. Now that they were safe again, the desire to close his eyes and surrender to sleep was becoming irresistible. Something nagged at him, something he should be aware of but for the life of him he couldn't think what. Then it came to him. The horses. Where were the mounted warriors? Here were only foot soldiers.

Arthur saw him swaying on his horse.

"Take the boy," he said to Perceval. "Find him a place to rest. The Saxons won't be here for some little time. Up there." He pointed to the ridge and Lancelot nodded.

"Did he really save you, sire?" Lancelot asked as Perceval led Taliesin away, Cash drooping low on the pony's neck.

"He set the Saxon fleet on fire and freed us in the confusion," Arthur said. "Had he not done so, Aelle would have had us flogged to death." Lancelot looked shocked.

"Aelle didn't know who I was," Arthur said. "He was trying to find out. Or just cleanse the beach of undesirables. He didn't much care which."

"And the boy saved you?"

"He did," Arthur said. "Again. It would seem that fate has sent him, just as fate sent us the Lady Carys."

"I won't let you go," Nimue said fiercely. "Not now. I can't."

"You must," Myrddin said. "And you must play your part."

"What part?"

Myrddin made no reply but with the arm he didn't have round Nimue, he indicated Y Ddraig Goch.

"What has he seen?" Nimue demanded.

"Truth be told, I have no wish to play my part either," Myrddin said. "Nor does Y Ddraig Goch. But we have no choice."

"What must you do?"

Myrddin said nothing.

"Then what must I do?" Nimue demanded, her voice rising.

"Hush. You'll wake the child." Cary had fallen asleep some time before, uncomfortably curled on the hard stone floor of the cavern, but quite unable to stay awake any longer. Pythagoras, too, had his head under a wing.

"What must I do?" Nimue insisted but more quietly.

"You will know when the time comes."

"And when is the time?"

"Soon," Myrddin said. "We have till dawn."

"So many years," Nimue said brokenly. "We wasted so many years."

"Not wasted," Myrddin said. "I loved you all that time."

"And I loved you, but we could have been together."

"You forget what happens when we're too close too long. We would have killed each other. Now that would have been a waste."

They fell silent, content to spend their last hour together in quiet communion.

At last Myrddin stirred and rose to his feet. Nimue came to join him and together they stood facing the huge bronze doors. Nimue drew the shape of a key in the air and then turned it about. Myrddin tapped the doors with his scroll and with a great scraping and the squealing of uncoiled hinges, they began to move.

Cary and Pythagoras came instantly awake and watched in awe as the side of the mountain cracked open to reveal the sun rising redly through an angry sky. Myrddin gave Nimue a last embrace, mounted Y Ddraig Goch and the two made their way out of the cavern to meet their doom.

Chapter Ten

"Quick," Pythagoras said. "Before the doors close."

He and Cary dashed through as they began to swing shut, assuming Nimue was on their heels, but as the mountain sealed itself with a final boom, Cary realised she had disappeared.

"Quick," Pythagoras said again. "We'll fly to the top."

As he and Cary rose rapidly up the flanks of Snaw-dun they could see Myrddin and Y Ddraig Goch struggling to gain height. Far above them, white against the dark thunder heads, another shape was plummeting down. It was the White Dragon and while they couldn't see her yet, they knew that Morgan le Fay would be riding him to battle, determined to fight to the death, determined to defeat Myrddin finally and bring him down for all time.

The summit was all jagged rocks and rain-sodden gravelly earth. Cary scrambled for footing as thunder, deafening, terrifying, began to roll around the nearby hilltops and jagged streaks of lightning probed down, blindly searching for victims. It seemed to herald the end of the world, Cary thought, and cowered lower as a bolt smashed into the side of Snaw-dun not all that far away. The two combatants were very close to each other now and as another great burst of thunder cascaded around the towering storm clouds, White Dragon crashed into red with brutal force, sending Y Ddraig Goch and Myrddin spinning wildly. Next second, the two dragons were locked together, slashing and tearing, goring each other, spewing gouts of flame as they wheeled across the sky, a storm every bit as potent as the one surrounding them.

