

Avalon
The Return of King Arthur
By Stephen R. Lawhead

Chapter One

Even as a child, James could remember feeling that some mysterious power held his fate in strong, infallible hands. Perhaps a youth spent in the Highlands—where ghosts and Fair Folk still haunt the hidden glens, and the quaint predictions of country sages and seers find enthusiastic reception among the locals—had shaped him more than he imagined. Superstition clings to the ancient hills like the gorse and heather, and it would be unusual indeed if an impressionable youngster did not imbibe something of his surroundings.

He did not ask for second sight; he never sought it, but simply accepted it as a feature of his unique being. In time, he learned that not everyone possessed the power of the *fiosachd*—Gaelic for "the knowing." It covers a range of subtle manifestations—some physical, some mental which most people view as extraordinary. As a child, however, James did not think himself unusual; he merely considered his gift a sign intended to confirm his special existence. Children are self-absorbed creatures, true enough, yet many was the time he had dreamed of greatness. Many was the time he had awakened in the night to the knowledge that his soul was destined for a higher purpose.

Of course, every child entertains similar thoughts of grandeur. Growing up, however, dulls the secret insistence; life's harsher lessons teach us we are not so special after all. Sooner or later, we arrive at the cold realization that we will never be the first astronaut to set foot on Mars; we will not be the doctor whose miracle cure rids the world of cancer; we will not win fame and fortune and the eternal adoration of the masses through the wondrous artistry of our writing, singing, or acting.

Despite this—despite all evidence to the contrary James never outgrew his belief that something amazing would happen to him one day. Although he did come to understand the natural limitations of circumstance, and the extreme randomness of opportunity, deep in his inmost being the belief in his own particular destiny doggedly persisted. Like the *fiosachd*, he was born with it, and it never deserted him. He had always known his life would end in one of two ways: triumph or tragedy. One or the other, but nothing less.

This produced a curious bravado. Once, when as a freshly commissioned officer with the UN peacekeeping force in Afghanistan, Captain Stuart was leading his small company of

men down one of the many shattered streets of Kabul, the fiosachd began jangling like crazy. He recognized this as its usual manifestation—a sharp tingling or squirming sensation on the back of his neck or down between his shoulder blades—and by it he knew, as the company approached a deserted intersection, that they would be ambushed by snipers. The flesh between his shoulder blades began twitching, and in his mind's eye he saw, as if in the very room with them, six black-turbaned rebels crouching at the windows of a bombed-out apartment block across the street.

He halted the company, chose two men to help him reconnoiter, and the three of them circled around and came into the building from the back. They climbed three floors up a mangled fire escape and crept down a blackened hallway to the room where James knew he would find the rebels. Without the slightest hesitation, he put his hand to the doorknob, pushed open the door, and strode into the room, demanding their surrender.

The six snipers were so surprised, they threw down their rifles and gave themselves up without protest. James' men were likewise amazed; afterwards they made out that he was the fearless hero—a latter-day John Wayne beating back a war party of bloodthirsty Apaches with bare hands and a rifle butt. He won a commendation for saving the lives of a dozen men that day and capturing a valuable rebel cell without firing a shot.

He was also given a citation for valor—a fine gesture but one James felt superfluous. Although, as a career officer, he recognized the tremendous risk—of all the possible outcomes of such an action, the one actually resulting was the least likely—he knew in his bones it was not courage that had sustained him but simple conviction: he knew what lay behind the door and, just as surely, he knew his life would not end in that room.

Even James—who understood better than anyone else the peculiarities of his special gift—accepted the extreme improbability of his childhood intimations of greatness ever coming to fruition. After all, it is one thing to pretend oneself a prince or a pirate; but who, in all sanity, could imagine—much less orchestrate—the extraordinary interplay of incident and accident, chance and serendipity, as well as the immense complexity of enterprise needed to make such a pretense possible in reality?

That this dream should become solid waking reality seemed no less incredible to James than it would have to anyone else. Although he experienced it daily, he did not pretend to fathom it. If pressed for an explanation, he would only shake his head and say that there were forces in this universe which even the most gifted among us apprehend but dimly ... and the rest of us not at all.

Privately, however, deep in his secret heart, he thought that if there was a higher power at work in the world, shaping men to its purpose, then might we not apprehend it in action from time to time? And if so, might not that action look suspiciously like destiny?

Like everyone else in Britain, James learned of the King's death from television. It was a cold Thursday night in November, and he was at the Pipe & Drum with Calum and Douglas, watching Hearts in action against Celtic on big screen TV Aberdeen was down by one and mounting an attack in the closing seconds of the first half when the picture blanked and a Stand By sign flashed on.