



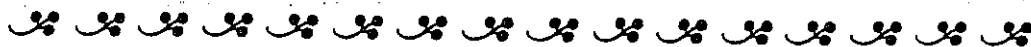
## ❧ GAWAIN ❧

**I**n the months that followed the exile of Lancelot, the armies of the High King gathered. From Caerleon, from Camelot, from Bedegraine, from Camelerd, from Lyonesse and Tintagel, the vassals of Arthur and his men came, obeying, as they must, the summons of their overlords. Led by marshals bearing the banners of those overlords, long lines of cavalry snaked across the countryside of Britain. Knights, each preceded by the squire who bore his armor, made up the van. They were followed by lesser horsemen, by companies of bowmen, by trains of pack mules carrying supplies. They converged at Cardiff on the Welsh shore and erected bright tents near the High King's castle. Close by, a hundred ships floated at anchor. The King himself rode among the companies, the golden crowns of his standard snapping in the sharp wind that blew off the water. But Arthur moved silently, cloaked in solitude in the midst of the crowd, his face drawn, his eyes hooded. The orders came from the two men who rode at his side, under the double eagle of Lothian and Orkney: Gawain, impatient, burning with barely restrained fury; Mordred, pale of face and always smiling, telling coarse jokes that the soldiers loved.

Mordred remained in Britain, standing as regent for his father. In their armada, the High King's host sailed at last down the Bristol Channel, around the grassy headlands of Lyonesse and across the sea to France. There the armies swept across the fields and through the forests, burning crops and trees as they went, until they reached the high-walled fortress town of Benwic, stronghold of Lancelot. They pitched camp on the plain that lay before the castle, in full view of its towers, they threw up earthworks and built the ladders and the platforms—siege machines—that they would use to scale the walls.

But no response came from Benwic. The sentries paced the walls and did not answer the taunts from Arthur's camp. The iron gates of the town remained barred.

After some days, however, the gates creaked open. A young woman, escorted by a dwarf bearing the white banner of truce, rode down the track that descended from castle to plain. A knight named Sir Lucan le Butler took the reins of the woman's





*Commanded by Gawain, the High King's armies sailed for France in pursuit of Lancelot.*

palfrey and led her through the crowded camp, among tents and tethered horses, past idle soldiers who gambled with knucklebones on the ground, to the tent crowned with the High King's standard. Arthur sat at its entrance, Gawain stood close by, along with Lucan's brother Bedevere, an old warrior and a steadfast companion to the High King, although he had wept at the departure of Lancelot months before.

The maiden gave Lancelot's offer of peace: that he would remain here on his French lands, that Arthur should cease his attack and return to his own country.

"The offer is a fair one," said Bedevere. "I have no stomach for the death of such as Lancelot."

The High King nodded. But Gawain glared down at the messenger with the flat and lightless eyes of madness. Spittle flecked his grizzled mustache, and his big-veined hands trembled. He swung around to the King. "What will you do, my lord, my Uncle?" he said. "Will you turn back and let the whole world cry villainy and shame, now that you have passed thus far upon your journey?"

"Aye," said Arthur slowly. "I have come on a long journey." He paused, sunk in sadness. Then he said, "I will do as you advise, Gawain, since honor demands it. But it goes against my heart, you must speak the word."

And the son of Lot spoke to the messenger in harsh and grating tones: "Lady, say you to Sir Lancelot that he wastes his breath to appeal now to the High King, my Uncle. And say that I, Sir Gawain, send him word that for the murder of my brothers I will have my revenge. I shall never leave until I have slain him or he me."

The knights around the High King muttered, the maiden left the camp with her message. And during the watches of the night, Arthur's forces prepared for war,



leaving leaders to the walls of Benwic, massing below in close-drawn ranks. When they were assembled, Gawain signaled the marshals to hold them in position. Alone, he rode to the castle gates, a huge and menacing figure in his battered armor. He shouted Lancelot's name. Above his head, the soldiers made room to let Lancelot face his old companion. The French knight's kinsmen stood by his side.