How Myrddin and Morgan le Fay had survived the initial impact, how they could cling to their steeds in the face of such savagery, Cary couldn't begin to imagine. It was awful, awesome, utterly appalling. And as the dragons fought on, it was becoming apparent that Y Ddraig Goch was getting the worst of it. One wing had been broken in the White Dragon's fearsome first charge and it was plain that one of Y Ddraig Goch's legs now was also useless. Blood was streaming from his flank and as far as the watchers could see it was only the White Dragon seizing him and hurling him about the sky that kept him aloft at all.

The two dragons were coming rapidly lower and lower and drifting over the two lakes, Glaslyn and Llyn Llydaw. It seemed certain that the end for Y Ddraig Goch could only be a matter of moments away.

It was then that the surface of Llyn Llydaw began to roil.

"Nimue," Pythagoras breathed. "But what can she do? The White Dragon and Morgan le Fay are so strong."

A spout rose from the surface of the lake, spinning like a tornado but rising up, not reaching down, twisting and turning, questing ever higher, thickening with each passing second, growing more and more terrible. Morgan le Fay saw it lifting towards them but

was powerless to resist. Myrddin looked into her eyes one last time and smiled mirthlessly.

Morgan le Fay began to scream and to scream, a shriek so wrenching that it drowned the thunder, a shriek of mortal terror, a shriek of fury such as only a witch can give about to be held to account for her own evil.

Myrddin, too, lifted his voice until it rang about the heavens, a clarion, a last trump, drowning out even Morgan le Fay.

"Now, my love!" he roared. "Now!"

The great funnel veered towards the two dragons still locked together, and in the blink of an eye the struggling mass had been plucked from the sky, engulfed and devoured. Moments later the maelstrom was subsiding back into the lake. The surface quickly stilled as though it had never been roused. A ray of sun speared through the clouds and played on the water, turning it golden.

For the longest time, Cary was numb. She couldn't speak. She couldn't think. Myrddin was gone. Cranky Myrddin. Cantankerous Myrddin. Bad-tempered, grouchy, crabby Myrddin. But nevertheless, the same Myrddin who was Arthur's great friend and counsellor, who had done more than anyone to bring about the birth of Camelot and who then, knowingly, had given his life to protect it.

"What happened?" she said at last. "Py, what happened?"

"It is the prophecy," Pythagoras said quietly. He too was unusually subdued. "It is ordained that Y Ddraig Goch, the Red Dragon of Wales, and the White Dragon, the White Dragon of the Saxons, shall be entombed in the depths of the earth to fight on for all eternity. That neither shall ever emerge."

"But that's horrible," Cary said. "Really horrible. Poor Myrddin."

"Poor Nimue," Pythagoras said. "To have to bring it about."

"You mean...?"

"She was the great tumult that consumed them, that drew them down, that consigned them to the depths for all time."

Cary shivered.

"Can we go, please. Can we go now. I need to see Cash. I need to know he's all right."

The Saxons had been in no hurry. Scouts had confirmed that they must first march north to skirt the great forest, where it would be foolish for the army to venture, before striking east to Camelot and Aelle had every intention of making easy stages to keep his men fresh. He allowed them a leisurely breakfast to clear their heads from the night's carousing before breaking camp and setting forth.

It was thus almost noon by the time the point men started picking their way up the rising ground of Mynydd Baedan towards the waiting army on the hilltop. Arthur let them approach to within yards before signalling his trumpeter.

The blast of the carnyx was deeply shocking to the advance guard and the sight of hundreds of men at arms rising from the heather under their noses sent them racing wildly down the hill. The Britons gave a great belly laugh and some made to follow, but Arthur held them in check. He wanted the Saxons warned and on their mettle. His plan depended on them being incited into a reckless charge. Meanwhile, the laughter was good for morale and his men would need all the courage they could muster when they realised just how huge was the Saxon horde, just how badly out-manned they were.

The burst of jollity did not last long.

The Saxon vanguard came quickly into view and Arthur's men sobered rapidly at the sight of the massed shields, the forest of spears, at the sight of all those following on behind, rank upon rank without apparent end.

