

# Bad Heir Day

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*For, lo! Whosoever pulleth this swordeth out  
of the stoneth, shall, all things being equal,  
probably be King of Britain, more or less, if  
everything works out okay.*

*From the Prophecies of Geoffrey  
the Equivocal, Sixth Rev. Ed.*

It's not my fault how things turned out. My brother (he's not really my brother, but that's another story that the bards don't like to sing) says it's only what anyone could expect, but Mo has a much lower opinion of people than I do. Probably that comes from having studied magic in his misspent youth, although if you ask me, growing up on a farm with three older brothers like Ingrate, Aggravating, and Garish would be enough to sour anyone's disposition. By the time I was old enough to get to know them, I was glad, believe me, that Mother'd had the foresight to dress me as a boy. Not that this alone would have been enough to save me, but I could run fast, too. Faster than the sheep, anyway.

But you'll be wanting to hear about the prophecy, and my parents, and things like that. I would like to stress that I neither planned nor expected how things turned out. Maybe Mo did. You could always count on Mo for things like that. Complicated plots and really spectacular revenges, that's my brother.

Well, step-brother, anyway. And it isn't as much his fault as it was the old king's. Rules are rules and prophecies are prophecies, and people should understand that what they say is what they mean, no matter what they intended to say instead. But the person whose fault it *really* was, was Ambrius' merlin. You'd think people wouldn't go around annoying wizards, wouldn't you? But kings are all the same, Mo says. He keeps wanting to tell me this long story about somebody named Saul who was king a long way east of here, and I tell him, "Mo, what is your *point*? Does this guy have a sword?" And Mo tells me that no, but there's a harp mixed up in it somewhere, which is not much of an inducement as I've never been really musical. The *zakpjip* sounds like a pig caught in a gate, if you ask me, and Orkney's too damp for harps. The bards are always complaining.

Anyway, I suppose you want to know about King Ambrius. The main thing to know is, he was one of these guys who put everything off until way beyond the last minute, and so the bottom line is, he's eighty, he's dying, and he hasn't got an heir. What he does have is a War Duke named Uther, and guess who's the insiders' pick for the next king? (This is the point at which Mo always wants to tell me about some people named David and Adonijah and Solomon and Abishag. I ask him, doesn't he know any stories about people with *normal* names?)

Anyway, what Uther didn't know when he hustled Ambrius off that mortal coil was that the king had gotten an heir on a girl named Nimhue, a serving girl of the blood of the Old Line who had been brought

to Ambrius' bed to give him heat. You can get away with a lot if you're king, as I intend to prove. I came into the world while Uther, now High King of Lochrin, was still piling stones on Ambrius' tomb in blessed ignorance of my mother's interesting condition.

I was smuggled from the palace on the night of my birth by the king's merlin, who was a lot fonder of my mother than he was of Uther, especially considering Uther had gone secretly to the Druids to be named Pendragon and King, and so much for the King's Royal Companions, a.k.a. the hostages Ambrius had exacted from all the noble families of the realm with the promise that, failing further developments, one of them would be King.

It sounds complicated, but it's not. A few murders, some betrayals, a clandestine alliance or two . . . of course, by the time Uther was hitting his stride in the backstabbing department, Nimhue was long gone. Uther had done a major pre reign housecleaning and parceled out the old king's women to whoever would take them. Mom got Lot, Orkney, and four stepsons. Uther got the throne. The merlin got the gate, because Uther didn't want him around when he was breaking his latest set of campaign promises. He'd promised the Druids that he'd drive out the followers of the Chrestos who'd come in on a "One God—One Vote" platform and were annoying everybody. What the Druids had failed to note was that the Chrestians were like *that* with the Roman legions, and Uther thought that a Roman legion might be more good to him later on than a few sprigs of mistletoe and some sacred snakes, but by the time the Druids had worked that out for themselves Uther was already on the throne *and* anointed with the Dragon's Blood, and they were pretty much stuck with him.

