

The King is Dying

*King Uther is dying.
I will do anything to make sure
Arthur rules Caerleon after him!*

Metal struck metal with a crash that sent birds flying from the treetops in panic.

'One for me!' shouted Arthur as his sword thumped Cai's ribs. A cheer went up from some of the warriors standing nearby. The rest just stood with their arms crossed, watching silently.

I glared at them. I hadn't realised how many supporters Taran had. Arthur will be king when his father dies, if all goes well. But Taran is the strongest warlord. The Council could choose him to lead the kingdom, if they wanted.

Cai leaped to one side, raised the long sword and connected with Arthur's shoulder. Arthur staggered and the birds scattered again.

'My point!' Cai grinned in triumph. As Arthur's cousin, he tried twice as hard to win. Though small he was quick on his feet, except when he tripped himself up.

'Careful!' I called to Arthur, ignoring the warrior's sniggers. I knew the swords were blunted but they could still wound, even with padded tunics and fish-scale armour.

Arthur thrust neatly past Cai's shield and knocked him flat on his back in the dirt.

'Arthur, good!' Bem shouted.

I smiled at Bem, who was perched next to me

on the stone wall by the field. He was born with a weakness all down his right side, which gives him a lopsided look. No one thinks about it, he's simply cheerful singing Bem, who's always right in the middle of everything.

I clapped wildly and others joined in as Cai jumped up, ready to fight again.

'Time for lessons, Arthur!'

'Ooo, better go Arthur,' jeered a warrior. 'Can't keep your *little sister* waiting.'

'No, no,' Bem chided the warriors.

'It's all right, I'm used to it.'

I jumped down from the wall and busied myself scratching the ears of Stinker, the huge shaggy brown mongrel who never left Bem's side. He'll eat anything smaller than a barrel, which makes him have farts so strong you can almost see them. He licked my hand and let one out now. I moved quickly aside, joining Arthur who was leaving the training field.

People think it's odd the king's son treats me like a sister. I can't say why, it just happened. My father was a warlord, one of the strongest and bravest men among all the tribes of Caerleon. After he was killed in battle three years ago, my mother shut herself away in the Abbey on the High Hill. I can go and see her any time I want, but she never leaves the compound. I think there's a rule that the nuns and monks must stay there.

'I didn't mark the hour,' Arthur said, pushing his blond hair off his forehead.

A servant darted forward to slip the heavy armour and padding over his head. Underneath,

his simple belted tunic showed how slender he was. Thin, almost. As usual his tunic was dirty and fraying at the edges. I thought if he dressed more like a king's son the people would respect him, but he always said respect had to be earned, not snatched at greedily by wearing fine clothes.

'I won!' Cai shouted.

He threw his sword in the dirt and turned a cartwheel. He forgot about the weight of his armour and overbalanced, landing flat on his back. The men broke out laughing and Cai's dark face turned as red as a painted vase. He obviously had the wind knocked out of him and made a few feeble swimming motions like a tortoise turned on its shell. Arthur and I couldn't help giggling.

'You did not win! Arthur clearly beat you!' I added for his ears alone, 'You need to make every win count, let the men see your skill.'

'You worry too much, Little Sister. That was just for fun. When we train properly we use wooden swords; they're twice as heavy.'

'I'm not really 'little' any more, you know!'

Arthur grinned at me. Until this year he was a head taller but I was catching up with him, even though he's a year older than me, almost fifteen. He never tries to make the warriors stop teasing me about being his sister or wearing tunic and trousers all the time instead of the long skirts of a woman. I guess he knows I can take care of myself!

Cai got to his feet and sulked along behind us as we walked down the hill past the war-house, a whole complex of buildings where the warriors lived and trained and stored their weapons.

'You didn't see the whole thing,' Arthur added. 'We were counting points. Cai had ten to my seven, but tomorrow it's my turn.'

I was wasting my breath, as usual.

'We'll sit for a while with Magnus to keep him happy,' he said, 'then I want you to meet us at our place on the High Hill. There's something I have to show you.'