Cash sucked in his breath as the full extent of the Saxon army was revealed. From his vantage point on the ridge he could see just how vast were Aelle's forces and just how puny Arthur's numbers appeared in comparison. To Cash it seemed that the battle must be over before it began, that the men from Camelot must instantly be swallowed up and devoured, leaving no trace. Worse, it was clear that Arthur was trapped. Before him were thousands of Saxons. Behind him the hill dropped away bounded by the steep cwm on the one hand, the heights of the ridge on the other, and ending in thick, all but impenetrable forest. There was no escape. Arthur must fight where he stood whether he wished to or not, and once the battle began it could only end with his utter defeat. To Cash it was clear that disaster was only the flash of a sword away.

He turned to Lancelot beside him who, strangely, seemed calm and unconcerned, as did the others of his detachment, a squadron that now looked pitifully small against the horde marching towards them. A horse stamped and a harness jingled, but otherwise the men were still, stern-faced and watchful, but motionless with no hint that wisdom must surely decree they abandon their comrades below and slip away to safety on the other side of the ridge. It was all they could do, Cash thought. It was logical, imperative even, that they escape and live to fight another day. Perhaps Arthur would survive and unless these men here remained free, there would be no one to rescue him.

Cash opened his mouth to speak, to say what he was thinking, that they must flee, now, but Lancelot forestalled him.

"Cassian," he said quietly. "Time for you to leave. Go join the other squires. And you will stay with them. Whatever happens, you will stay with them."

"But..." Cash began.

"Now!" And although Cash knew Lancelot had held a soft spot for him ever since the night of the bridal feast, it was clear that he would brook no further argument. Cash edged Taliesin away and back, but only far enough so that he was out of Lancelot's immediate view.

Aelle was not a king to stand on ceremony. He rapidly assessed the enemy, several hundred but vastly outnumbered by the strength of his own forces, and he calculated that if these relative few of Arthur's men could be swept away then in all probability the city of Isca Silurum or Caerleon or Camelot, or whatever it was that they chose to call it these days, would lie open before him.

He swept his gaze around the hilltop one more time and then ordered his whole army onward, intending to crush Arthur with one great blow. His men, however, betrayed him. They saw that the numbers of the enemy before them were relatively few and that the chances for glory correspondingly diminished. There simply wouldn't be sufficient enemy warriors to go round. The Saxons began to trot, anxious not to be left out, and then to run and then to race, losing all cohesion. Spears from the Britons came whistling down on them in sheets but they barely broke stride to hurdle fallen comrades or to hurl their own javelins, such was the pressure of their own men rushing on behind them. And then they were crashing into the front rank of Arthur's foot soldiers but in dribs and drabs, not the one, crushing mass Aelle had intended. As more and more of them arrived they slashed and stabbed and heaved with their shields, anxious to come to grips with the enemy, except that they now seemed to be melting away. A carnyx sounded and there, suddenly, were the Britons, not just melting but fleeing for their lives, running as if the hounds of Hades were at their heels. Which indeed they were.

The Saxons gave a great roar, a roar of victory about to be consummated and then they too were racing down the far side of the hill in full, careless pursuit, with only one thought in their heads: catch a Briton or two before there were none left to plunder, to enslave.

Cary and Pythagoras flying back from Snaw-dun were still high up when they saw Arthur's army at last, and then the Saxons charge. The Camelot men broke and ran with the Saxon pursuers apparently herding them down the tongue of land bordered by a cwm on one side and the ridge on the other. In another two minutes the Britons would be pinned against the forest. It was clearly catastrophe in the making.

Cary had one thought and one thought only.

"Cash," she shouted in the dragon's ear. "We have to find Cash. We have to save him." Pythagoras wasted no time on words but dropped into a steep dive, heading straight for the conflict. It was then that the miracle happened, the miracle that Arthur had planned with such forethought, arranged with meticulous care and timed to perfection. A distant carnyx sounded and the ridge erupted into surging life.

The Saxons, massed and jumbled, effectively leaderless and in total disarray, racing along intent only on rampage, were caught utterly exposed and unprepared.

