

THE DOG'S STORY

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“The Dog’s Story” was purchased by Gardner Dozois, and appeared in the May 1996 issue of Asimov’s, with an illustration by Darryl Elliott. Arnason is not prolific at short lengths, her only other Asimov’s story being her novelette “The Lovers,” but each of her appearances in the magazine has been with a complex, substantial, and satisfying piece of fiction. She’s more prolific at novel length, publishing her first novel, The Sword Smith, in 1978, and following it with novels such as Daughter of the Bear King and To The Resurrection Station. In 1991, she published her best-known novel, the critically acclaimed A Woman of the Iron People, which won the prestigious James Tiptree Jr. Memorial Award. Her most recent novel is Ring of Swords. In the vivid and evocative story that follows, she examines the Matter of Britain from a totally fresh and unexpected perspective, one that’s never occurred to any of the hundreds of other writers who have dealt with the legends of Camelot and its High Court...

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The wizard Merlin, traveling on his monarch’s business, came to a ford where a knight was raping a maiden. The rape had just begun, though it had apparently been preceded by a murder. A second man, most likely the girl’s companion, lay on the ground nearby, bloody and unmoving. Three horses wandered loose. Merlin reined his own animal and considered the scene to make sure that his first impression was correct.

The girl had already lost her long embroidered belt. The knight held it in one hand, while his other arm assumed the belt’s position around the girl’s waist. This seemed clear enough to Merlin. It isn’t easy to rape anyone while garbed in a knee-length mail shirt. Nor is it easy to pull such a garment off, while holding a struggling woman. Struggle the maiden did, screaming like a peacock, a creature that Merlin had seen—and heard—in King Arthur’s menagerie. The knight was planning to tie the girl up, then undress the two of them at leisure.

By this time he had noticed Merlin. He gave the wizard a brief glance, returning to his contest with the girl. An old man on a palfrey could be no

threat. After the girl was tied, maybe to the tree that shaded the ford and the two contestants, he'd be free to drive off Merlin or kill him; and then he'd be able to get back to his pleasure, if pleasure was the right word here.

Merlin, who'd been a sensualist in his youth, began to feel anger. This man dishonored all lovers of women and love. The old man straightened in his saddle and lifted a hand. "A cur you are," he cried. "A cur you shall be in the future!"

The knight turned as if jerked at the end of a rope. His armor fell in pieces around him; his clothing vanished; and for a moment he stood naked: a tall, fair, ruddy man with an erection. Then he dropped on all fours. A moment after that, he became a dog. In this form he glanced at the fragments of his mail and at the girl, who was trying to arrange her torn garments. He groaned; it was an oddly human sound to be coming from the dark lips and long curling tongue of a dog; then he ran away.

"You must be a magician," the girl said in the calm voice of one who had experienced too much.

"Evidently." Merlin dismounted and examined the man on the ground. Beyond any question he was dead.

Her brother, the girl told Merlin. They had been on a pil-grimage to a local shrine. On the way back, the false knight had attacked them. Their servants had fled. Her brother had fought and died. "And I was on the road to death when you arrived. What good fortune!"

Merlin kept quiet, knowing the events that occur around wizards are rarely accidental.

They loaded the dead man on Merlin's palfrey, which was not disturbed by blood, and the wizard coaxed the three loose horses, till they approached him, lowering their heads, letting him take their reins. Mounted once again, he and the girl went on.

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The name of the false knight was Ewen. He was the younger son of a minor baron: a rough, healthy, violent lad, awkward around women. At the time he met Merlin, he was eighteen years old.

Now a dog, he ran through a forest, one of the many that grew in England in those days. If a person wanted to, he or she could travel the

length of the king's realm and never leave the forest shadow, except briefly to cross a road or field. Out-laws used this green route, as did fairies and people grown tired of their obligations.

At first Ewen ran at full speed. Becoming tired, he trotted, then walked, pausing now and then to sniff at something that seemed interesting: a dead bat, folded among last year's fallen leaves, a badger's scat, the mark left by a male fox on a tree. Finally, exhausted, he settled in a patch of ferns and slept.

In the morning, he woke hungry and went looking for food. There was plenty, but he'd not hunted on four feet till now. The pungent aromas of the forest confused him. For some reason—who can understand the mind of a wizard, or the paths that magic follows?—the enchantment had not affected his vision. He still saw color as a human would. This was no help; it might even have been a hindrance. In any case, he couldn't see animals in hiding. When the animals leaped out of hiding, he chased but did not catch them, being unaccustomed to his new form, though it was a fine body: large, rangy, fierce of aspect and entirely white except for a pair of blood red ears. Looking in a pool of still water, he saw him-self and fled, horrified.

After several days of hunger, he came to a farm. It was nothing much: a rough cottage, a couple of outbuildings that were little more than sheds, and a pen that held pigs.

There was food in the cottage and in the pen. Ewen could smell it, but the scent of people frightened him, and no one in his right mind would climb in a pen with pigs. They were (and are) fierce, strong animals, intelligent enough to know that humans mean them no good. If they can, they'll kill.

He waited till nightfall and slunk close. The pigs grunted angrily. The cottage door opened. Ewen slunk away.

In the morning he hunted again, caught an unwary rabbit and ate it, crunching the bones between powerful jaws. It wasn't enough. He returned to the farmstead.

This time he investigated the outbuildings. One smelled of grain and vegetables, things he'd liked when human, but which did not entice him now. The second hut smelled of meat. Saliva filled his mouth. His tongue lolled out and dripped. He nosed the door. Unfastened, it swung open. Even as a man, he hadn't been much for thinking. Now, as a hungry dog, he didn't think at all. Instead of considering the possibility of danger, he pushed inside. The night was moonless and the hut as black as pitch, but

he could smell roast pig above him. Ewen leaped and caught nothing, then leaped a second time. On the third try, his teeth closed around a bone. He held on, off the ground and twisting in the darkness. The bone was one of many, fastened together and hung from the hut's low roof. They knocked against each other now and made a loud clattering noise, while Ewen swung below them like the clapper on a bell.

The hut's door closed. A bar came down with a bang. "There!" said the farmer. "He's a fine big dog. Someone must own him, a noble, if looks are anything. Or if not, a noble may buy him."

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Merlin delivered the maiden to her father, along with the corpse of her brother. Then he rode on, leading the false knight's charger. For two days, he traveled along the forest's edge, coming at last to an isolated farm.

The farmer made him welcome. Although nobles often ignored or mistook the old man in plain dark clothing, peasants usually realized he was someone important and dangerous, maybe because they actually looked at him.

The farmer's wife prepared dinner. The farmer told Merlin about the dog he'd captured.

"Can I see him?" the wizard asked.

They went to the hut, and Merlin peered through a crack. It was midsummer. The days were long. Rays of sunlight slanted through the hut, and Merlin had no trouble making out the white hound lying on the floor and gnawing bones.

"He's mine," said Merlin. "I'll pay you for your trouble."

The farmer praised his good fortune and Merlin's.

In the morning, Merlin went out to the hut and opened the door. Ewen raised his head. He'd eaten the few shreds of meat on the pig bones, then cracked the bones and licked out the marrow. Now he was bored and ready to leave.

"The man you killed has a father, who has sworn to hunt you down. He hasn't decided whether to kill you or tie you in his courtyard. It might be satisfying to have his boy's killer as a dog by his door. If I leave you here,

he'll get you." Merlin tilted his head, considering. "Maybe I should have made you a wolf. You might have lasted longer in the wild. But you don't have a wolf's nature. Come on." The wizard beckoned. Ewen rose and followed.

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In the histories, Camelot is a fine lofty city built of stone. In point of fact, it was made of low wood buildings, narrow dirt streets, yards with manure and midden heaps. The king's fort stood in the center of the town. *It* was stone, good Roman work from the days before the empire had abandoned Britain, though damaged by time, war, and neglect. Arthur was re-building. The gaps in the outer walls had been filled by rubble and logs bound with iron; inside the fort, scaffolding stood against most of the surviving buildings; and heaps of stone were piled next to the scaffolding, ready for use.

Merlin rode in the fortress gate, the captured charger following, the white hound running at his side. Before him, in the large front court, men practiced with swords. Among them was Arthur, a big handsome man just entering middle age. His hair was dark and curly, his face fair, his eyes grey. He was the love of Merlin's life, and both men knew it, though it was never mentioned. Their relationship was too complicated already.

Merlin dismounted stiffly. Arthur called a halt to the sword-play, and they embraced. Then the king asked about the new horse and the white dog that was trying to hide behind Merlin, afraid of all these people, especially the king.

"You know I have a way with animals. They'll follow if I tell them to."