'All right—what is it?' I noticed how serious he looked all of a sudden.

'Later!'

'You're practising with the wooden sword as well, aren't you?'

'Of course!'

'In battle, everything will depend on your skill.'

'An hour each day, without fail. I can kill a man any day with a bit of oak!' Arthur grinned and his eyes sparkled. They looked almost green now, but they changed with his mood.

He simply wouldn't take it seriously. The whole warrior training was an amusing game to him, and to Cai. Why couldn't they understand that Arthur's future, and even that of Caerleon kingdom, depended on him being a better warrior than anyone else? I'd never thought the Council would pick Taran over the king's own son, but now I was starting to wonder.

The villa below us shimmered in the hot summer sun. It was a large square of rooms around a central courtyard, with buildings such as stables and sheds for carpenter and blacksmith outside the square. The river Usk flowed between the king's villa and the town of Caerleon, where the Second Legion had

been quartered years ago. After the Romans left, some of their buildings were dismantled and the stones carried across to build the villa compound and wall around it.

‘Come on, hurry up, we’re late for our lesson!’ The boys were dragging their feet as we entered the courtyard by the small east gate and crossed to Magnus’ room.

‘Greetings, pupils!’

Magnus stood in the door of his work-room, his smile making the lines in his face look even deeper. He was the king’s advisor, easily the cleverest man in the whole of Caerleon kingdom.

‘You are late. Dare I ask why?’

‘We were at training.’

‘And you, Vibiana? Are you also training to be a warrior?’

‘She’s our keeper,’ Cai said. ‘We’d never get anywhere on time if we didn’t have her to boss us!’

I crossed my eyes at him when Magnus wasn’t looking and we followed him into the room, a combination of sleeping chamber, study and science laboratory.

Magnus tries his best to keep Roman language and customs alive, which is why he lets me join in the lessons, even though I’m only a servant girl. The Romans left over a hundred years ago and I reckon in another hundred we’ll have forgotten all about them, but not if Magnus has his way.

We worked hard for the rest of the morning but I hardly felt tired, unless I looked at the exhausted faces of Cai and Arthur. I held out my wax tablet and glanced up at Magnus.

'Good?'

'Good, Vibiana,' he said with a smile. 'You progress every day. Boys, take note! You will have to work hard to keep up with her.'

Arthur sighed and pushed the hair off of his sweaty forehead. Cai was bending over his tablet, his tongue sticking in his cheek and his dark hair nearly touching the wooden frame. I felt a bit sorry for them; they didn't think learning to read and write Latin was fun, the way I did.

'Have you begun your record-book?' Magnus asked me.

'Yes. I work on it at night when your mother sleeps.'

Magnus had told me write down what happens to me each day, or things I'm thinking about, to practice writing in Latin. He gave me some thin sheets of wood and a quill and sooty ink. I'm hiding the sheets in the chest where I keep my winter cloak. Not that anyone will want to read it. My mother doesn't care what I do; she just sits all day in her cell at the Abbey, praying.

'It's hard work!' I added.

'Your hand will accustom to forming the letters.'

'I mean, it's hard to think what to say. I want to write important things, not just *Today I brushed my hair.*'

'For you, that would be an event!'

I scowled at him and untied the string I use to keep my unruly hair out of my face, then tied it again more tightly. He was one to talk! His hair was like dark earth strewn with snow, and stood out in every direction.

'Now tell me: what is the vocative of *Brutus*?'

'*Brute*.'

'Good! Arthur, it's your turn....'

The lesson continued. After another hour I looked up from my tablet and gazed out the window. From this room at the front of the villa there was a view all the way down to the river and the ruined Roman theatre beyond. Suddenly I realised all the shadows were short and thought of Magnus' mother.

'I must go! Your mother needs me to wheel her out of the sunshine.'

Magnus sighed and nodded. 'Just think, I had hopes of making a scholar out of you!' He frowned, making the lines in his face look like furrows of a ploughed field.

I looked closely and saw his eyes sparkle.

'Go on then! I'll have to make do with these two.'