Nobody in Orkney paid much attention to this at the time. If it didn't come in a dragon ship waving torches, no one up north really cared. Still it was always amusing to hear what fools the *sassenach* were making of themselves, so when the merlin came to visit (usually arriving just before the first hard snow of the season, necessitating his staying the winter; the man had a marvelous sense of timing, ask anyone) and tell us what was going on down in Lochrin, we listened. Ingrate, Aggravating, and Garish (Lot's three eldest, in order of annoyance) never were sure he wasn't going to turn them into toads (a vast improvement, it would be, but not really a *stretch*, in my opinion) so they were marginally better behaved while he was here. Mo and I were the youngest, so we got most of his attention.

I think he would have liked to take Mo as his successor, but Lot was real down on the whole castration thing (Mo wasn't too big on it either, truth to say), so most of what the merlin knew would die with him.

At least, I thought so at the time. Now I'm not so sure. Being King changes your perspective.

Meanwhile, by the tenth year of Uther Versus Practically Everybody (the Tribute Kings of the Royal Kindred being really sore losers who could carry a wicked grudge), Uther was pretty desperate for some Peace In Our Time. The Druids weren't talking to him, the Legions were staying put in Armorica, and the Chrestians were proving to be a pretty weak reed—the White Priest might talk a good fight, but he couldn't bring Uther alliances and he couldn't bring him luck.

So when Ambrius' merlin floated a rumor that he had one last great magic to perform for the right person and the right price, Uther jumped at it like a gaffed trout. What the merlin did then did not bring Uther luck either, though it took Uther some time to figure that out. He was too dazzled by this fairy tale about a magic sword known only to the merlins' college, which lay in a cave in the hills to the west and upon which Ambrius had sworn his vows of kingship.

And which, the merlin let it be known, he was willing to give Uther as a free gift, owing to how he was the last of his line and all. Uther, never a subtle man, believed him.

And so the merlin went off with the White Priest, a cohort of soldiers, and two teams of double-yoked oxen to fetch Guenhwyfar the Shining, the merlin's magic sword. They found her right where he said she'd be, only there was a slight catch: Guenhwyfar was sunk to the hilt in two sword-stones.

One was an iron anvil such as swords had been forged on since my grandfather's day, and the one below that was a heavenstone such as the old bronze swords were poured out on. And written upon them both in large friendly letters was the merlin's final judgment upon Uther: that anyone who might draw the sword forth from the stone and anvil was the true and rightful overlord of the land, accept no substitutes.

Anyone, mark you.

Well, you probably know the rest of the story as well as I: that everyone—starting with Uther—tried to pull the sword out and nobody could, which was way too bad because Uther, like Ambrius before him, did not have an heir. Uther had gone through six Queens in all (divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, left with no forwarding address), with the interval between the weddings (and the beddings and beheadings) getting shorter as Uther lost patience, until there was absolutely nobody in all Lochrin willing to date the man, let alone marry him.

This was the main reason that Uther didn't simply sink the whole mess (sword, stone, anvil, inconvenient prophecy) in the River Tame and let the fish try to draw the sword. While the merlin's travelling wondershow was sitting in front of Caer Londinium, Uther could at least pretend he was taking the whole succession thing seriously. (Mo says Uther thought he'd live forever. I tell Mo I'm not as stupid as he'd like to think I am. I think Uther thought that the last time a king had named an heir, look what happened to that king. Better to keep them guessing.)

This was mainly the period during which Uther turned the place upside down looking for the merlin, who had made himself a very scarce fellow indeed, as who could blame him? Looking for him, though, ruined Uther's health, and after twenty-one adventure-fraught years of reign, Uther was dying, and *still* no heir in sight. People were talking, even up in Orkney.