Arthur's mounted warriors, all eighty of them, eighty armoured warriors on great horses, eighty warriors armed with lance and sword and shield and a thirst for vengeance, eighty warriors and one squire on a pony joining the charge in total defiance of his orders, swept down from the ridge at full gallop and carved through the Saxons' flank like a hot knife through butter left in the sun.

The shock of the impact could be heard for a league and sent what seemed like every bird in the forest wheeling into the air in alarm. After that one single collision, the rest of the battle was never in doubt. The Saxons, who had never so much as dreamed that horses might be used thus, were stunned into immobility and then shattered on the instant. That one irresistible charge down the hillside catching them unawares and as vulnerable as babes was destructive beyond Arthur's wildest imaginings. Aelle's army disintegrated into pockets of frightened men and as Arthur's cavalry wheeled about in tight formation and drove into them again and again they broke completely. Then Arthur's men-at-arms also stopped their flight and turned to join the fray in solid phalanx. Saxons in panic, caught between the hammer and the anvil with nowhere to go, dropped their weapons and trampled their comrades in a desperate attempt to escape. Flight became rout, rout became massacre, and massacre became outright slaughter.

Arthur, who from the beginning had been in the forefront of his foot soldiers to keep them steady, and Lancelot, who had led the cavalry charge, finally met in the middle of the field. Both were unhurt. They gripped forearms.

"Aelle?" Lancelot said.

"Dead," Arthur said. "He fell before I could reach him. I had a bone to pick with him."

"Never mind," Lancelot said. "It's still a great victory, a victory that will ring down the ages. The battle of Mynydd Baedan."

"I wonder what Geoffrey of Monmouth will call it," Arthur said with a rueful smile. "Mons Baddon perhaps?"

"Look there," Lancelot said suddenly and pointed south towards the coast. A great plume of smoke was rising to the sky.

"Leodegrance," Arthur said. "He will have seized what ships he can man and is burning the rest. I doubt we'll hear much more from the Saxons any time soon."

"But where's Cash?" Cary said, frantic with worry. She and Pythagoras were surveying the battlefield, a sight so desolate now that the fighting was done that it made Cary shrivel inside.

"I saw him in that first charge," Pythagoras said. "At least I think it was him. I can't think of any other squire stupid enough... But after that, I lost him..."

"He must be somewhere," Cary said. She was having great difficulty holding back the tears.

"Look," Pythagoras said. "Over there. Is that his pony by that bush? Is that Taliesin?"

The two began to run, picking their way through the grim remains of the fighting. As they got closer they saw that it was indeed Taliesin standing patiently. And then, there was Cash, sitting on the ground, holding his arm, his face white. He turned his head as they approached.

"Sorry," he said. "I came off somehow. I think I've broken it."

Cary stopped. She stood very still for a long moment and then marched round in front of him.

"I'm never speaking to you ever again," she stormed and then broke into a flood of tears.

"Phht. So that's all right then," Pythagoras said to Cash and winked.

"You ought to be grateful," Cash said with exasperation. "Not carrying on like a pork chop." They had finally arrived back in their chamber at Camelot and Cary had suddenly decided that she was speaking to Cash again, after all, shouting at least.

"Grateful!" she raged.

"If I hadn't broken my arm..."

"You should have been killed, charging on to a battlefield like that against thousands of Saxons..."

"If I hadn't broken my arm," Cash continued patiently, "they'd be sending us home, tomorrow. You know what Arthur's like. He's worried about our parents. Now they can't, send us home I mean, not until my arm is mended."

Cary opened her mouth to do some more shouting and suddenly thought better of it.

"See?" Cash said.

The corners of Cary's mouth turned up.

"And if they sent us home then we'd miss all the fun..." Cash meant the huge victory celebration that was being planned.

Cary smiled.

"But don't ever do it again," she said. "I can't imagine what mother will say."

"She doesn't have to know," Cash said anxiously. "Please..."

Cary looked at him consideringly.

"That depends," she said.

"Phht," Pythagoras said to him, with a most expressive burst of flame. "Now you really are in trouble."