"I know that you don't want to tell the story that lies in back of these new acquisitions. The dog is handsome, though a bit timid. Will you give him to me?"

"I'll give you the horse, but not the dog."

The king frowned, then laughed and accepted the horse.

"Not up to my weight, of course, but I'll find some poor young knight in need of a mount."

Merlin excused himself and went to his quarters, the white hound following. Servants brought him water and a brazier full of coals: the weather was cool, the wizard past his prime. He washed all over and put on

a clean robe, then settled with a cup of wine, also brought by the king's servants.

"You're wondering why I refused to tell the king about you," Merlin said to the dog. "One can never tell about Ar-thur. He might insist that I turn you back into a man. He might want to kill you. I doubt that he'd want to have a former knight fighting over scraps of food in his feasting hall." The wizard snapped his fingers. The dog came near. He ran his hand over the white head and tugged gently at the blood red ears. "Keep close to me for the next few days, till I have a collar made. Gold, I think. You're a noble-looking animal, though as a man you were a failure. I'll have my name and emblem put on the collar. Few people will steal from a wizard, especially the king's wizard." Ewen nosed the old man's hand, then licked the palm.

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It was surprisingly easy to be a dog. Ewen had never been much of a talker. Now he didn't have to make the effort. Barks and snarls served for almost every purpose. When they failed, he bared his long sharp teeth. Even the king's dogs gave him room.

Human women had always baffled him. Now, he had no interest in them. It was female dogs that attracted him, and it was far easier to court a bitch in heat than any human woman he'd ever met. Whether high or low in rank, they always seemed to want something Ewen couldn't provide. What the bitches wanted Ewen had and gave willingly.

Arthur, laughing, said, "All the dogs in Camelot are going to be white," then added, "You wouldn't give me the dog, but I'll have his children."

When they were alone Merlin said, "Don't worry about fathering dogs. The king wants his bitches to bear white pups. They will, and the pups will grow up to be everything Arthur is hoping for. But they won't be your children."

Ewen, chewing on an ox bone, had not considered the problem. After all, he'd been a younger son. His children, if any, would not have mattered much, except to his wife. Let them be dogs and hunt for the king! But he was sterile, the wizard said, at least when he mated with dogs.

"I have changed your appearance, but not your essence. You are still as human as ever you were."

Ewen cracked the bone held between his front paws, ex-tended his

long, rough tongue and licked the marrow out.

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He became famous: the big white dog with red ears and a gold collar who followed the king's wizard through Camelot, lay at Merlin's feet, ran beside his horse. He did not age in the ordinary fashion of dogs, as Arthur noticed.

"Nor do I," said Merlin. "Ewen is a wizard's dog, and he never leaves my side. Magic slows the passage of time, as you ought to have noticed."

This was a reference to the magic in the royal lineage. The king grimaced, not wanting to think about his family or about the family he had failed to produce—unlike Ewen, whose progeny filled the kennels of Camelot, Arthur believed. The queen was childless and increasingly restless.

By this time, Merlin had fallen into the habit of talking with his dog. Ewen had retained his original intelligence, which was considerable. His problem had never been stupid-ity, but rather greed, rashness and brutality. These were the traits that led him to attack the maiden at the ford and the pig bones in the storage hut. He understood most of what the old man told him, though not everything, of course. He could repeat nothing. Nor could he use what he learned for his own benefit or against his master: the perfect companion for a lonely wizard.

So began a strange double life. In daylight and in public, Ewen was an animal. At night, alone with Merlin, he was an audience for the great wizard's ideas, worries, reflections, speculations. Gradually, under Merlin's influence, he learned to think, but this process—thinking—had almost nothing to do with his daylight life. There he fought for scraps, mounted bitches, confronted other males, coursed the king's prey, followed at the heels of the king's wisest counselor. Thought belonged to the evening, when Merlin drank wine and tugged Ewen's blood red ears.

In his way, he grew to love the old man. In part, it was a dog's love. In part, it was the love of a man whose own father had been stupid as well as brutish. Strange, maybe, to look at the enchanter who'd made him a domestic animal and see, not an enemy, but a loved father or master. Such things do happen. The heart hath its reasons, which reason knoweth not, as Pascal tells us.

Sometimes, when they were traveling and had stopped for the night in a place distant from other people, Merlin would turn the hound back into a

man. Magic *had* slowed time. He looked no more than twenty, fair and muscular. His hair had grown just a little. It fell over his shoulders, curly and shaggy, the color of wheat at midsummer. His eyes were summer blue. His beard was like a wheat field after harvest: blond stubble shining in the light of their evening fire.

In his youth and middle age, Merlin had been a lover of men as well as women. The church forbade this kind of love, of course; but the church also forbade witchcraft and wizardry. Being a scholar, Merlin knew that the basis for these injunctions was a script that also forbade the eating of shell-fish. Yet he had seen Christian kings and prelates consume oysters with the zeal of pagan Romans, pausing only to give praise to God for the excellent food. He kept his counsel and did not abandon his inclinations.

In his old age, his passions diminished. Little remained except his love for Arthur, which had always been more familial than anything else. This was the baby Merlin had carried in his arms, the boy he'd watched over, the youth he'd made king. From the beginning, Arthur's future had enveloped him like a cloak or veil of light, visible to Merlin and a few others. The babe in his hands had shone as if swaddled in moonbeams. The boy had seemed garbed in the pale, clear light of dawn. The young man had been like morning.

The veil was still present, though dimmed by age and compromise. At night, when Arthur sat in his feasting hall, surrounded by retainers, Merlin saw glory flicker around the king. Duty and a sense of history transformed the wizard's love, as iron is changed by fire and water.

Ewen was different. Merlin looked at him, on those nights when the two of them camped alone. If the weather was cold enough, the boy would wrap himself in a blanket. Otherwise, he wore nothing except the gold dog collar engraved with Merlin's name. Whatever human modesty he might once have had was gone. He'd been a dog too long.

Merlin remembered lust, and that was what he felt now, stirring in his groin. The boy had no sexual interest in men.

Merlin could force him and be a rapist. He could seduce him using magic. In either case, he'd be a brute, acting from simple need without regard for reason, consequence or the dignity of his art.

No, the old man thought. Better to end his days a celibate.

Now and then, Ewen seemed briefly uncomfortable, as if he

suspected what Merlin was thinking. Usually, he was at ease, though rarely talkative. Even in human form, he preferred to listen.

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When Merlin wanted to travel in disguise, he gave the boy clothing, and Ewen became a servant or a young relative. At first, Merlin insisted that he not wear the collar. It was too rich and distinctive. But Ewen missed the weight. It was difficult being a man, he told the wizard. His clothes were binding and scratchy. Women were once again exciting.

“When I see one who seems in heat, I get an erection. But what can I do with it? I know you won’t let me push the woman down and mount her. As for seduction, it requires skills I don’t have and more time than I’m willing to put in. It isn’t time I want to put in, in these situations.

“When men brush against me or give me an insulting stare, I want to growl and bite. I know I could leave marks on them, even with human teeth. But you have told me to be mannerly.

“Let me wear the collar. It reminds me that I’ll be a dog again soon. I’ll keep it hidden.”

Merlin gave in, though with foreboding. The inevitable happened at a little roadside lodging place. A fastening came undone. The innkeeper saw gold gleaming at the boy’s throat. That night, six men came to rob the travelers.

In his old age, Merlin slept fitfully, and the robbers made the mistake of waiting. By the time they crept down the hall, the wizard had passed through the deep sleep brought on by fatigue to a state close to waking. The noise they made was enough to rouse him entirely. He roused Ewen, who pulled a sword out of their baggage.

One of the robbers had a lantern made of horn. By its dim light, they saw a man emerge from the travelers’ room, naked except for a wide gold collar, bare steel in his hand. The six robbers advanced, made confident by their numbers, their knives and their cudgels. A moment later, the lantern went out, dropped or tossed aside. This proved an advantage to Ewen, who knew he had no friends in the dark hall. He charged, swinging his sword. Deep growls came from his throat, interspersed with yelps and howls. It was the noise that settled the battle. The robbers, stumbling into one another in the darkness and striking out at random, became terrified. Surely this snarling creature was a madman or a demon. They turned and

ran. Ewen followed.

Merlin picked up the horn lantern and relit it. Two men lay in the hall. One was dead, his head crushed by a cudgel blow. The other wept noisily, holding onto his belly. Blood welled between the robber's fingers. Merlin lifted his hands; the man did the same, as if in imitation. Now the wound was visible. It was deep. Intestines spilled out. A fatal wound, unless the wizard used his magic. Why bother? England was already well supplied with robbers and murderers. On the other hand, no living thing should suffer, if the suffering could be ended. Merlin gestured a second time. The man slept, his hands falling to his sides. The wound continued to bleed.