Naturally there was a fair held in the City of Legions down South. A sort of a hiring fair, because with the sword stuck firmly in the stone, and Uther having done such a good job of weeding out importunate claimants in his salad days, any man's claim to the throne was by now as good as any other's (though, *entre nous*, the Duke of Cornwall's was better than most, plus he had an inexhaustible supply of Eirish mercenaries who'd work for cheap *usquebaugh* and some hot dance tunes). Claims needed armies to back them, and my step-father had an army for sale. Having learned from Uther's example, he didn't leave anybody behind in Orkney who might have the least interest in the throne. We all went, even Mother.

And certainly Mo, since Mo was easily bored and dangerous therewith and nobody knew it better than his father, especially after the affair of the sheep, the Archbishop, and the traveling portrait painter. If Lot went to war, I knew that the Three Stooges were going to draw lots to see who got Mo as squire, since, face it, would *you* want *him* to be the last person who'd handled your armor?

But I digress.

While Uther or his spies would probably recognize Mother, he didn't even know I existed. So Mo and I had the run of the town, while Mother stayed put inside the tent and Lot went around trying to drum up business. Naturally, the first thing Mo and I wanted to see was the merlin's sword—me, because it was probably the last piece of magic anyone would ever see, Mo, because the last piece of magic anyone would probably ever see could probably be used to cause trouble.

It's much better to stay on his good side, really. But he was my best (and only) friend and I'd always liked him. Besides, he has a strong appreciation of how long I can carry a grudge.

Anyway, we got to the courtyard in front of the White Tower, which was the king's residence, and there Guenhwyfar was, surrounded by bored guards and gold-painted iron chains.

"Do you think it's true?" I asked Mo, after I'd puzzled out the inscription on the stone and the anvil. The merlin had taught me to read, but it wasn't like there were any books in Orkney to practice on and I was a little rusty.

"You mean, do I think somebody can pull the sword out of the stone and live past the point Uther's chief steward Gaius slips something into their wine? No," he said comprehensively.

"But it says that whoever draws the sword gets to be king."

"Don't believe everything you read," Mo advised me kindly.

"It isn't fair," I said, kicking at a stone. Mo rolled his eyes, then grew thoughtful. "No," he said reflectively, "it isn't, is it?"

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Lot's first mistake was bringing Mo, and his second was in giving Mo enough free time to reflect on how much he'd hate going to war as squire to one of his brothers. This meant that by Friday everybody in Caer Londinium had heard a shocking new rumor that Uther was going to give everyone one last chance to draw Guenhwyfar the Shining out of the stone—*everyone*, not just knights and nobles and well-connected types like that. It was either the exciting new rumor (three guesses on the source) or the sight of his vassals preparing to carve him like a roast out of sheer boredom and uncertainty; either way, Uther geeked and set a date.

By the next Holy Day of the Chrestos a tent city stretched along both sides of the River Tame for half a league and the line to try Guenhwyfar was nearly as long. Uther made an impressive speech for a man who had to be carried out in a litter and swore that he would abide by Guenhwyfar's choice . . . and that any man who wouldn't do the same had better ride for the border, because his lands were forfeit.

It was exciting policy decisions like that which got Uther where he was today: no matter which way the cat jumped, all the kings were sworn to peace and mutual assistance. Mo said that Tyndareus had made all the Greek Kings swear a similar oath about somebody named Helen. My opinion is nobody would go to war over a girl. I don't know where he gets this stuff.

The princes had finished up by noon, and second sons and landless men were trying now, equally without success. Uther had gone back to the White Tower, but there were enough bored guardsmen and White Priests around to make sure he was informed of anything interesting.

"You try it," Mo said to me.

"Yeah, right," I answered. Mo's brothers were in the queue waiting for their turns, and if Guenhwyfar could be wooed by brute force and stupidity, we'd have a new king by tea-time.

"Let me list the reasons," Mo said, and proceeded to tell me a bunch of things I didn't know he knew, ending up with: "and since the inscription says '*whomsoever*,' and Uther says he'll abide by her choice, you've got it taped."