"Where are you now, false traitor knight, hiding within holes and walls like a coward? Come out and I shall avenge on your body the deaths of my brothers." Thus Sir Gawain screamed the challenge direct. Above him, the kinsmen of Lancelot waited, grim-faced. By the code bred into the warrior's soul, Lancelot had no choice but to fight. Not to do battle after Gawain's accusations was to admit them and lose all honor. And so Lancelot understood. He said to his fellows that sorrow hung on him at Gawain's words. He told them he knew that now he must fight against the friend of his youth.

He raised his voice, so that his enemies might hear him: "My lord Arthur, noble King that made me knight," he cried. "I am sad for your sake that you strive against me. I have borne it too long, and I will endure it no more. Sir Gawain has called me coward and traitor. It is greatly against my will that I should fight against a man of your blood. But I am driven to it, like a beast at bay."

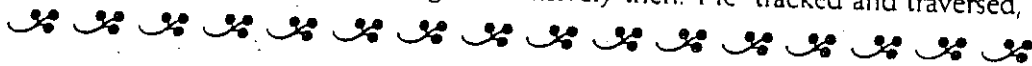
"Shut your babbling," Gawain snarled. "Come out and let us ease our hearts."

A pause followed, while Gawain withdrew from the gate to the plain below. Soldiers cleared ground for the battle, heralds rode to and fro, establishing the terms: that no warrior come near either combatant to defend or to attack, that the armies refrain from fighting, until Gawain or Lancelot had died or had yielded.

Then the garrison of Benwic left the castle, a mighty troop. Lancelot had indeed endured. His forces were as strong as Arthur's. They ranged their horses along one side of the tilting field that Arthur's soldiers had cleared, motionless as statues, they faced the ranks of Arthur's knights across the great empty space. Gawain took his place at one end of the field. Alone, astride a white charger harnessed in silver, Lancelot du Lac trotted to the other end of the lists. In the breathing hush, a herald cried the start, and the two men couched their lances.

**W**hen they thundered together, lances met shields and shattered harmlessly. So great was the impact, however, that the horses fell injured to the ground. With snorts and whinnies, they rolled free of their riders and trotted off the field. In moments, both knights were on their feet, swords drawn, shields at their shoulders.

Gawain fought with wanton rage, but he had more even than that. It was peculiar to his nature—a gift from some old god, perhaps—that his strength increased as the sun climbed toward noon and decreased after that. So terrible were his rushes, so swift his feints, so savage his strokes, that he could not be touched. Lancelot, cunning warrior that he was, fought defensively then. He "tracked and traversed,"



wrote the chroniclers, covering himself with his shield, saving his strength and making Gawain work for every blow. And shortly after noon, when the sun began its slow descent, Gawain's power began to leave him. He faltered, and Lancelot moved in.