Midsummer arrived, a balmy midsummer, the way midsummer is supposed to be but so rarely is. And with it arrived a ship from Leodegrance. On board was a great object shrouded in wrapping. Camelot immediately fell into a fever of speculation as to what it could possibly be. Many attempts were made to bribe the seamen on the ship to tell but they had all been sworn to secrecy on pain of death. When eventually the object, twice the height of a man, was actually rolled down a specially reinforced gangplank and then all the way to the amphitheatre, the guessing became wild beyond belief. It was wheeled to the centre and then set on its side by a great crowd of helpers. Of course, they wanted to remove the wrapping there and then, but Arthur wouldn't let them. The guessing intensified and the final consensus was that it was a giant cheese, big enough for the

whole city to share, though one faction held doggedly to the idea that it was obviously a cake, as who had ever heard of a celebration cheese.

Lancelot, of course, knew the secret as he had made the original request to King Leodegrance, a request that Leodegrance now felt privileged to honour, Arthur having proved himself a king of kings. Cash and Cary, while not exactly knowing but with the advantage of hindsight, or foresight, or whatever it was, also had no difficulty in guessing what it must be. They too, however, were pleased to keep the secret.

Came at last the day of the solstice. It dawned bright and clear and with the whole of Camelot and the surrounding countryside en fete, people streamed into the amphitheatre from an early hour, seeking the best seats. The entertainments began soon afterwards, jugglers and conjurers, singers and dancers, mummers and players, and there was food and drink in abundance, all provided by Arthur as a thank-offering for their deliverance from the Saxons.

At noon precisely, massed carnyx sounded a grand fanfare and the arena was cleared and fell quiet. The great round object still sat in the centre, still shrouded and even more mysterious.

A second fanfare blared forth. Then in grand procession, led by heralds, Arthur and his foremost warriors entered the stadium, all in shining armour and blazoned surcoats, all mounted on the finest horses, all armed with sword, lance and shield, pennants snapping in the breeze. They were followed by the rest of the army, the victors of Mynydd Baedan. It was a brave, brave showing and as they circled the perimeter, the people rose as one to cheer the heroes who against such odds had saved Camelot. In the rear, drawn in a chariot, came Cary and the six maidens of the labyrinth. Beside them rode Cash on Taliesin, his left arm still in a sling, now rather unnecessary except as a badge of honour and a guarantee against being sent home too soon. Cary was dressed in Pythagoras's wondrous silk robes with the dragon amulet about her neck. Cash wore livery and, of course, Angharad.

The only person not there was Myrddin and to those who had known him best, his absence was like a missing tooth, no longer quite so painful but impossible to forget, just as it was impossible to forget that without his sacrifice in the battle of the dragons doubtless they all would have been doomed.

Arthur circled the stadium twice, pausing each time to formally acknowledge Gwenhwyfar and her ladies in the royal box, then led the way out to the centre. Attendants ran on to the grass and with a final fanfare ringing across the ground, dragged away the covering to unveil the mystery. A great sigh went up and then a buzz of excited comment.

What stood revealed was a vast table, a round table, a table of marvellous workmanship, carved and polished, inlaid with gold and precious stone, exquisite both in design and execution. It was a thing of absolute splendour.

Arthur, himself wearing the Amulet of Annwfn, waited for the noise to die away and then began to speak.

"My people," he said. "People of Camelot." His voice carried easily in the skilled acoustic the Romans had constructed so long before. "Today marks the end of the Saxon oppression of our lands. No doubt the Saxons will continue to make war, they cannot help themselves, but never again shall they enslave us, never again shall they steal the hearths from our homes, never again shall we cringe to their whips. We are free! Each last one of us is free!"

The crowd roared and kept on roaring. At last Arthur raised his arms for quiet.

"And so that we may defend our freedom," he said when he was able to continue, "so that the weak may be protected, so that women and children may be safe in their homes, so that the law will be upheld, the guilty brought to account, the unjust punished, so that no man need fear treachery or murder, and last, so that the state need fear no treason, I give you the Round Table, the dower gift of our ally King Leodegrance. And I also give you the knights who, as judged worthy, I shall appoint its guardians, equal in all things."

Again the crowd roared, but this time the noise quickly descended to a buzz of speculation and comment.

Arthur turned and called to his escort.