The other men were in the yard: one dead and two dying. The last robber, a lad of fifteen or so, had scrambled to the top of the manure heap and was slinging dung at Ewen, as the naked man climbed toward him, coated now in blood and excrement. The moon shone down on all of this. The noise was terrific: the dying men groaning and calling out to God, the boy screaming curses, Ewen howling.

"Heel!" called Merlin.

Ewen paused and shook his head as if to clear it, then climbed down to join his master.

"Who planned this?" Merlin asked the boy on the dung heap.

"My brother. The one who keeps the inn."

They searched for the innkeeper, but he was gone.

"When he comes back," said Merlin to the boy, "tell him that he tried to rob Merlin the wizard, and that his com-rades—"

"Our brothers," said the boy. "There were seven of us, and you have killed five."

"Tell him that his brothers were killed by my famous white hound, which I turned into a man for the night. If I ever hear anything about the two of you again, I'll send him back as a dog or a man or something worse than either; and I'll tell him to spare no one."

They cleaned up and left, going into the forest. Merlin guided them with the horn lantern, which shone more brightly than before. They stopped finally. Ewen gathered wood in the lantern's light: by this time it was a

second moon, shining under the trees.

“That could lead them to us,” Ewen said.

Merlin gestured. The lantern grew dim. Ewen built his fire in almost-darkness. When it was burning well, the lantern went out. The lad cared for their horses, while Merlin sat by the fire. His dark, lined face looked weary.

At length, the young man joined him, pulling out the sword he’d used against the robbers and making sure that it was entirely clean. That done, he resheathed the weapon and un-fastened the collar around his neck. “I’ll miss it.”

Merlin took the collar and put it away. “You did well tonight. It may be time for you to consider becoming a man.”

“I was always good at doing harm,” said Ewen. “In any case, it wasn’t necessary. You were there. You could have turned them all into toads.”

“Magic has more to do with form than substance,” Merlin said after a moment. “If I had turned them into toads, they would have been extremely large toads. It’s possible that their new shape and structure—the toad skeletons and muscles and organs—would not have been sufficient given their size, which would have been the size of men. They might have collapsed in on themselves and died of their own weight.”

“Small loss,” said Ewen.

“If this hadn’t happened, you would have been dealing with mouths large enough to swallow you and long grasping tongues.” The wizard paused again.

Ewen waited. He’d leaned back on his elbows and stretched his legs in front of him, comfortable in spite of the scratches and bruises he’d gotten in the fight. Tomorrow he’d feel all his injuries, as he knew. Tonight he felt tired and content.

“There is another possibility,” the wizard said finally. “Magic likes to follow the rules of nature, to create things that are possible and have existed, if not now, then in the past. If I had tried to enchant the robbers in the way you have suggested, they might have turned into the ancient relatives of toads. Some of these animals were as large as men. Some were carnivores with heads like mastiffs and teeth that could put your teeth

to shame.”

“My dog teeth?” asked Ewen.

The wizard nodded. “The Flood, or some other catastrophe, destroyed these creatures. The world does not need to see them again.”

“You are less powerful than I thought,” Ewen said.

Merlin considered, then answered. “For the most part, magic has to do with seeing. I saw your canine nature at the ford. I saw Arthur’s future while he was *in utero*.”

Ewen knew some Latin by this time, as well as a little Arabic and Hebrew. He had no trouble understanding *in utero*.

“Doing is more difficult,” the wizard added. “Though it can be done.” He glanced up, smiling. “As you know.”

In the morning, they continued, riding through the forest shadow. The road they followed was narrow and grey. Sun-light stippled it like the spots on a trout.

As Ewen had expected, he hurt all over. Conversation might be a distraction. He said, “I’ve been thinking of those animals, the ancestors of toads. How do you know about them? Are they in the Bible or Aristotle?”

His knowledge did not come from human texts, whether sacred or profane, Merlin said. Rather, he had learned it from the fairies. Humans knew those folk as students of magic, and so they were, but they studied nature with an equal zeal, and they were obsessed with the passage of time. “They have dug out the bones that are preserved in stone, and they know these are not the bones of giants, nor are they unusual mineral formations. Rather, they are the remains of animals, unlike any animal alive today.”

Using magic, the fairy scholars had recreated these ancient animals. “Some are solid and alive,” Merlin told Ewen. “The fairies keep them as pets or use them as the prey for their hunts. But most of the animals—especially the enormous ones—are illusory. A reptile the size of a feasting hall would be difficult to make, difficult to feed and possibly dangerous.”

Ewen nodded his agreement.

Illusions, on the other hand, were safe, economical, and comparatively easy to make. The fairy scholars could study them, without having to cage or feed them. The fairies who were not scholars could take pleasure in their strangeness.

Ewen asked about the real animals in fairyland, the ones that could fight and had to be fed. Merlin described what he had seen on his visits to the Fair Realm: elephants covered with shaggy fur, pill bugs as big as his palm, a toothy creature with a sail on its back, a toothy creature that ran on two legs and gathered food with sharp-clawed hands.

The shaggy elephants had tusks that curved like hunting horns. The pill bugs had large eyes faceted like jewels. The sail creature was like a salamander, save that it was as big as a man and had a thick, leathery hide. The creature that ran on two legs could be compared to nothing.

The fairies had tried to train these bipeds, as they might have trained ostriches or humans; the creatures proved to be intractably wild. "Instead of being turned into a new kind of hunting dog, they became a new kind of quarry; and the fair-ies have bred dogs to course them and bring them down. The dogs are your size, when you are a hound, blue-grey in color with hanging jowls and long ears that are usually cropped. They are fearless, as they have to be. The bipeds have great curving claws on their feet, in addition to grasping hands and piercing teeth."

The Fair People were obsessed with all the aspects of time, Merlin told his companion. They studied the future as well as the past, though this area of study was full of challenge and obscurity. The future is always uncertain. Nonetheless, they had managed to create images of what the future might be like, and these also could be encountered in fairyland. "Though these illusions waver and shift and are rarely con-vincing." The wizard described groups of oddly dressed peo-ple, involved in activities that made little sense to him or the fairy scholars, and devices that seemed magical or perhaps like the devices made by ancient engineers such as Daedalus.

Cities would appear in the distance, at times as bright as ad-amant, at other times dark and wreathed in smoke. If one approached the cities, they receded. They could never be reached, nor could travelers get close enough to see them clearly. Instead, the travelers were left with confused impressions—of puissance, valor, and confidence or poverty, sad-ness, and pain.

Ewen had small use for illusion or for the future. Better to concentrate on what was present and real. He glanced around. Large ferns lined the road, so green that they seemed to glow with their own light. Farther back, in the forest shadow, fungi dotted the trunks of trees. Ewen recognized a number of kinds and recited the names to himself, as a charm against unreality: Jew's Ear, Dryad's Saddle, Witch's Butter, Poor Man's Beef.

Some of the animals in fairyland sounded interesting: the real ones, not the illusions. Maybe some day his master would take him there. In dog form, he'd chase the bipeds.

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That evening they came to a village, and Merlin bought liniment from the local witch, a tall handsome woman of more than fifty. She offered to put the liniment on. "I have the healing touch. But maybe you'd prefer to do this yourself, Merlin."

As much as possible, he did not touch the boy when he was human. In any case, this was a situation that required rubbing rather than magic. His own hands were stiff. He nodded his agreement to the witch's plan, and they entered her cottage: a single room, lit by a fire that flared up as they entered. Herbs hung from the rafters. Sealed pots stood along the walls. A pallet lay in one corner, and there were two three-legged stools. Merlin took one. The witch took the other. The boy settled in front of her on the dirt floor.

It was disturbing to watch the witch's dark strong fingers move over Ewen's back, the pale skin mottled with bruises. The lad's evident pleasure was also disturbing, how he leaned back against the hands, eyes closed and full lips faintly smiling. "Soon," Merlin told himself, "I am going to have an erection, and the witch will notice." It was the kind of thing that witches noticed. She might remember the old gossip about the wizard. It wasn't likely she'd disapprove. It was churchmen, not witches, who called sodomy a sin. But she was likely to make a joke, and then the boy would know for certain what went on in his master's mind.

Merlin excused himself and took a walk by the river. When he got back, the two of them were on the floor, naked and entangled. The boy was incorrigible! Merlin stepped forward, intending to grab Ewen by the scruff of the neck and pull him off the woman.

"Get that look off your face," the witch said. "And take another walk. The boy is younger than I am, but old enough to know what he's doing. I

used no charms. Both of us are willing.”