I heard Cai and Arthur stifling groans as I ran from the room, dodging bottles and jars heaped everywhere on the tile floor.

I never can quite figure Magnus out. He's a bit mysterious and I sometimes wonder what he gets up to when the rest of us are asleep. Especially, what he does with the huge globe of green glass which hangs suspended by heavy ropes over his work bench. I've asked him about it more than once, but he never gives a direct answer.

Sure enough, Zea was sound asleep in the hot sun. I felt guilty. I'm Zea's personal maid now, and her welfare is my responsibility. I had left her in the shade of the largest apple tree, one of many

fruit trees which border the beds of dog-roses and vegetables in the centre of the courtyard. It was where we usually sat in the mornings, while she told me stories from her childhood or from the Scriptures. Arthur used to join us most days, but he's grown out of that now.

Zea was old, the oldest person I'd ever known and not even as strong as a sparrow. Magnus had made her a rolling chair out of an old wicker war chariot stuffed with cushions, but of course she could not wheel herself. She depended on me to do it.

Now here she was, baking in the noon heat. I moved behind the chair to grab the handles and she woke with a start.

'Oh! Vibiana, it's you.' She peered up at me and smiled. I touched the enamel clip which held her grey hair in a knot, and scorched my hand.

'You'll catch fire!' I exclaimed, wheeling her across the yard towards her room on the other side of the court. 'Summer should be over, but the days are still hot. You should rest.'

'I already have. No, come and sit with me a while, and I will tell you my dream.'

This was a game we often played, to see who had the best dream. Zea usually won. Most nights I slept like a stone, so I didn't dream.

I guided the chair into the doorway of her chamber and across the bright tiled floor to her usual place by the window. From there she could look out on all the comings and goings in the vast courtyard which was the heart of the villa compound. There wasn't much that escaped Zea's eye! I was thinking

I should apologise for leaving her to roast in the sun when she smiled up at me, her face wrinkling like a dried walnut.

‘You did no harm. My old bones need the heat.’

‘Grandmother, you always read my mind.’ I smiled, settling down on the cushioned couch next to her. Of course she wasn’t really my grandmother, though sometimes I wished she was.

The light went from her face. ‘I had a dream that troubled me greatly.’

Something made my heart squeeze tight. Zea rarely had bad dreams. She always said she was so close to Heaven, it filled her thoughts even at night.

‘It concerns you both. You and Arthur.’

A Bad Dream

Grown-ups have no sense! Why did we have to wait days and days to learn about the lost torc and the challenge?

I waited patiently for Zea to collect her thoughts. I knew she was simply thinking out the best words. Her mind was clear, and she often saw things with her heart the rest of us missed.

‘It was just now, when I dozed in the sunshine,’ she began. ‘At first it was as many of my dreams these days: I am walking, fit and with two good legs, up a sunny hillside. The light has a golden shimmer, a resonance we do not see on this earth. On each side are flowers I have never seen before, of pure clear colours which sparkle in the brightness. Up ahead I see you and Arthur, climbing high in the meadow.’

She paused and her lips trembled. I moved close to her and took her hand.

‘Then a cloud moves across the sun. Not just a dark cloud, but thick with blackness, somehow evil. The cloud descends from the sky, moving towards you. I begin to run, faster and faster, but I cannot reach you in time. The black force envelops you first, then Arthur as well...’

She clasped my hand tightly. I saw tears form in the corners of her eyes.

‘What does it mean, Grandmother?’

‘I should not have told you. Hear me child, a dream may mean nothing. Usually our dreams are

only cast-offs of the thoughts, like a snake shedding its old skin. I was wrong to worry you with it.' She shifted in her chair, causing the wicker to creak.

'Perhaps I will sleep after all, Vibiana.'

I wheeled her over to the chamber behind the woven curtain, helped her into her bed. As I pulled the soft woollen coverlet up to her chin, she smiled at me. 'Always remember, God goes with us and will guide us through whatever comes, if we ask him to.'

