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PENDRAGON



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Pendragon

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Onboard the space-faring samara *Ophrys*, Harvester-Achene Pelles sheltered under the shattered husk of Pilot-Achene Bron. Heavy feet crunched across the samara's soft, organic interior and Pelles contracted his tendrils as much as possible, hoping that in the next life his friend would forgive him for hiding beneath his corpse.

By rotating his photoreceptors, Pelles could see two pirates with him in the chamber. He had encountered nothing like them before - though admittedly this was his first flight away from the colony - and displayed a bafflingly small array of appendages. The pair seemed identical in every respect but for the contrasting colouration of their respective crowns.

"Has the vessel been secured," the first, darker, pirate asked.

"Yes, Leader. All resistance has been suppressed."

"Excellent."

Sticky sap was leaking from the cracks in Bron's husk and dripping onto Pelles's crown. He forced himself to remain motionless and tried to ignore his discomfort by concentrating on the conversation. There was a curious rise and fall in the pitch of their voices, he noted. He tried not to think about what 'suppressed' might be a euphemism for, though the sap in his photoreceptors gave him a very good idea.

"Has the Planner been activated?" the leader asked.

"Yes, Leader. We have brought the unit online in the bridge of this vessel."

"Then we can begin. Proceed with the recycling of the organic material."

"At once, Leader."

The paler of the two pirates stooped to pick up one of the lifeless husks strewn about the chamber - that of Technician-Achene Pellehan - and carried it away via a connecting stem. A moment later, the leader followed. Pelles's sap bubbled. He and Pellehan had been pod-mates and thoughts of what the pirates might do to her, even after death, disgusted him. If the pirates were to be believed, he was the only member of the crew left alive, but that only made Pelles all the more determined. He might only be a lowly harvester-achene on his very first sporing, but he could still regain the honour of his colony.

The term 'bridge' was unfamiliar to Pelles, but he guessed that they meant the nucleus of the samara. That was some distance from where he was now and if he attempted to follow via the connecting stems then he was sure to be discovered. There was another way, however. When technician-achenes had to regenerate the samara's damaged tissues, they penetrated deep into the vessel via the cambium layer, which ran throughout the ship. Pellehan had told him all about it and Pelles was sure that he could use the layer to make his way to the nucleus undetected. First checking to make certain that he was unobserved, Pelles extended four tendrils and peeled back the seam that concealed the entrance to the layer before wriggling inside.

Terror chilled his sap as the seam closed shut behind him. Like most of his colony, Pelles had an instinctive fear of the dark. He did not need his photoreceptors to navigate, though - the hairs on his tendrils were sensitive enough for that - so he bravely pressed on. The samara's heavy tissues pressed in against him from all sides, but he forced his way through with undulating movements of his trunk, slowly inching forward. Finally, he reached the seam that separated him from the nucleus itself and he used his tendrils to open the seam ever so slightly.

In the centre of the chamber was a large, veined egg in a nest of transparent branches. It was alien to Pelles and he assumed that the pirates must have brought it with them. A silvery web extended from the egg and had embedded itself in the mottled green floor. Hanging from the web were the husks of at least a dozen of Pelles's fellow crew-members. One of the pirates was attaching Pellehan to the structure.

"Organic components in position, Leader," he said.

"Begin the process."

"No!"

Pelles leaped from his hiding-place and lunged for the egg.

"Subdue the organic," the Leader ordered.

Lightning sprung from the leader's outstretched fingers and hurled Pelles across the nucleus. He struck the wall and slid limply to the floor. The whole of his left side was numb and he could not lift his tendrils.

"You must submit," the leader said, "it is only logical. All organics will be recycled."

As surreptitiously as he could, Pelles pressed the tip of his right, proximal tendril against the wall and the petals of a storage compartment unfurled.

The leader took another step towards him.

"Resistance is futile."

Pelles's tendril wrapped around a container at the back of the storage compartment.

"You can kill me," he said, "but the Green is eternal."

Snapping his tendril back, he hurled the container across the nucleus. The leader raised his hand and blasted the container into fragments. Its contents flooded the room in an explosion of fine green dust.

"This is for Pellehan," Pelles whispered.

Far below, two friends were riding along a cliff-top path. It was the fair-haired, broad-shouldered one who spotted it first. His darker companion, who sported several days' worth of stubble on his cheeks and chin, was too caught up in the tale he was telling to watch the sky. His blond friend had to poke him in the ribs several times before he started to pay attention, but once he saw what his friend had spied, he fell silent. The sky glowed like a bonfire as a star almost too bright to look at fell from the heavens. A roaring, whistling noise filled the air, growing louder as the star grew closer. It seemed to be heading straight for them and their horses began to panic. In the end, the star fell short of the cliff, and plunged into the sea not more than a league distant. It hit with an almighty thunderclap, sending up a great cascade of spray and foam that the riders fancied they could feel even from their vantage point.

The two friends looked to one another, a shared smile signalling their agreement without the need for any words. As one, they spurred their horses to a gallop and descended towards the beach.

It was cold in the TARDIS, cold and dark. What light there was emanated from behind the roundels in the walls, which gave off a faint green glow. It gave everything a sickly pallor and Valentina Rossi wondered if the TARDIS itself might be ill, its condition reflecting that of its owner, who was still lying on the floor of the console room where he had collapsed.

Tom Brooker was trying to help him up.

"Val, give me a hand with the Doctor, why don't you," he said.

The Doctor. *Could they still use that title*, Val's wandering mind asked. The man on the floor was not the one who had invited her aboard this time machine, the elderly gentleman with the warm smile who had promised to show her the wonders of the universe. This man was younger, darker, harder and though Val had seen him change, watched his features melt like wax from one face to the other, she could not accept it. People could not do that.

"Val!"

Tom was becoming more insistent. He was a computer geek, not a sportsman, and he was struggling to lift the man on his own.

"Val, snap out of it! We need to get him to the sickbay."

"And then what?" Valentina asked listlessly. "Can you operate any of that equipment?"

"I'll figure something out."

"And what about the TARDIS?" Val watched the rise and fall of the time rotor, the only slice of normality in this situation. "We're in flight, in case you hadn't noticed, heading who knows where."

"We can deal with that when we get there," Tom said. "One problem at a time. Now are you going to help me or not?"

Tom had his hands under the man's arms as he tried to drag him towards the internal door so Val reached for his ankles. "I don't get how you can be so calm."

"I don't know what you mean."

"How can you just accept... *this*?"

Tom shrugged. "What choice do I have. We both saw it."

Val shook her head. "I don't know what I saw."

Tom turned his bright green eyes on her.

"Oh, come on, Val," he said, exasperated, "you can't really think..."

He never got to finish the thought. He was interrupted by a chime that reverberated throughout the ship. The time rotor stopped moving and the dim light flickered before failing completely.

"Well that's all we need," Val said, straightening up.

"Do you hear that?" Tom asked.

"I can't hear anything."

"Exactly. Haven't you noticed how there's always a background hum wherever you are in the ship? Even that's stopped now. It's like the TARDIS just... died."

"There's a cheery thought." Now Val could hear something. "Tom, what are you doing?"

"Going through the Doctor's pockets," Tom replied. "He's bound to have a torch in here somewhere."

Val blinked as Tom shone the beam of light into her eyes.

"Hey, watch where you're pointing that thing!"

"Sorry." Tom crossed to the hexagonal console and began to examine the instruments.

"What do you think you're doing?" Val asked.

"You know something, pet? You come over all schoolma'msy with your hand on your hip like that."

Val self-consciously shifted her stance. "Just answer the question."

"We've landed," Tom said. "Thought I might find out where."

"And how do you plan on doing that?"

Tom studied the console. Quite apart from the fact that the technology was far in advance of the mid-twenty-first century electronics Tom was used to, the TARDIS and the Doctor were intrinsically linked, the one having been tinkered with, expanded upon and patched up by the other so many times that she was essentially an extension of the Doctor himself, and equally unfathomable. There was, however, one control that Tom recognised.

"I suppose I could just open the door," he said.

"You could what? You've no idea what's out there. What if we've landed underwater or in deep space?"

"Or in the heart of a volcano or on a planet where the atmosphere is entirely methane?" Tom replied. "You think I haven't thought of that? But what's the alternative? Just stay here?"

"Why not?" Val said. "We're safe in here. There's food..."

"For how long? Sooner or later we'll have to face what's out there. Why not make it sooner?"

"Because..." Val cast about for a justification. "Because he might wake up."

"And he might not. Maybe there's someone out there that can help him, have you thought about *that*? Val, think of all the times he's saved our lives in the past and risked his own to do it. I don't know about you, but I can't just stand here and do nothing."

"Tom!"

Val's protest was a second too late. Tom had already pulled the lever that controlled the exterior doors.

Light streamed into the TARDIS, bright, natural daylight. A gust of cool wind blew an armful of dry, autumn leaves across the threshold. Val realised that she had been holding her breath and filled her lungs with sweet, fresh air.

"See, nothing to worry about," Tom said.

Val frowned at him. "That remains to be seen."

Tom started for the door, but he held up a hand to stop Val.

"One of us should stay with the Doctor," he said.

"And that should be me because I'm the woman," Val said, "while you, big strong man that you are, get to go exploring?"

"Actually, I was thinking more that you were too sensible to rush headlong into unknown danger." Tom flashed a roguish grin. "Back in a bit."

He darted out of the TARDIS before Val could stop him. She took another step towards the doors, but paused before going any further. She might not like it, but Tom was right. Someone should stay with the... the unconscious man, whoever he was. She would just have to trust Tom to take care of himself.

He could have at least left the torch.

The sunlight dazzled Tom and he raised a hand to shield his eyes from the glare. It was a good thing that he did because, now able to see again, he discovered that he was teetering on the edge of a precipice. Taking a hasty step back, he considered his surroundings.

He was standing on the first floor of a large, old building. At least, Tom assumed it was old judging by the amount of decay around him. One wall of the building had collapsed and the wooden floor beneath his feet had partly rotted away leaving him on the brink of a perilous tumble. There was a fountain in the middle of the courtyard below with a pair of stone dolphins leaping up out of a basin shaped like a clam shell. It looked to be still intact, though no water was flowing. Three low walls bound the courtyard (the fourth side being occupied by the building itself) and there was a gap at the centre of the farthest wall. Tom could make out rusted hinges still attached to the stonework and assumed that there must once have been a gate there. In one corner, there was another, small building. A stable, perhaps, Tom mused.

Beyond the walls, Tom could see trees wearing the autumn colours of gold and red and brown. Many had already started to shed their leaves and the dry, unwanted foliage carpeted both the forest floor and the open areas of the building. One of the larger trees had stretched its branches over the wall and wrapped them around the building. Tom wondered how much of the building's weight was now being supported in its grip.

Gingerly, Tom crossed the room in the direction of a staircase. He jumped when a raven threw itself from the rafters in a whirlwind of cawing and feathers. It flapped about his head, trying to drive the intruder away from its nest and Tom took the hint, hurrying to the stairs as quickly as he dared. The staircase was covered with a patina of green and grey fungus and Tom took his time descending. In spite of his trepidation, the steps supported his weight. The banister, however, did not. Tom had almost reached the ground when it split. He tried to pull

away from it, but it was too late and he fell from the stairs and landed in a twisted heap on the floor, crying out as pain shot up his leg.

"Tom!" Val called down to him. "Tom, are you all right?"

Trying to ignore the pain, Tom hobbled out into the courtyard. He waved up at Val who was standing in the TARDIS doorway.

"I'm fine, Val," he said. "You stay where you are. I just slipped, that's all."

He took another step and grimaced.

"Tom?"

"Think I twisted me ankle," he said. "Just gonna sit for a moment."

So saying, he sat down on the edge of the fountain's basin.

"Find anything yet?" Val asked.

Give me a chance, Tom thought, but instead he said, "Place looks to have been abandoned for some time. There's nowt here 'cept you, me and Rita the Raven."

A roar echoed across the courtyard, a roar like the barking of an entire pack of hounds.

"And that," Tom amended.

The stable block exploded as the beast burst from concealment. Fragments of straw and wood flew through the air as the creature shook the kinks out of its frame and stretched itself to its full height. It had the body of a great cat, pale fur patterned with darker spots, but the size of an elephant. Its cloven hooves cracked the tiles of the mosaic courtyard floor, kicking them out of its way. A long, serpentine neck covered in large, glistening scales emerged from the beast's shoulders. The neck was not raised high like a giraffe's, however, but writhed low along the ground as its triangular, draconic head scented out its prey. Its amber eyes alighted on Tom and it opened its jaws wide. Again the deafening roar cut through the air.

Tom tried to run, but unable to put any weight on his injured ankle, he toppled to the ground. It saved his life. The beast's head whipped over him, through the space where he had been standing just moments before, and smashed through the fountain, shattering it into pieces.

"Tom!" Val screamed.

The beast heard her and lifted its head.

"Val, get back inside!" Tom shouted at her. "Get back in the TARDIS and lock the door!"

The beast rocked its head from side to side. Val seemed hypnotised by its gaze.

"Val!"

It lunged. In that moment, it broke eye contact with Val and she was able to stumble back, out of the reach of its snapping jaws. As it drew back its head for a second strike, the heavy coils of its neck impacted with the floor on which Val was standing. The rotten beams that were supposed to support it cracked under the pressure and the room tipped forward before collapsing completely, taking Val and the TARDIS with it.

Tom started to crawl forward.

"Val!" He choked on the dust that filled the courtyard. "Val, speak to me!"

She was lying face down on the broken tiles. Her right hand was stretched out by her head, palm flat. Her left arm and both her legs were hidden beneath the rubble. She was not moving. A short distance away, on its side, Tom could see the TARDIS. The ship's doors were wide open and the beast was approaching them inquisitively. It batted the blue box with a hoof and it rocked back and forth, dislodging some of the debris that had piled up on top of it.

Tom shuffled backwards and sat up, propping himself up against the remains of the fountain. He picked up a chunk of stone, a fragment of the tail of one of the dolphins, and hefted it experimentally in both hands.

A narrow blue tongue flashed from out of the beast's mouth, tasting the air. It turned its head from the TARDIS to Val and back again as if undecided which to devour first.

Tom closed his eyes and wished that the Doctor were here to tell him what to do, but he was unconscious and vulnerable within the TARDIS. Val was equally helpless. It was all on Tom's shoulders.

He threw the chunk of fountain as hard as he could and it bounced off of the beast's shoulder. It twisted its neck and looked at Tom with eyes that flashed, not with pain, but with irritation. Slowly, as if Tom were scarcely worth the effort, the beast began to walk towards him. Tom picked up another fragment of masonry and hurled it. It struck the beast between the eyes, splitting in two and falling harmlessly to the floor. The beast opened its jaw wide, revealing long, sharp fangs.

Using the fountain as a support, Tom hauled himself upright and began to hobble away. Perhaps, an overly optimistic part of his brain suggested, he could lead the beast out into the forest, away from Val and the Doctor. Then the beast nudged him with the side of its head and he went sprawling. Tom rolled onto his back, bracing himself for the end as the beast lunged.

Its attack was brought up short when a metal blade embedded itself in its neck.

Tom turned his head and saw five armoured figures entering the courtyard.

"Foul beast," said the dark-haired man who had thrown the knife, "go back to that dark hell from which you came!"

Rather than retreating, the beast vaulted over Tom and the fountain, leaping towards its new enemies. As it fell, a second figure, whose black armour covered him from head-to-toe, strode forward and plunged his spear into the soft underside of the beast.

"Agravaine," another warned, "I gave no order."

This man's armour seemed to be in better condition than that of his companions. A metal mask covered the left side of his face, though the right side was exposed, showing his fair hair and beard. A strange crown encircled his head, attached to the mask where available, linked directly to the man's flesh where not.

The man with the spear - Agravaine - turned.

"I don't need you to tell me what to do," he said.

"He's our leader," the biggest and bulkiest of the five said.

"Your leader maybe, Cai..." Agravaine began, but his speech was cut off by a loud splintering sound. The wooden haft of the spear, shattered under the beast's weight and both the weapon and the creature collapsed on Agravaine, pinning him to the floor.

"Dagonet, assist him," the leader ordered.

Tom's eyes widened at the sight of the figure that stepped forward. The least human-looking of the five, Dagonet walked on all fours, his arms and legs of extraordinary length compared to his body. He seemed to be more a giant crane fly than a man and his limbs were jointed in more places than Tom considered natural. Dagonet sprang, landing nimbly on the beast's back and wrapping his limbs around it in a wrestler's hold. The beast roared as Dagonet bent back its spine.

"Cai," the leader said.

The big man stepped forward. Only his torso and his arms were protected by metal armour, but his right hand was completely encased in a heavy spiked mace. He proceeded to use this to strike the beast, which, pinned by Dagonet, was unable to strike back. Black blood splattered the tiles of the courtyard.

"Leader," the wild-haired knife-thrower asked, "may I assist?"

The leader nodded and the dark man stepped forward to join the fray. Twin blades sprang from scabbards strapped to his arms and he twirled these short-swords skilfully as he prepared to sink them into his enemy.

Tom looked to the leader of his rescuers. "Who are you?"

"They are the Knights of Camelot," he replied, "and I am their *Dux Bellorum*. My name is Arthur Pendragon."

Gareth stood on the city wall looking out to sea. He could see the waves crashing against the cliffs and, beyond that, against the tiny island of Avalon on which the Knights of Camelot were chosen. Behind him, the city was covered under a blanket of midwinter snow. The city had been built by the Romans, but it had been generations since they had departed and few now recalled the name they had given it. Today, the city was simply Camelot.

A delicate pair of hands wrapped themselves around his eyes.

"Guess who?"

A smile spread across Gareth's face. "Hmm... Ygrayne?"

"Please, I'm not *that* old."

"Morgan then?"

"Getting warmer."

"Wait, I've got it." He paused for dramatic effect. "Cai."

"Cai?" The hands were snatched away. "You're comparing me to *Cai*?"

Gareth turned around. "Oh, it's *you*, Lynette," he said, feigning surprise.

"Do I look like Cai?" Lynette said.

She looked like a young woman with an oval face, bright blue eyes and long blonde hair that was tied in a single plait that trailed down her back to the base of her spine. She was wearing an ankle-length woollen dress of Tyrian purple, belted at the waist and with silvery-blue trim at the collar and on the flared sleeves. Her hands were on her hips and she was pouting.

Gareth ran a hand through his light brown hair.

"I was just joking," he insisted.

Lynette wagged an index finger at him. "You'd better have been."

"How could I mistake you for anyone else? You're the prettiest girl in Camelot."

"You really think so?" Lynette asked. "Prettier than Morgan?"

"Much, much prettier."

"Prettier than Valentina?"

"She doesn't even compare."

Lynette leaned forward. "Prettier than Cai?"

Gareth pretended to consider. "Hang on, I'll have to think about that one..."

"You're terrible." Lynette punched him on the arm. "I don't know why I put up with you."

"Must be love," Gareth said, moving closer.

"Must be," Lynette murmured as their lips met.

"Guess who?" a flat, bass voice interrupted.

Gareth jumped back, looking up at the figure who loomed behind Lynette.

"Er... good morning, Sir Cai," he said.

"Aren't you supposed to be on sentry duty, Wart?" Cai asked.

"I was... I mean, I am," Gareth stammered. "Sir."

"Didn't much look like it from where I was standing," Cai said. "Looked as though you were allowing yourself to be distracted."

"Sorry, sir," he said. "It won't happen again."

"You want to be a knight, don't you, Wart?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure that you have what it takes?" Cai asked. "The burden of a knight is a difficult one to bear. His duty is not to any individual, it is to all of Camelot. A knight may be called on to make difficult choices in the performance of this duty. Emotional attachments only get in the way."

Lynette pulled a face, knowing Cai would not be able to see. Gareth struggled not to laugh.

"I'll... keep that in mind, sir," he said.

"See that you do," Cai said. "Now come with me, boy. I have a job for you."

"But what about sentry duty?"

"Tristan is on his way to take over from you." Cai turned to Lynette. "And you, girl, shouldn't you be helping your father?"

Lynette rolled her eyes. "Yes, Sir Cai, I'm on my way to the library now. And Gareth?"

"Yes, Lynette," Gareth said.

"Be careful. For me."

Val walked down the hill from the castle. The going was treacherous both because of the ice on the path, but also because, almost three months after having a building fall on her, she was still walking with the aid of a wooden crutch. The castle was a former Roman fort, or *castra*, that Arthur had occupied and restored and which overlooked the city like a protective parent. It served as base and home for the Knights of Camelot and their honoured guests, of which Val was one.

Valentina Sara Rossi, was a tall, attractive woman in her early thirties. She was wearing a grey woollen gown, the hem of which was now heavy and sodden from trailing through the snow, and a darker cloak. She had wound a scarf around her head to keep her long, auburn hair

out of her blue eyes. The olive tone of her skin, darker than that of most of the locals, was an inheritance from her Italian mother.

It was early in the morning, but Camelot was already alive with activity. People shovelled snow from the streets to allow carts to get buy, though their efforts were hampered by the children who seemed to think the snow was there principally for their amusement. Traders were laying out their wares on market stalls and Val could hear the bellman crying out the day's news to anyone who was willing to pause and listen. They called Camelot a city, but it was like no city with which Val was familiar. In size, it had more in common with a village like Winterbourne than with her native Bristol. Still, she supposed that, in this time and place, Camelot counted as a major settlement.

Tom spotted her as she crossed onto the main street. Tom was a few inches taller and a couple of years younger than Val. He had short, curly brown hair that was swept back from his forehead and light green eyes that caught the light. He was dressed in the local costume of woollen trousers and a knee-length tunic, that hung loosely on his wiry frame.

He fell into step beside Val.

"Hey, Val," he said. His Geordie accent had been softened by years spent away from home.

"Tom. Are you on your way to the library?"

"You going to see the Doctor?"

The conversation had become their daily ritual and both knew the answers to their questions, but the routine gave them both a sense of normality. That is, if anything about being stranded fifteen hundred years before their own time could be described as normal. Tom slowed his stride to match Val's pace, but he did not offer to help her the way he had every day for the first few weeks after she had started hobbling about. Val did not know whether to be relieved that he had finally stopped patronising her or irritated because she was tired and would have appreciated an arm to lean on.

"I see Dagonet's out again," Tom said.

They had entered the main square and could see the long-limbed knight sitting on the steps leading up to the hall. He was juggling with four brightly painted wooden balls while telling jokes in his high, sing-song voice. His audience, however, was pitifully small.

"I feel sorry for him," Val said. "He just wants to entertain, but all he does is frighten the children."

"It can't be easy looking the way he does," Tom replied. "Why'd he let them do that to him anyway?"

Val shrugged. "It's the sacrifice he made to become a knight. Arthur says the Lady of Avalon decides how best to improve them at the knighting ceremony."

"That's an improvement?"

"Depends on your point of view, I guess," Val said. "At least Mordred seems to like him."

"Yeah, but is he here for the jokes or just for the chance to stare at the freak?"

"Be nice, Tom. Mordred's all right, for an eight year-old kid. I bet you weren't much different when you were his age."

"Thanks very much, I don't think."

"You've got to admit, he's hardly the evil villain of legend."

"I don't know about that. Eight year-olds can be pretty scary sometimes." Tom paused. "It makes you wonder though. Here we are in Camelot with Arthur and Lancelot and all the rest. Does that mean all those legends are actually true?"

"Hardly," Val replied. "If they were, it's not like I'd have trusted the Doctor to Morgan's care, would I?"

"You still don't much like her, though," Tom pointed out.

"That's beside the point. At *Mysterious Times*, most of the articles that weren't about UFOs or aliens had some King Arthur or Grail connection - and that's not counting the Arthur was an alien stories - so I read up on the subject a bit. Turns out no one can really say for sure whether an Arthur existed or not because we know so little about sixth century Britain. There are virtually no contemporary written records so our twenty-first century view of Arthur is based on accounts from hundreds of years after the event. In fact, many of the components we now consider intrinsic to the legend - Merlin, Lancelot and the Holy Grail, for example - come from completely different traditions entirely that were woven into the Arthur myth at a later date. It's doubtful anyone will ever know the real truth."

"Except us," Tom said.

"Except us," Val agreed. "The point is, judge these people on who they are, not what you've read about them or seen on TV."

"You're getting all schoolma'msy again, pet," Tom said.

Val rolled her eyes. "Whatever, Brooksy."

She knew that Tom disliked that nickname, which is why she needled him with it, but he did not seem to mind so much when she was the one using it, in much the same way that it felt kind of right when he referred to her as 'pet'.

"It's a pity about the Merlin thing," Tom said. "I'd quite like to have met him."

"Who says you haven't?" Tom looked at Val quizzically so she continued. "A mysterious man who could change his appearance and who fell into a magical sleep when his friends needed him most?"

"The Doctor?" Tom was wide-eyed. "You really think so."

"I really hope not," Val said. "According to legend, Merlin never woke up."

They walked on in silence for a while.

"Val," Tom said at last, "what if... what if the Doctor never wakes up either?"

"I'm not ready to give up on him yet, Tom."

"It's been three months and there's been no change. I'm not saying we give up on him, just that maybe we need to prepare for the worst, just in case."

"Just in case of what, Tom? In case we get stranded in this century? I'm not like you, Tom. I couldn't be content to while away the rest of my days amongst Latin translations in some musty old library. I can't stay here, in this place, in this time. I won't."

"You may not have a choice," Tom said. "Do you think I want to be in a library, especially one that's got no hope of ever seeing a working computer? I do it because if I give something back to the community then they may be more willing to let me stay. Sooner or later we're going to wear out their hospitality, Val. What happens then?"

Val looked away. When she turned back, the corner of her mouth was turned up in a wry smile.

"Is that why you work in the library, Brooksy?" she said. "Here I thought it was because you fancied that Lynette."

Tom laughed, defusing the tension that had built up between them.

"Leave it out, pet. You know she only has eyes for Gareth."

"But you do fancy her, don't you?"

"Give over."

They had reached the library.

"Do you want me to walk you up to Morgan's place?" Tom asked.

"No, you go on in," Val said. "I'll be fine."

"Well, if you're sure..."

"Stop fussing, Tom. I'm a big girl now, I can take care of myself." She started to walk off, but stopped when she reached the corner and turned to look over her shoulder. "Hey, Tom?"

Tom had a hand on the library door. "Yeah?"

"Give Lynette a kiss from me, will you?" she said with a wink, rounding the corner before Tom could think of a retort.

Morgan's house was not Morgan's house, or rather it had not been three months ago. It had originally been set aside for Val when she and Tom had been brought to Camelot. There was, however, the problem of the Doctor. Once the knights had carried him to the city (something of a farce in itself since Tom had refused to allow them access to the TARDIS and had insisted on dragging the Doctor out himself, in spite of his twisted ankle), the Doctor had been examined by Morgan. Morgan was a druidess, herbalist and the closest thing to a doctor in these parts and she had come to the conclusion that the Doctor needed twenty-four hour care. She had had him installed as a resident patient in her own home, but, as soon as she regained consciousness, Val was having none of it. She had insisted that the comatose Doctor be moved to stay with her where she could be responsible for looking after him. Morgan had not objected, she had simply moved in with the pair of them and carried on her work.