He went back to the river. Swallows flew back and forth over the water like shuttles in a loom, though they wove nothing except the death of bugs and obedience to their own natures. Merlin waited till darkness, then returned to the cottage a second time.

They spent the night there. Twice Merlin woke to the sound of Ewen and the woman coupling. “Patience,” he told himself. “You are old enough to have learned patience.”

In the morning, the witch gave them food for their journey and a second jar of liniment. “You have a fine big penis,” she said to Ewen. “And you’re certainly willing to use it. But you lack skill. If your master ever lets you go, come to me. I’ll teach you how to fuck properly.”

Ewen blushed. The witch laughed.

Late in the morning, Merlin asked, “What would you have done if she’d been unwilling?”

“Have I learned restraint? Some, but probably not enough.” Ewen paused to watch a woodpecker flash—black, white, and red—across the road. “It really is easier being a dog.”

* * * *

They traveled north. Rain fell, and the weather was unseasonably cool. Merlin’s joints hurt. “We’ll stay with lords this time, and I’ll be the king’s wizard.”

Ewen, riding miserably through a misty rain, lifted his head. He’d be a dog again.

“You’ll be a youth of good family, not yet a knight.”

“*Why?*”

“I want you to practice being a man.”

He said nothing in reply, knowing it was futile to argue with Merlin in weather like this.

“If you forget your manners and act doggishly—well, it’s a long

distance from the north to Camelot; and these north-erners might not even notice.”

The lords along the border made them welcome. These were rough men, who guarded King Arthur’s realm against the incursions of bandits, infidels and Scots, as well as an occasional monster or dragon. Most were loyal in their way; and knew enough to treat the royal wizard with respect.

Ewen puzzled the lords. A promising lad, but past the age when most northern boys were knighted. He did not seem to be sickly or clerical. Everything in the south went at an odd pace, either too slowly or too quickly; and a lad in Merlin’s care must be noble or even royal, though maybe not legiti-mate. They did not puzzle further. Instead, they loaned him armor and told their younger sons to treat him well.

By days, he practiced the arts of war or hunted on horseback, though he would sooner have run four-footed in the baying pack, as he told Merlin privately.

“Patience,” said the wizard.

He killed a boar with a spear, on foot after his horse fell. The lord of that keep offered to make him a knight.

“Not yet,” said Merlin. “I’m not satisfied with his man-ners.”

“What use are manners to a soldier? D’you think dragons care about manners? Or Scots, for that matter?”

“I see things you do not,” Merlin said firmly.

The lord grew quiet then.

At another keep, Ewen joined a war band going after thieves who had taken twenty head of the lord’s best cattle. They got most of the cattle back, but all the thieves escaped.

When they returned, the lord held a feast, honoring the warriors who’d recovered his favorite cow, a great rough beast with wide horns. “A fountain of milk,” said the lord with satisfaction. “And the daughters she’s produced! She is a mother of queens!”

Ewen sat among his comrades from the war band, drinking as little as possible and trying to ignore the serving women. This had happened in

other keeps. The women brushed against him. The men made sly remarks and gave him mock-ing names: Master Prudence, Master Silence, the Squire with-out Reproach.

Always before this, he'd managed to control himself. To-night, he could feel the control slipping, though he wasn't certain why. The lord's lewd praise for his favorite cow and for the bull they'd recovered? The noisiness in the hall? Or his own weariness, after the long chase toward the Scottish border and over many weeks of self-restraint?

He knew what he wanted: to be a dog again, close to Mer-lin rather than separated by half the feasting hall. It had neyer been said aloud, but he knew this would be his reward, if he passed the test that Merlin had set him.

If he did not—Ewen shivered. Merlin might refuse to change him. He might remain as he was, awkward and un-comfortable. Worst of all, the wizard might cast him out to wander through England in human form.

The soldier next to him pushed a woman into his lap. She screamed and grabbed hold of Ewen. He wrapped one arm around her waist and with his other hand pushed up her skirt, knowing what he'd find—a wet furry hole like the witch's, though most likely wetter and furrier. The witch had been old. His penis was engorged. He would mount the woman here. Most likely, the men around him would cheer.

Merlin's hand gripped his shoulder. Merlin's voice said, "Down."

He shivered and withdrew his hand, pushed the girl away and stood. Merlin was sitting next to the lord, having never moved.

"You have a prick," said one of the other men. "We can see it. Why are you so unwilling to use it?"

"A promise," he said with difficulty. "To Merlin."

"Is he teaching you magic? Does that art require that you be celibate?"

"A hard art, if this is so," said a second man.

A third man said, "Nay, if this is so, then we must call magic a soft art, rather than a hard one, for it requires softness rather than hardness in those who practice it. Look at our squire now. His male member has diminished to nothing. If we believe him, this is the influence of magic and the wizard

Merlin.”

Oh God, thought Ewen, and turned and left the hall. It was raining again. He stood in the muddy yard, face lifted to the dark sky, a howl forming in his throat. He pressed his lips together. The test was too difficult. He could not endure it. On the morrow, he'd go down on his knees to Merlin and beg for an end.

“No,” the wizard said. “You will continue. You did well last night.” He reached out a hand, the fingers stiff with age and the weather, and touched Ewen's golden hair. “Surely it is nobler to be what you are now.”

“If you hadn't intervened, I would have treated that servant the way I tried to treat the maiden at the ford. How is this noble? These men along the border are animals and do not know it. I know what I am, Merlin. Let me be content.”

“Winter draws near,” the wizard said finally. “Arthur waits in Camelot. Be patient. Your test is almost over.”

* * * *

The northern foliage began to change. So did the weather, though too late to save most of the harvest. They rode south in sunlight, through drying fields.

“Something in the north has been troubling me,” said Merlin. “A sense of darkness, a feeling of oppression. For that reason I stayed as long as I did, talking to the beldams and the local magicians, trying to discover the nature of the problem. I thought a dragon might be stirring or maybe a pestilence was beginning to spread, though most plagues come to us from France.”

He stretched his aching shoulders, enjoying the sun's heat. “Maybe the problem was the weather. My vision was cloudy because it was a vision of clouds.”

Ewen had pulled his shirt off and rode bare to the waist, his fair skin turning ruddy. Looking at him, Merlin realized how much the lad had changed in the time he'd spent free of enchantment. His adolescent ranginess was gone. Thick muscles covered his long tall frame. His hair, which had been ragged and unruly, was short and neatly trimmed. So was the beard he'd grown. So much in only a summer, the wizard thought.

When they got close to Camelot, they stopped with a farmer, an old friend of Merlin's. That evening, the wizard got out the gold collar. "Are you certain?"

"Yes."

The wizard felt perturbed and must have looked it. "You can't take me into Camelot like this," said Ewen. "How would you explain me? Arthur knows you have no noble ward, and he certainly knows I'm not a royal bastard; and if you think I want to listen to orders from Kay or insults from the rest of Arthur's knights—the royal hounds have better manners."

The farm was built in the ruins of an ancient Roman farm. There was a tiled pool that still held water. Ewen bathed carefully—he was always cleanly—dried himself, folded his clothes and packed them, then put on the collar. "Now."

Merlin gestured. Where the man had stood was a white hound, tail wagging, tongue lolling, a look of amusement in the hazel eyes.

Ewen's horse stayed with the farmer, who knew better than to ask questions about the vanished companion or the sudden present dog. That afternoon, they were in Camelot. Arthur greeted Merlin with a hug and gave the hound a brisk rub over the head and shoulders. "How can I do less for the sire of my kennels?" Then he took his wizard off for a conference. The white hound followed.

They talked first about the harvest in the north, the lords there, the Scottish menace, then about other problems which concerned Arthur: rebellious barons, false knights, rival kings, and a dragon on the Welsh border.

Finally, Arthur got to his chief concern. "It's Guinevere. I know she pines for children."

"Pining" was not a word that Merlin would have used for the queen. She was a large, rosy, healthy woman with enough energy for ten or twenty children. Lacking these children—there were not even any royal bastards for her to gather and raise, except for Borre, who had a perfectly good and noble mother, unwilling to give her son up—Guinevere did her best to keep busy in other ways. Camelot was full of the hangings that she and her ladies embroidered: the deeds of Sir Hercules and King Alexander in the feasting hall, the deeds of the saints and prophets in the royal chapel, blooming gardens in the royal bower and the rooms used by royal and noble guests.

This was in addition to all the everyday work a queen must do: managing the king's household, training his pages, greeting his guests of high and low degree—kings, nobles, prelates, bards, and jugglers. Guinevere was especially fond of the jugglers. She was a woman in love with activity.

When Arthur made royal progresses, she accompanied him.