"Llwh Llenlleawg, Peredur, Cai Hir, Bedwyr, Gwalchmai. Come forward."

The five warriors looked at each other uncertainly, dismounted and marched up in line abreast.

"Squire Cassian," Arthur called.

Cash sat frozen, quite unable to move.

"Go on," Cary hissed. "Go on Cash. You have to go. Everyone's waiting."

At last, Cash managed to slide from Taliesin's back, and he too went forward to stand at the end of the line.

"Kneel," Arthur commanded. "Present me your swords."

Llwh Llenlleawg was first. He drew his weapon and offered it to Arthur hilt first and Arthur smacked him smartly on each shoulder.

"Arise, Sir Lancelot," he said. And then he went down the line, investing each a knight in turn.

"Arise, Sir Perceval... Arise, Sir Kay... Arise, Sir Bedivere... Arise, Sir Gawaine..."

Cash couldn't believe it, could not believe it was going to happen, but there was Arthur standing in front of him, smiling down at him.

"No sire," Cash stammered. "Not me. I'm not a knight."

"You forget," Arthur said. "But I never shall. Had it not been for you, I would be dead thrice over. I can think of no one more worthy. Give me your sword."

In a trance, Cash drew Angharad and held it forth. He felt Arthur take it and then a light buffet on each shoulder.

"Arise, Sir Cassian," Arthur said. "And wherever through the ages you travel, may you always find glory in battle."

The king and each knight then marched to his place at the table, lowered the points of their drawn swords in an arc to the centre and stood graven, the first of the Knights of the Round Table. The crowd gave a final roar that seemed to last forever.

It was time to go. Cash's arm had healed cleanly and their return could be delayed no longer. Arthur had wanted to give them a farewell feast but the twins said no. It would make it all too heart-breaking. Instead they spent the day wandering about Camelot, quietly saying goodbye to their friends, savouring one last time the sights and sounds of the flourishing city, so different to when they had first seen it, so different to their own town.

As the sun went down, they returned to their chamber and changed out of their Celtic clothes for the mundane stuff of the 21st century. Somehow their jeans seemed to have shrunk and were uncomfortably tight, not to say breezy about the ankles. Lying on a bed were Cary's silks, carefully folded, and the dragon amulet together with Cash's sword and dagger.

"It's like Annwfn," Pythagoras had warned them. "If you take the smallest thing with you, you can never return."

"And you will come for us," Cary had said. "Promise you'll come for us, Py."

"If it is possible, my lady," Pythagoras had whispered and despite all Cary's impassioned pleading would say no more.

"At least you'll visit me," Cary had demanded but Pythagoras had been unable to promise even that.

Cash touched his sword one last time, the sword that in the end had made all possible, and then he Cary made their way through the castle and up to the topmost of the new turrets where Pythagoras was waiting for them, and Arthur.

"We have nothing for Arthur," Cary suddenly said at the door. "We should have got him a farewell gift."

"I thought of that," Cash said. "But he has everything anyway. I thought we could give him this, something from our time."

"What?"

Cash pulled his champion cats-eye from his pocket.

"A marble? Cash we can't give the king a marble."

"Think about it," Cash said. "It's unique. Here it's unique. There isn't another one like it for hundreds and hundreds of years."

They emerged from the stairs and Cash held it out to Arthur.

"Here," he said. "To remember us."

Arthur took the offering and examined it carefully.

"I can't take this," he said staring at the blue-green vanes suspended in the glass. "I've never seen the like. It must be precious beyond imagining. And I need nothing to remind me of you and my lady."

"Please," Cash said. "We want you to have it."

Arthur embraced him and then Cary. She began to weep.

"I don't want to go," she said thickly. "I don't want to go..."

Pythagoras touched her gently on the shoulder.

"It's time," he said and she clung to him. Cash took hold of his other wing...

Cary stirred, unwilling to wake up. It was cold and she snuggled far down beneath the quilt. Why was it so cold, she wondered? Freezing. It was summer wasn't it? Wasn't it supposed to be summer?

All at once Cary left out of bed, threw on her dressing gown and raced across the landing to Cash's room. Ichabod watched her with amazement.