At first, while Val was bedridden due to her injuries, the arrangement had made a certain amount of sense. As she became more and more mobile, though, Morgan's constant, if quiet and industrious, presence had become a source of increasing irritation, so when Lancelot had invited her to stay at the castle, Val jumped at the chance (figuratively speaking), admitted defeat and moved out. She did, however, make a point of visiting every morning to check up on Morgan and her patient.

She knocked on the door.

"It's open, Valentina," Morgan called out.

"How did you know it was me?" Val asked as she entered the house.

"You used your crutch to knock with," Morgan said. "Now why don't you lie down so that I can examine you."

"Is that really necessary?" Val asked.

"It is if you ever want to stop walking with that stick," Morgan replied, "so do as you're told and lie down over there."

Val did as she was bid, lying face down on the bed. Morgan might have been a few years younger than Val, but she had an uncanny knack for making the latter feel like a child. The druidess had red-gold hair, green eyes with flecks of silver and milky skin with a light

dusting of freckles. She was wearing a blue dress, faded by age and repeated washing and darned and patched in places. There was a thin green shawl around her shoulders, held in place by a golden clasp.

"Have you been doing the exercises I set you?" Morgan asked as she probed Val's leg with her long fingers, starting at the ankle and working up her calf and thighs to her hips. Then she repeated the process with her other leg.

"I'm really here to see the Doctor," Val said.

"Of course you are," Morgan said, "but you're my patient too so forgive me if I take the time to check up on you. Sit up."

"How is he?" Val asked, inclining her head towards a curtained-off area.

"No change," Morgan said. "If there had been I would have sent word to the castle."

"You wouldn't have come yourself?"

"No." Morgan's response was curt.

"No?"

"No. The knights have no need of me and I want little enough to do with them."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Val asked.

"Are you enjoying life at the castle, Valentina?"

"Well, sure. The knights have been nothing but courteous towards me."

"But cold, correct? Cold and distant and *unnatural*."

"I don't know what you're implying," Val said, "but Arthur doesn't deserve - Ow!"

"I'm sorry, did that hurt," Morgan said. "Guess there's still some healing to be done. You can get up now, the examination is over."

"You're telling me," Val muttered. "If you've got such a problem with the knights, why don't you just leave Camelot? In fact, what's a druidess doing setting up shop in the heart of a city in the first place?"

"I'm here because these people need me and because..."

"Because?"

"Because I have my reasons," Morgan said. She started to fill a bag. "Are you planning to stay long?"

"Why, are you trying to get rid of me?" Val asked harshly.

"Far from it," Morgan said. "I was hoping you'd stay here while I go out. I have other patients I need to attend to, but I'd rather not leave him alone if I don't have to."

"Oh." Val felt a stab of shame for her outburst even though she was sure that Morgan had provoked her into it. "Sure, I'll sit with him until you get back. Maybe I'll read to him. That's supposed to help, right?"

"Who knows," Morgan said, slinging the bag over her shoulder. "I've never had a patient quite like him, but it couldn't hurt. And Val? Do yourself a favour. Stay away from Arthur."

"There it is, boys," Cai said, slowing his horse to a gentle trot. "That ship is our objective."

"I don't understand, sir," one of the men with him said. "What is it we're supposed to be doing here?"

Cai turned to rest of his party. "Would one of you like to explain our mission to Gwydre here or do I have to do everything myself?"

There were five in the expedition, one knight, Cai, and four warriors, Gwydre, Loholt, Sagramore and Gareth. Loholt spoke up first.

"That's a Saxon shipwreck, Gwydre," he said. "There's bound to be treasure in there we can offer the Lady of Avalon as tribute."

"I don't know what she needs tribute for in the first place," Sagramore grumbled. "We keep being told how wonderful and all powerful she is. If she's so perfect, why's she need anything from the likes of us?"

"It's not for the likes of you to question Our Lady," Cai said.

"Well pardon me for breathing. Sir."

"What's the matter with you?" Cai said. "Don't you want to be a knight?"

His voice was flat. If he felt anger or disapproval towards Sagramore, he was keeping it tightly contained.

"Not particularly, sir," Sagramore said. "I hear all you knights have to take a vow of celibacy or something and I fancy myself a wife and kids. Six or seven should suit me fine."

"Wives or kids?" Gwydre asked.

"What do you think?" Sagramore replied. "And then there's the outfits you knights have to wear. I mean, have you seen yourselves? They must chafe something rotten."

Gwydre sniggered.

Cai turned away and continued riding towards the wrecked ship. Gareth coaxed his horse forward so that he could ride alongside the knight.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said.

"Sorry?" Cai replied. "For what?"

"Sagramore, sir," Gareth said. "He was out of line."

"The opinions of inferiors are of no value."

"Inferiors?"

"He does not wish to become a knight," Cai explained. "Perhaps Our Lady can find a use for him as raw material."

The Saxon ship had been thrown up onto the rocks in a storm. Its mast had snapped clean off and its hull gaped open. The rock-face was too sheer for the horses, so the party left them at the top of the cliff and climbed down by hand. The corpse of a Saxon was lying on the shingle, a crab nipping at his tangled hair. Cai crouched down and began to strip the body of jewellery, weapons and other metal items.

"I don't like this," Gareth admitted.

"What's your problem, boy?" Cai asked without looking up.

"Looting bodies. It's not right."

"He's only a Saxon," Loholt said. "They don't count."

"That's not what Gildas says. Or Lynette."

"Aw, I forgot you were sweet on Saxons, Gareth," Gwydre said. "Better watch this one, sir. He might turn traitor on us."

"No, I wouldn't," Gareth protested hurriedly. "I'm loyal to Camelot, I swear. It's just that I think all people should be treated with a bit of respect. Even our enemies."

"If you're squeamish, Wart," Cai said, standing up, "then you can stay out here and keep watch. The rest of you, come with me."

Cai led Gwydre, Loholt and Sagramore through the hole in the side of the ship and into the darkness, leaving Gareth alone on the beach. He sat down on a large rock and watched the gulls diving into the surf. He picked up a small, flat stone and skimmed it across the waves. It bounced four times before disappearing from view. He found another stone and turned it over in his hands.

He should have gone with the others, he told himself. Cai must think he was a coward, or worse, and he so wanted to impress him, to convince him that he had what it took to join the knights himself. That was why he had come to Camelot in the first place, with only the clothes on his back to his name. Tales of the knights exploits - of how the Lady of Avalon had risen from the sea to arm Arthur, of how he had founded Camelot and drawn Britain's finest knights to his banner and of how they had driven back Saxons and sorcerers, monsters and demons - had reached even his little village and he had been inspired by these stories of courage and honour and derring-do. Said tales had been the subject of much embellishment, of course, but, on arrival in Camelot, far from being disappointed with the truth, Gareth had found the knights even more impressive in the flesh. He had taken a job as a kitchen-boy just to be close to his heroes and, after much cajoling, had been given a chance to join the city's warriors, the unknighthed defenders of Camelot. Gareth's enthusiasm made up for his lack of experience and he was always the first to volunteer for any mission that might give him a chance to shine.

But things had changed. He had found another love in his life besides knighthood. Lynette complicated matters. It had been her voice that he heard in his head when he looked at the corpse of that Saxon. Much as he wanted to impress Cai, he could not disappoint Lynette either.

He was disturbed from his brown study by the sound of booted feet crossing the sand. He looked up, expecting to see Cai returning, but his pulse quickened as he realised that the noise was caused by half a dozen heavily-armed Saxons who were circling the shipwreck. Gareth scrambled to his feet, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Look out!" he yelled. "Saxons!"

"What's that?"

Loholt stuck his head through the hull and the lead Saxon, a bulky man whose long hair and beard were shot through with grey, immediately plunged his axe into his skull.

"Loholt!"

Gareth charged forward, sword waving, as his friend's body tumbled to the ground. A Saxon turned and easily knocked Gareth's sword from his grasp, but Gareth did not slow. Instead, he jumped into the air and wrapped his fingers around the Saxon's throat. Surprised, the Saxon stumbled backwards and tripped. The additional weight of his assailant carried him over backwards and he struck his head on a sharp rock. Blood seeped into the grey sand. Gareth watched as the life left the Saxon's eyes then he stared in horror at his own hands, unable to quite comprehend what he had done. His state of shock was such that he barely noticed when a bald, red bearded Saxon grabbed him by the collar of his tunic and hauled him off of the corpse.

"What have you done to Eadric!" he bellowed, spraying spittle into Gareth's face.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gareth could see Cai burst from the ship, his mace smashing through Saxon flesh and bone, but the knight was too far away.

"So you think the likes of you can lay hands on a pure-bred Saxon, do you?" the bald Saxon said, throwing Gareth to the ground. "Well you're never going to get the chance again, I promise you that."

The Saxon raised his axe and Gareth's world exploded in white hot pain.

"Good morning, Tom," Lynette said.

The library was dark. Lynette's father, Gildas, refused to allow candles in the building in case an accident damaged or destroyed the precious manuscripts. The only light came from small windows near the ceiling. Bookcases lined the walls and wooden tables and benches filled the space between.

"Good morning, Lynette," Tom said, "and may I say you're looking especially beautiful this morning."

"I bet you say that to all the girls," Lynette replied.

"True," Tom admitted as he sat down opposite her, "but I only make time for the really pretty ones."

"Which must be why you keep coming back to see me," Gildas said as he shuffled out of the gloom. He was a stooped figure with a monk's tonsure and habit.

Lynette frowned. "Is this true, Tom? Are you spurning me in favour of my father?"

"Afraid so, pet," Tom said. "It's brains over beauty every time for me."

Lynette dipped her quill into the pot and flicked ink at him.

"Hey!" Tom reached for his own ink-pot in order to retaliate.

"Father!" Lynette protested, seeking cover.

"Children." Gildas's tone was gently scolding.

"She started it," Tom said.

Lynette stuck her tongue out at him.

"Settle down, we have work to do," Gildas said, sitting down next to his daughter. "You can throw things at each other later. Preferably outside."

'Work' consisted of translating the manuscripts left behind by the Romans when they had withdrawn from this city. Literacy was uncommon in Camelot and the ability to read Latin, the language of the Roman occupiers, was rare even among the literate class. Gildas knew it as a result of his clerical background and he, in turn, had taught it to his daughter. Tom was cheating. He did not know Latin, had had no interest in the language before now, but he could read it like a native as a result of the TARDIS gift that translated any language for him. He took the fact that he could read the text as a good sign since it meant that the TARDIS was still functioning, but a small, fearful voice in the back of his mind wondered how long it would be before the ship failed completely, depriving him of his gift and putting an end to his usefulness to Gildas.

Gildas leaned over the table to examine Tom's work.

"You're getting very good, Tom," he said. "Your handwriting is much improved."

Tom was glad of the praise. In his previous life, he had done everything (well, almost everything) via computer. Words were typed, not handwritten and he had really struggled with the quill and parchment at first, but it seemed his perseverance was finally paying off. The work itself was not terribly exciting. Any document that was discovered was brought to the library for Gildas to look at and its true value could not be established until it had been translated. Some of the documents were significant - treaties and declarations, genealogies and other works of import - but most simply depicted the daily grind of the ordinary Roman, being shopping lists and letters and the like. Actually, Tom found the letters more interesting than the treaties and he and Lynette would read the best ones aloud to each other, trying to imagine what life would have been like for the boy writing a love poem to his sweetheart or the family receiving news from their cousins holidaying in Armorica.

Work carried on in this manner for several hours until Gildas set down his pen.

"That's quite enough for one morning," he said. "I think we all deserve a break for lunch."

"I'll go get it, sir," Tom said, glad of the excuse to stretch his legs.

"I'll go with you." Lynette stood up. "You'll only get lost on your own."

"That only happened the one time," Tom said. "What do I have to do to live that down?"

"If you're both going," Gildas said, stretching out on the bench, "don't hurry back. This old man could do with a nap."

"You're not that old, Father."

Lynette bent down to give her father a peck on the cheek. Gildas did not reply. He was already snoring softly.

Lynette linked her arm with Tom's as they stepped out of the library and into the street. The gesture made Tom more than a little uncomfortable. He liked Lynette, liked her a lot, but he also knew that she only had eyes for Gareth. He didn't let go of her, though.

"You really love the old man, don't you?" he said.

"He took me in when nobody else would," Lynette replied. "I'm a Saxon by birth. My parents were killed during a raid on a Saxon village when I was just a baby. The native Britons see the Saxons as invaders and there are plenty of people, even here in Camelot, who would have been happy to see all the villagers put to the sword, adult or child."

"But Gildas had other ideas," Tom said.

Lynette nodded. "He said his faith came first. He stood between me and the warriors and refused to let them past. In the end, they gave up and told my father that if he wanted me so badly then he could have me. He picked me up, carried me home and raised me as his own daughter. So you see, I've got a lot of reasons to love him."

"It must be tough being a Saxon in a city full of Britons," Tom said.

"It's not so bad," Lynette replied. "Father was friends with Arthur and he was quick to put a stop to anyone who wouldn't treat me right."

"You say your father and Arthur *were* friends, past tense," Tom said. "What happened, did they have some kind of falling out?"

"No, nothing like that," Lynette said quickly, "it's just that, after Avalon appeared, he changed. Arthur and Lancelot and the rest... it's like they became different people when they became knights."

"Well, being a knight is a tough gig," Tom said. "Maybe that's just how they deal with the pressure."

"No, it's more than that," Lynette insisted. "You weren't here back then so you wouldn't know, but..."

"Lynette! Lynette!"

Whatever Lynette had been about to say was cut off by the cries of the young man who came hurtling around the corner.

"Gaheris, what is it?" she said. "What's the matter?"

Gaheris doubled over, hands on his thighs, as he tried to regain his breath.

"It's Gareth," he wheezed. "I think he's dead."

Gareth was not, in fact, dead, though the confusion was understandable. When Lynette reached the North Gate, with a breathless Tom in tow, and saw the returning expedition, her eyes immediately fell on the stretcher. She forced her way through the crowd that had gathered and reached for a corner of the shroud.

Tom put a hand on her shoulder. Lynette tried to shake him off, but he was insistent.

"Are you sure that you want to see this?" he asked softly.

"No," Lynette replied, her voice breaking, "but I have to."

She lifted the shroud. At first the figure beneath it was just a blur, his features distorted by the tears welling from her eyes, but as the image came into focus, Lynette felt waves of relief, guilt and pity wash over her in quick succession. Relief that it was not Gareth. Guilt that she could find happiness in the face of such a tragedy. And pity for Loholt and his family, for the ashen, lifeless body was his. It was all too much for Lynette. Her limbs turned to water and she fell backwards. Fortunately, Tom was there to catch her. He held her close as she released her conflicting emotions as quiet sobs.

When she regained her composure, she looked up at Tom.

"Where's Gareth?" she asked.

Gwydre and Sagamore were carrying a second stretcher. Its occupant tried to lever himself up when he heard Lynette.

"Lynette?" he said weakly. He was almost as pale as Loholt. Sweat plastered his hair to his forehead.

"Gareth!" Lynette ran from Tom to the stretcher. She tried to take his hand in hers, but the end of his limb was wrapped in blood-covered bandages.

"What happened?" Tom asked Gwydre.

"It was an ambush," Gwydre said, looking down at the floor. "The Saxons killed Loholt. They'd have got the rest of us too if it hadn't been for Gareth."

"And what did they do to him?" Tom asked.

Sagamore ground his teeth before replying.

"They cut off his hands," he spat.

An awed hush descended over the crowd. Tom turned to find the cause and saw Arthur Pendragon striding towards them, his armour gleaming. Cai was at his left hand, Lancelot his right.

"Is this the boy?" the *Dux Bellorum* demanded.

Cai nodded. "Indeed, my lord."

Arthur stepped up to the stretcher, indifferently forcing Lynette to step aside.

"Gareth," he said, "Cai has been telling me of your bravery. You do Camelot proud."

"Thank you, my lord." Gareth tried to rise, but the pain proved too much for him.

"No, don't get up," Arthur said. "Cai tells me that you want to become a Knight of Camelot."

"I did," Gareth replied.

"Did? You've changed your mind?"

"I'm not good enough," Gareth said. "I failed Loholt. I let him die. A knight could have saved him."

"I didn't save him," Cai pointed out.

"Not even a knight can save everyone," Arthur said. "Cai has recommended you, Gareth, and I value his judgement. If you wish to become a knight then a knight you shall be."

With that, Arthur turned and marched back up to the castle.

"How is he?" Tom asked Morgan as she left the bedroom.

"I've cleaned and dressed his wounds and given him something for the pain," Morgan said. "There's little more I can do."

"And his hands?"

Morgan shook her head.

Tom followed her with his eyes until she had left the building then he entered the room where Gareth was resting. Lynette was sitting next to his bed, a bowl of soup in her hands. She was trying to get him to eat something, but Gareth was showing little enough interest in food.

"Did you hear what Arthur said?" Gareth said, his eyes blazing despite the weakness of his body. "He wants me to be a knight!"

"And is that really what you want, Gareth?" Lynette stirred the soup listlessly with a wooden spoon.

"Of course." Gareth was firm. "It's my dream. That's why I came to Camelot in the first place."

"And what about us?" Lynette asked. "Don't you have a new dream now?"

"I don't understand," Gareth said. "There'll always be an us. My becoming a knight won't change that."

Gareth reached for her and there was an awkward moment as he realised that he could not hold her hand anymore. Tom looked away, acutely conscious that he was intruding.

"You don't know that," Lynette said. "Cai said that a knight has to set aside emotional attachments."

"I'm not Cai," Gareth replied. "I can be a knight and still be with you."

"Oh, you say that now." Lynette set down the soup bowl and wiped at her damp eyes with the back of her hand. "What if it changes you? What if, when you come back from Avalon, you're not the same person you were before?"

"What are you talking about?" Gareth said. "Of course I'll be the same person."

Lynette's tears were flowing freely now. "You're so... so *selfish*!"

Lynette ran from the room. From his bed, Gareth looked at Tom with utter confusion.

It was snowing, but that did not stop revellers from lining the streets to witness the parade from the castle down to the harbour. Ribbons and streamers decorated the route and people everywhere were shouting, singing, dancing or otherwise making merry. Some of the more enterprising denizens of Camelot had erected temporary stalls to sell refreshments to the crowd and the tempting odours were proving too much for many to resist.

They had offered Gareth a litter to ride in on account of his health, but he had insisted on walking the route like everyone else. Halfway round, however, his strength failed him. As soon as he saw him start to fall, Gwydre vaulted the barrier that separated the masses from the knights and picked his friend back up. With Gwydre offering Gareth his shoulder to lean on, the pair of them made slow, but steady progress the rest of the way down to the harbour. Gareth kept scanning the crowd for Lynette, but she was nowhere to be seen. He wished that he had had another chance to explain to her why this was so important to him, but she had not come to visit him since running away in tears. He had asked after her through Tom and Gildas, but neither would share any but the most basic of news no matter how hard he had pressed.

Arthur and Cai were waiting for him. They were standing by a small boat with a single sail. The other knights had already gone on ahead and were preparing Avalon for his arrival.

"Thanks for your help, Gwydre," Gareth said as he disentangled himself from his friend, "but I think I can manage on my own from here."

"If you're sure. Don't forget about me when you're powerful and famous." Gwydre grinned and winked before letting the crowd swallow him up.

"Are you ready, Gareth?" Arthur asked him.

"Yes." The word caught in Gareth's throat so he coughed and tried again with more confidence. "Yes, sir, I am."

"Excellent," Arthur said. "Then let us be off."

"Wait!"

Lynette was running along the harbour wall, skirt billowing around her. She descended the stone steps two at a time and barrelled into Gareth, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her mouth against his, hard. He could feel her heart pounding through his chest.

"Lynette, I..." Gareth began when she finally let him up for air.

"Ssh, don't say anything." Lynette put her fingertips over his lips. "I just want you to remember. Whatever happens, whatever they do to you over there, remember that I love you. I'll always love you, Gareth."

Tears sparkled in her eyes as she stepped away from him. Gareth was crying as well, though he did not know why.

"We should go," Cai said. "They're expecting us."

Gareth looked back at Lynette, trapped in a moment of indecision.

"It's your dream," was all she said.

Cai put an arm around Gareth's shoulders and helped him, unresisting, into the boat. Arthur joined them, wrapping blankets around the boy, and Cai cast off. Oblivious to what was going on around him, Gareth continued to stare back at Lynette as she got smaller and smaller, further and further away, until she disappeared from sight completely.

"There she is," Arthur announced. "Avalon."

Gareth turned in his seat. Through the fog, the island started to appear. It was like a half-submerged cone, rounded at one end, tapering at the other. Its surface was a carpet of unfamiliar plants and fungi. Gareth could see birds nesting in some of the taller examples. At the water-line, the plant material had been eaten away and barnacles and other molluscs were clinging to the surface that had been exposed beneath.

Cai navigated their boat around the island until they reached a cave mouth. The cave was smooth and regular in shape and Gareth assumed that it had been dug by man rather than by the tide. Arthur helped him to disembark and then led the way deep beneath the surface of the island. Gareth had expected Cai to light a torch, but there was no need. The interior of the island was illuminated by glowing veins running through the walls. The walls themselves, not to mention the floor and ceiling, were soft and spongy to the touch. Most of the surfaces were green or deep red in colour, but there were patches of brown here and there. Unlike the rest of the walls, these brown spots were dry and brittle and bits flaked off when Gareth ran his fingers over them. The faint sickly sweet smell of rotting fruit was everywhere, but his companions did not seem to notice.

The smell became much more intense as they entered the main hall and Gareth lifted his tunic to cover his nose and mouth. Here the walls were almost completely desiccated being brown and grey - or even black in some areas - rather than red and green. A steel mesh was embedded in the walls, a net cast out from the object in the centre of the chamber. To Gareth, it resembled nothing so much as a large glass egg. And it spoke.

"What have you brought me this time, Arthur?" The voice was feminine, but there was a buzzing note underlying it, like the sound of an insect in flight. With every word, the egg flashed with white light.

"My Lady." Arthur dropped to one knee in front of the egg. "We are here to see this man knighted."

"You wish for another to undergo the conversion process," the egg said. "That would be unwise."

Gareth shifted uncomfortably. He looked to Cai, but he and the other knights remained unmoved.

"My resources are extremely limited," the egg continued.

"We bring you what tribute we can," Arthur said. "Look!"

He pointed to a chest carried by Agravaire. It, and two more chests like it, contained the treasure salvaged from the Saxon shipwreck.

"It is insufficient," the egg said. "The damage from the crash was extensive. I require much more if I am to return to the fleet."

"We agreed that if I provided you with tribute, you would help me protect Camelot," Arthur said. "An additional knight would help me with that."

"It is inefficient," the egg said. "However, this unit is operating at only sixteen per cent of optimum capability. Cooperation with organics at this time is logical. Where is the subject?"

Gareth stepped forward.

"This subject is substandard," the egg said, "even for an organic. We agreed that only the very best would be converted."

"Gareth *is* the best," Arthur said. "He has proven himself to me."

"His limbs are compromised," the egg observed. "Given the available resources, I can only complete a twenty-eight per cent conversion."

"Do it," Arthur said.

The metal web on the floor rose up. A ripple ran through it as it reshaped itself into a raised table.

"Lie down on there, Gareth," Arthur said.

Further strands of web detached themselves from the walls, the ends twisting and reconfiguring into sharp points and spinning blades.

"It doesn't hurt for long, Gareth," Cai assured him.

The web descended. Gareth screamed.

"Hungry?" Tom asked.

Lynette looked up at him, a puzzled expression on her face as if she could not remember who he was. It passed quickly.

"No, thank you," she said. "I doubt I could keep anything down right now."

Tom nodded as if he understood and then sat down, taking a bite out of one of the freshly baked rolls he was carrying as he did so.

"Man, it's freezing out here," he said. "Why don't we go back inside?"

"I want to be here when Gareth gets back," Lynette insisted, before adding, "but you don't have to stay if you don't want to."

"If you're staying, pet, I'm staying," Tom told her. "He's going to be all right, you know."

"I know." Lynette rested her head against his shoulder. "You're a good friend, Tom."

"And ain't that the most painful thing a lass can say to a lad."

Lynette looked up at him. "I don't understand."

Tom smiled ruefully. "The pretty ones never do."

Lynette suddenly sat bolt upright. "Look! It's a boat."

Tom peered out into the fog and, sure enough, he could see the shadow of a sail approaching them. Soon they could see three figures standing in the prow. Lynette ran down to the waterfront to meet them, Tom following behind. By the time they arrived, Gareth was already climbing out of the boat. The hair on the left side of his head had been shaved off and there was a curved scar that ran from his forehead to just behind his ear. His torso was encased in metal from his waist to his collarbone. His lost hands had been replaced by articulated metal

replicas that were attached to vambraces that ran from wrist to elbow. This forearm protection was linked to the rest of his armour by segmented steel cables.

"Gareth?" Lynette said, uncertain. She darted forward and wrapped her arms around him. "Gareth!"

Gareth gently but firmly pushed her away.

"You are called Lynette," he said. "I knew you."

"You *knew* me?" Lynette repeated, voice quavering. "Is that... is that all?"

"Is that inaccurate?" Gareth asked.

Lynette stumbled backwards. Her mouth moved, but no sound came out. Tom reached out an arm to steady her, but Lynette shook him away.

"We love each other, Gareth," she said. "Don't you remember?"

"Love is an emotional response," Gareth said. "Emotion is a weakness. Weaknesses have been eradicated."

Lynette turned to Arthur. "What have you done to him?"

"We made him a knight," Arthur replied. "He has been rebuilt, enhanced, upgraded. He is superior in every way to the man he once was."

Lynette pointed a trembling finger at Gareth.

"You think that... that *thing* is better than Gareth was?" she said. "You've killed him!"

She started hammering her fists against Arthur's breastplate. The knights looked on impassively.

"Don't you understand, you monster?" Lynette sobbed. "You've killed him."

Arthur Pendragon stood on the battlements of the castle looking out to sea, towards the setting sun. His crown of steel glowed gold in the half-light.

"Do you ever ask yourself if it was worth it, Lancelot?" the *Dux Bellorum* asked the man standing beside him. "How many years has it been since we saw that falling star?"

The two knights were a contrasting pair. Arthur was tall and broad-shouldered. His hair and beard, what little of it could be seen beneath the mask that was fused to his head, was fair and neatly cropped. Lancelot was dark, his hair long and wild, his cheeks decorated with neglected stubble. He was shorter than his companion and, even locked into his armour, it was clear that he was lither of build.

"Too many," Lancelot said. "I remember a time when there were no knights and Camelot was just a dream you had. That star made everything possible."

"But at what cost?"

"What's brought this on, my Leader?" Lancelot asked.

"Not Leader," Arthur said, "not to you. We were the first, you and I, and I couldn't have built all this without your help. We will always be Arthur and Lancelot to each other, nothing more, nothing less."

"And yet only one can rule."

"Do you want the job?" Arthur asked. "Maybe you'd be better at it than I?"

"The Lady of Avalon chose you, Arthur," Lancelot said. "That's good enough for me. It should be good enough for you as well."

Arthur turned away. "The girl, Lynette, hates me. She accused me of killing Sir Gareth."

"That's illogical," Lancelot said. "Sir Gareth is very much alive and much improved over his previous fragile condition."