"She stops to visit with every good wife famous for her herbal lore and every hermit famous for his piety," the king said. "It's obvious why. I have the most famous wizard in the kingdom in my employ. I ask again, is there nothing you can do?"

"In the first place, don't presume that you know your wife's mind. Women are not easy to understand. Even I, with my vision, make mistakes about them. In the second place, my liege, I am not a village witch dealing in potions and cures, though I have met one recently who seems excellent to me. You can send for her, if you like. If she's honest, she'll tell you that the problem does not lie with Guinevere."

The king's fair skin reddened slightly. "Are you certain?"

"I've told you there's magic in your line. Most likely, one of your ancestors was a fairy. They are slow to reproduce and rarely have more than a child or two. If this were not so, they'd fill the world, since they age slowly and are difficult to kill.

"Sometimes they take our children, raise them and mate with them, hoping to produce offspring who combine fairy magic and endurance with human fecundity. In general, the fairies tell me, these experiments do not achieve the hoped-for end. Most of the half-breed children lack magical ability and die young, being barely a hundred or a hundred and fifty, and they are only slightly more fertile than their fairy relatives."

Merlin paused. Arthur looked uncomfortable.

"It's possible you might have better luck with a fairy wife or with someone who, like you, has fairy blood. But I promise nothing."

The king shook his head. "I love Guinevere. Tell me where to find this witch."

* * * *

She came to Camelot on a white mare, a fine new cloak over her shoulders.

Arthur and Guinevere received her privately. Afterward, she sought out Merlin. He was in his quarters, reading the *Logic* of Aristotle, which a learned Jew of Cairo had translated into Latin and sent to the wizard in return for a book on fairy natural history. The white hound slept at his feet.

Merlin greeted the woman and poured wine for her, which she tasted before she spoke. "I could have said 'no' to the king, but not to that sweet lady. Where's your serving man? Has he left you?"

"No."

She laughed. "You've hidden him, for fear that I'll seduce him."

Merlin stirred the white dog with a foot. Ewen, who was dreaming of deer or possibly of bipeds, made a wuffing sound.

"What did you tell them?" Merlin asked the witch.

She tried the wine a second time, giving it so thorough an assay that Merlin had to refill her cup.

"I gave the queen a potion that will calm her. In my experience, women who fret have trouble breeding, especially if the thing they fret about is their infertility. Why this is, I don't know, though worry can disrupt the behavior of the body in many ways. Also, it's possible that the queen's activity—especially the traveling she does—is having an adverse effect on her female functions, though I have certainly known farm wives who worked as hard as any queen and bred like rabbits.

"I'm not happy with the number of shrines she visits. Or with the hermits. A pestilent lot! Full of vermin and bad advice! I told her to travel less, and if she must talk with religious folk, let them be seemly nuns and clerics who wash."

Merlin smiled and stirred the dog again. This time Ewen was silent.

"I told the king to wear loose clothing whenever possible. Monks and priests have no trouble fathering children. I have long suspected it's their clothing that makes them fertile."

"None of this will do any harm," said Merlin. "No good either, I fear."

"I could not say 'no' to the lady," the witch replied, finished her wine and rose to go. Merlin escorted her to the door of his quarters. She glanced

up at him, her face flushed with wine. "I'm going to the kitchen to brew a tisane for Sir Kay. He suffers from headaches, he has told me. After that, I'll go to my room. I would like company, if your serving man is free and willing."

Merlin closed the door behind her, then walked back to his study. The white hound was up on all fours, ears lifted and tail wagging.

"Do you think you can behave in a seemly fashion, like a knight, instead of a cur?"

The tail-wagging grew more furious.

"Very well," the wizard said after a moment. "I imagine this woman can take care of herself, but you are to act as if she were the mildest and silliest of maidens. Do you understand?"

The dog wagged harder.

Laughing, Merlin changed him into a man. He dressed quickly, pulling clothing from one of Merlin's chests, then hurried through the palace, already dark in the early evening of autumn.

In dog-form he had explored every corridor; and he had no trouble finding the witch's lodging-place. (In any case, she had described the location to Merlin.) At the moment, it was empty, unlit and as black as pitch. But the witch's aroma was everywhere. He could smell it through all the other odors: the dry herbs in the bedclothes, the dry rushes on the floor, the dust in corners and—very faintly—a mold.

He undressed and realized, when he was done, that he was still wearing the hound's gold collar. No time to take it back to Merlin. He wanted to be in the room when the witch arrived. He unfastened the collar and hid it in the middle of his clothing, then settled on the bed, among blankets that smelled of herbs and the woman.

She took longer than he had expected, in his eagerness. At last, the door opened. The witch entered, carrying a lamp. In the dim glow cast by it, she took on the appearance of a young matron, blooming the way some women do after their first few children.

Ewen raised himself on an elbow. She glanced at him, her dark eyes shining, then laughed and blew out the light.

He listened to the sound of her undressing, then felt her settle on top of him, astride his hips. In this fashion they coupled the first time: the witch on top and riding like a knight in a tournament.

The second time was side by side. They were both less eager than the first time. Their coupling was slow, gentle, and affectionate. When they finished, Ewen fell asleep.

He woke to lamplight. The witch stood in the middle of her room, dressed in a plain white shift. In one of her hands was the lamp, now relit. Her other hand held his gold collar.

“How have I deserved this?” she said.

Puzzled, he did not answer.

“I am a woman of no great birth, never beautiful, no longer young—those being the only virtues a village woman may have, as I know. My skills are nothing much, compared to Merlin’s art and science. Your master might well look down on me. But to play such a trick! To make me couple with his dog!”

Now Ewen understood the expression on her face. As quickly as possible, he explained he was a man. “Though I have spent most of my time as a dog in recent years. Still, I began my life in human form, and my birth was gentle.”

“Why did Merlin turn you into a dog?”

Ewen flushed with shame, sat up and told the story of his life before he met the wizard.

The witch listened, frowning. When he finished, she said,

“I’m glad that Merlin did not trick me into an act contrary to nature, which requires us to mate with our own kind. But it doesn’t sound as if you’re much of a man.”

He flushed again and nodded.

“Though you were young and had a bad upbringing. That much is evident. Have you learned to do better?”

“I don’t know.”

She glanced at the collar and held it out. "Put it on."

He obeyed, then looked up. The witch wore a smile that combined affection with malice. "It certainly is a fine piece of jewelry, fit for a prince or king; and now that I know you're a man, I like how it looks on you." She set the lamp down, came over, bent and kissed him, one hand resting on his shoulder. Her fingers touched the collar. He could feel her caressing the gold links.

He pulled her down, pushing up the shift, which was made of wool, coarse and prickly. They coupled a third time, with less vigor than the first time, but more passion than the second, then slept tangled together.

At dawn, he returned to Merlin's quarters. The wizard had spent the night with Aristotle and was still up, a lamp burning next to him.

Ewen told him about the witch's discovery, then added, "I will never know enough to be a man."

"What makes you say that?" asked Merlin.

"Why was she disgusted by the collar, then enticed by it?"

"That's a question she will have to answer, though every witch and magician knows that things have many qualities that can be called accidental—or, if these qualities are not entirely accidental, then they are capable of variation, depending on context and use. The same herb may be a medicine or a poison. A knife can be used for surgery or murder. A gold collar on a man does not have the same meaning as a gold collar on a dog.

"Also—" The wizard closed his book. "Actions performed in knowledge and through choice are not the same as actions performed in ignorance, without decision. No one likes to be tricked."

Ewen frowned, not understanding much of this. Merlin told him to go to bed. When he woke again, midway through the morning, he was a hound.

* * * *

The witch left, having promised Merlin that she would keep Ewen's secret. "If you ever decide to let him remain a man, send him to me. He needs teaching, and not by men. This father of his seems to have almost ruined

him, and I'm not certain about the education you have given him."

For a while after that, Guinevere took the witch's potion, and Arthur wore long robes, made by his wife and richly embroidered, so he looked (his knights said) as fine as a priest at mass.

But the potion made Guinevere languid and drowsy. She missed her energy. Kay the seneschal took Arthur aside and told him in full what the knights were saying.

"You can't keep the respect of rough fellows like these, if you dress like a priest or a lady. This isn't Constantinople or even Rome."

Arthur sighed and nodded.

"Just as well," Merlin said later to his white hound. "The queen was nodding off in the middle of banquets, and Arthur could not learn to manage his robes. He kept tripping over the hems."

Ewen listened, while chewing on his flank. Something itched in an infuriating fashion.