"Woof?" he said with a questioning tone.

"Cash," Cary said urgently. "Wake up! Wake up! You must wake up."

Cash groaned and regarded his sister with profound irritation. Then his eyes began to widen.

"Did you...?" he said

"Did you...?"

"Um..." Cash hesitated. "Dragons...?"

"Camelot...?" Cary answered.

They looked at each other in amazement.

"Then it's true," Cash said.

"Or we both dreamed the same thing."

Cash jumped out of bed and went to the cupboard. His jacket was filthy, a knee was gaping in his jeans.

They rushed back to Cary's room. This time Ichabod growled, not at all happy with such strange goings-on.

Cary's clothes, too, were much the worse for wear. She took down her jacket and looked at it wonderingly, then something impelled her to put her hand in a pocket. When she pulled it out it was full of white rose petals, crushed but still faintly perfumed.

Cary looked at them in shock and then began to cry brokenly, utterly miserable.

"Why would he do that?" she sobbed. "Why...? Why...?"

Cash understood. Pythagoras... It could only have been Pythagoras... a rose from Camelot to ensure they could never return. He found Cary a handkerchief and then put his arm round her.

"He knows we can never go back," Cash said. "And this is his way of telling you, us."

"But I love him," Cary said.

"He loves you. That's why he did it like this. He couldn't bear to part any other way."

Chapter Eleven

It was the weekend, so breakfast was late. Their mother, Gwendolyn, and their father, Bill, were at the table when the twins went down with Ichabod galumphing behind. A Newfoundland descending steep stairs bears a strong resemblance to an avalanche.

"Help yourselves," Gwendolyn said, kissing them absently. Bill was reading the paper and glanced up. He was about to grunt amiably and go back to it, when he suddenly stopped.

"You two have caught the sun," he said. "You ought to be more careful."

"What?" Gwendolyn exclaimed. "What sun? It's winter." She swung round to examine them.

"You have caught the sun," she said, amazed. "What on earth have you been doing? And you've grown. Inches. Overnight. Look at you! Look at them, Bill! And why is your hair so long ...?"

Bill put down his paper to stare. Cash caught his father's eye and winked.

"It happens," Bill said. "That's what kids do, they grow." He gave Cash a very old-fashioned look and went back to the paper.

"Well, I don't know what we're going to do about all your clothes," Gwendolyn said. "Your school uniforms certainly won't fit any more. We'll have to go shopping..."

"Look at this," Bill interrupted. "Look here, Cash. This knife is exactly the same as the one I gave you..."

The twins went to peer over his shoulders. There, jumping out of the page at them was a double-column picture of Cash's knife. All three of them began reading the story:

Reuters, Cardiff. Volunteer archaeologists continuing excavations of Roman ruins at Caerleon have discovered a modern pocket knife buried with human remains that have been carbon dated to the fifth century. The knife was apparently wrapped in linen cloth, shreds of which still survive.

Professor Oliver Holmes of Cambridge University, who is supervising the dig, said the find was a complete mystery. On the one hand, it was clearly impossible for the knife to date from that period, but on the other hand there was no evidence of it having been planted.

Prof. Holmes said that "salting a dig" was by no means unknown in archaeology but as he had been closely involved with all stages of this particular excavation he had no idea how it could have been achieved so convincingly, nor why anyone should bother.

"Trahaearn must have had the knife buried with him when he died," Cash whispered to Cary, automatically speaking Welsh.

Gwendolyn pounced.

"Why are you speaking that funny Welsh?" she demanded. "And why are you so fluent all of a sudden? Even I can't understand you."

"Um... We've been practising," Cash said.

"Cash, go and get your knife," Bill said. "I want to compare it to the picture."

Cash looked desperately at Cary.

"He doesn't have it any more," Cary said. "He was too embarrassed to say."

Bill swung round to stare searchingly at his son.

"Is there something you two want to tell us?" Gwendolyn demanded.

"No mother," Cary said firmly, her eyes wide.

"Nothing," Cash said. "Nothing at all."

As soon as they could, the twins escaped, got their bicycles and rode into town. The librarian was touched by their sudden interest and willingly bent the rules so they could borrow every book the library had on King Arthur, all at once.