"I know, but... The people down there, our people, do they love us or do they fear us?"

"Does it matter either way?" Lancelot asked. "The Lady of Avalon teaches us that an emotional response is a weakness."

"Is it?" Arthur asked. "I remember the way things used to be and I wonder."

"What good is a Leader who doubts himself?" a deep bass voice interjected.

"Agravaine," Arthur said to the knight in black armour, "I didn't hear you approach."

"Another indication of your lack of competence."

"Speaking of which," Lancelot put in, "what good is a knight who can't follow orders. One of these days your arrogance will get you killed. Or worse, it will get one of the rest of killed."

"Is it arrogance to refuse to take orders from an incompetent commander?" Agravaine replied. "You've had your day, Arthur. It's time to stand aside."

"Call him Leader," Lancelot said. "Show some respect."

"Respect him? Never!"

"And if I were to stand aside, who would step up in my place?" Arthur asked. "You, Agravaine?"

"Why not? At least I'd be prepared to do what was necessary."

"The position is not vacant," Arthur said. "The Lady of Avalon chose me and I intend to do my duty until she decides otherwise. You should do the same."

Without another word, Agravaine turned and stalked away.

"Don't let him bother you," Lancelot said.

"Agravaine does not bother me," Arthur replied, "though I wish I knew why he said such things."

"Once a traitor, always a traitor," Lancelot said. "It's all he knows or have you forgotten how he betrayed King Lot to us. I warned you not to make him a knight at the time."

"He rendered us a singular service," Arthur said. "He deserved the honour."

"So why do you doubt yourself, Arthur? I thought you said that he didn't bother you."

"He doesn't."

"Is it Lynette then? Are you feeling guilty about your actions?"

"No," Arthur said, "I don't feel guilty. I don't feel anything anymore. But I remember an Arthur who would have done and I wonder when I lost him."

"We've all made sacrifices, Arthur," Lancelot replied, "but none more than you. If the people are permitted to feel anything then it should be gratitude, gratitude that you were willing to become the leader they needed."

"Thank you, my friend."

A woman was crossing the castle courtyard down below.

"Valentina's back, Lancelot."

"Is she?" Lancelot leaned forward for a better look.

"You should go to her. Show her that the knights aren't neglecting her hospitality."

"I should," Lancelot agreed, "but what about you."

"I'll stay out here a while longer," Arthur said, "and try to find away to forget these troublesome memories."

"Is everything all right, Lady Valentina?" Lancelot asked when he caught up with her in the castle corridors.

"For the last time, Sir Lancelot, it's just Valentina," Val said. "Val by preference. I'm not nobility like you."

"In my eyes, you are the noblest woman in Camelot," Lancelot said.

"Stop it, you'll make me blush." Val reached around behind her to scratch a spot between her shoulder-blades. "And to answer your original question, it's this damn dress. I don't know how people in Camelot can wear this stuff. It *itches*."

"I'm sorry, Lady Valentina. Val."

"That's better," Val said. "And it's not your fault. Fabric softener hasn't been invented yet. I'm going to go take a bath, see if that helps."

"I'll send a servant to assist you," Lancelot said.

By the time Val reached her rooms, the servant was already filling a bathtub with hot water.

"Let me help you with that," Val offered, trying to take the jug from the girl.

"No, my lady, it wouldn't be right," the girl replied. When the tub was full, she asked, "Can I help you undress?"

The concept of servants made Val uncomfortable, though she had come to accept that that was the way things were done at Camelot. There were still, however, places where she drew the line.

"No, thank you," she said. "I can manage from here. You may go."

The girl curtsied and left the room.

As soon as the door closed behind the servant, Val locked it, stripped off her uncomfortable clothes and slid gratefully into the warm bath. The tub was not very big so Val could not stretch out. If she tried to submerge her shoulders, she had to fold her legs so that her knees poked up out of the water. Still, in spite of that, Val was grateful for the chance of a good soak, which is why the knock at the door was so very irritating.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"It's Lancelot, Lady Valentina."

"Val," Val called back. "Oh, what's the use. Can't you come back later?"

"It's all right, I'll wait until it's convenient for you," Lancelot replied. "Take as long as you need."

Val muttered something less than complimentary under her breath then clambered out of the bath, splashing water over the floor.

"Just give me a minute."

Val shivered in the cold air that was seeping through the shuttered window as she shrugged her way into her under-dress. Hoping that everything was concealed that needed to be concealed, she snapped back the bolt and opened the door. Lancelot was standing right outside. His dark eyes bored into her and Val regretted that she had not taken the extra time to get fully dressed rather than standing there in under-things that clung revealingly to her damp skin.

"Um, err..." Val hastily folded her arms across her chest. "Hey."

"Lady Valentina."

Val waited for Lancelot to say more, but the knight seemed content to watch and wait. Her throat had gone dry so she swallowed before speaking.

"What, err, what can I do for you, Lancelot?" she said.

Lancelot lifted his arms and Val noticed for the first time that he was carrying a number of folded dresses. But these were not the coarse woollen dresses that she had become used to over the past few months. These dresses were of linen and cotton and... was that silk? And the colours...

"I found these in storage," Lancelot said. "They were left behind when the previous occupants left."

"They left these behind?" Val's voice was filled with wonder as she ran her fingers through the fabrics.

"Do you like them?"

"What girl wouldn't?"

"Then they're yours," Lancelot said. "My gift to you."

"You mean it?" Val gathered the dresses up into her arms before Lancelot could change his mind. "Thank you."

"I'll look forward to seeing you in them," Lancelot said.

The corners of Val's mouth crinkled. "You would."

They stood either side of the doorway in silence. The moment started to lengthen into awkwardness.

"So..." Val said.

"So..." Lancelot replied.

"Why have you been so good to me?" Val said. "You barely even know me."

"I don't know," Lancelot admitted. "I think it's who I am."

Tom was sitting on the harbour wall, one leg bent, foot resting on the wall itself, knee tucked under his chin, the other leg dangling into space.

"Hey!" Val called.

"Hey," Tom replied without looking up.

Val sat down next to him, a manoeuvre complicated by the presence of her crutch. In the end, Tom took it from her and held it to one side until she had settled herself.

"I went looking for you at the library," Val said. "Gildas said I might find you down here. I thought working at the library was important to you?"

"Didn't much feel like it today," Tom said. "What do you reckon they do over there?" he continued, nodding in the direction of Avalon.

"Does it matter?"

"Ask Gareth," Tom said. "Or Lynette. She still hasn't come down from her room, thanks so much for asking."

"Look, don't take it out on me, Tom," Val snapped. "It's not my fault. It was Gareth's decision, he wanted to become a knight."

"You think he knew he was going to become that? Are you telling me he would willingly have chosen that if he'd really known what was involved? Would anyone? Would you?"

"No," Val replied, "but that's not the point."

"Then what *is* the point?" Tom asked. "Nice dress, by the way."

"Thanks." Val smoothed down the skirt. "It was a gift from Lancelot."

"Figures."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"We're stuck in a foreign time and we do what we have to to get by. I don't blame you."

"What?"

"You're in with the top dogs, good on you. And if the people with the power couldn't give a rat's arse for the people without, well, that's not your problem, is it?"

"That's not fair, Tom," Val said, "to me or the knights. Everything they do is for the people of Camelot."

"Yeah, right."

"And don't try to paint yourself as some great representative of the masses. The only reason you care is because you fancy Lynette. You should be grateful. With Gareth's out of the way the field's clear for you to move on in. What are you waiting for?"

Tom stood up and started adjusting his cloak.

Val's hand flew to her mouth. "Tom, I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"I know what you meant." Tom started to walk away.

Val tried to stand, but her legs refused to cooperate. "Where are you going?"

"Away." Tom looked back over his shoulder. "Val, go back to your mates in the castle. Best of luck and all, but I really can't be around you right now."

Val was finally able to balance her crutch and used it to haul herself to her feet. By that time, however, Tom was long gone.

Dagonet tottered on his hind legs on the steps of the main hall. He normally moved about on all fours, like an ape, and it came as something of a surprise to Tom to discover just how tall the knight was when he stood upright. He was even more surprised to hear Dagonet singing.

"Glad someone's having a good time," Tom said.

"A good time?" Dagonet bent at the waist so that he could talk to Tom.

"You know, having a laugh. Bit of singing, bit of dancing. It's good to see someone enjoying themselves. I didn't think your sort could do that anymore."

"We can't."

Tom blinked. "Come again?"

"I don't get any pleasure from what I do."

"Then why do it?"

"I'm an entertainer, Tom," Dagonet said. "A jester. It's who I was before I became a knight. It's my function still."

Hands in his pockets, Tom kicked a stone across the square.

"Wish I knew what my function was in this wretched place."

Dagonet sat down on the stone steps and started to juggle.

"What were you before you came here?" he asked.

"I was a computer geek," Tom replied. "A hacker. Good one, too. Not that there's much use for it in these parts. I spent the best part of my life honing all these skills and they're no good to me now, are they. Aye, that's the joke. Feel free to use that one in your act."

"I can do better than that, Tom," Dagonet said. "People loved me once. I was a famous jester and they came from far and wide to see me perform, to hear my tall tales and laugh at my jokes and japes. But I gave it all up to become a knight."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Dagonet said. "It meant something to me at time, everything, I suppose, but I can no longer feel anything in here." He tapped a long finger against his chest. "I can't comprehend why I made that decision, I don't have the facility anymore. They took away the thing that made me want to become a knight in the first place."

Tom chuckled darkly. "I think, Dagonet, that may be the funniest - and saddest - thing you've ever said to me."

"Told you I was good," Dagonet replied.

"You know, mate," Tom said, "I don't get you knights. Most of the time you're all cold like robots, but every so often you seem just like proper human beings."

"We *are* proper human beings, Tom," Dagonet said, "it's just that sometimes it can be hard to remember."

Tom looked him up and down. "I'll bet. Is that why you're out here doing your thing every day? To remind yourself what you used to be like?"

"Perhaps."

"In that case, I'd leave off the singing if I were you," Tom said. "You might have been good once, but based on that performance... let's just say you're no Elvis."

"Hey!" A scrawny, fair-haired boy ran up and tapped Dagonet on the leg. "Why'd you stop?"

"See, Tom? Somebody likes my singing."

"Sorry, Mordred," Tom said. "My fault. Me and Dagonet got to talking."

Mordred scrutinised Tom. "What about?"

"This and that," Tom said, "and why someone would want to become a knight."

"Oh, that's easy."

"Oh aye? Why don't you enlighten us."

"People want to be like the knights because they're big and strong and powerful," Mordred told him.

"And I suppose you want to be one too, is that it?"

"I *will* be a knight," Mordred declared proudly. Then his face fell. "Only my mum won't let me."

"I'm sure your mam has her reasons," Tom said. "Maybe when you're older, eh? By then you might have had a chance to wise up."

As Val approached the door of Morgan's house, she could hear raised voices coming from within.

"I want the truth, woman," a man was saying. "I don't need you to repeat any more of my wife's lies."

"'Lies' is it?" Morgan said. "That's a fine way to speak about Olwen, particularly when she's just given birth to your son."

"My son?"

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Val said, pushing open the door.

"Not at all," Morgan said. "Valentina, this is Culhwch, new father to a charming, healthy baby boy."

"Congratulations," Val said.

Culhwch folded his arms and glared at her.

"Olwen was in labour through the night," Morgan said, rolling her shoulders and bending her neck to relieve the tension in her muscles, "but we finally brought the lad into the world at dawn this morning. And what does Olwen get for her pain and trouble? This pig-headed individual wants to make the boy a bastard!"

"I'm no fool," Culhwch said, "and no woman's going to pull the wool over my eyes. I've only been back in Camelot these last six months. That's six months only. I know how these things work. There's no way he's a son of mine."

"He's got a... ow!" Val began before her response was cut off by a yelp of pain. Morgan had taken a casual step backwards and planted her heel squarely on Val's toes.

"You men are all alike," Morgan clucked her tongue at him. "You think you know everything there is to know about everything."

"I know a pregnancy lasts for nine months," Culhwch replied stubbornly. "*Nine*, not six."

"And you'd know better than the midwife, wouldn't you," Morgan replied. "How many pregnancies have you tended to?"

"I've delivered lots of litters," Culhwch said.

"Of swine! I don't doubt that pigs have a set cycle, as do horses and cattle and all the other animals, but man stands apart. Or are you claiming that you, Culhwch, are no better than a beast of the field." Morgan punctuated this by poking a fingertip into his broad chest.

"Of course not, but..."

"Not only does man stand alone," Morgan continued before Culhwch had a chance to complete his thought, "but each individual man - and *woman* - is unique. What is true for one cannot be said to be true for all. I've known pregnancies to last ten months or more or to flash by in half that time, but it never occurred to me to wonder at that because I don't expect then all

to be the same. Every woman, every child, is different so why should any two pregnancies be identical? Answer me that if you can, Culhwch."

"Well, I guess I can't," the big man admitted.

"Of course you can't," Morgan said with triumph. "You need to face up to the responsibility of fatherhood, Culhwch. Go home, tell Olwen how much you love her and take a moment to hold the baby - *your* baby - in your arms."

"But..."

"Go. Now." Morgan waved her arms at him, driving him towards the door. "Out! Shoo!"

"You don't really believe all that, do you?" Val asked when she had closed the door behind Culhwch.

"I know I don't want to be responsible for Culhwch turning Olwen and her newborn out onto the street," Morgan replied. "Do you?"

"Is that what happened to you and Mordred?" Val asked. Morgan threw her a look. "I just meant, what with his dad not being around..."

"I've never cheated on Mordred's father," Morgan said.

"I'm sorry," Val said. "Guess it's my morning for putting my foot in my mouth."

"Want to talk about it?"

"I'd normally confide in Tom," Val admitted, "but he's the one person I really can't talk to right now. The Doctor might be able to help, but..."

"So talk to him," Morgan suggested. "He might not be able to answer back, but that doesn't mean he can't listen."

"You think so?" Val said. "You're sure you wouldn't mind?"

"I should be getting back to Olwen," Morgan said. "I'm only here to pick up a few bits and pieces and check up on the patient. You sure you'll be okay here on your own?"

"Actually, there is something else you could do for me," Val said. "Tom told me that Lynette hasn't come out of her room since Gareth... well, you know."

"I know," Morgan said. "You want me to see if there's anything I can do for her?"

"Would you?"

"It's on the way. I'll make a point of stopping by."

Val helped Morgan gather her things and saw her to the door. She stood in the doorway a moment or two, watching Morgan as she skipped her way past first a runaway chicken and then the boy chasing it. Once she was sure that she was alone, Val locked up and then sat down on a stool by the Doctor's bed.

"Good morning, Doctor," she began. "Do I still call you 'Doctor'? Do you change your name along with your face? Is 'Doctor' even really a name?" Releasing a long sigh, she looked up at the ceiling. "Get a grip, Val. Listen to me, I'm getting so worked up about this and I'm not even sure that you can hear me."

"The thing is, it's tough trying to get by without you. Not that I couldn't get by without you before, but that was different. That was back in my own time, the place where I belonged. I knew the rules, there. Sure, I knew there were things beyond my little corner of the universe. I even had a job where I went looking for them. But, in the main, they left me alone to get on with my life and, I hate to admit it, but I guess I kind of liked it that way. It was dull and ordinary, but it was comfortable."

"Then you came along, my first proper alien, and I had stars in my eyes and of course I jumped at the chance to see what was out there. And it was okay because you were there and all the craziness seemed normal when you were around. Even when it went wrong, I knew you'd make it right in the end. And we had fun. Only, I don't think I ever really appreciated what we were doing. Exploring time and space isn't the alien equivalent of a fortnight's cruise around the Adriatic. It's on a whole other level.

"How do you do it? How do you seem like a local wherever we end up? I suppose geographically I'm not that far from home, but I've never felt more lost. And alone. First you and now Tom. I'm driving him away, Doctor, and I don't even know why. It's not like we've got anything in common. And yet there's a part of me that expects him to always be around, not running my life or anything, just hanging out in the background, a piece of the furniture. So why aren't I trying harder to keep him? What's wrong with me, Doctor?"

Val tipped forward, burying her face in the Doctor's blanket.

"Please wake up. I need someone to tell me it's going to be all right."

"Lynette? Your friends asked me to look in on you."

Morgan eased open the bedroom door. Lynette was sitting in a chair, a moth-eaten blanket draped carelessly over her lap. Her skin was sallow and her hair uncombed. An untouched bowl of vegetable broth sat on a table beside her.

"Let's get some air in here, shall we?" Morgan said, pulling back the shutters and throwing open the window.

Lynette rocked back in her chair as she recoiled from the bright light. An inarticulate moan escaped her chapped lips.

"It's good for you," Morgan said without sympathy. She crouched down so that she was on a level with Lynette. "What do you want to do first: eat or wash? No answer? Then let's start by getting your strength up."

Morgan picked up the bowl and filled the spoon.

"You have to eat, my love," Morgan said, gently pushing the spoon between Lynette's lips.

Lynette swallowed and Morgan took this as invitation to keep feeding her. When they had emptied half the bowl, however, Lynette started to choke, then threw her head forward and sprayed watery vomit onto the floorboards.

"It's okay, it's okay," Morgan said softly, putting her arm around the girl. "Let's get you cleaned up."

She dipped the corner of a cloth in a jug of water and started to wipe Lynette's face. Lynette tried to pull away, but Morgan kept a firm grip on her.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm being as gentle as I can. And you want to look your best for your man, don't you?"

Lynette sniffed and then the tears started to fall.

"That's it," Morgan said. "Let it all out."

Lynette looked at her with red-rimmed eyes. "I miss him. I miss Gareth so hard it hurts."

"I know, my love," Morgan said. "I know exactly what you're going through, just like you know that he's not coming back, don't you?"

"I know."

Morgan dried Lynette's eyes and frowned at the dark circles beneath them.

"When did you last sleep?"

"I can't. Ever since Gareth left, I've had nightmares."

"I understand."

Morgan left Lynette's side and started poking about in the grate until she had got a fire going. She hung a pan of water over the flames, then took a handful of herbs from her bag and started crushing them on the table.

"Thank you," Lynette said quietly.

"For what?"

"I don't know," Lynette said, "but I don't feel so alone anymore. How did you know? Is it true that you've got the Sight?"

"You've been listening to gossip again, haven't you? You'll be accusing me of being half-Fay next." Morgan shook her head. "No, there's nothing supernatural about it. You and I just have a lot in common, that's all."

Morgan lifted the pan of water off of the fire, tossed the crushed herbs into it and stirred the mixture before pouring it into a cup.

"Drink this," Morgan said, "and I promise you restful, dreamless sleep. No, not so fast. It's still hot."

"Thank you." Lynette nursed the cup in both her hands.

"You just get some rest. I'll call on you again later tonight."

"I'd like that."

Morgan opened the door, but she did not leave. Instead, she turned back to Lynette.

"They hurt you, Lynette, Arthur and his knights. I promise you, I won't let them hurt another girl like that ever again."

"What is this thing?" Lancelot asked.

"I have no idea," Arthur whispered back.

Arthur's sword was in his hand and he was dripping water onto the floor, his clothes soaked from his swim from the mainland. He and Lancelot had seen the object they were now exploring fall from the sky and, overwhelmed by curiosity and enthusiasm, they had struck out to investigate without first fetching a boat. They had neglected to bring any light with them, either, and counted themselves fortunate that the walls inside this fallen star gave off a dim glow of their own.

"You think they'll sing songs about us when we get back?" Lancelot said. "The brave warriors who captured a star."

"More like the two idiots who got lost inside a bit of rock," Arthur replied. "I'm sure we've been this way before."

"Maybe you should make a mark on the wall so we'll know if we get turned around," Lancelot suggested.

It seemed a good idea so Arthur swung his broadsword - not easy in the confined passageway - and scored a line in the wall at shoulder height. Viscous black fluid immediately welled up from the wound and the passageway convulsed, knocking both Arthur and Lancelot off of their feet.

"Sorry about that," Arthur said, sitting up. "Let's not try that again."

"Hey, Arthur!" Lancelot said. "You need to see this."

"What is it?"

Lancelot was lying on his back on the floor and next to him was...

"Is that a body?"

"I don't know," Lancelot replied. "I think so, but it's like nothing I've ever seen before."

"And this sticky stuff. Blood?"

"Maybe we should get out of here," Lancelot suggested.

"We can't, not now we know there are people in here." Arthur grabbed hold of Lancelot's hand and hauled him to his feet. "Someone could be alive further on, alive and in need of help."

"Then let me investigate on my own," Lancelot said. "You're a new dad. You've got a family to think about."

"And you're all on your own, is that it?" Arthur said. "What about Ceinwyn? Or Enide? Or Nimue?"

"You know what I mean," Lancelot said, not sharing his companion's humour. "No one's going to miss me if I don't come back."

"I'd miss you," Arthur said. "We go on together."

"Fine." Lancelot drew his paired short-swords. "But we do it armed."

Shoulder to shoulder, they edged their way along the passageway.

"Heat signatures detected."

Lancelot jumped. "Who was that?"

"I think it came from in there," Arthur said, pointing to an opening from which a bright beam of light streamed.

"Leader!" the mysterious voice continued.

Cautiously, Arthur and Lancelot followed the light into a large round chamber.

"Leader, protect me from these intruders!"

"I wouldn't want to meet the bird that laid that," Lancelot said.

The 'egg' in the middle of the room flashed furiously. "What has become of the Leader?"

"Is this his?" Arthur asked, kicking a metal helmet across the room.

"The Leader has been deactivated," the egg said. "You must replace him."

"I don't like the sound of that," Lancelot said.

"I like the look of those even less," Arthur replied, indicating the metal arms rising up around them. "Back to back. We'll fight our way out."

"Bring it on." Lancelot crossed his swords. "Let's see how they like UPDATE COMPLETE. RE-INITIALISING HIGHER FUNCTIONS."

Arthur blinked his right eye. His left, hidden behind a lens in his masked was held constantly open. He was hanging from the metal web in the main hall of Avalon.

"Is it done?" he asked.

"For now," the egg said. "We still lack the necessary resources to complete the process, but each stage brings you closer to full conversion."

Arthur was lowered to the ground and the web detached itself from his back and arms.

"While you were working," he said, "I think I dreamed."

"Corrupt data in your neural pathways," the egg said. "It will be deleted during the next upgrade."

"Is that all it was?"

The egg declined to answer.

"How go the repairs?"

"Progress is being delayed due to unfamiliarity with the design of this vessel," the egg replied. "I can find no match within my database, but assimilation is inevitable. We will regain contact with the fleet."

"And then we bring them here," Arthur said. "More knights for my cause."

"We bring them to Earth," the egg said, "and we upgrade your world."

"There is one concern," Arthur said. "What's to stop the same fate befalling the fleet as befell your first knights?"

"It is a minor risk," the egg said. "The probability of the same weapon being used against us is insignificant. All but one of the organics who crewed this vessel were eliminated."

"All but one?"

"There was a lone survivor. This unit lacks mobility so was unable to pursue."

"And this survivor," Arthur began, "does he have access to the weapon?"

"Lady Valentina!"

"Sir Lancelot?"

Val had been taking a meandering route through the city hoping to clear her head and had been paying little attention to her surroundings. As such, she had not noticed the knight until he was practically on top of her. Lancelot was riding a tall horse with a sable coat.

"You're shivering," Lancelot observed, dismounting. "Take my cloak."

"Thanks. This dress is wonderful, but it's not really made for this weather."

Lancelot settled the heavy cloak around Val's shoulders. Their eyes met as he tied the cords that would hold it in place. Val shivered again.

"Are you still cold?" he asked.

Val shook her head.

"Are you heading back to the castle?"

"Eventually," Val agreed.

"Then ride with me."

Val looked at the horse sceptically. "I don't know..."

"Rest your legs awhile," Lancelot suggested.

Before Val could object, he picked her up and settled her on the back of his mount. Lancelot climbed on behind her, reaching around Val to take hold of the reins.

"I don't feel entirely stable," Val said. She was sitting side-saddle, both legs draped over the horse's left flank.

"Hold on to me," Lancelot said. "I won't let you fall."

Val put an arm across his shoulders and he in turn wrapped his free arm around her waist.

"I'm not holding too tight, am I?" he asked.

Val shook her head. "Not at all."

Lancelot spurred the horse forward and the momentum forced Val back against the knight's breastplate. She caught herself wondering about what might lie beneath it and tried to banish the thought from her mind. She was having a bad day, she reminded herself, and her emotions were all over the place. Was it any wonder that she went a bit giddy over the first man to show a bit of interest? It did not hurt that said man was also dark, handsome and mysterious. *Don't do it, Val*, her inner voice of reason piped up. *That way lies madness.*

"This isn't the way to the castle," she said, tearing her eyes away from Lancelot for a moment.

"I thought, if you weren't in any hurry, I'd show you some of the countryside," Lancelot explained. "There's food in the saddlebags."

"Lancelot, are you taking me for a *picnic*?"

"Is that wrong? I can take you back if you prefer."

"Not wrong," Val said, "just unexpected. I wouldn't have thought it was the kind of thing you knights did."

"I remember this... other man. A friend," Lancelot said hesitantly, "from long ago. He took this woman whom he liked very much - Ceinwyn, she was called, or Enide - for rides in the country. They would eat together in the meadows and they would laugh. I remember that she enjoyed it. I thought you might enjoy it too."

"I'd enjoy it very much," Val said. "You know, where I come from, we have stories of a knight called Lancelot, but he's so different from you. He's a bit of a ladies' man, but you're so nervous, so unsure of yourself. I think it's sweet."

"Tell me more about this other Lancelot," the knight said. "He reminds me of this... *friend* I once knew."

Lynette looked nervously around the hall. She sat on a low stool, hands folded demurely in her lap. She was not alone. The room was full of people, sitting on chairs where they could or sitting on the sawdust covered floor if they could not. Their attention was fixed on the person standing on the table at the front of the room. He was holding forth on the subject of Arthur and his knights.

"Are you all right?" Morgan asked her.

"Just a bit... overwhelmed," Lynette admitted.

"That'll pass."

"I wasn't expecting quite so many people. I don't think I can get up and talk in front of them."

"They really want to hear what you have to say," Morgan said.

"I know and I don't want to let you down, but..."

"That's all right." Morgan put a hand on Lynette's arm. "It *is* only your first meeting. Just sit at the back here and listen, if you like. Maybe you'll feel more like getting involved next time."

Lynette smiled weakly. "Maybe."

Morgan gave the girl another reassuring pat on the arm and stood up. She glided across the room and the man on the table paused in his diatribe to help Morgan clamber up beside him. There was a smattering of applause.

"You must all have heard by now," she told her audience. "Those knights, our *sworn protectors*, have taken another young man and snuffed him out in the prime of his life. They've destroyed not only his life, but the life of the girl who loved him. Are these the kind of defenders we want in Camelot?"

"Gareth isn't dead and the girl will recover," an audience member interjected. "Aren't you being a bit harsh?"

"You wouldn't say that if you saw Gareth or spoke to Lynette. What Arthur has done to that young couple is criminal."

"The way I heard it, Gareth wanted to become a knight. And why shouldn't he? Camelot needs people to defend it."