"Do you have fleas again?" Merlin asked, but didn't wait for an answer. "I've not told this to anyone, but the king is not fated to have a legitimate heir. I have seen this and also seen—" Merlin paused. "Harm will come to him from a child he fathers. I've been watching young Borre for years now. He seems a harmless lad. Maybe he'll turn malevolent as he ages, or maybe there is someone else I don't know about. My vision isn't as clear as it used to be. Time van-quishes everything."

Not you, thought Ewen.

* * * *

The beginning of the end was ordinary: one of Arthur's fellow kings came to Camelot on a visit, bringing in his train a maiden, slim and comely with black eyes and hair. Her face was pale, except for a faint blush in the cheeks, as if wild roses—the kind that bloom along every road in spring—bloomed there. Her name was Nimue.

In the old story, it says that Merlin became "sotted," a word that means "foolish, stupid, drunk, or wasted." A sot is a dolt, a blockhead or a soaker: harsh words to use on a man so old, wise, and learned.

What happened was this: Nimue was interested in magic. While the king she followed spent time with Arthur, she sought out Arthur's ancient wizard, drawn by his wisdom and learning. Even his age was attractive, or so she explained to Merlin. Wisdom is not found in the young. Nor is true learning, which requires not only memorization, but also pondering and the testing of learned truths by experience.

Merlin, in his turn, was attracted by her interest in magic, as well as by her beauty. Ewen disliked her at once, though she fawned on him, rubbing his red ears and his snow-white neck and shoulders, praising him to his master. What a fine dog! How handsome and famous! He wanted to bite her.

How could Merlin, the wisest man in England, fail to see the calculating look in Nimue's dark eyes and fail to hear the falsity in her honey-sweet voice?

Maybe falsity is too harsh a word. Beyond any question Nimue was interested in magic and respected Merlin as a magician. But she had no interest in him as a man, as Ewen could tell by her odor and her expression, when Merlin turned away from her.

Merlin, on the other hand, was in love, as he had not been for years. That a woman so young and fair and graceful should be drawn to him! She was intelligent, as well, and knew something of magic already, enough to ask him good questions. She listened to his answers intently, her dark eyes fixed on him.

Ewen, at Merlin's feet, felt the fur on his back prickle and his upper lip lift. A growl was forming in his throat. He pushed his head down between his paws, trying to keep his hatred hidden, telling himself to be patient. The visiting king would not stay forever. When he left, he'd take the woman, and Merlin would recover.

So it went, through late spring and early summer, until the king—Nimue's host and Arthur's guest—made ready to re-turn home. Merlin asked Nimue to stay in Camelot.

"The city is growing hot," she said in answer. "Soon it will be filled with flies and foul aromas. I will not remain in such a place. Nor should you, Lord Merlin. A man as venerable as you, a repository of so much knowledge, should guard himself against discomfort, which can lead to disease." She added that she had a villa in the country. "Which the ancient Romans built and my relatives restored to its former splendor and dignity. Come there

with me.”

That evening, at the end of yet another long feast and drinking bout in honor of Arthur’s guest. Merlin walked back to his rooms. Ewen was beside him. The dog was uneasy, nudging his master and nipping at the old man’s hand. When they were alone, Merlin changed him and said, “What is it?”

It had been months since Ewen had been a man. Something had happened. He no longer felt comfortable with nakedness. His human body seemed horribly bare. It was difficult to stand upright and face the wizard, who was frowning at him, obviously angry. Prescient as always, the old man knew he wasn’t going to like what Ewen had to say. The youth thought of dropping back down on all fours, so his belly and genitals would be protected. Instead, he pulled a robe from one of Merlin’s chests and put it on.

“Speak!” said the wizard.

Ewen tried, but he’d never been good at talking, and most of what he knew was canine, having to do with Nimue’s scent and the tone of her voice, the way she moved, how her hands felt when she petted him or tugged his ears. The woman was selfish and dishonest. As wise as Merlin was, he was being tricked.

The wizard listened. His eyes—usually a soft faded blue, like cloth washed many times and laid out in the sun to dry—darkened, becoming the hard blue-grey color of steel. Ewen faltered and finally stopped.

“Do you think I’ll listen to a dog about such matters? Or to a rapist? You have not learned much, have you, in all your years at Camelot? Not respect for women, nor courtesy, nor chivalry. My fault, I suppose. I should have kept you a man and sent you to the witch or to a monastery. What can a dog learn, except obedience and odors?”

Loyalty and love, Ewen thought. A dog can learn those as well. But he could not force his tongue to move and speak.

“I intend to go with Nimue,” the wizard said. “If you wish, you can stay here. Arthur will take good care of you, though he will treat you like a dog, as I never have. Or you can go to the witch in human form. That might be best.”

And leave the old man with Nimue, who stank of falsity? No. Ewen shook his head. “Take me with you.”

Merlin pondered, saying finally, "If I do, you will have to remain a dog. I want no more conversations like this one."

Ewen agreed.

The three of them set out several days later, the wizard and maiden on palfreys, Ewen running beside them in dog form. The weather was pleasant, once they left the closeness of Camelot, and their journey ordinary. Because he traveled with a woman, Merlin stopped in the houses of noblemen and the hostels maintained by religious orders. In most of these places, Ewen stayed in the stables. Every morning, it seemed to him, Merlin looked happier and younger, though the wizard did not smell of satisfied lust. Nor did Nimue smell like a bitch who'd been mounted. Her odor remained the same as always: a combination of eau de rose and something Ewen could not put into words: self-containment, aloofness, an ab-sence of sensuality so marked that it became a presence.

It was not lust that had transformed the wizard, but rather love and hope.

The villa, when they reached it, proved to be on an island in the middle of a lake and hidden by trees, so no one on the lake shore could tell the island was inhabited.

They left their horses and rowed across in a small boat. Ewen, at the prow, felt his fur go up. Something about this place was uncanny. Merlin, pulling the heavy oars, noticed nothing except his own strength—surprising in a man of his age—and a sense of happiness.

It was, in fact, a Roman villa, restored as if by magic, though a bit dusty at the moment. The floors were covered with mosaics and the walls with paintings: the deeds of Dame Venus, portrayed in the style of the ancients but with colors so fresh and bright that they could not be genuinely Roman. In one room, she rose from the ocean, as naked and lovely as a pearl. In another room, Prince Paris awarded her the golden apple. A third room showed her husband Vulcan ex-posing her adultery. The goddess lay with the war god Mars, the two of them imprisoned by a net, which Vulcan had made through magic and thrown over them, as they coupled. Mars grimaced, and rage was evident on Vulcan's face, but the lovely goddess remained tranquil, faintly smiling, as if none of this—her infidelity, her exposure, the trap that held her—mattered.

Nimue guided them through the villa, then out into the garden that

surrounded it. If she had servants, they were care-less. The garden had a half-wild look. Still, it was full of mid-summer flowers, roses especially. Sweet aromas filled the air.

Some of his old acuteness returned to Merlin. "This place is a wonder. Who are your relatives?"

Nimue smiled. "I have kin in fairyland."

She settled on a marble bench, and Merlin settled next to her, Ewen at his feet, panting a little in the midday heat. There, in the overgrown and aromatic garden, the maiden told her story. She was one of the fairy experiments, not an ordinary hybrid but the product of generations of interbreeding between fairies and the human children they stole. In the end, it had been decided that the experiment was a failure. Her line would not be continued.

"The fairies had no further use for me, and I did not wish to stay in their country. There is enough of them in me so I'm not especially affected by their enchantments. Pure humans are and rarely leave, if they have the chance to stay, though you have come and gone many times, as I have heard."

Merlin said, "Yes."

She picked a rose and turned it in her hands. "They would have let me stay. They recognize their obligation to me and the other hybrids. But I didn't want to be a poor relation, and I didn't want to grow old, while my cousins remained as fresh and blooming as this rose."

While she spoke, she tore at the rose, apparently without noticing what she was doing. When she glanced down finally, nothing remained in her hands except the stalk. Her lap was full of bright red petals. Nimue laughed and stood, brushing the petals off, then invited Merlin into the house.

They remained there for the rest of the summer, while Merlin taught Nimue about magic. She had little interest in the other things he knew: the logic of Aristotle, the philosophy of Plato, the medicine and mathematics he had learned as a young man, traveling in India and China. Now and then, she would permit the old man to speak of such things. Ewen listened, feeling more comfortable with human knowledge than with the spells that fascinated Nimue.

The house remained empty except for the three of them. Meals appeared out of the air. So did music, pipes and stringed instruments playing through the long summer evenings. The musicians were never visible, nor were the instruments they played.