They hurried home and buried themselves in Cary's room. Fortunately the weather chose to shut in again so they had the perfect excuse for spending all their free time over the next days reading.

It was most confusing. There were so many different versions of the legend with locations ranging all over Wales and England, even Scotland and Europe, that it was almost impossible to get a clear picture of what might have happened after they left Camelot, but one thing was certain. It had all ended badly. The twins found it depressing in the extreme but at the last, Cash summed it up for both of them.

"Well," he said. "At least the Round Table, Camelot, worked for a while. Maybe next time it will work a bit longer, and the time after that a bit longer again. If people can ever learn, that is..."

Time passed and Christmas was suddenly close upon them.

"Your great-grandmother has asked to see you," Gwendolyn announced one morning. "She says she has gifts for you."

"Oh no," Cary said. "Not another dress..."

"Cary!"

"Must we?" Cash groaned.

"She is a very old lady," Bill said severely. "And you will show her respect. Understand me now. She has asked to see you alone and you will show her respect."

Cary remembered something, something important. Great-grandmother lived outside a tiny village, and the tiny village was at the foot of Mount Snowdon. She nudged Cash, who in the uncanny way of twins, divined her meaning. It would be good for Cary to see the mountain again if nothing else. They both abruptly ceased protesting.

Bill and Gwendolyn looked at each other. It had been a worrying time for them. Clearly, something had happened with the twins. Not only had they grown

outrageously, literally overnight, but they were also startlingly more mature all of a sudden, never mind the fact that they seemed incapable of speaking to each other in anything but archaic Welsh and so fluently that it was impossible for anyone else to understand. And then there was the matter of Cash's knife. Bill had let it pass at the time, but the more he thought about it, the more certain he was that the knife in the newspaper had been the exact same one that he had given to his son. There had been a scratch on the hilt, just visible in the picture. Cash, early on, had managed to scratch the hilt of his own knife and had been upset until Bill had told him that it was a tool and that tools were to be used, not kept in a museum, where undoubtedly the newspaper knife now resided in some bottom drawer. The irony was uncomfortable.

The car stopped at the end of the long drive.

"We'll go and have lunch at the pub," Bill said. "Back in a couple of hours. Give her our love."

The twins got out and stood there looking up at the mountain as the car drove away. The front door of the cottage swung open.

"I wonder what happened to Nimue," Cary said, slipping automatically into Welsh. "I never saw her again."

A cramped figure moved slowly to stand in the door.

"Yes, you did," a voice said. "Yes you do."

It came to Cary all at once in a blinding flash. Nimue had seemed so familiar rising out of Glaslyn because indeed she was.

"But..." she began.

"No. I'm not really your great-grandmother, though generation after generation of this family have thought that I was. Lives are so short, memories are so short, and I have endured for so long. Come in. Come in."

"But you're old," Cary said, without thinking that she was probably being incredibly rude. "The books all say you're immortal. How can you be old?"

"Immortality is very tiring. Exceptionally tiring. A burden that gets heavier and heavier. Come in," Nimue said again.

The living room of the cottage, Cary realised, now bore a startling resemblance to the chamber beneath the lake, the same trophy heads and weapons, even if the furniture was relatively modern.

Nimue was bent nearly double and could only shuffle. Her face was so wrinkled and crevassed that it might have been Snowdon itself. She gestured to a table standing alone. Cash and Cary gasped simultaneously and moved forward.

There on the polished wood lay Cary's ceremonial robes and the dragon amulet. There lay the sword Angharad and the matching dagger. There, also, was a common glass marble.

"King Arthur made me swear to see that these objects would be returned to their rightful owners, which of course I could not do until you had first possessed them. And that has taken a very long time indeed. Too long. Far too long. The prophecy has now come full circle. My task is fulfilled and I may depart. Long have I wished to go."

Neither Cash nor Cary could think of a thing to say. A tear slipped down Cary's cheek.

"And I have a message," Nimue said at last, breaking the silence. "Pythagoras sends his dear love to his lady... Good with silk that dragon, but no judge of taffeta."

The end