"And why can't we defend her ourselves?" Morgan replied. "Why do we have to put up with these... these *creatures* running our lives?"

"Because they're strong," a woman with a toddler sitting in her lap interjected. "Strong and powerful. The Lady of Avalon made them immortal. What hope do the likes of us have against them?"

"The knights aren't immortal."

A deep, bass voice echoed around the room and the audience recoiled in horror as a black-armoured figure strode through the door.

"If you're looking to depose Arthur," Agravaine said, "count me in."

"It's hardly picnicking weather," Val said, brushing crumbs from her lips.

They had found a sheltered spot in which to dine, but, even though the wind could not reach them, it was still cold and Val huddled ever deeper inside her borrowed cloak.

"Have I done something wrong?" Lancelot asked.

"No, no," Val hurried to reassure him, "it's all really lovely. I just wish I'd brought some gloves, that's all."

"Your hands are cold? Let me warm them for you."

Lancelot took one of Val's hands in both of his and started to rub the warmth back into it. Val yelped in pain and snatched her hand back. The sharp edges of Lancelot's metal gauntlets had scraped her skin raw.

"I'm sorry," Lancelot said. "I didn't think."

"Maybe if you took the armour off?" Val suggested.

"I can't. It's a part of me now. That's what happened when the Lady of Avalon rebuilt me." Lancelot looked away. "I thought that with you I might be able to be the man I was, but I can't. Not ever. You must think I'm a monster."

"No, I think you're just a man," Val said, "whose doing all he can to deal with an incredible trauma."

"I don't think I know what it means to be 'just a man' anymore," Lancelot said. His head snapped round. "We're not alone."

"What do you mean?" Val asked.

Lancelot put a finger to his lips and stood up slowly. Suddenly, he sprang into the nearby bushes and emerged wrestling another man. Lancelot pinned him to the floor, his right forearm across the man's throat. He raised his left arm and a blade sprang from a concealed sheath within his gauntlet. The tip of the blade came to rest pressing against the skin between the intruder's eyes.

"Identify yourself and your purpose," Lancelot demanded.

"I'll tell you nothing," his prisoner replied, spitting in Lancelot's face.

"I can see by your colours that you're one of Cerdic's people," Lancelot said. "What's he doing this far west?"

"Soon you'll be kneeling before King Cerdic's might," the prisoner hissed.

"I recognise no leader but Arthur."

"Then Cerdic will crush you and your precious *Dux Bellorum* beneath his heel and there's nothing either of you can do to stop him."

Lancelot increased the pressure on his blade. The point broke the skin and blood trickled into the prisoner's eyes.

"Tell me what Cerdic's planning and I'll let you live," Lancelot said.

"You give me your word?"

"I give you my word."

Cowed, the prisoner admitted that he was scouting the territory for Cerdic who had left his Kingdom of Wessex and was marching west along the river to claim Camelot for his own. Eager to save his skin, he went on to give a detailed description of Cerdic's forces. When he was convinced the prisoner had nothing more give, Lancelot slit his throat.

"You said you'd let him live," Val protested.

"Promises to inferior life-forms have no value," Lancelot said. "He was a threat. To let him live would have been illogical."

"Tom, wake up."

Tom was brought back to consciousness by Gildas, who was shaking him by the shoulder.

"What's the crack?" Tom yawned and squinted out the window. "It's still dark out."

"I know," Gildas replied, "and I'm sorry for waking you so early, but..."

"Is it Lynette?" Tom interrupted, his brain coming up to speed. "Has something happened to her?"

"No, it's not that," Gildas assured him. "Lynette's fine. She spent the night with Morgan." Tom reached for his tunic.

"I wouldn't have thought you'd approve," he said, "what with you being a Christian and Morgan being... well, whatever it is Morgan is."

"She and I both have Lynette's best interests at heart," Gildas replied, "and that's what really matters. Now hurry up and get dressed."

Tom complied in silence.

"Arthur has called an assembly of all of Camelot's warriors," Gildas explained.

"Why?"

"I don't know," Gildas replied, "which is why I thought you might like to come with me to find out."

Tom laced up his boots. "What are we waiting for?"

The amphitheatre was in the heart of the city. It was rapidly filling up when Gildas and Tom arrived and the pair of them had to climb almost all the way to the top of the steps to get a good view.

"There's Lynette with Morgan and Mordred," Gildas said, dragging Tom through the crowd.

Arthur stood within the basin of the amphitheatre, his fellow knights standing around him. Gareth was among them and Tom found his eyes kept being drawn back to the knights' newest recruit, searching for any sign of the boy he had once known. Lynette, he noticed, was staring at her feet, refusing to look in Gareth's direction. Tom took her hand in his and gave it a comforting squeeze. She looked up at him and attempted a smile.

"People of Camelot!" Arthur's voice echoed around the amphitheatre and everyone fell silent. The first rays of dawn were peeking over the horizon, causing his armour to shine. "An army of Saxons is, at this very moment, marching towards our city. They plan to take Camelot from us and claim it for their own."

A ripple of disquiet swept around the open space.

"You have nothing to fear," Arthur continued. "My knights and I will lead your warriors out to meet King Cerdic's army before it gets here. They will not be expecting us and I have no doubt that they will be swiftly dispatched. We will keep you safe."

"Whether we want you to or not," Morgan muttered, softly enough that Tom was not quite sure that he had heard her correctly. He turned to ask, but his words were cut off by the cheer that erupted in the amphitheatre. Morgan did not cheer. Instead, she tightened her grip on her son, her eyes flashing daggers down at Arthur.

The knights started to organise the warriors into columns and the civilians began to disperse through the arched exits of the amphitheatre. Tom let himself be carried back down to ground level by the flow of the crowd. As they passed the knights, Mordred broke free of his mother and ran to Arthur's side.

"I'm coming with you," he declared.

"No, you're not," Arthur said.

Mordred pouted. "But I want to be a knight like you!"

"Mordred, come away from there," Morgan told him.

"The boy's doing no harm," Arthur said.

"You stay away from him," Morgan said, her words laced with venom. "He's *my* son and you've no right to have anything to do with him."

She scooped up Mordred in her arms and tried to carry him forcibly away, but the boy wriggled free.

"I hate you," he spat at her. "You never let me do what I want."

He ran off, disappearing into the crowd.

"Mordred!" Morgan called after him. "Mordred, come back!"

"I'll go after him," Tom said then ran off into the early morning.

Tom was already hard at work translating a new scroll when Lynette arrived at the library. He was so engrossed that he did not notice her until she sat down beside him.

"Morning," she said.

"Hey, how are you?" Tom put down his quill and they embraced. "I wasn't expecting to see you here today. You haven't been back to the library, like, since..."

"Since... yes," Lynette said. "But I need to start living my life again. At least, that's what Morgan says."

"Smart woman that Morgan."

"Yes, she is," Lynette replied. "How's Mordred?"

"Fit," Tom said. "Took me forever to catch up with him. His mam's grounded him."

"Poor lamb," Lynette said. "For how long?"

"I'm thinking maybe forever."

Lynette laughed. It was not much, but it was a start.

"It's good to be back," she said.

"I missed you," Tom said. He sniffed the air. "Lynette, do you smell burning?"

Culhwch spotted them first. He was on his way to his butcher's shop, a pig carcass over one shoulder. The sow was a good size and he was hoping to turn enough of a profit today to be able buy a little something for Olwen on the way home, a way of apologising for the way he had been acting lately. He happened to glance out towards the headland and he saw a pair of longboats cast up on the beach. He frowned. He was sure that they had not been there when he had passed this way the day before.

He heard a heavy tread behind him and turned in time to see a Saxon lunging at him with a wide-bladed knife. Culhwch swung the pig down from his shoulder and hit the Saxon in the face with it. The man dropped and did not get back up, but now Culhwch could see dozens more Saxons scaling the walls and fanning out through the streets.

"Culhwch, what's going on?" A round face appeared at a nearby window.

"Geraint, sound the alarm," Culhwch said. "The Saxon's are here."

"And what will you be doing?" Geraint asked.

Culhwch did not reply. He broke into a run and set off back the way he had come, the pig's carcass held in both hands like a club. Olwen and his boy were alone and unprotected at home and Culhwch's only thought was to get to them before the Saxons did.

Fire gripped Camelot as the invading Saxons set light to thatched roofs and hurled burning torches through open windows. They rampaged through the streets, battering down the doors of buildings, overturning and smashing furniture, throwing out what they did not like, pocketing any item that caught their eye. The brave tried to mount a resistance, using farm tools, kitchen implements and whatever else was to hand as improvised weapons. The trained Saxon warriors mocked them, dodging ineffectual blows before disembowelling the defenders. Still others tried to make peace with the Saxons, to surrender rather than fight, but the Saxons had no interest in taking prisoners in Camelot and anyone caught within range of a Saxon blade was considered fair game, whether they were armed or not. Then there were those who simply tried to hide, to barricade themselves away in places where the Saxons could not reach. But the Saxons had felled trees to use as battering rams and carried great axes to hack through obstructions. These hastily erected barriers were merely delaying the inevitable.

"What's that?" Val asked, getting up off of her stool.

She had been sitting at the Doctor's bedside. Morgan was at her workbench while Mordred was sulking in corner.

"It's the warning bell," Morgan said. "They're sounding the alarm."

Her announcement was punctuated by the first screams from outside. Mordred went to peer out of the window.

"The city's on fire," he said with wonder.

"Get away from there." Morgan's voice was almost a scream as she hurled herself across the room and pulled Mordred to one side. She shoved him into Val's arms. "Take him."

Morgan started to pore over her tools.

"What's going on?" Val asked her, tense.

"The Saxons are here," Morgan said as she picked up a white chicken and a curved knife.

"Here? How?" Val said. "What happened to Arthur and the knights?"

"I don't know," Morgan replied. "I'm more concerned about what's going to happen to us. Keep Mordred away from the door."

"But I want to help you," Mordred whined.

"You can help by protecting me and my friend," Val said, keeping a tight grip on his shoulders.

Morgan slit the throat of the chicken and used her thumb to daub blood on her cheeks and forehead. Chicken in one hand, knife in the other, she threw open the door. A group of Saxons had gathered in the street outside. On seeing the redhead, they leered and began to

approach. Without taking her eyes off of them, Morgan dripped chicken's blood in a line across the threshold.

"I am a priestess of the old gods," she said, "of Don and Beli Mawr and the oldest beings in this land. I am a channel for their power and I say unto you that if you cross that line then the skin shall be flayed from your bones."

"We worship Woden," one of the Saxon said, "not your petty deities."

"You are a long way from the land of your ancestors, little Saxon," Morgan replied. "Can your Woden reach far enough to protect you from me?"

The Saxons looked at one another.

"She's bluffing," one said.

"If you're so sure, *you* cross that line then," another replied.

The Saxons hesitated, unwilling to back down, but too fearful to go forward. Morgan stared defiantly back at them, her thoughts with her son in the room behind her. Each side stood their ground, waiting for the other to make the first move.

The area around the North Gate exploded with dust and blood and screams as Dagonet vaulted the wall. His long limbs scythed through the invaders, catching three, four or five at a time, hurling them up into the air and slicing them to ribbons. The other knights rode in his wake. Agravaire held his spear like a lance and charged down Saxons who ran in terror at the sight of him. Cai leaped from his horse, preferring to fight with his feet on the ground, and used the heavy mace around his right hand to crack open enemy skulls. Lancelot too had taken to his feet. He was a dark whirlwind of energy, spinning and kicking with his feet, thrusting and slashing with the blades that sprang from his wrists. Arthur rode forward on his white charger, ignoring the melee around him, his attention saved for just one man.

"Cerdic!" he shouted. "Where are you, Cerdic? Come out and face me!"

Tom had tipped a bookcase in front of the library's double doors, but the Saxons were making short work of it with their axes.

"Get behind me," Tom told Lynette.

He cast about for a weapon, but he was in a library, not an armoury. In desperation, he started picking up books and scroll-cases and hurling those at the Saxons. The intruders ducked down behind the bookcase, batting away the missiles with their shields or the flat of their swords.

"Make a run for it," Tom said and Lynette sprinted to the door at the other end of the hall.

"It won't open," she called out. "It's locked!"

Tom had run out of things to throw and the Saxons were emerging from behind cover. He snatched up a chair and, with a roar, smashed it over the head of the nearest enemy. The chair broke, the Saxon did not. Instead, the Saxon grabbed Tom by the front of his tunic, picked

him up and hurled him across the room. Tom bounced off the top of one of the tables and came to a halt when he collided with the wall in a crumpled heap.

Lynette screamed. She wrenched at the door handle, but it refused to budge. The Saxon who had thrown Tom stepped forward, cupped her chin in a big, rough hand and forced her round to face him.

"Woden's beard, what have we here?" he said. "What do you think, lads? Isn't this wasted on the Britons?"

"Why are you doing this?" Lynette asked. She was trying to be defiant, but her voice was trembling.

"Because we can," the Saxon replied. "Because we're strong and you're weak. Your people don't deserve to survive, though I might be tempted to make an exception in your case."

He tipped Lynette's head up and forced his mouth down on hers. His coarse beard scraped her face. Lynette bit down on her lower lip, drawing blood. When he recoiled, bellowing in anger, she lashed out with her right hand, raking her nails down his cheek. The Saxon lunged forward, plunging his sword up under her ribs.

"You stupid girl," he said as she slid off the blade. "You shouldn't have done that."

Tom struggled groggily to his feet. The room was spinning, but one thing was clear.

"Lynette!" he yelled. "What have you done to her?"

"You'll be joining her soon enough," the Saxon replied.

Tom snatched up the leg of the broken chair and aimed the sharp edge at the Saxon. With a bored expression on his face, the Saxon swept his bloody sword back and forth, slicing the chair leg into tiny fragments.

"Make peace with your gods," the Saxon said, holding his blade on a level with Tom's eyes, "but do it quickly."

Tom swore in his face.

"Have it your way," the Saxon said.

He thrust the sword forward. At least, he tried to, but the blade was being held in place by a powerful metal hand. Gareth squeezed and the blade shattered beneath his grip. He jabbed his elbow into the Saxon's throat and the Saxon stumbled back, struggling to breathe. Pivoting on the balls of his feet, Gareth spun around and thrust his sword deep into the Saxon's chest.

As the corpse dropped to the floor, his two comrades advanced, banging their axes against their shields. Gareth lashed out with his foot, breaking the knee of the closest Saxon. He tumbled forward, meeting the edge of Gareth's sword as it swept up in the opposite direction, decapitating him. The third and final Saxon swung his axe at Gareth's back, but it skidded off the knight's armour in a shower of sparks. Gareth moved before the Saxon had time to recover, lashing out with his free hand and grasping the Saxon around the throat. Gareth twisted and there was a sharp crack as the Saxon's neck snapped.

Tom stumbled across the room and dropped to his knees beside Lynette. She was still breathing raggedly, but the light in her eyes was fading fast. Tom pressed his hands over her wound, but could not stop the warm blood spilling out over his fingers.

"Hold on," Tom said. Stinging tears filled his eyes. "Please, pet, just hold on. I'll get help. I'll..."

"Tom, it's all right," Lynette whispered. She took Tom's hand in hers, heedless of the blood. "It's going to be all right. Is that Gareth?"

Tom nodded, struggling to speak.

Lynette smiled. "I knew he'd come back for me. I knew. Please Tom, do something for me."

"Anything."

"Tell Gareth that I..."

And Lynette said no more.

Gareth was standing at Tom's shoulder.

"Who was she?" he asked. "Should I remember her?"

"It was a deception," Arthur said.

The room he was in was dominated by a large, round table with writing in both Latin and Greek around its edge, and it was around this table that Arthur and his knights sat. Val, their honoured guest, sat opposite Arthur.

"We were meant to capture the spy," he continued. "His information was false. While we went to intercept an attack by land, we left Camelot undefended against an invasion from the sea. If we had not turned back when we did..."

Arthur did not need to finish the thought. Down in the city they were still burying their dead. Fortunately, the knights and the warriors had turned back and the Saxons had been routed. King Cerdic had refused Arthur's challenge to face him in single combat and had instead been in the vanguard of the retreat, over land this time. The knights had burned their ships. In spite of everything, Arthur had elected not to pursue the Saxons. He had left Camelot undefended once and he only had to look at the blood staining the streets of the black smoke rising from fires yet to be quenched to know the consequences of his actions. Here he would remain until the city had been rebuilt.

There was a commotion outside the hall. Heads turned and Arthur rose to his feet. As he did so, the doors were flung open and Tom burst into the room, closely followed by two guards.

"We're sorry, sir," one of the guards said. "We tried to stop him, but we didn't know if it was right to use force or not. He *is* a friend of Gildas."

"Do you want me to remove him, Leader?" Cai asked.

"No, Cai," Arthur said. "Let's hear what he has to say."

"I'll keep it simple," Tom said, stepping away from his escort. "I want to become a knight."

Arthur's response was equally simple. "No."

"No? Why the heck not?"

"Being a knight is an honour and a privilege," Arthur replied. "We only accept the very best."

"And I'm not good enough, is that it? Well see here, mate, I've got more to offer than the lot of you. I've travelled farther than you can imagine, seen things and faced dangers like you wouldn't believe. I've helped save the world. You can't even protect your city. You need me."

"Can you prove what you say?"

"Ask Val," Tom replied. "Ask her about our adventures, her and me and the Doctor. We're ruddy heroes."

"Tom, why are you doing this?" Val wanted to know. "You hate the knights."

"You didn't have to watch Lynette die in your arms because you weren't strong enough or fast enough to save her," Tom said bitterly. "I want to be stronger. I want to be faster. And most of all, I don't want to be able to feel what I'm feeling anymore."

"You've just got to be patient a little longer," Val said. "The Doctor'll wake up soon and then he'll take us both home."

"Don't you get it, Val?" Tom replied. "He's not going to wake up. This is what our lives are from now on and I'm sick of it. Becoming a knight is a way out, a means of numbing the pain and right now it's a pretty attractive one to me."

"Tom..."

"You make a persuasive argument, Tom Brooker," Arthur said.

"Does that mean I'm in?"

"I shall have to think on what's been said."

"You're stretched too thin, mate," Tom said. "You need all the knights you can get."

"I don't dispute that, but there are other factors to consider," Arthur said. "Return in the morning. I'll give you my answer then."

Tom bowed and left. Val jumped to her feet.

"You can't let him do this," she said. "He doesn't know what he's saying."

"Do you mean to say that he doesn't want to become a knight?" Lancelot asked.

"Of course he doesn't," Val replied. "That's the grief talking."

"Why wouldn't anyone want to become a knight?" Cai asked.

"Arthur, you took me in without knowing who I was. You gave me a place to stay, food, clothes... I've no right to ask you for anything else. But I'm begging you. Please, Arthur, for me, don't make Tom a knight."

"I said I would give my decision in the morning," Arthur said. "I have nothing more to say on the matter."

Under other circumstances, Val would have been in her element. Here she was boarding an alien spacecraft. And what a spacecraft! It did not seem to have been built so much as grown. Rather than metal or plastic or ceramics, it was made up of plant matter, like a seed pod ejected from some giant flower floating through space. Admittedly, it had seen better days, but in another context Val would have given her right arm for a chance to learn more.

Today was different. The spacecraft was simply a prelude to the main event. Arthur's decision. Tom's conversion.

"So this is where the magic happens," Tom said. "This is where you turn people into knights. Well, let's get on with it then."

"I haven't given my decision yet," Arthur pointed out.

"But that's why we're here, right?" Tom said. "Just get it over with."

"You desire me to convert another subject? Must I remind you that that would be an inefficient use of limited resources?"

Val jumped. The voice had come from the glowing egg in the middle of the room.

"What is that?" she asked.

"That is the Lady of Avalon," Arthur told her.

"That's no lady," Tom said. "That's a computer if ever there was one."

"I am far beyond a mere computer, human," the egg replied, "but in this time your species should not even be familiar with the term. Explain."

"It's like this," Tom said, "I'm from the future."

"Impossible."

"Says the talking egg," Tom mocked. "You're not the Lady of Avalon at any rate. What do I call you?"

"I am the Planner," the egg said.

"The Planner. Right. And you're responsible for all this?" Tom gestured at the knights. "I want to be like them."

"The subject's knowledge would be an asset to our cause," the Planner said, "but I have assessed the benefits and they do not outweigh the costs to our overall objective. Request for conversion is denied."

"What!" Tom rounded on Arthur. "You promised..."

"I promised nothing," Arthur said. "I have something else in mind for you."

"Yeah, like what?"

"If you wish to be a knight then you must prove yourself to me," Arthur said. "There is a quest I wish for you to undertake."

Tom was unimpressed "Bring it on."

"My Lady, show me the weapon we spoke of."

A hologram appeared in the air above the Planner.

"You want me to find a cup?" Tom said.

"The vessel is unimportant," the Planner said. "It is the contents of the vessel that are dangerous."

"That vessel is a threat to everything we've worked for in Camelot," Arthur said, "and to everything we might yet achieved. I want you to find it and bring it to me before someone else can use it against us."

"Is that all?" Tom asked. "And how am I meant to find this thing?"

A metallic arm reached down from the ceiling and deposited a palm-sized black box at Tom's feet. A light flashed on one side. Tom picked it up and moved the device about, but however he turned it, the light always pointed in the same direction.

"The cellular structure of the weapon is unlike anything else on this world," the Planner said. "This device will lead you to it."

"A magic lamp? Sweet."

"I expect the weapon to be guarded so Cai will go with you," Arthur said. "Do this for me, Tom, and I will give you what you asked for."

"You'll make me like you?"

Arthur nodded.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Val went to Arthur's side.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for not turning him into a knight."

"It is just a delay," Arthur replied. "I meant what I said. If he returns with the vessel then a knight he will become."

Val paused on the threshold of Morgan's house and cleared her throat to announce her arrival. Morgan glanced up briefly before returning her attention to the seeds she was grinding with pestle and mortar.

"Mordred found you then?" she said. "I was worried he'd forget my message and wander off. It's the first time I've let him out of the house in a week."

Val did not need to be reminded of the passage of time. She had been counting the days since Tom and Cai had left on their quest.

"Mordred said that the Doctor had woken up." Val was out of breath having hurried all the way from the castle and her voice was raw as a result. "Can I see him?"

Morgan frowned. She pushed the mortar to one side and turned to face her visitor. "That wasn't the message Mordred was supposed to deliver."□

Val's face fell. "You mean he's still unconscious."

"Valentina, look at me," Morgan said. "Yes, he's still asleep, but he's shown more activity today than at any time since you arrived at Camelot. He twists and turns and, when the mood takes him, babbles."

"Babbles?" Val repeated.

"It's like he's caught up in a dream," Morgan explained. "Mordred talks in his sleep sometimes too."

"What does he say?"

"I couldn't understand the words," Morgan said. "It's not a language I recognise. Valentina, I don't know if this means he'll wake up soon, and the last thing I want to do is raise your hopes unnecessarily, but this could be something and I thought you'd like to sit with him just in case."

"Thank you."

Morgan acknowledged Val with a tilt of her head, then drew aside the curtain that split the room and gave her patient a measure of privacy. Val picked up her usual stool and carried it to the side of the bed. The blanket was pulled up to the Doctor's chin, and Val reached under it to find the Doctor's hand.

Long fingers clasped around her wrist and she cried out in pain and shock. The Doctor's eyes snapped open, the pupils darted this way and that as he raced to assess his surroundings. Morgan started forward, but Val used her free hand to motion her back.

"Doctor?" Val said.

The Doctor's pale eyes fixed on his companion.

"Who are you?"

"Don't you remember?"

The Doctor tightened his grip on her wrist.

"Who are you?"

Val tried to pull her arm away, but the Doctor would not let up.

"Doctor, you're hurting me."

"Answer the question!"

Val gasped as his grip tightened still further.

"Valentina Rossi," she hissed through gritted teeth. "Val. We travel together, you, me and Tom. You must remember."

"Don't tell me what I must and must not do," the Doctor snarled. He started to sit up, but Morgan was at his side, pressing a damp cloth over his face. Val caught the scent of lavender.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Some herbs I've been growing," Morgan replied. "It should calm him." Even as she was saying this, the Doctor's body relaxed and he sank back on the bed. The fingers clasped around Val's wrist relaxed and she snatched her hand away. Morgan folded the cloth and draped it over the Doctor's forehead.

"I remember," he said dreamily. His eyes settled on the piled of clothes nearby. "Do you mind?" he said, indicating the curtain. "I'd like to get dressed."

"Is that wise?" Val began, but Morgan was already leading her away.

"Let's give your friend his privacy, Valentina," she said, "and I'll take a look at that wrist."

She sat Val down by her work table and began mixing ingredients in a clay bowl.

"He seems so different," Val said, looking back across the room as if she could see beyond the curtain.

"People change."

Val laughed, briefly and with little humour. "You don't know the half of it."

For a moment, Morgan seemed about to respond to that. Instead, however, she picked up the bowl and said, "Give me your wrist."

Morgan smoothed a cool paste over Val's bruise and then bound her wrist with a clean cloth.

"That should keep the swelling down."

Val opened her mouth to thank Morgan, but was interrupted by the sound of the curtain being pulled aside. She had not noticed it before, but now, seeing him wearing his old clothes, Val realised that the Doctor had shrunk during the change, perhaps only a few inches, but enough to cause him to turn up the ends of his grey suit trousers. He had not bothered with the jacket and tie, settling simply for the cream-coloured shirt. He had left several buttons undone so that it gaped open around his chest and he had rolled the sleeves up above his elbows. His hair was tousled and beneath it was a hard face, planes and angles chiselled out of granite rather than sculpted and smoothed in marble, with high cheekbones, a pointed nose and a mouth drawn in a tight line.

"How do I look?" he asked.

Val said the first thing that came into her head. "Those clothes don't fit you."

The Doctor shrugged. "The only others I could find were far too small."

"They must belong to Mordred," Morgan said.

The Doctor looked her up and down, taking her measure. Morgan stared back defiantly.

"Miss Rossi I know," he said, "but you're a stranger."

"Morgan looked after you while you were unconscious," Val said.

"Know much of Gallifreyan physiology does she? No? Then I doubt her ministrations had much effect."

"Doctor!"

"It's all right, Valentina," Morgan said, keeping her voice level. "If your friend is so underwhelmed by my hospitality then perhaps he'd like to leave."

The Doctor shrugged and strode out of the door. With an apologetic look towards Morgan, Val followed in his wake.

"Doctor, that was uncalled for," she said. "Morgan was trying to help you."

"And?" the Doctor said. "Is there a point in there, Miss Rossi?"

"This isn't like you."

"And how would you know what I'm like?" the Doctor snapped. "You've only just met me. Don't make the mistake of thinking that I'm the same man who welcomed you aboard the TARDIS with open arms. That man is dead. He let himself be manipulated and he paid the price. That's not a mistake I intend to repeat."

"So what, you're going to be obnoxious to everyone from now on?"

The Doctor spun on his heel and lunged forward until his face was barely an inch from Val's own.

"You may think that we have some kind of special relationship and that you have a right to judge me, Miss Rossi, but let me disabuse you of that notion. We are not friends. We are barely acquaintances. At best, you might be considered a friend of a deceased family member. He may have had a soft spot for you, but I've yet to see anything that inclines me to share his opinion. Where did you abandon my TARDIS?"