Though the house was always a little dusty and slovenly, it never became dirty. It was being cleaned somehow, by someone, though never thoroughly. This was no surprise to Ewen. Merlin had told him years before that the stories humans told about the excellent work of spirits were untrue. "Some are quick, but also careless and slipshod. Others are so meticulous that they finish nothing. Their idea of what's important is not the same as ours. With the best will in the world—and they often lack good will—they can't do a job to our satisfaction."

The garden remained ragged, but never turned entirely wild. Sometimes, in the morning, they would find bouquets throughout the house, filling the rooms with sweet aromas. Merlin must be doing this, thought Ewen. The old man remained sotted. Now that they were alone, away from other people, his passion grew stronger and more obvious. He began to court Nimue as a lover would, praising her beauty, speaking of his own desire, creating illusions to amuse and entice her.

Some days, the mountains of China rose outside the villa, tall and strangely shaped. Mist floated among them. The sky above was pearly grey. Now and then, Ewen saw a flash of green or blue. At first, he thought these were breaks in the clouds through which he could see the sunlit upper heavens. No, as Merlin explained to Nimue. The flashes of color were Chinese dragons. Unlike the local English dragons, who were compounded largely of earth and fire and liked living underground and causing trouble, the oriental dragons were creatures of air and water, who lived in the clouds as well as in lakes, rivers, and the Great Eastern Ocean. As a rule, they were beneficent, though powerful and very proud.

On other days, Ewen went out and found the meadows of fairyland. Animals grazed there such as he had never seen before: huge quadrupeds, their faces and necks covered with helmets made of bone and skin. Three horns—as straight and sharp as lances—protruded from each armored face.

He ran out among the animals, barking from pleasure. They, being illusions, ignored him. Still, it was pleasant to trot past gigantic leathery haunches and catch the gleam of a tiny eye, the pupil a vertical black line across an orange iris, or to sit and watch some massive cow or bull—he could not distinguish the sexes—shear grass with a great curving

fal-con-like beak.

Nimue was interested in the dragons, since they were magical. The quadrupeds were not, and she had seen them often before. "Make them vanish," she said to Merlin. The old man did.

She remained cool and aloof, interested in the wizard's skill, but not his body. Would anybody have interested her? A handsome young knight? A fairy lord? The dog could not tell. She always smelled of distance and self-control.

Merlin's passion continued to grow, and his courtesy decreased. He began to stand close to Nimue and touch her as if by accident, his old withered hand brushing her arm or the fabric over her thigh. He spoke of his love, usually indirectly—hinting, making allusions, frowning, and heaving sighs.

She was growing angry. Ewen could see this and smell it.

But she would not send the old man away. She was too curious, too anxious to have Merlin's power and knowledge.

So the summer ended: in dry heat and a conflict of wills. Now, instead of flowers, Ewen smelled dying vegetation, the old man's frustrated lust, the woman's anger and dislike, which she hid from Merlin, but could not hide from Ewen. A bad situation! Beyond any question the woman was dangerous. He needed to speak with Merlin, to issue a warning. But how could he? The old wizard had to change him. Ewen nosed and licked Merlin's hand, whined softly, stared beseechingly.

"No," the wizard said. "I told you, no further conversation. You came here as a dog. A dog you will remain."

He had reached the limit of his endurance. He could no longer bear the sight of Merlin fawning over the woman, all his dignity and wisdom forgotten, sharing his magical knowledge with Nimue, giving her with open hands the power that made him the greatest wizard alive. In the end, Ewen knew, she would turn on his master.

Very well. If he could not speak as a man, he would act as a dog.

One morning he came upon Nimue in the garden. The day was already hot. She stood by a rose bush, as languid and drooping as the plant's last blowzy flowers, which she gathered, bending slightly, her long

white neck exposed. The two of them were alone; and as far as he could tell, the woman did not realize that he was in the garden. He attacked, going straight for her throat.

The moment he began to move, she whirled, flinging her basket of flowers aside and raising an arm. His teeth closed on tender flesh, but it was not the flesh of her throat. Nimue screamed.

A moment later Merlin was with them.

The old man said nothing. Nor did he lift a hand. But Ewen felt as if he'd been struck by a giant. He let go of Nimue, falling to the ground and cowering in the dust of the garden path. The other two ignored him. The woman stood absolutely straight, holding her arm, from which blood gushed. Her lips were pressed together. No sound emerged.

The wizard touched her gently. The flow of blood stopped; the wound closed; and there was no evidence of Ewen's crime, save the bright splotches of blood on Nimue's white gown.

"Is the dog mad?"

Merlin glanced at Ewen. "He has no disease, if that's what you are asking."

"Kill him," Nimue said.

For a moment, Ewen thought the wizard would do it. Then Merlin shook his head. "I've had the brute for a long time. I won't kill him, even now. But I will tie him up."

He snapped his fingers. Ewen rose and followed him to the back of the garden. An old stone hut stood there, a storage place for garden tools and pots. Merlin led him inside. Ewen stood shaking in darkness while the wizard rummaged and found an iron collar fastened to an iron chain.

His gold collar came off; the iron collar was fastened in its place.

"When I have time, when I'm not otherwise occupied, I will decide what to do with you," Merlin said. He left the hut, closing and locking the door. Ewen began to whine. The wizard rapped on the door. Ewen found that he could make no noise.

At first, he lunged at the end of the chain, trying to break it and reach

the door. At the same time, he tried to bark and howl. Neither effort produced any result, except his throat became sore, and the iron collar rubbed his neck until it was raw.

Finally, he gave up and sat. What had happened? Had he really been trying to kill Nimue? He reflected on the question, while licking his chest and paws. Some of Nimue's blood had spurted onto him. It tasted of salt and magic. Yes. Murder had been the plan, though not a deeply considered plan, but rather the impulse of a moment. Still, he had failed another test of chivalry. After years at Camelot and in Merlin's care, he'd ended as he began: a bad dog imprisoned in a hut, waiting for who knew what kind of punishment.

Ewen lay down in the dark, staring at the hut's locked door. A whimper formed in his throat like a tic that wouldn't go away. He couldn't release it, though he opened his mouth and yawned and shook his head, trying to break the noise free.

Late in the afternoon, two dishes appeared in the hut: one of water, the other of meat. Ewen ate and drank, then went to sleep.

He remained in the hut all autumn. Every day food and drink appeared, and his waste products vanished. The hut never became filthy, though it always smelled of dirt and dog. The sores on his neck became scabby and itched. Bugs came into the hut and bit him. These wounds itched as well. No one visited except the bugs and, now and then, a field mouse. The mice were timid and quick. He never managed to catch one.

In the high corners of the hut were spiders. They spun webs, catching a few of the bugs that tormented Ewen, like angels helping the damned just a little. Enough light shone in through cracks in the door so he could see his benefactors: little round bodies glowing in the sunlight, with as many legs as angels had wings.

The punishment was just, Ewen concluded. He had failed as a man and a dog.

And what was going on with Merlin? How could such a man succumb to lust and folly? The old man had, though Ewen was reluctant to admit this. Still, the dog thought, nosing at the problem, if he knew nothing else—not honor, not chivalry, not courtesy—he could recognize the urge to mount a bitch.

If Merlin had wandered from the *via media* and lost himself in

wilderness, what hope was left for lesser men? Who could live wisely, if the wise could not? The problem was an itch, almost as painful as his bites and sores. He worried it when-ever he was unoccupied by bugs, mice, or spiders. No answer came to him.

One day the door opened. Nimue stood before him, rimmed with sunlight. She gestured, and he felt himself change, be-coming a man. The iron collar remained around his neck.

Nimue looked him over. "I wondered what lay under your enchantment. You're certainly handsome enough. Why couldn't Merlin be satisfied with you?"

He tried to speak and couldn't. She gestured a second time.

"He wasn't a man who fell in love with men," said Ewen. "What's happened to him?"

"Of course he was a lover of men. Did you know nothing about him? And of women also, of course. He would not leave me alone, though I tried every way I could to hint him off."

Ewen went up on one knee. It seemed more decent than standing, naked as he was, and less humiliating than remain-ing on all fours. He leaned cautiously against the chain. It held. The collar cut into his neck. "Where is he?" His voice sounded rough.

"Under a stone. A big one, which ought to serve to hold him down, though he lifted it with a gesture. There was a treasure under the stone, which he wanted to show me. He was always trying to show me wonders, as if they could win me. As a teacher, yes. I wanted nothing more than to be his student. But his leman? No.

"He went into the pit beneath the stone, the stone hanging above him, held in midair by magic; and he opened the chests and jars that held the treasure, pulling out—oh, necklaces and bracelets made of gold, silver goblets with satyrs dancing on them, bowls engraved with nymphs and goddesses, and glass that had been transmuted by time, so it shone as many-colored as an opal. All the while he smiled at me from a face made of wrinkles.