I said goodbye and left her to join Cai and Arthur at the High Hill, above the Abbey. From ancient times people had worshipped their gods in the wood there, but we never went into the wood. It was dark and mysterious, filled with echoes of the old ways. They say the Druids sacrificed children there long ago, and that severed heads of their victims once hung in the trees.

I climbed the hill to our meeting point, an outcropping of rock just below the wood. I couldn't put Zea's dream out of my mind. It wasn't the dream which upset me, but the way she reacted to it. She was usually so strong! What could it mean, this sudden weakness the dream left her with?

Although I loved hearing Zea tell Scripture stories, I felt uneasy when she talked to me about God. I don't know why; of course I was a believer, like everyone. But she seemed to have a faith that was stronger than anything I ever felt.

Cai and Arthur were waiting for me on top of the flat rock. Cai stood up and waved. Arthur

was seated, holding what looked like a scrap of parchment in his hand. I thought he looked worried, which was quite unlike him.

'Finally!' Cai said. 'How long can it take, to wheel an old woman across a courtyard?'

'I had to do something else.' I'd tell Arthur the dream later, when Cai wasn't around.

'What's that?'

Arthur held out the parchment. I sat next to him and took it from his hand. It was stained with age and the markings were faded. The sketch showed a neck-ring such as warriors wore, a circlet of metal like a twisted snake.

'A torc. Your father wore one into battle, when he was –' I stopped short of saying, when he was healthy and led our warriors well.

'Yes, but not this one. Look closely.'

I peered at the drawing and saw that the rounded ends which would clasp around the throat, were formed into some kind of animal. 'Dragons?'

Arthur nodded. 'The symbol of our people. I found this parchment in my father's chamber last night, when I sat by his bed. Someone had left it on his table. I thought I had heard of it.'

'Go on, tell her! You are the slowest storyteller I know!'

'It's the golden torc of our legends,' Arthur said.

'Oh yes, the ruler wears it to battle, and victory is assured. It's been lost for ages, according to the old tales.'

‘Maybe it’s more than a tale.’ Arthur heaved a sigh and leaned back against a boulder. ‘I showed this to my mother, and you won’t guess what she told me. There was a meeting of the Council, and they decided whoever could find the torc would rule after my father’s death.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Who will be king.’

‘You will, of course!’

‘That’s what I thought. But now my step-sister has come up with this wild idea about finding the torc.’

Morcanta! I could just picture it: the woman with her long flame-red hair worn in the old style, parted in the centre and bound by a cord around her forehead. She’d lecture the Council of Elders in that haughty way of hers, and they’d do whatever she asked.

She had taken over the running of the villa several months ago, once the king became so ill that the queen refused to leave his bedside. I’d had several encounters with her. It was clear she didn’t think a servant girl should be treated like a friend by Prince Arthur.

‘Can you believe it?’ Cai was fuming. ‘The Council met days ago, and no one even bothered to let Arthur know!’

‘I’m sure my mother would have mentioned it, but you know my father’s been much worse lately.’

I nodded. Even from outside in the courtyard I sometimes heard the king coughing harshly in his

upstairs chamber.

‘What did your mother think about it?’

‘She told them I was a good warrior already, even if I’m barely fifteen. I don’t think they believed her. Taran said the torc was just an old tale. Of course, he wants the kingdom for himself.’

‘The whole thing is ridiculous!’ I said. ‘Even if the old stories are true, there’s no way to find a neck-ring that’s been lost for hundreds of years.’

‘The point is,’ Cai said impatiently, ‘guess who was the person just before Arthur, to sit by the king’s bedside?’

‘Uh, I don’t know – Morcanta?’

‘Clever girl!’ Arthur said.

‘You think she left the drawing there?’

‘I’m sure of it.’

‘But why?’

‘Why do you think!’ Cai said. ‘She wants to find the torc so she can rule the kingdom herself. Maybe she’s found it already!’