"Wh-what?" Val was still reeling from the Doctor's tirade so she barely registered the change of subject.

"My TARDIS. Where is it?" The Doctor snapped his fingers. "Quickly now, it's not a difficult question."

"It's in a Roman villa about two hours ride from here. Just head north until you hit the road and follow that."

"Thank you," the Doctor said, "and goodbye."

Val took a moment to regain her composure, but in that moment the Doctor was gone, striding away through the cold, wet slush in the streets. She was about to start after him when she felt a restraining hand on her arm.

"Wait," Morgan said.

"How long have you been standing there?" Val demanded. Her voice was harsh and brittle and she realised that she was venting some of the anger she felt towards the Doctor. Morgan seemed unaffected by it.

"Long enough," she said. "Think very carefully before you go after him."

"What do you mean?"

"That man isn't who you think he is. I don't know the details - you chose not to confide in me, remember? - but I can read the signs. Whatever trauma he experienced has scarred him deeply and it's the kind of wound that will not heal."

Val shook her head. "I don't understand you."

"Then let me put it simply, Valentina. If you run after that man, will you be chasing the person he is now or the person you used to know? One of those men exists only in your memories."

"Is that your considered opinion as a druid?" Val said.

"No, as a woman," Morgan replied, "one who doesn't want to see you hurt as I've been."

"You know nothing about it," Val snapped.

She tore her arm from Morgan's grip violently and hobbled off in the direction she had last seen the Doctor heading in. She nearly collided with him coming the other way, galloping out of Camelot on the back of a black mare.

"Doctor!" she called after him, but either he did not hear or he chose to ignore her.

Val found the Doctor's horse outside the ruined villa, its reins looped around the low branches of a beech tree. Val clambered off of the cart she had borrowed and tied the pony pulling it to the same tree.

"Sorry I haven't got a carrot for you," she apologised to the animal before leaving it behind and venturing through the collapsed gateway that led onto the villa's courtyard. She carried her crutch under her arm. She barely needed it anymore, though she still walked with something of a limp without it. Still, it was reassuring to have it with her.

"Doctor," she called. "Doctor!" □

The only response she received was her own voice echoing back to her.

She tried to recall exactly where the TARDIS had landed. Three months was a long time and the place looked very different blanketed by snow rather than autumn leaves. She walked over to the wreckage of the fountain and it all came flooding back to her in a tidal wave. That giant monster lunging at her, the floor collapsing from under her feet, the ground rushing up towards her and then... And then nothing until she woke up in Morgan's care. She had been unconscious when the knights found her and she had not seen what had become of the TARDIS. Still, if she had fallen into the courtyard then perhaps it had done the same.

Now that she knew what she was looking for, it did not take long to find. Half buried beneath the rubble created by the fallen upper storey, the familiar blue box was lying on its side. Fortunately, it had landed with its doors facing outward. There was still no sign of the Doctor so Val assumed that he must be inside his ship and moved closer to investigate.

She ran her hands over the police box exterior, revelling in the feel of wood that was not wood, the gentle vibration of a machine that seemed almost alive, unaware until now of how much she had missed it. She had not been travelling with the Doctor all that long, but already

the TARDIS felt as much a home as her flat back in the twenty-first century. With a sense of nervous anticipation, she inserted her key in the lock.

It would not turn. No matter how much force she applied, her key would not open the TARDIS doors. Her elation melted away in an instant to be replaced by painful frustration. She felt tears stinging the backs of her eyes, but she blinked them away.

She hammered on the door with her fist. "Doctor! Doctor, are you in there? Let me in. *Doctor!*"

The vibrations coming off the ship became more intense. They were accompanied by howling sound and a wind swept through the courtyard, causing the one remaining gate to bang back and forth against the wall. Val knew all too well what these signs portended.

"Doctor, wait!" she implored, banging more vigorously on the doors. "You can't go. You can't leave me."

The howling grew louder and the blue colour of the TARDIS less intense. The ship had begun to fade and Val could see the wall of the villa beyond it.

"What about me? What about Tom?" Val wrapped her arms around the ship as if she could somehow hold it in place. "What about Vincent? How am I supposed to find my brother without you?"

Her pleas were in vain. The TARDIS dematerialised and Val fell forward into the space it occupied no more. The howling noise continued to echo around the courtyard for a few moments more, but then it too faded away to nothing.

Val lay unmoving on the ground. What, she asked herself, was the point in getting up? She had been so sure that things would be all right if only the Doctor would wake up, but his first act had been to abandon them. Val was stranded in this primitive century, fated never to see friends or family ever again. Tom would either die in the pursuit of his made quest or - worse - he would survive only to be turned into one of Arthur's knights. And then there was Vincent. Her younger brother had disappeared just after his twenty-first birthday under circumstances that baffled the conventional authorities, circumstances that had led Val to the paranormal in search of answers, but years of investigation had brought her no closer to the truth. She had given up any hope of ever seeing him again, but then the Doctor had appeared and the whole of time and space had opened up to her. Finally, she felt she had a genuine opportunity to find out what had really happened to Vincent, perhaps even to find him in person. Admittedly, the Doctor had refused to help her when she had asked, but she had been sure that she would be able to win him round eventually. Now, though...

The only consolation Val could find in all this was that at least things could not get any worse.

Her blood ran cold as a roar like that of an entire pack of hounds reached her ears.

Tom had told her that the knights had killed that monster. Of course, it was hardly the first time Tom had exaggerated, but it was probably the first that trait was likely to cost her her life.

The beast vaulted the wall and landed heavily in the courtyard. Val tried to scramble to her feet, but that only succeeded in attracting the beast's attention. It roared again and then lunged.

"I'll take that."

A man snatched the wooden crutch from out of Val's hand and shoved it into the beast's gaping maw. Unable to close its jaw, it bellowed in pain, whipping its head back and up.

"Doctor?" Val said.

He had taken the time to change out of his predecessor's suit and was now wearing a three-quarter length navy blue duffle coat over an oversized grey polo neck jumper. If he had taken the opportunity to run a comb through his hair then it did not show, though Val had to admit that the untamed look sort of suited him. There was a hint of gold amid the dark tangle that she had not noticed before, a tantalising glimpse of hidden riches.

"Stay where you are and don't move," the Doctor said. Val started to reply, but he raised a finger to stop her. "Don't make a sound either. Not if you want to live."

The Doctor ran off in the direction of the villa. The collapse of the first floor room in which the TARDIS had arrived had created a slope of rubble leading to the upper storey. The Doctor barely slowed as he scrambled up it, his boots kicking up clouds of dust. Bricks and wooden boards shifted beneath him and he had to use his hands as well as his feet to climb, but it was not long before he had reached the first floor of the building.

It was long enough, however. The beast had finally dislodged the crutch in its mouth and it snapped it in two like a toothpick. Val was certain that it was now going to charge her again and finish the job it started. Instead, the beast began to twist its head about, writhing its long sinuous neck as if in pain.

The Doctor held a tin whistle between his lips. Val assumed it was a dog whistle of some sort due to the fact that she could not hear it but that the beast was clearly reacting to some kind of noise. Enraged, the beast turned away from Val and focussed its attention on the cause of this new frustration: the Doctor. It launched itself at a gallop up the pile of rubble and into the room in which the Doctor was standing. That is to say, where the Doctor *had* been standing. As soon as the beast had begun to move, he had gone into motion himself, running deeper into the villa. He continued to blow on the whistle and also started to clap his hands together, creating even more noise to taunt the beast.

The Doctor had the advantage inside the villa. The size of the beast made movement awkward. It lumbered about the rooms, its hooves skidding across the smooth floors as it tried to turn quickly, giving the Doctor a chance to dive between its legs and out of reach. He paused in his flight, leaning casually against a supporting wall. He beckoned the beast with his left hand. The beast roared, drew back its head and then struck like a cobra. At the last moment, the Doctor spun away, rolling along the length of the wall, and the beast crashed head first through it. The building trembled.

The Doctor stepped through the hole in the wall the beast had just made. It turned to look at him, head wobbling from side to side in a daze. The Doctor continued to walk directly towards it, blowing blast after blast on his whistle. Blinded by rage, the beast charged once again, but this time the Doctor did not turn away. This time he jumped, planting both feet on top of the beast's head and using it as a springboard to reach the cross-shaped chandelier, still decorated with the remains of four candles. The beast could not stop in time and again plunged through the wall, demolishing yet more of the structure.

Once again the villa shook, only this time it did not stop shaking. Walls buckled and caved inwards. Beams split and cracked. The floor beneath the beast gave way and it roared as

it plunged to the ground. Its terrible roar was cut short as the rest of the villa fell after it, burying it. High above, the Doctor clung to the chandelier, trusting that his calculations were true and that this corner of the building, and this corner alone, remained structural sound. Here, he had deduced - as Tom had suspected before him - that the weight was supported not by the building's own walls, but by the tree growing in and around its side.

Once the dust had settled, he dropped cat-like onto the top of the pile of debris and scrambled down to rejoin Val. He was breathing heavily from his exertion and light danced in his eyes.

"You didn't leave," were Val's first words to him. "You came back for me."

"Don't be so full of yourself, Miss Rossi," the Doctor said, his eyes going cold. "There were more compelling reasons to return."

"Such as?"

The Doctor's face was grim. "Cybermen."

"You shouldn't light a fire," Cai told Tom as the latter searched about for dry wood. "We're deep in Saxon territory and we don't want to attract attention."

"That's easy for you to say," Tom replied. "You don't feel the cold. Some of us aren't so lucky."

"I'll put something over the cave mouth so they can't see the light," Cai said.

"And fill this place with smoke?"

"Better than filling it with the enemy," Cai replied.

Tom had to concede that the knight had a point.

The lamp had led them north and east, away from the coast. On their second day out from Camelot, they had come across a road heading in the same direction. Tom had wanted to follow it, since the going would be easier, but Cai had insisted that they continue to cut across country. The road, he had remarked, showed signs of recent use and it was in their best interests to avoid contact with anyone who might be hostile. Cai had made all of the decisions thus far on their journey, planning their route, deciding when to set out in the morning and when to stop for the night. It was Cai who located their campsites and Cai who found and caught their meals. Despite - or possibly because of - the fact that this was supposed to be Tom's quest, he was feeling distinctly redundant.

As they trekked through yet more foreboding woodland, Tom raised the issue with Cai.

"Based on evidence gathered so far," Cai said, "I agree that your presence is superfluous."

"Thanks very much," Tom muttered even if the knight was simply confirming what he already suspected.

"However, the Leader feels that you are important to this mission," Cai continued. "It is possible that you possess skills that will be necessary when we reach our destination. At this

time, there is insufficient data to make an assessment, but you have not been such a hindrance as to outweigh any theoretical benefit you may yet bring."

"You know," Tom said, "that almost sounded like a compliment."

If Cai intended to reply, he was cut off by a loud *thwip* noise. Ropes snapped taut around them and Tom and Cai were hoisted high into the branches in a crude net.

"Great, just what we need," Tom said. "Any bright ideas for getting us down from here?"

"You have a sword," Cai pointed out.

"Oh, right." Tom was not used to carrying a weapon, but Arthur had insisted that he travel armed. "Good point."

Wriggling about, he drew the sword from its scabbard and started sawing through the net.

"Hey, don't do that!"

Tom paused mid-sawing and stared at the girl glaring up at them, hands on her hips.

"You can't escape," she said, "you're my prisoners. I've been tracking you for hours and now you've fallen right into my trap."

Tom looked at Cai. "She's been tracking us for hours and *you* didn't notice?"

"True," Cai said, "but we can also cross observational skills off the list of your potential talents, Tom."

"Sarcasm? Will wonders never cease?"

"Hey, I'm still down here, you know," the girl said, annoyed at being ignored. "Prisoners shouldn't talk among themselves."

"What's your name?" Tom asked her.

"I'm Aelthryth," she said.

"A Saxon name," Cai said. "This is a Saxon ambush."

He took hold of the part of the net Tom had already weakened and tore it apart with brute force, dropping through the gap and landing in front of the girl. Tom came tumbling after him and would have hit the ground head first had his foot not got caught in the weave of the net leaving him hanging upside down. Cai towered above the girl.

"Who sent you?" he demanded. "Where are the rest of your people? Answer me."

"Leave her alone, Cai," Tom said, struggling to disentangle himself. "Can't you see she's terrified?"

"We are superior to her," Cai said. "It is only logical that she should recognise that."

"That's not what I meant." Tom finally managed to free his foot and dropped to the ground in a tangle of limbs. He scrambled to his feet and interposed himself between Cai and Aelthryth. "It's all right. He can't help being big and scary. He wasn't really going to hurt you."

"That depends on what she has to say for herself," Cai said.

"Not helping," Tom said to the knight. "Tell her you're sorry."

"What for?"

"Tell her you're sorry for frightening her."

"But I'm not," Cai said.

Tom released an exasperated sigh. "Just say it."

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," Cai said.

"That's okay," the girl said with a sniff. "I wasn't really frightened."

"You're here all alone, aren't you?" Tom said.

"That would be illogical," Cai said. "She's far too vulnerable to risk attacking us without allies."

"If there were other Saxons around, don't you think they'd have jumped us by now?" Tom said. He turned back to Aelthryth. "What did you think you were playing at?"

"I wasn't playing, I was scouting," Aelthryth said, proudly drawing herself up to her full height. Unfortunately for Aelthryth, that was not all that much. "I saw you two in the forest and I thought that if I caught you and made you my prisoners then I could make you help me."

"Make us help you?" Tom repeated. "Where's your dad, Aelthryth?"

"He... went away. Only mother and me are left."

"Just the two of you on your own?"

"We're fine," Aelthryth insisted, "except what if the monster comes back?"

"Monster?"

"Please," Aelthryth said, "you've got to help us. I can't hunt it on my own."

"We already have an objective, Tom," Cai said. "Deviating from our mission parameters would be a waste of resources."

Tom looked from the knight to Aelthryth. The girl's eyes were wide and pleading.

"We can at least see that she gets home safely," he said.

Aelthryth wrapped her arms around him. "I knew you'd help."

"I'm not making any promises," Tom insisted, though he doubted she was listening.

"Lead the way, half-pint."

"My name is Aelthryth," Aelthryth said as she started off through the trees.

"I know that," Tom replied, "but you must have a nickname, right? Short Round? Mighty Mouse?"

"Ael-thryth," she said with exaggerated slowness.

"Why couldn't we take the TARDIS?" Val said as they rode towards Camelot. "It'll be dark by the time we get back."

"Arrival by TARDIS is ostentatious," the Doctor replied, "and she's safer where she is."

The TARDIS was now parked, right side up, just outside the villa where she had originally landed.

"Safer from whom?" Val asked. "Me? You locked me out."

"Don't take it so personally," the Doctor said. "I changed the locks, that's all. You never know to whom the previous owner might have given a key."

"So you're going to give me a new key, right?" Val said. "One that fits the new lock?"

"No," the Doctor replied.

"No? But we're still going to travel together, aren't we?"

"Miss Rossi, you'll find that I have different standards to my predecessor."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Val threw up her hands in frustration. "And why do you keep referring to the old Doctor as a different person? You're the same guy!"

"You really don't get it, do you, Miss Rossi," the Doctor said. "Total cellular regeneration. *Total*. Every cell broken down and reconfigured. Every organ, every tissue regrown. I am a new man, Miss Rossi, fresh off the biological production line. Nothing remains of the Doctor you once knew, nothing except the memories. I for one am glad of it."

Val looked away. "And where does that leave me?"

"Why is that my problem?" the Doctor replied. "Just because I broke your crutch, don't expect me to replace it. Sort your own life out."

"If you feel that way, why am I even here?"

"Because I need information. I'd like to know what the Cybermen are planning before I have to face them."

"I don't see how I can help," Val said. "I don't even know what these Cybermen are. All I know is that I'm stuck in a bad remake of *Excalibur* complete with Arthur, Camelot and mythical monsters to boot."

"I take it you're referring to the Questing Beast."

"Is that what it's called?"

"The Questing Beast is the name by which it will go down in legend," the Doctor said. "I've never encountered that particular species before so I couldn't comment on its true name, but it will be some kind of alien survivor trying to make its way on an unfamiliar world."

"That was an alien?"

"You didn't think it was a local, did you?" the Doctor said. "Alien arrivals on Earth are more common than you might think, it's simply that, by your time, you have UNIT and JADE and all the other alphabet agencies running about covering it all up. There's none of that in Sub-Roman Britain so stories of these encounters spread and last, even if later centuries will dismiss them as so many myths."

"Here be dragons," Val said.

"Precisely."

"And Arthur? Is he another case of truth being hidden behind myth?"

"Every myth starts somewhere," the Doctor said, "and Arthur and his knights are one of the fundamentals. They appear in many different guises across the multiverse."

"I still don't see what this has to do with - what did you call them - Cybermen?"

"The Cybermen were like you once," the Doctor said, "the inhabitants of your twin planet Mondas."

"I think I read about that," Val said. "Wasn't there some big thing about a tenth planet in the 1980s?"

"So you're not completely ignorant," the Doctor said. "Just mostly. Getting back to the subject at hand, there was a planetary disaster and Mondas was thrown out of your solar system into deep space, far from the heat and light of the Sun. In order to survive, the Mondasians began replacing body parts with cybernetic alternatives, better suited to their new circumstances. But conditions continued to deteriorate and they were forced to convert more and more of themselves until there was very little left that could be considered human."

"That's horrible."

"Perhaps, but the true tragedy wasn't the physical transformation. Along the way, they had somehow managed to remove that part of the brain that expressed feelings, replacing their emotions with cold, implacable logic."

"Doctor," Val began slowly, "there's something you should know. The knights of Camelot, they seem to be part cybernetic too."

"And only now do you think that might be relevant?" the Doctor said. "You've been living with these people for three months now and you've never thought it a bit odd that King Arthur is half robot?"

"Of course I thought it was odd, but..."

"I thought you were an investigative journalist, Miss Rossi? Did you forget how to investigate?"

"Investigate or spy?" Val shot back. "You've no idea what it's been like these past few months. The knights took us in on faith, not knowing who we were or where we came from. They helped us when we were injured, gave us a place to stay. They became our friends, Doctor, and friends don't spy on other friends. I trust them."

"People lie," the Doctor said. "It's a fundamental principle. Matter decays, systems break down and people's moral standards fail. They can't help it. Everybody lies."

"I don't believe that."

"Naive," the Doctor said. "My predecessor was naive and look what happened to him."

"At least the old Doctor had a heart," Val said.

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. "You liked him, didn't you? You considered him a friend? Trusted him?"

"Yes," Val replied uncertainly. Where was he going with this?

"You asked him to help you find your brother," the Doctor continued. "What did he tell you?"

"He said he couldn't help. He said meddling would cause even bigger problems."

"And you believed him?"

"Well, yes, why wouldn't I?"

"Then why were you hammering on the door of my TARDIS begging me to help you find your brother?" the Doctor asked. "Could it be that you didn't believe him after all? What happened to friends trust other friends? You may know all the right words, Miss Rossi, but your actions speak far louder."

Aelthryth led them out of the forest and towards the banks of a river. Judging by the state of the ground, Tom reasoned that it must flood on a regular basis. At some point, there had been a village here, but now the round wooden buildings were abandoned, half-submerged in the mud.

"What is this place?" Tom asked.

"Father told me once," Aelthryth said. "Ynys something. Ynys Witrin?"

Half an hour's further walking brought them to an isolated farmhouse. A woman with hair the colour of sandalwood was standing in the doorway. She was dragging a broadsword in her hands, its point scraping on the floor.

"Mummy, mummy!" Arms wide, Aelthryth ran to her. The woman put a hand on her daughter's shoulder and guided her round until she was hidden behind her legs.

"Who are you?" she demanded of Tom and Cai.

"We're friends," Tom said. "We don't mean any harm. Look, I'm putting my sword down."

"That is unwise," Cai said. "The woman is armed."

"Will you just trust me," Tom hissed back. More loudly, he said, "We're only here to make sure your daughter got home safe."

Aelthryth tugged on her mother's skirt. "Mummy, they're going to help us with the monster."

"And then there's that," Tom admitted.

"You'd better come in then," Aelthryth's mother said. She leaned the sword against the wall. "I doubt I could have lifted that thing anyway."

"I take it that's where I'll find him," the Doctor said, looking towards the castle. "King Arthur."

"The don't call him King," Val said. "He's the *Dux Bellorum*."

"Leader of Battles," the Doctor translated. "As good an equivalent of Cyber-Leader as any, I suppose. Let's get this over with."

The guards did not stop them. Even if they had sensed the threat from the Doctor, the presence of Val beside him made them turn a blind eye. The Doctor did a quick head count on entering the council chamber. The total came as a disappointment.

"I was hoping you'd all be here," he said.

Arthur was sitting at the round table, on the opposite side to the door through which the Doctor and Val had just entered.

"Dagonet is in the city and Agravaine is undergoing treatment on Avalon," he said. "And Cai is on a mission with your friend, Tom."

"You neglected to mention that little detail," the Doctor said to Val.

"You never asked," Val replied tartly.

"You must be the Doctor we've heard so much about." Arthur stood up. "These men are Lancelot and Gareth. I am Arthur."

"I know."

The Doctor reached forward as if to shake Arthur's hand, but at the last instant, he opened his fingers to reveal a test-tube that he threw at the knight. It spun end over end as it soared over the round table, then the glass shattered as it struck Arthur's breast-plate. Arthur raised a hand to his chest as the contents of the tube began to eat through his armour. He cried out in an electronic wail of pain.

Gareth and Lancelot started to rise, but the Doctor was already in motion. Digging his hands deep into his coat pockets, he produced two more test-tubes and hurled them, one left,

one right. The first struck Gareth square in the chest, with the same effect as was being experienced by Arthur. Lancelot was faster and turned away so that the tube impacted with his right shoulder. The liquid in the tube was not picky, however, and was quite happy to devour that part of his armour first on its way to his chest.

"What have you done?" Val asked. "What did you throw at them?"

"A particularly nasty solvent." The Doctor produced another test-tube from his pocket and shook the liquid inside. "Something a former associate of mine came up with."

"What was he: a chemist or a terrorist?"

"Neither," the Doctor replied. "She was a secretary. The solvent attacks the Cybermen's artificial components."

Val was horrified. "It's killing them!"

"Yes, that's the general idea. Come on, we need to find the other Cybermen before they have a chance to react."

Lancelot barred his exit. The knight's right arm hung uselessly at his side, but he backhanded the Doctor with his left, sending him sprawling across the round table. Arthur staggered to his feet.

"You shouldn't be able to move," the Doctor said, his speech slurred by concussion.

Arthur drew his sword and raised it high above his head. The Doctor was too dazed to roll aside.

"Stop!" Val jumped onto the table and threw herself on top of the Doctor. "Don't hurt him!"

"Get out of the way, Valentina," Arthur said. Val shook her head. "He tried to kill us. He is a known threat. Why shouldn't he be eliminated?"

"Because I'm asking you not to," Val said, "and because you're not the monster he thinks you are."

"That was delicious, Beorhtraed," Tom said, clearing his plate. Aelthryth's mother beamed. "Do you grow everything yourself."

"We're pretty self-sufficient," Beorhtraed replied, "except at harvest time. Then we need to bring some men down from Glestingaburg to help."

"It must get lonely out here on your own, especially after your husband left."

Beorhtraed looked down at the table. "Aelthryth, go outside and feed the chickens."

"But, Mummy..."

"Go, Aelthryth, there's a good girl."

Sulkily, Aelthryth got down from the table and went outside to do her chores. Once her daughter was out of earshot, Beorhtraed continued.

"Ealdraed didn't leave," she said. "He died. I just claim otherwise for Aelthryth's benefit. I don't know why. She's a smart girl and I'm sure she knows the truth, but she pretends not to in order to humour me."

"How did he die?" Cai said.

Tom shot him a look to warn him over his insensitivity, but Beorhtraed did not seem to mind.

"He was killed," she said, "by that thing up on the moor."

"Aelthryth's monster." Beorhtraed nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you," Beorhtraed said. "It was a year or so ago now. I've had time to come to terms with it. It's Aelthryth I worry about. She idolises her father, even now."

"Tell me more about this monster."

"Tom," Cai said, "we should not get involved."

"Your friend's right," Beorhtraed agreed. "Plenty of people have tried to kill it, my husband among them, and not one has come back. It keeps to its own territory in the main, only coming down here when there's a flood. And if it does come by, we just hide and wait for it to move on."

"But what about the damage it causes?"

"Better to lose a few crops than to send any more men to their deaths," Beorhtraed said. "You're welcome to stay the night, but in the morning you should leave and not look back."

The Doctor woke up on his bed in Morgan's house.

"I wasn't expecting to see you back here so soon," Morgan said with a hint of disapproval.

"What happened?" the Doctor asked. He sat up and absently ran a hand through his hair to drag it out of his eyes.

"Lancelot hit you." Val was standing on the other side of the room, arms folded. "Be grateful. Arthur wanted to chop your head off."

"I miscalculated," the Doctor said. "Their conversion isn't as extensive as I imagined. The solvent crippled their artificial components, but they were still organic enough to take action. I won't make that mistake again."

"Again?" Val was incredulous. "Are you insane?"

"I appreciate that you've developed an emotional attachment to these knights, Miss Rossi," the Doctor said. "The technical terms for what you're experiencing is Stockholm syndrome."

"Stockholm syndrome? Sure, that explains why I don't think the man who saved my life is a homicidal maniac," Val said. "Or maybe it explains how your companions can be so blind to the truth about you, Doctor."

She swept out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

"She'll be back," Morgan told the Doctor.

"And that matters to me why exactly?" the Doctor replied. He stood up and began to root around in his coat pockets.

"They're empty," Morgan said. "Arthur's not stupid. He may have spared your life but he's not going to leave you with a weapon to attack him with."

"I can always whip up another batch," the Doctor said. "It's a delay, nothing more."

Morgan grew thoughtful. "If you're still determined to do something about the knights, I'd like to be involved."

"I'll manage just fine on my own," the Doctor replied.

"You've tried that already," Morgan pointed out. "It didn't go well. Are you so arrogant that you won't accept help when it's offered?"

Night had fallen and Beorhtraed had lit a few candles to keep the dark at bay. Aelthryth had (under protest) gone to bed and Cai was keeping watch outside.

"Doesn't he ever sleep?" Beorhtraed asked Tom.

"Not as much as you might think," he replied. Beorhtraed was clearing the dishes left over from their evening meal and Tom reached for the stack of plates. "Here, let me help you with that."

His hands brushed hers. It was rough and callused from working in the field. Slowly, Beorhtraed drew her hand away and smiled at him.

"So," she asked, "what brings you out this way? Are you looking for something or running away from it?"

"I'm sorry?"

"That's why people travel, isn't it? Either they want to be where they're going or they don't want to be where they started out. What is it in your case?"

"A bit of both, I guess," Tom admitted.

"Want to talk about it?"

"It's complicated. You wouldn't understand."

Beorhtraed uncorked a clay flask and filled two cups with a cloudy liquid. She handed one cup to Tom.

"Try me," she said.

Tom took a sip from the cup. His eyes watered and he choked as the liquid set his throat on fire.