Assuming I could pull the thing at all, but Mo never let minor obstacles like that stand in his way.

"And what's in it for you?" I asked suspiciously, because Mo did not generally exert himself for nothing.

"To be your chancellor," he said promptly. "And not Gawain's squire."

I guessed they'd already drawn the lots. So to speak.

"If I can be King," I said, "you can certainly be Chancellor, Modrat."

We had to wait until Ingrate, Aggravating, and Garish were out of the way, drowning their sorrows in the nearest ale-butt, but by the time they were well gone the only people who approached Guenhwyfar did so for sport, and it was easy enough to usurp their place. While the sun still stood a good handsbreadth above the horizon, I stood on the platform and clasped Guenhwyfar.

I knew at once that the merlin had left her for me and that Mo'd probably had inside information. One might suggest that if the merlin had wanted me to have Guenhwyfar, it would have been better just to bring her to Orkney, but that wasn't how his mind worked. And besides, his way had led Uther into a most inconvenient pledge (never piss off a wizard, remember?), and as I have said, rules are rules and prophecies are prophecies, and Uther had been very explicit: who pulled the sword would be king, and king hereafter.

So I did.

Wouldn't you know that one of my step-brothers would pick *then* to be thrown out of the tavern? Ingrate—or, to name him properly, Gawain—staggered to his feet, took one look at me, and bawled out for all the world to hear:

"That's my sister Vivane! She can't be King!"

So I'm a girl. Sue me. I was amazed he knew, actually. Most people don't look past the hair and the clothes.

I'd been hoping to put the moment off a little longer—but Gawain has a voice that can stun a sheep at

sixty paces (which explains much about his love life), and soon enough Agravaine and Gaheris had joined him, telling anyone who would listen that *their sister* had just pulled Guenhwyfar from the stone and what was somebody going to do about it, eh?

I found out then that cold steel is a better argument than all the words in the world, because I managed to defend my position beside the anvil until Uther could be summoned back from the tower. By then three of my brothers (guess which) were sitting at the foot of the platform bleeding and howling, and an enormous crowd had gathered to stare at me as if I were the two-headed pig at St. Audrey's Fair.

Uther's litter was ringed with torches. He stared at me, and at the sword, and did not say anything for quite some time.

"Well," he finally said. "Well, well, well, well, well."

("That's a deep subject," Modrat muttered. I elbowed him in the ribs.)

"What am I to do with you?" Uther said.

The crowd—and my foster brothers—had a number of suggestions, none of which I thought it would do me any good to hear.

"This woman Vivane is the daughter of Nimhue, last wife of King Ambrius, and your heir," Modrat bellowed loud enough to be heard in Oxford. "And by your law and your oath, she who has drawn Guenhwyfar from the stone and the anvil must rule Lochrin when you are gone."

Mo was speaking for the broadsheets, needless to say. He never talked like that at home.

Uther smiled as if his face would crack, because Modrat was right, and if he went back on his word now he'd be cold potroast by morning and Cornwall would be on the throne.

So the king beckoned us down to him and the crowd cheered and we all set off for the White Tower—a place a good deal safer to be than *Chez Orkney* this particular evening, by my reckoning. Modrat walked beside the king, the torches glinting off his fox-red hair, and I carried Guenhwyfar upraised for everyone to see.

"I'll have to be sure to find her a good husband," I heard Uther muttered as he was carried off.

"Did I happen to mention," Modrat asked him, "the ancient Druidic prophecy that states the wielder of Guenhwyfar cannot marry anyone except a man who has defeated her fairly in battle . . . ?"

Yeah, right, and the ancient prophecy was dated about fifteen minutes ago. I didn't think Uther would go for it, but tomorrow is another day, as the bards say. I had the sword. I'd be king. Simple.

Besides, possession is nine points of the law, and now that I had Guenhwyfar what were they going to do, write me out of history?