Arthur nodded. ‘That could be why she brought up the idea. I’ve never thought much about ruling the people – I guess I just figured it would happen one day in the distant future. But the idea that my step-sister might grab power for herself –’

I leaped to my feet. ‘Arthur, you can’t allow that! You have to stop her! The future of our people is at stake!’

‘Cai, run get a bucket of cold water to throw over Vibiana!’ He laughed. ‘Calm down, Little Sister! At least you cheer me up, that’s something.’

'It's nothing to laugh about, as far as I can see!
Come on, both of you!'

'Where?' asked Cai.

'We've got to start looking for the torc!'

'If Morcanta's already found it –'

I shook my head. 'No, don't you see? Why would she bring the drawing to the king's bedside? She wanted to ask him if he knew where it was.'

'But he's too ill to answer,' said Arthur. 'Besides, he would have told me before now, he would never have kept such a thing secret. So maybe you're right, she doesn't have it.'

'If you're worried about anyone, it ought to be Taran,' said Cai.

'Why? Except that he hates Arthur and would drown him in the river, if he could get away with it! Is he looking for the torc?'

'He doesn't need the torc. All he needs are plenty of warriors who don't think a boy should rule them. Then he could easily overpower Morcanta.'

Arthur frowned. 'Both of you have to face the truth: Taran is a much better warrior than I am. He's stronger, more experienced –'

I shook my head to clear it and turned my back on them. All my life I had believed, not merely believed but *known* as surely as I knew my name, that Arthur would be king some day. I felt my safe, secure world was about to be shattered. Did the black cloud of evil from Zea's dream warn of this?

My eye was caught by something moving up the valley. It was a horseman, riding swiftly. As he came

closer I recognised the horse, and then the rider. No one else had a steed of that glossy midnight black. No other warrior had such a long dark moustache. I pointed and the three of us watched as Taran circled the Abbey compound and rode up the hill towards us.

The Blow of a Sword

*It took the blow of a sword
— the thought of losing a sword—
to shock Arthur out of his laziness.*

Arthur jumped up and stood flanked by Cai and myself, as Taran reined in his mount.

‘Greetings, Arthur.’

‘Greetings, Taran. What news?’

‘I reckon you know already.’ A large man on a large horse, he looked down at Arthur with a scornful expression, ignoring Cai and myself completely.

‘State your business plainly!’ I burst out.

Arthur made a shushing motion with his hand. Taran didn’t even glance at me. If I was a warrior, I’d show him a thing or two! I blew my breath out through my nose and managed to hold my tongue.

‘Perhaps you will explain what you mean,’ Arthur said politely.

Taran inclined his head. ‘The Council met with your mother, to consult about who should rule – after your father dies.’ I saw Arthur stiffen at this. I guess I’m used to my father dying, but it was still to come for him.

‘Naturally she has you in mind. But you’re only a young pup, after all – you haven’t even fought

in one battle!

'Your step-sister Morcanta wants the kingdom for herself. She gave us a challenge: whoever can find the lost ancient torc, will be seen to be chosen by the gods.' He grinned as if he found this a huge joke.

'This is nothing new.' Arthur lifted his chin, looking Taran straight in the eye. 'It's a foolish idea. Any kitchen servant who found the torc would be king!'

'The Council would never allow that. It's understood it must be a warrior, but your step-sister fancies herself in that role. Perhaps she intends melting down all her gold bracelets to make a torc!'

Taran dismounted, leaving his horse to graze. I couldn't help feeling like a cat with a large dog invading its space. His muscular bare arms were tattooed with swirling designs.

I dug my fingernails into my palms to keep from blurting out something rude. Cai scowled and shifted from one foot to the other, but Arthur seemed calm.

'You did not climb the hill just to tell me this,' Arthur said.

As he stood there, tall and fair in the sunshine, I thought what a truly good king he would be, and knew I would do anything to make sure that happened.

'No, you're right. Here's the thing.' Taran smoothed his long moustaches with one hand. 'You're a sensible lad. Surely you see you're not

ready for this. Just say the word, I'll step in for you. Let you have time to grow up, train, find your feet. As soon as you're able, I'll move aside, seeing as how you're the rightful the king and heir.'