"What is this stuff?" he asked hoarsely.

"Ealdraed was a brewer," Beorhtraed said, "like his father before him. I've tried to maintain the family tradition in his memory. Guess I'm not very good at it."

"I wouldn't say that," Tom replied. "This is some quality rot-gut."

He took another swig and it went down smoother second time around, possibly because it had already destroyed his taste buds on the first pass. Rather than return to the stools up at the table, Beorhtraed sat down on the rugs and furs spread across the floor, folding her long legs demurely beneath her as she did so. With less grace, Tom dropped down beside her.

"So?" Beorhtraed asked. Candle flames danced in her eyes.

"There was this girl," Tom began. "I fancied her, but she was in love with someone else. That was okay because all I ever asked was to be allowed to be around her and if she just wanted to be friends then that was enough for me." He took another swig of home-brew. "But then her man... well, he changed. He betrayed her. I don't think he did it deliberately, I don't

think he even realised he was doing it, but he betrayed her and he left her and he hurt her. He hurt her badly."

"And how did that make you feel?" Beorhtraed asked.

"I don't know. Like... I just hated to see her broken. It was like the hardware still worked, but all the software had been deleted, like she'd been emptied out inside."

"And that's why you left?"

"No, no," Tom said hastily, "I couldn't have left her like that. She didn't want to have anything to do with me, didn't want to have anything to do with anyone, but I had to stay close, just in case she needed my help. And she *was* getting better."

"So what happened?"

"She was murdered," Tom replied. "She was murdered right in front of me and I couldn't do anything to stop it. Lynette never asked me for anything and the one time she really needed me, I let her down."

Beorhtraed refilled their cups.

"What could you have done, Tom?" she asked.

"I don't know." Tom shook his head, both a negative and an attempt to dispel the memories. "If I'd been stronger then maybe..."

"But you weren't, Tom," Beorhtraed said. "You are who you are and you did everything you could. You've got nothing to blame yourself for."

"Wish I could believe that."

Tom tipped back his head and drained his cup. He held out the empty vessel towards Beorhtraed who obligingly filled it up again.

"Where will you go now?" she asked.

"I don't want to *go* anywhere," Tom said. "I've had enough. I just want it all to stop. I should never have agreed to travel with the Doctor. Everything I needed was right there at home. I could have been happy with that. But no, I had to go looking for more, didn't I? For adventure and excitement and all that jazz. Well I found that, only it came with a side order of danger and death. Now I'm stuck in a century that isn't my own, completely out of my depth and with nothing to look forward to but an all-pervading sense of abandonment interspersed with periods of intense pain. I'm sick of it and I just want it all to end."

"You don't mean that," Beorhtraed said.

"Don't I?"

"I know what you're going through," Beorhtraed said. "I lost someone I cared about too. I promise you, it gets better. You never know what tomorrow will bring. There'll be bad days, but there'll be good days too. Brilliant days. You want adventure and excitement? They're out there waiting for you. And there'll be other women, too, other loves."

"Is that an offer?" Tom asked.

"What if it was?"

Tom's mouth went dry and he took a hasty swing of Beorhtraed's home-brew. The candlelight had smoothed the lines on her face, enhancing her handsome features.

"It's not that frightening a prospect, surely?" Beorhtraed said.

"No, it's not," Tom spluttered, "not at all. It's just..."

"It's all right, I'm teasing," Beorhtraed assured him. "I'm not looking for a relationship right now, with you or anyone else. But I could if I wanted to. I just don't want you to give up until you've really seen what's out there."

"Why, because I've so much more to give?"

"No, because the world has so much more to give *you*."

"You sent for me, Arthur?" Val said.

The two of them were alone in the council chamber. Arthur's armour was still badly scorched where the Doctor's solvent had struck it. Unlike his fellow knights, Arthur had not yet made the journey to Avalon for repairs and was wearing his injury like a badge of honour.

"Your friend called me a monster," Arthur said. "Why?"

"He hasn't had a chance to get to know you," Val replied.

"Lynette grew up in Camelot," Arthur said, "yet she called me a monster too. And there are many in the city who share her view."

"And you're afraid they might be right," Val said.

"I can't feel fear," Arthur replied.

"Can't you?" Val said. "Then why are we having this conversation. It's your inhumanity that scares people, but you're more human than you'll admit."

"Am I? I feel less human with each passing day. Sometimes I get flashes of the man I once was before Avalon fell from the sky, but I can't hold on to him."

"Like trying to grasp smoke," Val said.

"Will you help me, Valentina?" Arthur said. "Will you help me remember what it is to be human?"

"I don't know."

Val was hesitant. She had imagined that, as soon the Doctor woke up, he would whisk her and Tom back to the TARDIS and they would set on yet more adventures, leaving Camelot far behind them. The reality was falling short of her expectations. The new Doctor was so different to the old and she was not sure that he was the kind of person she wanted to travel with. But if not then where did that leave her?

"Please, Valentina," Arthur said. "I need to be the ruler my people deserve."

"All right," Val said at last. "I'll help you."

Her mind was still in a whirl when she left the council chamber and as such she did not notice the figure watching her from the shadows. It was Lancelot.

Tom yawned and stretched as he stepped out of the house and into the brilliant sunshine.

"Sleep well?" Cai asked, getting up from the step from which he had been keeping guard all night.

Tom looked down at his feet, embarrassed for a moment, before returning to business.

"We should be going," he said.

"Already?"

Beorhtraed was standing in the doorway. Tom grinned at her and she smiled back. She brushed a stray lock of hair back behind her ear.

"We've still got a long way to go," Tom said, "and so much more to see."

Beorhtraed nodded then picked up a bag which she handed to Tom.

"I didn't know what you had in the way of supplies," she said, "so I put some bits and pieces together for you. Both of you," she added, glancing at Cai. She turned back to Tom.

"There's even a few flasks of that 'rot-gut' you liked so much."

"Something to remember you by?" Tom asked.

"I thought we were going," Cai interjected.

Tom and Beorhtraed hastily stepped apart, looking everywhere except at each other. To cover his embarrassment, Tom asked, "Where's Aelthryth? I thought she'd be here to see us off."

"Still asleep. She's not a morning person."

"Oh." Tom was disappointed. "Well, give her our best, won't you?"

"I will," Beorhtraed said. "You take care now. And think about what I said."

With a nod and a wave, Tom shouldered his pack and set off.

"Will you just shut up and listen for a moment," the Doctor snapped, his limited patience worn thin. "There's an enemy in your midst and I'm trying to help you deal with it before it's too late."

He was addressing a gathering that Morgan had called in the town hall.

"The knights will protect us," a man in the front row said. "They always have before."

"Am I wasting my breath?" the Doctor said. "The knights *are* the enemy!"

"Listen to the Doctor," Morgan said, standing beside him on the makeshift stage. "He only wants to help."

"You've always had a problem with the knights," another man said, "and we all know why."

"Why?" the Doctor asked quietly.

"Arthur was my husband," Morgan whispered back, "and Mordred's father. He abandoned us to become a knight."

The Doctor shook his head. "Should have seen that one coming."

He turned back to his audience.

"The knights aren't who you think they are," he said. "Arthur isn't the man Morgan married. That man is dead. He died the day the Cybermen left his mark on him."

"Looks pretty active for a dead man," a heckler interjected.

"I didn't say that thing wasn't alive," the Doctor said. "I said it wasn't Arthur. They've taken away everything that made him what he was and replaced it with a cold, steel heart. Don't tell me you don't feel it. You avoid them, don't you? It unnerves you to let them get too close because there's something not right about them. There's a reason they have to live apart from the city, isn't there, even if you can't put that reason into words. I can see it in your eyes."

Several members of the audience shifted uncomfortably, darting quick glances at one another when they didn't think everyone was looking.

"What do you suggest we do about it?" a woman asked.

"Get rid of them," the Doctor replied. "March on their castle and take them out."

"How? You must have seen how powerful they are. We wouldn't stand a chance if we attacked them."

"And why should we want to? They may be a bit creepy, but they've always been there for us in the past."

"Is everyone in this city wilfully blind?" the Doctor asked, exasperated. "Is there something in the water that saps your common sense? I despair of you."

The Doctor jumped down from the stage and stalked out of the building. Morgan hurried after him.

"Doctor, they don't know what they're saying. You can't just abandon them."

"We tried it your way, Morgan, and it didn't work out," the Doctor said, "but no, I won't abandon them. They're going to get my help whether they want it or not."

Gulls wheeled overhead as Arthur and Val walked slowly along the sand-covered beach. Val was carrying her shoes in her left hand, allowing the tide to wash over her bare toes.

"I don't understand why we're here," Arthur said.

Out over the sea, the sun was setting. Val paused to admire it.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Beauty is a subjective measurement," Arthur said. "Objectively, I do not see the value."

"Then forget about objectivity and try being subjective yourself for a change," Val said.

"Doesn't it make you feel anything?"

As a magazine editor, Val knew the value of a well-chosen image in stirring the emotions of a reader. Unsurprisingly, the knights did not keep paintings around the castle, so Val had brought Arthur outside, to see the images nature had to offer. He was proving a difficult subject.

"Emotions are a weakness," he said.

"You don't really mean that. If you did, you wouldn't have asked me for help."

"It doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't?"

"The confusion in my mind," Arthur said, his electronic voice rising in pitch. "I see images, memories, but they don't belong. They defy logical analysis."

"Tell me about them anyway," Val encouraged.

Arthur closed his uncovered eye. "I see a beach, but not this one, a sun setting, but a different evening, a woman, but not you, and there's me, but not me. A me that might have been before..."

"Before you became a knight," Val supplied. "The setting's woken up a memory from your past, one you've been trying to suppress."

"So why can't I suppress it now?"

"Because you don't want to. What else do you remember?"

"I don't know what to say around her," Arthur said. "We shouldn't be there. Our parents don't want us to see each other, but we're meeting in secret anyway. What we're doing is wrong, but it's right at the same time. It makes no sense."

"Love never does," Val told him. It was odd to hear the knight talk about such a tender subject in his artificial, sing-song voice.

"She looks at me and tries to smile," Arthur continued. "I realise that she is as nervous as I am. I take her hand to reassure her."

The back of Arthur's hand brushed against Val's so she twined her fingers with his, hoping that the physical contact would strengthen the memory.

"She smiles again, with warmth this time. I feel..."

"Yes, what do you feel?"

"I feel... things that cannot be. Hot and cold at the same time. My mind is racing, yet time has slowed right down. I'm rooted to the spot, yet light as a feather. I cannot reconcile these sensations. I feel..."

They were interrupted by the sound of a horse galloping down the beach. Arthur pulled away from Val and turned, drawing his sword as he did so.

"Lancelot?"

"Leader, what are you doing here," the horse's rider said, "with Lady Valentina?"

"We went for a walk," Arthur replied. "Valentina is helping me with a problem."

"What sort of problem?"

"One that does not concern you, Lancelot."

"But it does concern Lady Valentina," Lancelot said as he dismounted. "Perhaps the Lady of Avalon can help. I am told that you're overdue for your latest upgrade."

"Maybe I don't want the upgrade," Arthur said. "What if I choose to stay as I am?"

"You'd defy the Lady of Avalon?" Lancelot pointed at Val. "Is this her idea? What else has she been filling your head with?"

Val was baffled. "Lancelot. What's gotten into you?"

Lancelot lunged for her. A blade sprang from his right wrist and he held it against her throat. Val did not dare to move.

"Can't you see? She's working with that Doctor, Leader. She's poisoning your mind against us. Against *me*."

"I told you, Lancelot," Arthur said. "Valentina is *helping* me."

"Helping you?" Lancelot said. "She's supposed to be helping *me*. But that Saxon had to ruin things. I killed him and now she thinks I'm a monster and she's chosen you over me."

"It wasn't like that," Val said.

"You don't know what it's like," Lancelot retorted, "to have all this information inside my mind that I just can't understand."

"There are plenty of things I don't understand," Val said. "It's called being human. Please, Lancelot, put the sword down."

Lancelot looked at his blade as if seeing it for the first time. Slowly, he retracted it and Val put a hand to her neck to check that the skin was unbroken.

"It's like they took away a piece of me," Lancelot said. "You were supposed to make me whole again, to be that part for me."

"I can't Lancelot, I'm sorry," Val said. "Only you can do that."

"Lancelot," Arthur began.

"I know," Lancelot said. "I was wrong to come here, which is why I've decided to leave Camelot."

He climbed back onto his horse. Val rushed to his side.

"Lancelot, you can't go," she said. "Running away from a problem never solves anything."

"I *am* the problem, Valentina," he replied, "and by leaving I can at least spare the rest of you."

He galloped off down the beach. Val turned to Arthur.

"Aren't you going to go after him?"

"I..." Arthur dropped to his knees, his hands clutching his head. "The pain!"

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Arthur's exposed eye glazed over.

"I hear the Lady of Avalon. I hear her summons and I obey."

As if in a trance, Arthur stood and walked away. Val was left alone.

"Does he have to be here?" the Doctor asked.

"Agravaire wants to help us," Morgan replied.

The Doctor had taken over Morgan's workbench and was slowly mixing two liquids together, one cloudy, one clear. Morgan sat beside him, keeping one eye on the Doctor and another on her son, who was lying on his stomach in a corner and drawing a picture with a stub of charcoal. Agravaire stood sentinel-like at the Doctor's shoulder.

"He can't *want* anything," the Doctor pointed out. "He's a Cyberman. He's had his emotions and desires surgically removed. He's probably here to spy for his masters."

"Is that why you won't tell me what you're doing?" Morgan asked. "In case Agravaire overhears?"

"That and the fact you wouldn't understand."

"You aren't even going to try me," Morgan said, "or have you already decided you're smarter than everybody else."

"It's a tough gig, but someone's got to do it."

Morgan shook her head, laughing softly.

"What's so funny?" the Doctor asked.

"You are. Tell me something, Doctor. If you're so smart, how'd you end up here in the first place? You weren't looking too bright when your friends brought you to me."

"That wasn't my fault. That rests squarely on the shoulders of my predecessor. He was weak and he got played. I won't make the same mistakes."

"Excuse me if I don't see the distinction," Morgan said. "You've been through a trauma and that changes a person, but you're the same man deep inside."

"Total cellular regeneration," the Doctor said. "Complete physical metamorphosis. There isn't a single trace of him left in me anymore."

Morgan raised an eyebrow. "What about the part of you that isn't physical?"

Before the Doctor could reply, there was a knock on the door.

"Well there's a face I didn't expect to see," the Doctor said when Morgan let their visitor in.

"It's the knights," Val said without preamble. "Something's wrong and I don't know who else to turn to for help."

"We should consult the 'lamp' to confirm our heading," Cai said.

The device that the Planner had given them to find the vessel was stowed away in the top of Tom's pack. He made no move to retrieve it.

"I thought we might take a quick look at this moor first," he said.

"You want to find this monster the girl spoke of," Cai said. "That isn't part of our mission. This detour makes no sense."

"Something doesn't have to be sensible to be the right thing to do," Tom said. "We owe it to Beorhtraed and Aelthryth to at least investigate. And what's the good of being a Knight of Camelot if you let a little monster get away from you?"

They walked for some time in silence, Tom leading the way. The ground was becoming increasingly water-logged and at one point they found themselves wading up to their knees. After that, Tom started using a stick to probe the solidity of the ground ahead and find the least sodden route across the moor. There were few trees in sight, just grass and shrubs and the occasional stubby bush. There were a handful of wading birds to be seen, but even they seemed unimpressed with their surroundings.

It was approaching noon when Cai spoke again. "Did you mean what you said to Arthur?"

"I said a lot of things to Arthur."

"You said you were a hero. That you had 'saved the world'. Was that true?"

"Well, kind of," Tom admitted. "It's more a case that I helped the Doctor when he saved the world. Or tried not to get in the way too much. But you're a real hero, Cai. You're a Knight of Camelot."

Cai shook his head. "I'm just a soldier. I do what Arthur tells me, no more, no less. But when I was a boy, I wanted to be a hero."

"You *wanted* to be a hero?" Tom said. "But I thought you knights gave up all your emotions."

"We did," Cai said, "but the longer I'm away from Camelot, the more I'm able to remember. Last night, I saw my father as clear as I see you now. I remembered how he would read me stories about Gwydion and Pryderi and the other heroes and I wanted to be like them so much."

"That's a good thing, right?" Tom said uncertainly.

"No," Cai replied. "I don't want these memories. The Lady of Avalon teaches that emotions are a weakness. If I were back in Camelot, I'd go to her and ask her to remove them, to fix me, but what am I supposed to do out here?"

"You don't have to listen to everything that glowy egg says, Cai," Tom replied. "Sure, emotions are confusing and they can be painful. After Lynette died I'd have been quite happy to be rid of them myself, but I'm starting to remember that there's a lot to be said for emotions too."

He looked wistfully back the way they had come. Out of the corner of his eye, he spied movement in the undergrowth and his expression turned serious.

"We're being followed," he said.

"By whom?"

"Who do you think? Come on out, pipsqueak."

"It's Aelthryth," Aelthryth said, sticking her head out from behind a bush.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to help you hunt the monster," she said.

"Well, tough," Tom said. "We're taking you home right now."

"B...b..." Aelthryth could not form words. Her eyes were wide and her lower lip was trembling. She pointed over Tom's shoulder and he turned, feeling the ground shifting beneath his feet as he did so.

Behind him, rising up out of the peat and the snow, was a small hillock covered in rich green vegetation. As it continued to grow, Tom realised that it was not a geological formation at all, but a humanoid figure, a not-so-jolly green giant. Plants and fungi grew out of its flesh, there was even a small tree sprouting just below its shoulder. Thick vines grew in place of its hair, falling down in front of its face. Vines also sprouted from its back and along the length of its limbs, coiling and undulating.

"Gwydion's army," Cai said. Tom looked at him, so he explained, "It's from my father's stories. Gwydion was a wizard who summoned an army of trees to fight for him."

The creature made a noise, somewhere between a gurgle and a full-blown roar.

"Do you think it's friendly?" Tom asked.

The creature lashed out at them, hammering both fists on the ground and throwing up earth and knocking them off of their feet. The birds took flight, crying out in panic. Vines lunged towards Tom and he rolled away, trying to free his borrowed sword from its scabbard as he did so. Cai was faring worse. He had attempted to attack the creature with his mace-arm, but the creature had simply wrapped a number of vines around it, immobilising the weapon. Cai lacked a sharp blade to cut his way free and despite digging his heels into the mud, was being dragged towards the monster.

Tom rolled to his feet and sprinted to his side, kicking up melting snow as he did so. Swinging his sword as hard as he could, he cut through the vines, freeing Cai, who stumbled backwards.

"Definitely not friendly," Cai said to Tom. He nodded to the sword. "You any good with that."

Tom shook his head. He doubted his video-game experience had been much preparation for the real thing.

"Anything in your dad's story about how to kill this thing?" he asked.

"All I remember," Cai said, "is that the trees won."

The creature lunged again and Cai and Tom scrambled for cover.

"I've got an idea." Tom threw his sword to Cai who caught it in his left hand. "Try to keep it occupied."

"You don't ask for much, do you?" Cai said as he dived forward, hacking and slashing with Tom's sword. The damage was minimal, every wound seemed to heal before Tom's eyes, every severed plant or vine re-grew at absurd speed.

Tom struggled out of his pack and started to root around inside it. He produced one of the flasks of Beorhtraed's home-brewed alcohol, uncorked it and stuffed a strip of cloth, torn from his tunic, into the neck of the flask. Using a piece of flint, he struck a spark and lit the cloth.

"Get down!" he yelled at Cai.

He threw the burning flask at the monster, but it was too quick for him. A vine shot out and battered the flask harmlessly to one side where it disappeared beneath the marsh.

"Try it again," Cai said, crawling over to join Tom.

Hurriedly, Tom started to prepare a second flask. He was all too aware of the creature drawing closer and he fumbled it, spilling some of the alcohol into his lap. Cai reached over and helped steady the flask so that Tom could complete the preparations. This time, Cai threw it, but again the monster batted the projectile away. This time, however, it sent it hurtling in a more worrying direction.

"Aelthryth!" Tom screamed. She was right in the path of the falling flask, paralysed with fear.

Heedless of the danger to himself, Tom hurled himself on top of Aelthryth. The flask hit him between his shoulder-blades and shattered on impact, spreading burning liquid across his back. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he shucked his cloak, throwing it as far away from him as possible, and rolled back and forth in the snow until he was sure that his clothes were no longer on fire.

"You remembered my name," Aelthryth said, dazed. Tom drew her to him.

"Course I did, pet," he said, stroking her hair. "Course I did."

As the beating of his heart began to return to normal, he returned his attention to Cai. His pulse began to race again in horror.

"Cai, no, don't do it!"

The knight had removed the remaining flasks from Tom's pack and was strapping them to his armour.

"You said it yourself, Tom." Cai called back. "What's the good of being a Knight of Camelot if you let a little monster get away from you?"

Cai charged the giant. It lunged for him, but Cai was too heavy to simply bat aside. He grabbed hold of the vines with his free hand and began to pull himself closer, little by little. The monster roared, throwing its head back and yelling at the sky. It pulled up its vines, lifting Cai up off of the ground, but the knight refused to let go. Cai struck his mace against his armour. Three times he did it and on the third attempt he created a spark. The alcohol ignited and he went up like a torch.

The tone of the monster's protests changed. It was in pain now. It shook the vines furiously, desperate to dislodge the knight, but Cai was going nowhere. Steam rose from the

vine, the monster too damp at first for the fire to take hold, but as it dried out the flames started to spread. And once they had taken root there was no stopping them.

Tom tilted Aelthryth's head so that she was facing into his chest, but he could not tear his own eyes away. He felt he owed it to Cai to bear witness to his final moments.

"You stupid, brave, stubborn, idiot," he said, his eyes watering. "Damn you for figuring out how to be a hero in the end."

"Run that by me again," the Doctor said.

"Which part?" Val asked. "The bit about how the knights are losing their minds?"

"No, Miss Rossi, I want to know more about this Lady of Avalon. Who is she and what's her connection to the Cybermen?"

"Well, I guess she's some kind of computer, though she calls herself the Planner."

"A Cyber-Planner? Yes, I can use that..."

"Use her?" Val asked. "How exactly?"

"Of course, three months isn't nearly long enough for you to have put together the clues by yourself," the Doctor said. "Clearly the Cyber-Planner has a way of communicating wirelessly with those she's converted."

"She sends messages through the air," Val translated for Morgan's benefit.

The Doctor scowled. "That's what I said. Anyone who can't keep up shouldn't be here. Now, as I was saying, if I can interfere with the Planner's signal, it should disorient the Cybermen to the point where they can be overpowered."

"Are you sure?" Morgan asked.

"I'm a thousand year-old Time Lord and clearly the smartest person in the room. Why can't you people accept that I know what I'm doing?"

"There's a problem," Agravaine interrupted. "The Lady is on Avalon and only the knights are allowed to go there."

"That's no problem," Morgan said. "You're a knight. You can take us."

"I would have to justify my journey to Arthur," Agravaine pointed out.

The Doctor was smiling to himself.

"You have to go to Avalon for maintenance work, correct? Then allow me."

He threw the liquids he had been mixing into Agravaine's face.

It took the giant a long time to die. The green turned slowly black and sunk back into the ground, small patches of flame still dancing on the surface. The sun was setting when Tom finally spurred himself into motion and purple clouds were gathering overhead. He walked slowly over to his discarded pack and began to gather up everything that had fallen out of it. Aelthryth was trailing along behind him.

"You all right, pet?" he asked.

Aelthryth said nothing, just stared and the charred remains. Still in shock, Tom told himself. He bent down to pick up the 'lamp' and noticed that its light was shining straight ahead. He looked in the direction it indicated and saw a conical hill silhouetted against the horizon with a solitary tower on top of it.

"We should really be getting you home," Tom said to Aelthryth, "but I don't much fancy walking back in the dark. What say we see if we can shelter in there?"

He buckled his sword about his waist and scooped Aelthryth up onto his shoulders before setting out in the direction of the hill.

"So this is the so-called Lady of Avalon," the Doctor said. "I wish I could say it was a pleasure."

The Planner glowed brightly. "Agravaine, who is this individual?"

Agravaine's face was disfigured, his mask warped by the Doctor's improvised chemical weapon.

"He calls himself the Doctor."

"Look me up in your databanks." The Doctor was on his hands and knees, examining the connections between the Planner and the spacecraft. "If you can't find me under D for Doctor, try N for Nemesis."

"Your physical appearance is inconsistent with our records," the Planner said.

"I haven't had much time to pose for photographs," the Doctor replied. "This really is a botch job, isn't it? This technology is a complete mystery to you."

"Cyber-technology is superior," the Planner said. "Assimilation is inevitable. It is only a matter of time."

"Time, yes. You're not from around here, are you?"

"Doctor?" Val was not following this turn in the conversation.

"Cybermen don't belong in the time period, Miss Rossi." The Doctor turned back to the Planner. "How did you do it, I wonder..."

"Superior cyber-technology..."

"Don't make me laugh," the Doctor snapped. "*Stolen* technology more likely. And yet more technology you couldn't control. I can't believe that this was really your intended destination."

"A minor miscalculation."

"*Minor!* Ha! I'll bet you're stranded here."

"The fleet simply requires resources to make the necessary repairs," the Planner said.

"A Cyber-Fleet?" The Doctor paused in what he was doing. "Yes, I suppose with a Planner there *would* be a fleet. So if I'm right, which I am, you were dispatched to locate the resources the fleet needed for repairs, but, in this time period, your databanks are useless and your unfamiliarity with the local space-faring races led to you biting off more than you could chew."

"We shall rebuild," the Planner insisted. "We shall triumph."

"And when exactly are you planning to do that?" the Doctor asked. "You've already recycled all the parts you could salvage when you crashed and you still haven't got a single fully converted Cyberman in your squad."

"They will bring me what I need."

"How? As scavenged tribute? I don't think so, Cyber-Planner. The technology you want just doesn't exist yet. This planet isn't due an industrial revolution for over a thousand years. Do you really think you've got what it takes to kick-start one early?"

The Planner answered a question with a question. "What are you doing?"

"Took you long enough to notice." The Doctor stood up to judge his work from a distance. "A bit of rewiring, a bit of topiary. You may not have the botanical knowledge to marry these technologies together, but I do."

"You will cease what you're doing immediately."

"I don't think so."

The metallic filigree woven into the chamber's walls shimmered and bowed outwards. Two claws extended and latched onto the Doctor's shoulders.

"Watch it, that's a new coat!" he complained as he wriggled out of it and continued working.

Since their prey was no longer in it, the claws discarded the garment and lunged for the Doctor again. Still on his hands and knees, he scuttled across the floor, putting the Cyber-Planner between himself and his pursuers. In response, the Cyber-Planner extended another pair of arms from the opposite wall so that the Doctor no longer had anywhere to hide.

"A little help might be in order, Miss Rossi," the Doctor said as he danced and weaved between the arms' attempts to grab him.

"It might help if I knew what you were trying to do," she called back.

The Doctor ducked as a claw went for his face, then had to leapfrog a second arm that was aiming lower.

"I've almost got the transmitter working, I just need to put the last piece in place," he said. "What I wouldn't give for a screwdriver."