"I knew the charm he used to raise the boulder and used it to bring the boulder down."

“He’s dead then,” said Ewen, his heart full of sorrow.

Nimue shook her head. “It’s not easy to kill a man so powerful. He is trapped beneath the stone and tangled in the spells he set to guard the place. But most likely he’s still alive and will remain so.”

“This was a bad action,” Ewen said. “Unkind, discour-teous, ungrateful, and lacking in respect. He was your teacher, an old man and very wise.”

“Don’t talk to me of courtesy and kindness. He made you a dog and chained you in this hut; he was after me day and night to have sex with him. Was this courteous? Or kind? Did he respect my maidenhood or your manhood? Who knows what he might have done next—a man of such great power, no longer held in rein by reason?”

Ewen frowned, trying to puzzle out right and wrong. “I’m here as punishment, for trying to harm you and for other crimes.”

“Is that so? I could ask what you’ve done. But it’s not my concern. Nor does it interest me.” Nimue turned as if to go.

“I’ll die here, if you leave me chained.”

She turned back. “Then you have an argument with Mer-lin. You don’t believe you deserve what’s happened to you.”

“I’d prefer not to die, especially here and now. As to my deserts, I can’t answer you. I don’t think Merlin would have killed me or let me die.”

She tilted her head, considering. He waited, still on one knee. Finally she snapped her fingers. The iron collar opened and fell away.

Ewen leaped to his feet, lunging at Nimue. He moved less quickly and gracefully than he had before his imprisonment. None the less he reached her.

As soon as he laid hands on her, she turned into a dragon of the western variety, as black as iron, rather than blue or green. Magic is mostly illusion, Ewen told himself and held on tightly. The dragon twisted its long serpentine neck, opened a mouth full of teeth like daggers and spat a gout of fire into his face.

He screamed with pain, but his grip did not loosen, though his face

felt as if a mask of red hot metal had been fastened over it, which burned through skin and flesh to the bones of his skull.

The pain should have killed him or at least made him let go. It didn't. *Ergo*, it was illusion.

As soon as he decided this, the dragon became a fish as long as he was tall. It thrashed in his arms: cold, slimy and powerful. Better than a dragon, Ewen thought, though difficult to hold. He tightened his grip further. His face still hurt.

The fish became an eagle, which he gripped around the lower body. The creature beat him with broad strong wings.

As the feathers brushed his face, he felt pieces of flesh fall away.

The bird lasted only briefly, turning into a spotted cat that screamed (a sound like the scream of an eagle) and bit Ewen in the neck. Blood, his own blood, ran into Ewen's lungs. He was drowning.

The cat became a troll with green skin and foul stinking breath. Ewen's arms were locked around the creature's torso. Its arms were free and beat his head and shoulders like a pair of hammers, wielded by two strong smiths. His face was almost gone by now, and blood filled his lungs, so he was no longer able to breathe. What an illusion! His old master was without equal, and Nimue had obviously been an exceptional student.

The troll became a slim young man, who stood quietly in Ewen's arms. The lad had all of Nimue's beauty, transformed so it (and he) was clearly masculine.

"Well," said the youth. "You are certainly brave, or else extremely stupid. I can't tell which. Why are you holding me?"

"I won't let you go till you promise to free Merlin," Ewen said. He looked down at the lad and thought, why should I trust him? This is still Nimue. "I won't let you go till Merlin is free."

The youth shook his head. "You're no danger to me. But if the old man were free and had the use of his powers, there's no place on Earth where I'd be safe."

"Then you are trapped, as he is trapped," said Ewen.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said the youth and clicked his tongue.

Ewen’s arms fell to his sides, heavy and powerless. His entire body seemed made of stone.

The youth stepped back, and Ewen could see him clearly for the first time. Dark curls fell around his shoulders. His straight young torso was garbed in fine mail; a sword with a jeweled hilt hung at his side; and his tall boots were made of a leather so thin and soft it must have come from fairyland or Constantinople. Ewen had never seen a knight or squire more comely or better dressed.

“Can you swim?” Nimue asked.

“Not well.”

“I’ll send the boat back for you. By the time this spell wears off, I’ll be long gone. Don’t bother to look for me or Merlin. You won’t find either of us. If you get hungry, there are plants in the back of the garden. My kin brought them from a land in the distant west. Their fruit will give you both food and drink. Farewell.” The lad turned and walked off, stepping lightly and whistling with right good cheer. Long after he’d vanished from sight, Ewen heard the whistle, still clear but growing gradually fainter, as if Nimue were departing into an unimaginably distant place. A trick of magic, Ewen thought, or a rare natural phenomenon. Still it was disturbing to hear the high clear music recede farther and farther.

Late in the afternoon, he found himself able to move. He stretched cautiously, then felt his face. It seemed as always. There was no charred flesh, no burning mask. His throat was not torn open, though it certainly felt sore.

So much to the good. He went to the villa. The rooms were empty of furniture. Carpets of dust covered the mosaic floors. The frescoes looked old and faded, as if years had passed instead of weeks. He searched every corner, though without much hope. There was only dust and cobwebs. His gold collar was gone. So were the clothes that Nimue and Merlin had brought.

In the end, he realized that he was going to find nothing; and he was filthy and hungry. He went to the shore of the island. The boat was there, waiting for him, oars shipped. He waded in next to it and washed.

After he was done, he looked at his reflection. What his hands had

told him was confirmed by vision. His face was the same as always. The damage done by Nimue had been illusory. Though he'd never been vain about his human body, Ewen felt relief.

He pulled the boat farther up on shore and returned to the garden. The plants described by Nimue were there: knee-high, bushy, laden with round red fruit that was obviously too heavy for the branches. Narrow stakes had been driven into the ground, and the branches fastened to them. In spite of this support, the plants drooped, so heavy was the load they bore. He picked a fruit. Sun-warmed, almost certainly ripe, it lay comfortably in his palm. Now that he looked closely, he could see it was not perfectly round, but rather flattened at top and bottom. Grooves ran down it, dividing the flesh—soft under the thin skin—into lobes. Of what did the fruit remind him? An undersized melon? A new kind of apple?

In truth, the fruit resembled nothing he had seen before.

Was it poisonous?

Nimue could have killed him easily, or left him chained in the hut to starve. She meant him no harm, apparently, though he had tried to kill her.

Ewen took a bite. The fruit was juicy with a flavor that combined sweetness and sharpness. Both food and drink, Ni-mue had said. He remembered her words as liquid ran down his chin. The fruit had seeds, too many to pick out, so he ate them, then licked his palm to get the last of the sweet, acidic juice.

He was a man again, with no clothing, no weapons, no money, no master, no home. Merlin was under a stone, which stone he did not know; and he lacked the skill to free his master. Nimue had vanished. He doubted that he'd be able to find her. In addition—he counted over his problems, while his throat grew tight with grief—winter was not far off. The fairy fruit might survive cold and snow. He would not. If he stayed on the island, he'd freeze and maybe starve.

He sat a while longer in the dust, October sunlight pouring over him, the warm air full of the scent of the fairy bushes, weeping for Merlin and himself. For the most part, his weeping was silent. Now and then he groaned. It was a harsh, human sound.

At last he ate another fruit, taking pleasure in the combination of sweetness and acidity, also in the way the liquid felt running down his raw throat. A thought had come to him, and he returned to the hut where he'd

been a prisoner.

The two dishes that had provided food for him were empty. That magic had ended, as he might have expected. But the spirits who had taken everything from the house had not been told to clean here, or else they had forgotten, as minor spirits often did. The iron collar and chain still lay on the dirt floor, and the corners were full of piled up pots and tools. He even found a gardening smock, folded in an ancient battered basket.

He need not go into the world entirely empty-handed. The basket would serve to carry some of the fairy fruit. The smock might hold together, though the fabric was old and badly worn. If he took the tools, the scythe especially, he'd have a way to defend himself and to earn his keep. Adam, who was the father of all humans, had kept a garden; and many hermits and pious monks still did, some of them men of noble birth. According to Merlin, there had been kings in ancient times who took pleasure in such things; and monarchs in Asia still vied with one another to build and maintain gardens. Such an activity could not dishonor him. Surely it wasn't any worse than coursing game or catching rats in Arthur's stables, as he had done now and then, mostly for his own amusement, though also to help the stable boys.

Thinking this, he carried his discoveries out of the hut.

He'd find the witch. She knew more of magic and human behavior than he did. Maybe she'd be able to explain what had happened on the island. It must have a meaning, this test that he had failed and Merlin also, apparently. Maybe she would know a way to rescue Merlin. If not—he would not think so far ahead. The important thing was to go forward, remembering what his old master had taught him.