'Wouldn't you like that!' I shouted. Arthur shot out his arm to keep me from lunging at Taran.

'Hush, Vibiana. Taran, it's a reasonable request.'

Taran shrugged. 'I reckon when you do think about it you'll say no, so here's another idea. Man to man, you and I both know this tale of the torc is just an old story to keep people entertained around the fireside. We can settle this in the traditional way.'

'You mean single combat?'

'The two of us, hand to hand in a fair fight.'

'But it wouldn't be fair, would it! Arthur will be twice the warrior you are, but he must grow into it!' I paused, realising I had insulted my friend without meaning to.

'Thank you, Little Sister,' Arthur said with a faint smile.

'I just want –'

'– the best for me. I know. Taran, I will think on this. What of the Council?'

'They don't want Morcanta. And they figure we could be waiting ages for someone to find the torc. I reckon I can persuade them that we'd get a quicker result this way. Of course, I'll give you plenty of time to train.'

Arthur nodded, but his eyes were cold as a winter's morning. 'That may be what we don't

have. Time. My father ill, rumours of invaders beyond the river. I will think on it,' he repeated.

Taran inclined his head and turned away to make clucking noises for his horse. In a moment he was trotting back down the hill.

'I don't believe him!' I said as soon as Taran was out of hearing.

'Nor I. *Of course, I'll move aside*' Cai mimicked. 'He's determined to get rid of you, one way or another – he'll either kill you in combat or let you die of old age waiting for him to give you the kingdom.' He kicked at a stone and stubbed his toe hard.

'He's right, you know,' Arthur said.

'About what?' I asked, ignoring Cai who was hopping around yelping like a hurt dog.

'He would be the better ruler. I simply don't have the experience to lead men into battle. And I can't see myself beating Taran in single combat, except by a miracle.' He settled down again against the boulder, tugging irritably on a hunk of blond hair that flopped over his forehead.

Cai and I both stared at each other, stunned.

'You're giving up?' Cai asked.

I thought of something else. 'What would your mother say?'

Arthur looked sheepish. 'I know. No one would understand, she least of all. But shouldn't I do whatever is best for the people?'

'Pig-slop!' I shouted. 'You as king, that's what's best for the people. We could at least try to find

the torc.'

Arthur grinned at me. 'All right, I'll agree to that at least. Where do we start?'

'Well,' I said, thinking fast. 'We could ask Magnus what he knows. If anyone can find lost ancient objects, it will be him!'

'Agreed.' Arthur clambered to his feet.

'Any ideas on where it might be?' Cai asked Arthur as we headed down the hill.

'Who knows?'

'We should gather together every possibility, then explore them one by one,' I said.

'That would take forever,' said Cai.

'Not if we don't have many ideas,' Arthur said. 'As for me, I can't think of a single one.'

I was silent, letting my eyes travel over the scene below us: the Abbey compound, where men and women quietly tilled gardens or prayed; below that, the walled villa with its chambers and outbuildings; beyond the villa, Caerleon town and the ruins of the Roman amphitheatre.

'It could be lots of places! For instance, buried under one of the stones in the old theatre.'

'Oh good idea,' said Cai. 'How many years would it take us to dig up every stone in the place?'

'Well if you've got a better idea, say so!'

'Calm down you two,' Arthur said. 'Vibiana, there's only one problem.'

'What's that?'

'During the time when the torc supposedly went

missing, the Romans were here and the amphitheatre was in use. I can't see anyone burying our sacred treasure in the centre of Roman activity.'

'I guess you're right.' I felt deflated.

'What about somewhere in the Abbey enclosure?' Cai said. 'Maybe they buried it under the altar in the chapel.'

'The Abbey wouldn't have been here either.'

'No,' Arthur said. 'Face the truth: the torc was stolen by someone passing through. Now it's probably in the treasure house of the emperor of China!'

We found Magnus in his work-room, seated at the table next to Gruffin, the red-cheeked servant boy who worked for him. They were peering into a large bound book. I didn't know Magnus was teaching Gruffin to read Latin, but I guess he figured the more Latin readers the better.