"Will this do?" Val asked. "I 'borrowed' it from Arthur."

She was holding the Doctor's sonic screwdriver.

"Miss Rossi," the Doctor said, "I take back everything I've ever said about you."

"Really?"

"No," the Doctor replied. "Now stand back."

He pointed the sonic screwdriver at the area he had been rewiring and switched it on.

Agravaine screamed. The shrill electronic whine that threatened to burst Val's eardrums. He staggered drunkenly across the floor, limbs twitching as if in response to repeated electric shocks. He stumbled into one of the arms extended from the wall, snapping it in two, and fell to the floor, where he continued to spasm.

"What's happening to him?" Val asked, shouting to be heard over the noise Agravaine was making.

"The same thing that will be happening to all the other Cybermen within range," the Doctor replied. "You'll have to help me carry him."

"What?"

"I'm not going to leave him here for the Cyber-Planner to operate on. Now take an arm."

Taking hold of an arm each, Val and the Doctor dragged Agravaine to his feet and helped him to stagger down the corridor towards the entrance.

"Won't the Planner simply turn your device off?" Val asked.

"Not without great difficulty," the Doctor said. "It can't smash it without damaging itself and to remove it is delicate work and the Planner just doesn't have the digits." He wriggled his fingers in the air to illustrate his point. "Let's hope Morgan's managed to do her part."

"I'm sure you can rely on her."

"I might be more reassured, Miss Rossi," the Doctor said, "if your opinion actually made any difference to the outcome."

As they boarded their boat and cast off for the return trip to Camelot, neither Val nor the Doctor noticed the stowaway that they had left behind.

Across Camelot, the remaining knights were falling victim to the Doctor's transmission. In the main square, Dagonet stumbled over the words of his story. His arms twitched and then suddenly flailed. He sprang, but not in any predetermined direction. He careened from one wall to another, heedless of the damage he caused to the buildings or to himself. It took five of Morgan's co-conspirators to tie him down. He was still twitching as they carried him away.

Gareth was patrolling the city walls when nausea overtook him. The noise in his head made his world spin and he missed his step. He toppled from the wall, rolling and bouncing across a roof and tumbling into a muddy street below. He struck his head on the way down and lay unmoving until they came for him.

Morgan found Arthur in the council chamber. He was curled up in a foetal ball on the floor, hands clamped over his ears and tears streaming down his face as the noise turned his mind inside out. Morgan crouched down on one knee beside him and gently lifted his head so that he could look at her.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," she said, "but it's for your own good."

The tower was made of pale stone, but most of that was obscured by the moss and lichen that clung to it. The door swung open of its own accord as Tom approached.

"That's not, like, foreboding or anything," he said.

He put Aelthryth down on the ground and drew his sword. Taking the girl's hand in his, he crept inside. There were plants everywhere. Wherever there was a chink or a crack in the masonry, an invader had taken root. Rich foliage cascaded down the walls and spread like a carpet across the floor. Tom was no botanist, but even he could see that these species were not native.

A spiral staircase hugged the wall.

"I guess we go up," Tom said to Aelthryth.

They had to take their time. Plant life covered the steps as well, making them uneven and slippery. Not wanting to let go of Aelthryth, Tom sheathed his sword so that he had a hand free for balance.

At the top of the staircase there was a small wooden door. Like the one at the base of the tower, this one swung open as they neared. The room beyond was bathed in green-gold light and it took Tom's eyes a moment to adjust as he moved from the gloom of the rest of the tower. Earth had been gathered in one corner of the room, forming a loose bank where the two walls met, and, standing in the middle of it, was a figure.

"Gwydion, I presume," Tom said.

As his eyes adjusted, Tom could see that the figure was not so much standing in the earth as growing out of it. Spindly white roots spread out from the base of its slender green trunk and disappeared beneath the dirt. Higher up the trunk were a half dozen tendrils or 'arms'. There were covered by a number of dark green leaves, overlapping like plates of armour. At the top of the trunk, one large petal, coloured white at the base and gradually changing to pale violet as one approached the splayed tip, curled up and over, forming a hood above a circle of three smaller purple petals. At the heart of this circle was what passed for the figure's face.

"I do not understand your terms," the figure said, a slim black proboscis darting in and out of his mouth as he spoke. "I am Harvester-Achene Pelles."

"Tom," Tom said. "The little one is Aelthryth."

"You defeated the guard," Pelles said. It was a statement, not a question.

"That giant was yours?"

"Grown to protect me and that which I carry," Pelles confirmed.

"It killed a friend of mine," Tom said.

"That was its function," Pelles said, "but I am sorry for it. All life has value. But the seasons turn and what was once now is now no more. Has the time of withering come to me at last?"

Tom was perplexed. "I don't understand."

"No? I thought that when someone finally did come that they would know all, but perhaps it is better this way." Pelles's limbs wafted slowly in the air, as if buoyed by an invisible current. "Ours was a peaceful mission, one of scientific research, nothing more, but our samara was attacked by pirates. We could not resist them and they ended us one by one with the death that burns. They ended Pellehan, my pod-mate."

"I'm sorry," Tom said, without really understanding why.

Pelles bobbed his head in acknowledgement. "Soon I was the only one left, hidden in the gaps within our vessel too narrow for the pirates to follow. And I felt anger and I knew that it was my duty to end these pirates. I found my way to the nucleus and I retrieved our precious cargo. I am ashamed of my actions. I used that which was created to bring life to take life from others. It is not our way and yet I had no doubts. I have strayed far from the Green."

"What was your cargo," Tom asked, "and how did you turn it into a weapon?"

"I will show you."

Pelles buried its limbs in the earth. When they emerged, they were holding a container, a deep basin linked to a circular base by a short stem.

"This is what I've been looking for," Tom said, unable to quite believe it. "It's only the ruddy Grail."

Pelles reached into the Grail and produced a few tiny spores that he proceeded to scatter on the floor. Where they landed, even if there was nowhere to take root on the smooth stone, they immediately began sprouting, growing with astonishing speed.

"This is the treasure we created," Pelles said. "The spores will grow anywhere, under any conditions, any but one. The properties of this Grail, as you call it, render them dormant."

"With no one to pilot it, our samara crashed on this world. Somehow I survived, despite my injuries. I took the spores and crawled away, determined that no one else should be able to turn our treasure into a weapon as I had. It took me a long time to reach this place and, when I did, I could go no further."

"So what happens now?" Tom asked.

"Now, you will attempt to take the treasure by force and I will attempt to stop you," Pelles said. "That is the way of things."

"I don't want to fight you," Tom said.

"Of course you do. You and your kind are violent and seek only new ways of creating death."

"That's not true," Aelthryth said.

Tom tried to hold her back, but she stepped out from behind him and approached Pelles.

"Tom came here to protect me and my mother. The only reason he fought that monster of yours was because it attacked us first. He's a good person."

"Is what the seedling says true?" Pelles asked.

"I don't know," Tom said. "I was sent here to bring back the Grail, but I agreed because I wanted something else in return. Thing is, I don't think I want that anymore. I'm not ready to give up on life just yet. Keep your treasure, Pelles. I'm not going to take it from you."

"Then I give it to you freely," Pelles said, holding out the Grail towards him. "I have misjudged you Tom and perhaps I have been too quick to judge your species. I am not long for this life and I pass the burden of guarding the treasure to you. Use it wisely."

"Are you sure they won't be able to get out?" Val asked the Doctor.

"I think the procurator who had this built was pretty security conscious, Miss Rossi." The Doctor slapped his palm against the wall of the vault. "He wouldn't have wanted just anyone making off with his treasure. And look at the size of those doors. Arthur and the others may be strong, but I doubt even they could shift those on their own. So long as they're kept in separate chambers, we should be fine. Speaking of which, put Agravaine in the cell on the end."

"You're locking Agravaine up?" Val said. "But he helped us."

"He didn't betray us," the Doctor amended, "which given how easily he betrays everyone else has to be considered something of an achievement. I for one will feel much safer with him out of circulation."

"I have to agree with the Doctor, Valentina," Morgan said. "I've never trusted Agravaire. I only accepted his help because I felt I didn't have a choice."

"Some of the greatest crimes in human history have been justified by those words, Morgan," the Doctor said. "The fact that you got away with it is nothing to be proud of. And as for you, Miss Rossi, blind trust is a plus for children and lovers, but it's somewhat less advantageous when trying to save lives. The universe isn't simply going to remap itself the way you want just because your motives are pure. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to be somewhere where people aren't sucking the common sense out of the ether."

"He used to call me Val," Val said to Morgan. "Now it's always Miss Rossi. What's that about?"

"He's trying to keep you at arms' length," Morgan replied. "Of all the people here, you know him the best and I think that scares him. He thinks it makes him vulnerable."

"That's funny, because, since he 'changed', I don't feel like I know him at all," Val said. "He's nothing like the old Doctor."

Morgan put a hand on Val's shoulder. "Maybe he's more like the old Doctor than he wants you to know."

"Who's there?" the Planner barked. "Show yourself!"

Mordred stepped out from the shadows.

"Who said that?" he asked.

"I did," the Planner said. "Identify yourself or be eliminated."

"My name is Mordred," Mordred replied. "Are you the Lady of Avalon?"

"I am the Cyber-Planner," the Planner said, "but some of the native population apply that title to me."

"In that case, please, will you make me a knight?"

"You wish to be converted?"

"More than anything. I want to be a knight so that I can protect my mother. And the rest of Camelot, of course. But mum says I'm not allowed to be a knight and Arthur says I'm too young, but I know I'd be really good at it. If they would just give me a chance, I could show them. Please, Lady, will you help me?"

The Planner whirred and beeped as it calculated.

"I will convert you," it said, "but first you must do something for me?"

"Anything!" Mordred's eyes were shining.

"Do you see that device at the base of this unit?" the Planner asked. "I require you to rewire it."

"Rewire it? I don't understand."

"You do not have to understand, infant," the Planner said. "Just do exactly what I say...."

"I'll need to get some tools from the TARDIS," the Doctor said, "if I'm to deactivate the Cybermen permanently."

He, Morgan and Val were still outside the cells in the underground vault.

"Why not just run them through the heart with a lance or something," Val said sarcastically. "Wouldn't that be quicker?"

"I'm a doctor, not a butcher, Miss Rossi," the Doctor replied. "Don't think I take any pleasure in this."

"It hadn't crossed my mind."

"We're not killing them," Morgan said. "If we can show them the error of their ways then they can become part of our community again."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," the Doctor said. "I thought you, Morgan, of all people, understood. But no, you're just as deluded as Miss Rossi here. They can't be rehabilitated. It's in everyone's best interests to put them out of their misery."

"But not everyone's as eager to give up on them as you are, Doctor," Val replied.

"Yes, it seems ignorance is contagious. Fortunately, I have no qualms about doing everyone else's thinking for them. It's something at which I've had plenty of practice."

Val seethed. "You think you're so clever, don't you?"

The Doctor shrugged. "I try not to fly in the face of public opinion."

"How dare..." Val began, but the Doctor held up a hand for silence.

"Enough."

"I haven't finished."

"Yes, you have, now be quiet," the Doctor said. "Can anyone else hear that?"

"I don't hear anything," Morgan said.

"Exactly." The Doctor walked closer to the cells. "A moment ago they couldn't control their motor functions and you could hear them banging against the floor and the walls."

"Agravaire was screaming," Val added, realization dawning, "but it's all gone quiet."

"Doctor, what is it?" Morgan asked. "What's wrong?"

"The signal's stopped." He hesitated, just long enough to let his words sink in, then sprinted from the room. "The signal's stopped and I have to get back to Avalon before it's too late!"

"Now, infant, in return for your assistance, I will give you what you desire," the Cyber-Planner was saying. "You will become like us. You will undergo conversion."

"No!" Mordred cried out as spindly metallic arms grabbed hold of him and pinned him to the wall. A circular saw whirled menacingly as it drew closer.

"Leave the boy alone," the Doctor said as he bounded into the room. "He's done nothing to you."

"On the contrary, Doctor," the Planner replied, "the infant has allowed me to complete my objective. I am in contact with the Cyber-Fleet."

A hypodermic needle was jabbed into Mordred's arm.

"Mother!" Mordred screamed. "Mother help me!"

"Mordred!" Morgan tried to run to her son, but the Doctor held her back.

"Don't," he said. "I'll get him."

"The fleet is on its way," the Planner continued, "and it's all thanks to you, Doctor."

The Doctor visibly tensed. "My transmitter."

"Yes, Doctor, your transmitter," the Planner said. "You were right, I had been unable to assimilate the alien technology, but you solved that problem for me."

"And then you got Mordred to redirect the signal for you."

"The Cyber-Race thanks you, Doctor."

The Doctor glowered. "This is what I think of the Cyber-Race."

He strode forward.

"What are you doing?" the Planner asked. "Keep away!"

Metallic arms went for the Doctor to try to hold him back, but he simply pointed his sonic screwdriver at them when they got close. The brief burst of sound scrambled their motor control and the arms twisted away in any direction except towards their target.

"Get back!" the Planner demanded. "I forbid you to lay a hand on me."

"I don't intend to," the Doctor replied.

He lifted his foot and stamped on the Planner, shattering the egg into tiny crystal fragments beneath his boot. The metallic arms twisted one last time, then went still. Mordred was dropped from the wall. Morgan rushed to his side, cradling his head in her lap and running her fingers through his hair.

"I'm sorry, mother," Mordred sighed. "I just wanted to be a knight. I didn't know."

"It's all right, Mordred, everything's going to be all right now," Morgan soothed softly. She turned to the Doctor. "Thank you. Thank you for saving my son."

The Doctor's face was bleak. "I wish I had."

Beyond the edge of the solar system, the fleet waited. A flat, wide mothership, like a city-sized manta ray, was flanked by eight cigar-shaped warships, bristling with weaponry. Dozens of smaller, saucer-shaped craft trailed behind.

The fleet drifted randomly. It had done so for some time. But now, at long last, the mothership was receiving a signal. Slowly, very slowly, the fleet began to turn.

It turned towards Earth.

The Doctor lay on his back in the bottom of the boat and watched dirty grey clouds scud across the sky.

"Why so glum?" Val asked him. "You've won, haven't you? You've defeated Arthur and his knights, destroyed the Cyber-Planner and rescued Mordred. That used to be all in a day's work for you."

Mordred himself was huddled in the stern of the boat, wiry limbs wrapped tight around his body. His mother sat next to him, trying in vain to coax some more life out of him.

"She sent a signal," the Doctor said. "The Planner sent her signal and she used me to do it. This wasn't supposed to happen anymore, not to me. The Intelligence was supposed to be a line in the sand."

"So she sent a signal," Val said. "So what?"

"So what?" the Doctor repeated. "So the Cyber-Fleet is on its way here. You weren't at Hevlaska when their last defences crumbled. You didn't see the breeding pens on Ulquior or witness the destruction of the fourth moon of Pan. You don't have to live with the memory of Planet 14. The Cybermen are coming and there's nothing on this primitive planet that can pose the least threat to them."

"So what do we do?" Val ask.

"My advice? Run. Run and hide. I estimate three days at the most for the Cybermen to subjugate and convert every man, woman and child in Britain. In less than a fortnight, this planet will be completely in the grip of the Cybermen and the human race will be extinct."

"But we know that didn't happen," Val pointed out. "I'm from the future. I exist, therefore the Cybermen couldn't have won in the past."

"It doesn't work like that, Miss Rossi," the Doctor explained. "Time is relative. Whenever you are, it's always now, and everything beyond this point is malleable even if you think you know what's to come. Even if you remember living it. From where we stand at this moment, tomorrow has yet to be written and the content of that page is still very much up for grabs."

"Does this mean that you're heading back to the TARDIS?" Val asked. "Are you giving up and leaving the rest of us to our fate?"

"No," the Doctor replied, "I'm going to stay and fight, pointless though it may be. I brought the Cybermen here. I'll send them back."

"Or die trying."

"Hello, pet," said the tired figure at the door of the council chamber. "I'm back."

"Tom!" Val sprang to her feet and hurried to embrace him.

"Leg's all better then?" Tom said.

"Well, I won't be running any marathons anytime soon," Val said, "but I'm glad to be able to lose that crutch. Did you get it?" Tom nodded and Val's heart leaped to her throat. "Does that mean you're going to..."

"No," Tom said. "I changed my mind."

Val could see a story hidden behind Tom's eyes, but her friend refused to elaborate. Having accepted the Grail from Pelles, he had returned Aelthryth home, much to her mother's relief. Then he had returned to the moor to bury Cai. He had stayed two nights at Beorhtraed's farmhouse, recovering his strength, but on the morning of the third day, he had quietly packed his bag and set out for Camelot.

"Where's Cai?" Val asked.

"Cai would be the missing Cyberman, correct?" the Doctor said. He was sitting in Arthur's chair, his feet resting on the edge of the round table. "He's probably holed up somewhere waiting for his allies to arrive."

"So you're awake." Tom took in the Doctor's outfit. "Who are you meant to be: Paddington Bear or Captain Birdseye?"

The Doctor glared at him.

"Tom," Val said quietly, "this isn't the time for jokes."

"No, it isn't." Tom turned serious. "Cai's dead."

"Good riddance," the Doctor muttered under his breath. Tom ignored him.

"He died saving my life. I should tell Gareth."

"Do you really think he'll care?" the Doctor asked. "He's had a humanity bypass, remember?"

"He's not the only one," Val whispered, loud enough for Tom to hear.

He took a step forward. "You don't know the first thing about these people, Doctor."

"And you do, Brooker?" The Doctor swung his feet down to the floor and stood up. "Let me enlighten you. Your friends are Cybermen. Only partially converted ones, I'll grant you, but Cybermen all the same. Cybermen are emotionless, implacable killers governed by cold, hard logic. They have only one purpose: to survive. And they do so at the expense of other species. Right now, an entire Cyber-Fleet is heading straight for Earth with the single aim of making every person on the planet like them. Once they land, the human race will cease to exist and that is on your friends' heads."

"You're wrong," Tom said. "they're not like that."

"I'm wrong? Have you any idea how long I've been fighting the Cybermen. I am sick of having to listen to sympathisers and apologists and others who say that Cybermen are just misunderstood. That we should try to reason with them. That even Cybermen have a right to survive. Let me tell you something, Brooker, this universe isn't nice and neat and ordered. It's governed by random chance and random chance is far from perfect. It creates things, terrible things, that have no right to exist, that have no purpose than to bring suffering to others. Someone has to take responsibility for cleaning up the universe's mistakes and if you're not man enough, Brooker, I am."

"I feel so much safer already," Tom said sarcastically. "You may know these Cybermen, Doctor, I'll give you that, but you don't know the first thing about the knights. Where are they anyway?"

"The Doctor's got them locked up," Val said, "while he figures out what to do with them."

"I know what I want to do with them," the Doctor amended, "but Morgan and her lot seem to want to hold a committee meeting about it."

"It can't be easy for her," Val said. "we're talking about the fate of the father of her son."

"What?" Tom said. "I have been away a long time, haven't I?"

The Doctor was pitiless. "Morgan would find her choice much simpler if she would concentrate more on the fate of the *son* rather than mooning over a dead man."

"Arthur's not dead."

"As good as." The Doctor threw himself back down in a chair. "None of it will matter anyway once the Cyber-Fleet gets here. One organic is much the same as another to them. We're all so much material for conversion."

"You should ask Arthur for help," Tom said.

"Excellent idea, Brooker," the Doctor replied, "and I'll invite some foxes to guard the hen-house while I'm at it, shall I? He's a Cybermen. *They're* Cybermen. Whose side do you think he's going to be on?"

"Camelot's," Tom replied, matching the Doctor's glare unflinchingly. "I know you think they've been turned, but I'm telling you, whatever the Planner tried to do to them, it didn't take. They're still human where it matters."

"I doubt that."

"At least talk to him, Doctor," Val said, adding her voice to Tom's. "What have you got to lose?"

"Fine, have it your way," the Doctor said. "I'll talk to him, if only to show the two of you how wrong you are."

The bolt on Arthur's cell was drawn back and the door opened to allow the Doctor to enter.

"Aren't you concerned to be locked in here alone with me?" Arthur asked.

"Should I be?" the Doctor asked, strolling casually around the room.

"I'm stronger than you, faster than you."

"Duller than me."

"Logically, I am your superior," Arthur said.

"Please don't start with that," the Doctor replied. "I've heard it all before. How Cybermen are physically superior because they're built of metal and plastic rather than flesh and bone, that they do not tire and do not age. How they are mentally superior because of their adherence to logic and their denial of all emotions. Well if you're so good, how come I beat you?"

The Doctor stepped right up to Arthur, unintimidated by the knight's greater height and bulk.

"That's right," he said. "I. Beat. You."

With each of these last three words, the Doctor poked a finger against Arthur's chest-plate. The knight did not so much as flinch.

"What's the matter?" the Doctor continued. "Aren't you going to react? I'm right here."

"An emotional outburst warrants no response," Arthur said.

"Of course not, you're a Cyberman," the Doctor said. "That's what I keep telling everyone, but do they listen? Well I'm convinced and there's no point me wasting my time here any longer."

He started for the door and raised his hand as if to knock for someone to let him out. At the last moment, however, he spun on the balls of his feet, fished something out of his coat pocket and hurled it at Arthur. Arthur snapped his arm up and caught the yo-yo in mid-air, crushing it in the palm of his hand.

"Is that it?" the Doctor yelled at Arthur when the latter made no further move. "Don't just stand there like an envelope waiting for a stamp. Aren't you going to retaliate?"

"You pose no genuine threat, Doctor," Arthur said. "Retaliation would be a waste of resources."

"But it would be satisfying, wouldn't it? I've been a thorn in your side ever since I woke up. First the solvent, then the transmission. Now I've locked you up in here where I can taunt you. But I'm at your mercy. Tell me that revenge hasn't crossed your mind."

"Revenge would also be a waste of resources."

"Then how about taking me hostage?" The Doctor circled Arthur. "You could threaten to kill me if Morgan and the others didn't let you go."

"Why would they risk their own lives to save yours?" Arthur asked. "That would be illogical."

"Illogical, right. That's all that's left in there. Logic this, illogic that. What happened to your dreams, your hopes and fears, your imagination? The wheel's still turning, but the hamster emigrated some time ago."

"Your questions serve no purpose."

"No, they don't. Miss Rossi assured me that there was something of the old Arthur still left inside that stupid tin box, but she couldn't have been more wrong, could she?" the Doctor said. "You remember Miss Rossi, don't you? Valentina? She's the one with the irrational belief that if you wish hard enough all people can be saved, be they family or cybernetic killers. But some people are beyond saving, Arthur, and it will take more than a spoiled princess with delusions of adequacy to make a real boy out of you!"

Arthur's fist was a blur. One moment it was approaching the Doctor's face, the next the Time Lord was sliding down the opposite wall. The Doctor held a handkerchief to his nose to staunch the flow of blood.

"What happened to 'retaliation would be a waste of resources'?" he said.

"Take back what you said about Valentina."

"She means something to you, doesn't she?" The Doctor clambered to his feet. "Where's the logic in that?"

"Take back what you said."

"Never!" the Doctor replied. "I will, however, give her credit for seeing something in you that I missed. So, the question is will you reward her faith in you by helping me to save her life? Oh, and the small matter of the lives of everyone else on this wretched planet."

"What happened to you?" Tom asked when he saw the blood on the Doctor's face and shirt.

"A minor contretemps, Brooker," the Doctor replied. "Nothing more. I have, however, on calm and considered reflection, agreed to accept the assistance of Arthur and his knights."

Val was overjoyed. "That's great news!"

"Not so great, Miss Rossi," the Doctor said. "Four against thousands doesn't exactly tip the odds in our favour. We need something more if we're going to fight back."

"Will this help?" Tom said, brandishing the Grail.

The Doctor and Tom stood on the city walls, waiting for the arrival of the Cybermen. Through the clouds, they could see the dark shadows cast by the approaching shuttles.

"What if they land in the middle of the city?" Tom said. "What good will your plan be then, Doctor?"

The Doctor gave a slight shake of his head. "They won't."

"Why not? It would make more sense," Tom pointed out. "They could land behind our defences and, if they're as powerful as you say, it would only take about ten of them to take the whole city."

"Less than that, I'm sure," the Doctor replied, "but they still won't do it. You're forgetting, Brooker, that the Cybermen don't know just how defenceless we are. All they know is that they lost an entire landing party here and that contact with the Cyber-Planner was abruptly terminated. Cybermen may be fearless, but they're not stupid and a simple risk assessment will tell them to approach with caution, probably from over there."

The Doctor extended an arm to point inland, just in time to see the first of the shuttles land in exactly the spot he indicated. The Doctor produced a brass telescope from his pocket and held it to his eye. He handed the telescope to Tom. Tom could see a ramp opening up beneath the shuttle and massed ranks of Cybermen marching out onto the open field.

"It's starting," the Doctor said. "Brooker, get over to Avalon and start setting up. I'll join you as soon as I can."

Three rode out to meet the Cyber-Army. The first was the Doctor, his blue duffle coat snapping in the breeze as he galloped along on his black mare. To his left was Arthur, sitting rigidly upright in his saddle on the back of a mighty chestnut stallion. Morgan rode on the Doctor's right, whispering soothing words to the young gelding beneath her as they approached the enemy.

A single Cyberman, taller than the others and with a high, domed cranium, stepped forward to meet them.

"Cyber-Leader," he addressed Arthur, "why do you ride with these inferior organics?"

"I am not your Cyber-Leader," Arthur said. "I am Arthur, *Dux Bellorum* of Camelot, and I stand with my people."

"Well, well, Cyber-Controller," the Doctor said with a cruel smile, "it seems that no matter what you do you never can quite crush the human spirit."

"Then we shall eliminate all the humans," the Cyber-Controller replied. "Where will your human spirit be then, Time Lord?"

"Is that supposed to impress me?" the Doctor asked. "Your audio receptors are sensitive enough to detect my double heartbeat. I'd be disappointed if they weren't. But tell me, Cyber-Controller, are they sensitive enough to tell you exactly which Time Lord I am?"

"That information is irrelevant."

"You wish," the Doctor replied. "I am the Doctor, your worst nightmare."

"Cybermen do not have nightmares."

"Whatever. Who was it who defied you on Telos, on Voga? Who held back the tide of Planet 14? Each and every time you've tried something, I've been there and I've stopped you."

"These facts are known to us."

"Then leave. Leave now. I'll hunt you down, of course - can't have a Cyber-Fleet running loose in this time period - but you might survive that little bit longer. Stay and I guarantee that this will be your final battle."

"Why would you make such an offer?" the Cyber-Controller asked. "It is illogical."

"Because if we fight here then, no matter what I do, innocents will die. I would prefer to avoid that if I can."

"And what of innocent Cybermen?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why do humans have a greater right to survive than Cybermen. Our sole objective is to reproduce, to increase our numbers."

"Which you do at the expense of other sentient life."

"Humans take lives. On this planet they fight among themselves, eliminating other races in the name of progress, waging war for territory and for resources and for glory. Once they reach the stars, they will turn their attention to others. How many species, how many planets have been irrevocably scarred by the actions of these humans. The difference between our species is that what the Cybermen do, we do out of necessity."

The Doctor's eyes blazed.