'What are you reading?' I asked.

Magnus looked up and slammed the book shut. I got a glimpse before he closed it and it didn't look like Latin after all. Gruffin jumped up and scurried to the other side of the room where he grabbed a broom and began to sweep the stone floor like a whirlwind.

'Just an old book of wisdom, handed down to me by my mother. It is worth a great deal, so I keep it locked up.'

Magnus flicked a glance at Gruffin, who darted forward and snatched the book, locking it up in the tall cupboard where Magnus kept all his valuable books

and scrolls. He had been collecting the written word for years. According to him, learning would vanish one day if someone didn't work to preserve it.

'So, the three of you want more lessons?' Magnus spoke heartily, standing and walking towards us. It was odd, but I had the feeling he was trying to distract us from thinking about the book. Which, of course, meant I definitely would think about it. Arthur handed Magnus the bit of parchment with the drawing of the torc. Gruffin stopped sweeping and tiptoed closer to see.

'Ah. So your mother has told you. I had hoped she wouldn't worry you just yet –'

'She didn't tell me until yesterday when I found this by my father's bedside. I think Morcanta left it there.'

'Where did the drawing come from?' I asked. 'How did Morcanta get it?'

'I gave it to her,' Magnus replied. 'It has been in my safekeeping for years. I thought, with the king near death – I am sorry Arthur, but we must face the truth – it would be good if the torc could be found.'

'So it was your idea! But if Morcanta finds it, she'll take the kingdom!'

'Now Vibiana, calm yourself. I have no doubt the three of you can outwit Morcanta. I would not have suggested it otherwise.'

'Just now Taran has come with a different challenge,' Arthur said.

'He wants to fight Arthur in single combat!' I

said. 'That's not fair, is it Magnus? What are we going to do about it?'

'That's for Arthur to say, I think.'

'Well,' said Arthur, looking away from Magnus, 'actually I've been thinking it might be best for the people if we all just agree that Taran is the most capable ruler for now. He says it would only be until I am ready to take over.'

'Oh, he does, does he?' Magnus pursed his lips.

'But first we're going to see if we can find the torc,' Cai said.

Arthur frowned. 'We have so little time. I don't know how long – even if we take a few weeks, what is that? It's been lost for centuries.'

'My mother would suggest you pray,' Magnus said.

'Don't you pray?' I asked. The whole villa gathered each morning and evening in the chapel, for prayers and psalms. Now that I thought of it, I didn't often see Magnus there.

He shrugged. 'I have never seen the point of worshipping a God who is so weak, he would come to earth as a human and die.' He smiled at us to take the sting out of his words.

'Well, we've got to do something!' Cai said.

'If not praying, then what?' I asked.

'There may be other avenues.'

I waited for Magnus to explain that, but he didn't.

'Conceding to Taran sounds like a reasonable plan,' Magnus went on. 'He is an excellent warrior.'

Giving him the kingship would increase his natural powers. Even those who now oppose him might eventually give in, and our people would be united under a strong leader.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing! I was about to interrupt when I saw Magnus twitch one

bushy eyebrow at me in warning. Arthur stared at Magnus, his face suddenly flushed.

'So you agree.' Arthur heaved a sigh but for a moment his eyes had a lost expression.

'Why not? It seems expedient. Of course, there is one thing you may not have considered.'

'What is that?'

'Caliburn.'

'My father's sword?'

'It will pass from your father, not to you as his son and heir, but to Taran as the ruler of the people.'

Arthur's mouth dropped open and his eyes blazed. He drew himself up and spat out one word: 'Never!'

He turned and strode from the room, fury in every line of his body.

Cai hurried after him and I moved to join them, when I felt something tug on my tunic. Gruffin leaned forward and spoke softly, not letting go his grip.

'Magnus can find things. You could ask Magnus.'

As I pulled myself free and ran after Cai, I glanced

back to see the wise man standing quietly in the shadows. It was too dark to see his expression.