"The difference, Cyber-Controller, is that they have me in their corner. They have their flaws, some pretty big ones I admit, but they have such potential. They have imagination and passion and drive and creativity. Tell me, Cyber-Controller, when was the last time you created a thing of beauty. When did you sing or dance or paint or write a story just for the sheer joy of it. The legacy of the human race won't be what they took from the universe, it will be what they gave back. Can you say the same?"

The Cyber-Controller took a step back, rejoining the front rank of its army.

"Kill them," it said.

"Wait, wait, wait." The Doctor held up his hands. "I don't think that's a good idea, do you? We wouldn't really ride all the way out here, just the three of us, and let you kill us unless there was something in it for us, would we? That would be illogical."

"Human beings are illogical," the Cyber-Controller said.

"But I'm not human," the Doctor said. "Kill me and what do you think I've got planned for you, Cyber-Controller? Call my bluff, let's find out."

"Lower your weapons," the Cyber-Controller said. "Let these three return to the city. We can afford to postpone their deaths until the city falls."

"What did that achieve?" Morgan asked as they galloped away.

"It bought the others some more time," the Doctor said, "and we need all the advantages we can get." He pulled on the reins to bring his mare to a halt. "This is where we say goodbye. Brooker's waiting for me on Avalon. You have your roles to play, I have mine."

"We will see you again when the battle is won," Arthur said, but the Doctor shook his head.

"No, you won't," he said.

He spurred his mare into action and rode off towards the coast. Morgan stared after him.

"That seemed very final," she said.

"Morgan?" Arthur reached out to her, but Morgan pulled back.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," she said, unable to meet his eyes. "I can't deal with this right now. We can talk more after we win the battle."

"If we win the battle," Arthur said quietly.

Valentina had been placed in charge of three hastily erected catapults. They had been built according to the Doctor's design and mostly under his supervision, but he had left before they were finished and Val was struggling to make sense of the final stages of the plans.

"So if you pull on that arm, Geraint, then we should build up tension here."

Yet again, the ropes that were supposed to be pulled tight slipped free of their moorings and slapped uselessly against the timber frame.

"How's it going, Valentina?" Morgan called. She had taken up a position on top of the wall where she could keep lookout.

"Not great," Val admitted, "but we'll get there. We just need a bit more time."

"I think time's something we've just run out of," Morgan said.

The army of Cybermen had finished disembarking from their shuttles and had formed up into several detachments. The Cyber-Controller gave the order and his troops began to march slowly in the direction of Camelot. The infantry was supported by heavy weapons, several large cannons floating on hexagonal anti-gravity platforms. They fired and pulses of crimson energy soared over the field and struck the walls of Camelot, causing the masonry to crack and buckle under impact. Val put her fingers in her ears to try to keep out the thunder-clap that accompanied the shots, but it was a pitiful defence.

One of the warriors - Gwydre, Val thought - was running towards her.

"Arthur sent me to tell you that we need those catapults," he yelled as he jogged up the slope.

"What does he think I'm trying to do?" Val snapped back. "This isn't easy."

The cannons fired again, and this time a great chunk of wall came loose. For a moment, it simply swayed in position, but then it tumbled forward, raining debris down on top of screaming defenders.

"Geraint," Val said quietly to her assistant, "we need to make this work. Their depending on us."

"This time for sure, Lady Valentina," Geraint said, but Val could see that his optimism was forced.

A horn sounded. It was held by Arthur.

"What's he doing?" Val asked. In the distance, she could see Arthur draw his sword and bark commands at his fellow mounted warriors.

"Perhaps he's decided that he can't wait any longer," Gwydre suggested.

Val pressed her lips together in a tight line. "The Cybermen will cut them to pieces."

Nonetheless, Arthur gave the order and the column of riders, with Arthur, Dagonet, Gareth and Agravaire at its head, galloped towards the massed ranks of Cybermen. As they drew near, the Cybermen raised their rifles and fired as one.

Val looked away.

"Doctor, am I glad to see you," Tom said as the Time Lord joined him on Avalon.

"Haven't you even started yet, Brooker?" the Doctor asked. "We can't afford for you to be wool-gathering."

"This is completely alien technology," Tom replied. "I don't even know where to begin."

"Surely the Cyber-Planner's modifications are based on familiar principles?"

"I guess," Tom conceded, "but..."

"Not more excuses."

"Well it might help if you let me in on what we're supposed to be doing here."

"Isn't it obvious?" the Doctor asked. "we're going to make this ship space-worthy again."

"Can we do that?" Tom asked. "I mean, wouldn't the Planner have done that already if it could?"

"It tried, Brooker," the Doctor said, "but it didn't understand the botanical technology so was effectively having to rebuild the ship from scratch."

"And we don't?"

"Not at all." The Doctor shrugged off his coat and threw it carelessly over the remains of the Cyber-Planner. "Most of these structures look to be intact. Only a few key systems have failed and we should be able to plug those gaps using the Planner's modifications. And then..."

"And then?" Tom asked.

"Enough questions." The Doctor cracked his knuckles. "Let's get to work."

Arthur's horse had been shot in the first volley, so he brought the attack to the Cybermen on foot. A broadsword would not normally pose much of a threat to the Cybermen, but, driven by Arthur's hydraulic muscles, it severed limbs and sliced heads from torsos with ease and, in close quarters, the Cybermen were unable to bring their cumbersome rifles to bear to stop him.

Dagonet was attracting far more laser fire. He bounced around the battlefield, never stopping in one place long enough for the Cybermen to get a target-lock, but doing all he could to draw their attention away from the men under his command. Every once in a while, he would lash out with an arm or a leg - even his teeth on one occasion - snatch up a Cyberman and hurl it into the air and away from the combat. Their landings were rarely fatal, but it would be some time before they were able to rejoin the battle.

Gareth was still mounted. He lashed out all around him, using his fists as weapons in the way his one-time mentor Cai might have done. Sturdy cyber-helmets crumbled like tin-foil beneath the weight of the new hands that the Cyber-Planner had given him.

The non-augmented defenders of Camelot, however, were faring less well. Gaheris and Sagramore fought back to back. The neat rows adopted by both sides before they advanced had disintegrated when the armies met and the warriors found themselves caught up in a chaotic melee where it was difficult to tell an armoured friend from a cybernetic foe. Gaheris stumbled and fell against Sagramore's back, nearly knocking him over.

"Hey, watch it!" Sagramore complained, glancing over his shoulder.

His complaint died in his throat. Gaheris had not stumbled out of clumsiness. He had stumbled because a Cyberman had shot him at point blank range. The Cyberman was readying his rifle to dispatch Sagramore as well, but the warrior roared with rage and lunged forward. The point of his sword found a weak point, the lens covering the Cyberman's eye, and the blade carried on through the socket and into the Cyberman's brain. He put a foot in the Cyberman's stomach to give him enough leverage to withdraw the sword then spun round, looking for more opponents.

"Come on then!" he bellowed, seeing the world through a red haze of anger and pain. "Who wants some?"

A Cyberman started towards him. Sagramore swung his sword in an arc, but the Cyberman deflected the blade with a metal arm. Sagramore scrambled backwards, but tripped over the body of Gaheris and ended up on his back in the mud. The Cyberman unholstered its rifle from its shoulder and aimed at Sagramore's head. Blood pounding in his ears, Sagramore threw himself forward, his blade thrusting upwards. The sword connected with the weapon, slicing it in two and the Cyberman immediately dropped the fragments. On the ground, the remains of the rifle started to emit a high pitch whine that steadily increased in volume. The Cyberman started to walk away, but it had already calculated that it could not escape in time. The rifle exploded in a burst of heat and light and when the smoke cleared, all that remained of Sagramore were a few fragments of bone.

The explosion distracted Culhwch, who had volunteered to fight despite the objections of his wife. He was beating on his enemies with a severed Cyberman arm that he had retrieved from the floor of the battlefield. He looked up when the rifle exploded, however, and that moment's inattention was all that the Cybermen needed. Culhwch was promptly disarmed and then disappeared beneath the Cybermen's boots.

Agravaine saw Culhwch fall and took a step towards him, but a voice in his head held him back.

You are one of us.

"No," Agravaine said through gritted teeth, "I'm nothing like you."

You have been remade. You have become like us.

"No. I won't accept it."

You belong to us. You are Cyberman.

"Dagonet!" Agravaine gasped, doubling over.

"Agravaine?"

Dagonet loomed over his fellow knight and peered down for a closer look. Agravaine snapped his hands up and grabbed hold of Dagonet's head. He pulled with all his might, ignoring Dagonet's screams. The knight fell silent when his neck snapped, but Agravaine continued to pull until he had severed Dagonet's head from his body.

"Dagonet!" Val yelled when she saw the knight fall. She turned her attention back to the catapult. "Geraint, we need to fire this thing. Like now."

Geraint had crawled under the timber frame. "I've almost got it."

"Almost is going to be too late, Geraint," Val said, looking back out over the battle. "We need to..."

She trailed off as she caught sight of a shape approaching the northern edge of the battle.

"What in the world?"

It was a mass of vegetation, vines and woody branches tangled around mosses and fungi and flowers in full bloom. It was vaguely humanoid, yet easily three times the height of a man. It walked hunched over, seeming to shamble along, yet also to cover the ground at tremendous speed. It hit the Cybermen like a tidal wave, scattering them like pins before a giant bowling ball.

"I'm glad that thing's on our side," Geraint said as he levered himself up from under the catapult.

"Who says it is?" Val replied darkly.

"Oh, he's definitely on our side," another voice interjected. "At least, I think he is. He definitely doesn't like the metal men."

A small girl had made it halfway up the hill on her way to join them, but had paused to get her breath back.

"Who are you?" Val asked.

"I'm Aelthryth," Aelthryth said. "I got a bit of a shock when that thing knocked on our door I can tell you."

"It did what?"

"It knocked on our door," Aelthryth said. "Well, it knocked on the wall really. Made the whole house shake. The flower man sent him to us."

"The flower man?" Val asked. Maybe she had been hit on the head by a piece of shrapnel, she reasoned, and that was why the world had stopped making sense.

"You know, the flower man. The one who gave Tom the Grail. He sent the giant to us and he said..." Aelthryth scratched her head. "What did he say?"

"He said that he trusted Tom to do what was right, but that didn't mean that he couldn't offer him a branch to lean on." Aelthryth's mother had finally caught up with her daughter and now she scooped her into her arms and carried her up the rest of the hill. "He needed someone to show his giant the way, which is why he came to us. I'm Beorhtraed. Is Tom about?"

"He's busy right now," Val said. "Helping the Doctor."

"Oh." Was Val imagining it, or was there a flicker of disappointment in Beorhtraed's face. "Never mind. What can we do to help?"

"I think just by bringing your friend You've done more than your fair share," Val said. "Now if only we could get this wretched catapult to work so we could help him."

"Actually," Geraint said, clearing his throat to attract their attention, "I'm ready to give it another go."

He pulled down on the catapult's arm, tightening the ropes coiled around the frame, then wedged a wooden pin in place to prevent them coming undone. Val loaded a clay pot filled with earth into the sling at the top of the arm and, very carefully, used a pair of tweezers to take some of the spores from the Grail and place them in the earth. Almost immediately, the spores began to sprout.

"Fire!" she ordered Geraint.

Geraint whooped and swung a mallet, dislodging the wooden pin. The ropes snapped back, taking the catapult's arm with them and the clay pot was thrown high into the air. It sailed over the heads of Arthur's forces to land deep in the heart of the Cyber army. The pot shattered when it hit the ground and the runners rising from the spores groped for the nearest available targets. Green shoots wrapped themselves around the Cybermen, found the tiniest of gaps within their armour and burrowed deep within. They took root in the organic tissue and started to grow back outwards. Pressure built up beneath the armour as the alien plant grew and grew until at last it became too much. The shell cracked and the Cyberman burst open in an explosion of vibrant green. His neighbours succumbed in quick succession, victim to an invader against which they had no defence.

Elsewhere on the battlefield, Agravaine was still standing amid the wreckage that had once been Dagonet.

"Agravaine, face me!"

Agravaine answered the challenge and turned to see a familiar figure approaching.

"Lancelot," he said, "join us. Forget your pain. Become like us."

"Become like you?" Lancelot echoed. "You killed Dagonet. Why would I want to become like you?"

Blades erupted from his wrists and he dived forward. Agravaine attempted to block him with his spear, but Lancelot sliced the weapon in two with the sword on his right. His left blade continued forward, finding a chink in Agravaine's armour where the helmet met the torso. The blade travelled forward through the trachea and the oesophagus and finally severing the spinal cord.

"You deserved to suffer," Lancelot said as he retracted his blades, "but I don't have the time to waste on you."

"Lancelot!" Arthur ran a Cyberman through with his sword and then vaulted the corpse as it fell in order to join his fellow knight. "I thought that had gone for good."

"I couldn't leave you to fight this battle on your own."

The pair reached out to one another, each clasping a hand around the other's forearm.

"It's good to see you, Lancelot," Arthur said. "It's good to have you back."

"Just tell me what you need me to do."

"I need you to take charge of the army for me."

"Take charge?" Lancelot was taken aback. "Me?"

"I can't think of anyone I'd trust more."

"But what about you?"

"There's something I have to do," Arthur responded, "but at least now I know I'll be leaving my people in good hands. Try to stay alive, old friend."

"You too," Lancelot said.

Arthur did not reply.

Back on Avalon, the Doctor had woven a cat's cradle out of various colours of string across the area he assured Tom was the control panel. Tom thought it looked more like a herb garden.

"This ship was obviously designed for people with more than two arms," he explained. "Hopefully this arrangement will go some way to helping me compensate."

"I'm more worried about the integrity of this thing," Tom said. "The hull took a major beating when the ship crashed. What if it cracks open when you're out there?"

"It only needs to survive one flight, Brooker," the Doctor replied. "After that, it won't matter."

"If you say so, Doctor." Satisfied that the last connection would hold, Tom stood up. "So we land on the mothership and then what?"

"There is no 'we', Brooker. I'm doing this alone. I also don't plan on boarding their ship. One man surrounded by hundreds of Cybermen? It's too risky even if that one man *is* me." The Doctor tugged on a red length of string that was coiled around his thumb and a holographic representation of the mothership appeared in the centre of the room. "That blue area represents the engines. When I pilot this ship right through them, it will shatter the magnetic containment field and the resulting chain reaction will atomise not just the mothership, but all the other craft in orbit with it."

"You're talking about a suicide mission," Tom said.

"Yes, I really don't need you to point that out to me, Brooker."

The Doctor reached inside his coat and produced a brown envelope.

"What's this?"

"A key to the TARDIS," the Doctor replied. "One that fits the new locks. When I leave, find Val and get out of here. There are instructions in the envelope on how to set the coordinates to get you both home. I've tried to keep it simple so even you should be able to follow them."

"Doctor..."

"Just go, Brooker, you're wasting time."

"Doctor."

"I said..."

But this time it was not Tom who had spoken and when the Doctor turned, Arthur struck him round the head, knocking him out cold.

"What did you do that for?" Tom asked.

"It's not his sacrifice to make."

"You heard?"

"Enough."

"What if it's not your sacrifice either?"

Arthur towered over Tom. "Before you left to find the Grail, I made you a promise, Tom. Get down on your knees."

"But..."

"Kneel!"

Tom knelt. Arthur drew his sword.

"I dub you Knight of Camelot," he pronounced. "Arise, Sir Tom."

Tom rose slowly. His knees were shaking.

"A knight should be loyal to his commanding officer, Sir Tom," Arthur said, "and as your first and last duty, I order you to take the Doctor and get out of here."

"Do you know how to fly this thing?" Tom asked him.

Arthur was already wrapping his fingers around the Doctor's arrangement of string. "I'll figure it out."

Tom nodded. "Then Godspeed, Lord Arthur. And don't miss."

The samara *Ophrys*, the spacecraft that Arthur had renamed Avalon, launched on one final flight. Out of the water, it was easier to see what the vessel really looked like, a domed front end couple to a long, flat tail. Within, Arthur wrestled with the controls. The samara was extremely responsive and the slightest twitch of his finger could send it into a spin or a dive.

The Cyber-Fleet detected the threat as soon as the samara escaped Earth's atmosphere and were quick to bring their weapons to bear. Targeting computers assessed the samara's flight pattern and provided firing solutions based on the most probably projections. The samara was not being flown in accordance with any logic, however, so all this processing power was wasted. It was all Arthur could do to avoid colliding with anything, let alone pilot the samara in any given direction.

Finally, however, Arthur began to get the hang of it. The holographic display in front of him indicated the samara's position relative to his intended target and he began his approach. Too late, he saw a saucer drifting in front of him. He banked left, but not quickly enough and the samara clipped the saucer's edge. The impact sent him corkscrewing away, but this mistake proved beneficial when twin torpedoes, launched by a rapidly approaching warship, raced through the space he had just occupied and collided with the saucer, ripping it to shreds.

Pulling gently on the blue string while easing the tension on the yellow, Arthur guided the samara in an arc until he was looking up at the mothership from below. Now he yanked violently on all the strings at once and the samara accelerated. Torpedoes and laser blasts exploded all around him, but Arthur did not deviate.

Change course, a voice beat in his mind. Turn aside. You are like us. You cannot harm us.

Arthur closed his eyes and drew on his memories, the few precious things he had left to remind him that he was still human.

"Morgan!" he screamed.

The samara struck the mothership.

Seen from Earth, it was as if a second sun had ignited in the sky. Then a third. Soon there were so many that it was impossible to identify them individually. It was as if someone had smeared a streak of fire across the heavens.

Not one of Camelot's defenders knew exactly what happened, but somehow, by some instinct, they felt that the tide had turned. They charged the Cybermen with renewed purpose, intent on gaining justice for their fallen comrades. Directed energy weapons fired again and again bringing yet more death, but for every man that fell, another warrior emerged to take his place.

Overlooking the battlefield, the catapults were being readied for another volley. Aelthryth picked up a clay shell, but she was too small to reach the sling so Beorhtraed loaded it for her. Val added the spores and Geraint released the pin to send the arm rocking forward. They too were buoyed up with renewed hope and worked with fervour, raining shell after shell down on the Cybermen.

The spores were insidious. If there was the slightest opening in a Cyberman's armour - a vent, a join, an imperfection - then they would get in and devour the Cyberman from the inside out. In other circumstances, rapidly growing tendrils simply wrapped around the Cybermen, too strong and too numerous for it to break. The Cyberman would struggle, but while the plant held it immobile the warriors were quick to capitalise on its plight. A single axe blow was ineffectual, but a dozen, twenty, thirty in the same spot would eventually break through. It was slow, hard work and it was not without sacrifice - as the charred, mutilated bodies would attest - but the defenders could sense that they were on the verge of snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.

Morgan had abandoned her lookout position atop the city walls and was on her hands and knees amid the carnage. With hands that were caked with mud and blood, she rolled away the remains of a Cyberman to reveal the body of Culhwch buried underneath. The big man opened his eyes.

"Morgan," he croaked, "what are you doing here?"

"I couldn't let you die out here," Morgan said. She took some dressings from her bag and began to apply them to Culhwch's wounds. "Who'd help Olwen take care of your son?"

"Ha!" Culhwch said. "Die? Me? I knew I'd be too strong for them."

"Too dense is more like it," Morgan replied, not ashamed of the tears in her eyes. "I knew that thick head of yours would have to come in handy eventually."

The Cyber-Controller sounded the retreat and his troops began to withdraw to their ships. Lancelot sprinted across the battlefield, determined not to let the general get away. The distance was too great, however, and the Controller had already reached his shuttle.

Fortunately, Gareth had got there before him. He used his left hand to yank the Controller back down the ramp leading up to his ship and his right fist to smash the translucent dome over the Controller's cranium. Blades flew from Lancelot's wrists with a hiss of compressed air and he dived into the fray. A quick combination of cuts and slashes severed the hoses and cables wrapped around the Controller's body and his heavy chest unit fell away. Without hesitation, Lancelot dug both his blades deep into his enemy's torso and opened him

up along his sternum. Foul-smelling white foam bubbled out of the gaping wound as the Controller writhed about on the ground in his death throes.

The Cybermen had completed their withdrawal and now their ships took to the air, ignoring the taunts and jeers of the humans beneath them. The Cybermen had, however, brought unintended passengers with them. Spores embedded in the mud on the boots and elsewhere continued to grow and expand, bringing chaos to what remained of the fleet. The defenders cheered as the shuttles tumbled out of control and crashed into the cliffs where they were consumed in fire.

In a boat, slowly making its way back to land, the Doctor watched the explosions.

"What happened?"

"Arthur hit you," Tom explained.

"What, again?" the Doctor said. "I'm starting to think that that man doesn't like me."

"Can't imagine why," Tom said. "Anyway, he decided he was going to pilot the ship himself."

"The fool," the Doctor said. "Why is it that nobility is so often synonymous with stupidity?"

"You're just jealous that he got to go out in your blaze of glory," Tom replied. "And if he hadn't hit you, I would have."

"Are you that desperate to throw your life away too?" The Doctor's question was accompanied by a raised eyebrow.

"No," Tom said, "I've just been looking for an excuse to wallop you all day."

With that, Tom matched action to words and gave the Doctor a (gentle) punch to the arm.

Sometime later, the Doctor was walking across the battlefield, surveying the loss of life he had not been able to prevent. Around him, people hurried back and forth with carts, taking the injured back to Camelot where they could get medical treatment. There would be time enough to bury the dead when the living had been taken care of. He noticed Lancelot and Gareth approaching and stopped to let them catch up.

"What happens now?" Lancelot asked.

"To Camelot? we're in a period of time about which future historians can tell us very little," the Doctor replied. "Camelot might see another hundred years of glory or fall to nothing in the space of a month. That's for her people to decide. With Morgan in charge, though, I'd bet on the former."

"And to us?" Gareth asked.

"Without the Planner to maintain them," the Doctor said, "those cybernetic bodies of yours will eventually fail."

"How long?"

"That rather depends on what you do and how much wear and tear you subject yourselves to."

"We're intending to travel," Lancelot said. "Camelot doesn't need us anymore, but there are bound to be others out there who could use out help."

"There are always more evils to fight," the Doctor agreed. "Logic says that activity will run your bodies down all the faster. Still, it would be good if the two of you could prove logic wrong on that score."

Tom found Beorhtraed and her daughter at the North Gate.

"Hey, seedling!" he called, waving as he hurried over to them.

"It's Aelthryth!" the girl protested. She sighed resignedly. "But seedling's okay, I suppose."

"Do you have to go already?" Tom asked Beorhtraed.

"It's a long way back to the farm," she replied.

Tom hesitated. "I could go with you."

Beorhtraed smiled, but it was a lacklustre kind of smile. "I told you, Tom, I'm not looking for anyone right now."

"You sure you won't get lonely?"

"I've got Aelthryth," Beorhtraed said. "She'll look after me." Her daughter beamed with pride. "I will miss you, Tom, you know that."

"I'll visit," Tom said.

Beorhtraed shook her head, sensing how unlikely it was that that promise would ever be kept.

"Goodbye, Tom," she said, taking Aelthryth by the hand and turning back towards the gate. "Don't ever give up."

Valentina was sitting on the edge of Morgan's workbench, swinging her legs in the air.

"Is there something I can do to help?" she asked.

"I've got everything in hand, thanks," Morgan replied. She was rushing about, gathering up her supplies before she went back to tending to those injured by the Cybermen. Mordred had asked if he could help so Morgan was letting him carry her bag.

"I suppose you'll need to move out of here soon," Val said. "If you're running the city, you deserve better digs."

"I quite like this place." Morgan reached round behind Val. "Excuse me, Valentina, but you're sitting on my bandages."

"Sorry." Val hopped down from the bench.

Mordred brought the bag over to his mother so that she could drop the bandages inside.

"Valentina, I appreciate the offer of help," Morgan said, "but, honestly, you're getting underfoot. Why don't you go and join the Doctor?"

"Maybe I don't want to go off with the Doctor," Val said with a hint of petulance. "Maybe I'll stay here in Camelot."

Morgan laughed, but her mockery was gentle.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "We both know you're going to go with the Doctor. You belong with him."

"Yeah, right."

"Just because he's walking and talking that doesn't mean he's recovered," Morgan said. "Not all scars are visible. He needs you, Valentina."

"He's got a funny way of showing it."

"Stick with him. Maybe one day he'll even thank you for it."

"And pigs might fly," Val said, but she was smiling in spite of herself.

There was a knock at the door. Morgan opened it and ushered in Culhwch and Olwen. Culhwch was carrying his son in his arms.

"We're not staying long," Culhwch said. "We just wanted to say thank you for all you've done for us. Both of you."

"Don't be silly," Morgan scolded him.

Val wiggled her fingers in front of the baby's face.

"He's adorable," she said. "Have you chosen a name for him yet?"

"Yes, we have." Culhwch glanced at his wife and she nodded. "we're going to call him Arthur."

Val and Tom joined the Doctor on the Roman road leading away from Camelot. He was looking out to sea, to where Avalon had once stood. A chill breeze was blowing inland, tugging at his coat and his hair.

"What kept you?" he asked without turning around. "No, don't tell me. I'm quite sure I don't want to know."

Tom rolled his eyes and Val stifled a grin. They had changed out of their contemporary clothes and back into the outfits they had been wearing when the TARDIS had first landed.

"I think I may have misjudged you," the Doctor continued. "On reflection, the two of you aren't quite as useless as I first thought."

"Was that an apology?" Val asked.

"Almost as useless, but not quite," the Doctor said, ignoring her. "As it happens, I have a couple of vacancies going for TARDIS crew. I asked Morgan."

"You asked Morgan before us?" Tom interrupted.

The Doctor looked over his shoulder and threw a hard stare in Tom's direction.

"As I was saying, I asked Morgan, but she's too busy running Camelot. She did, however, suggest that I ask the pair of you."

"We'd love the jobs, Doctor," Val said. "Wouldn't we, Tom?"

"Does this mean I get to keep the TARDIS key?" Tom asked, brandishing the envelope the Doctor had given him on Avalon.

The Doctor snatched it back. "You're on probation," he said. "Don't forget that."

"Aye aye, skipper," Tom replied.

"That's better," the Doctor said. "A little respect can go a long way. Just remember that it's my ship, my rules and what I say goes. You'll find I have a very different way of doing things to my predecessor."

"Just in case we hadn't noticed already," Tom murmured *sotto voce*.

Thoughts of Vincent rose to the fore in Val's mind and she tentatively ventured a question. "Does that mean *meddling* might be on the cards?"

The Doctor grinned.

"Watch this space," he said. "The best is yet to come."

Britain in the sixth century.

It is a time of myths and legend, a time magic and monsters.
It is the time of Arthur.

While Tom embarks on a quest for the legendary Grail,
Valentina finds herself a guest at King Arthur's court.
But there is a dark secret at the heart of Camelot. On a mysterious island out to sea,
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those of mortal men, but who is she and what does she want in return?
An enemy is coming - an enemy that will threaten not just Camelot, but the whole
world - and only one man can save us.

Val soon learns, however, that the new Doctor
is very different from his predecessor, both in means and in motives.
When the time comes for him to act, will it be as Arthur's greatest ally
or as his bitterest opponent?

The Doctor is dead. Long live the Doctor.

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