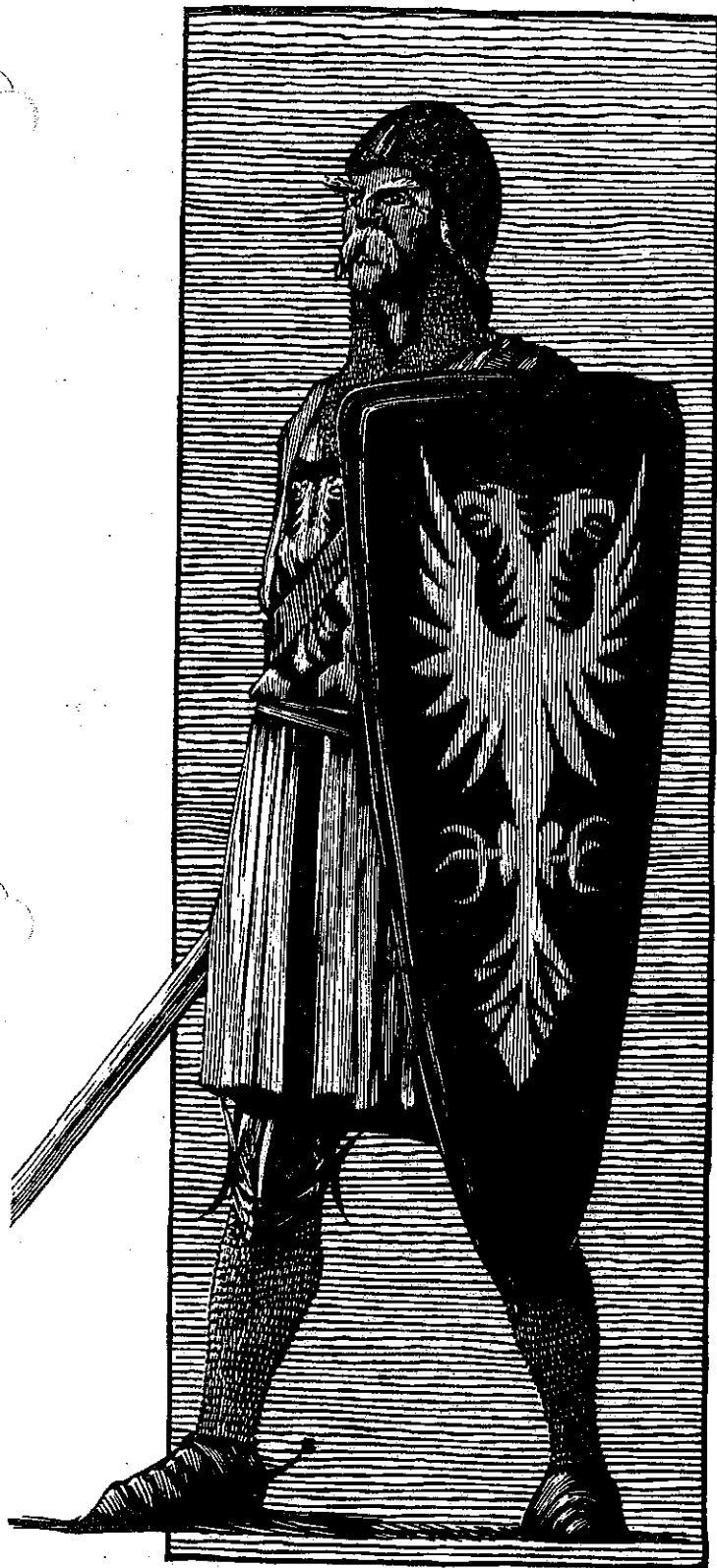
"Now, sir," Lancelot shouted, his voice muffled to a hoarse whisper by his visor. "Much have I endured and will return." He swung. The sword blade glanced off Gawain's quickly upturned shield. He swung again, and the sword crashed into Gawain's helmet, sending Gawain to the ground. He lay, coughing blood, easy prey for his adversary. Lancelot lowered his sword and withdrew to the edge of the lists.

"Why withdraw?" cried Gawain. "Turn back and slay me, for if I recover, you will die by my hand."

"I will fight you, Gawain," Lancelot replied. "I will not strike you as you lie in the dirt." And he limped toward his own ranks, where a squire stood holding his horse for him. Soldiers came onto the field and carried Gawain to the High King's tent.

For three weeks, the uncertain truce held – three long weeks while, in fortress and camp alike, knights and soldiers idled and quarreled among themselves without much energy, three weeks while the physicians worked on Gawain's wound. The defeat and



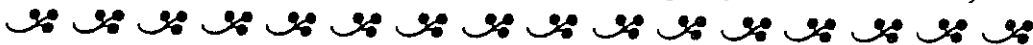


the humiliation of Lancelot's prowess and of his charity did nothing to the Scots knight's determination: As soon as he could sit a horse, he stood before the gates of Benwic, shouting his challenges again. Again Lancelot met him. Again the two great paladins charged down the lists. The point of the French knight's lance lodged in Gawain's armor; the force of the charge lifted his body from the saddle and his horse's hoofs from the ground. Both fell, Gawain lurched to his feet, shouting curses, and Lancelot dismounted to meet his broadsword.

Again they fought through the morning, in a slow and vicious dance. And again, after the sun had reached its apogee and begun its descent, Gawain faltered, and Lancelot struck him on the helmet, knocking his head to one side and opening the old wound. Gawain slumped unconscious.

Lancelot waited, panting and leaning on his sword. Within moments, Gawain stirred, kicking feebly and waving his arms. "Traitor, I am not yet slain, come now and finish the fight," he cried.

Lancelot, however, stayed as he was, looking down at his adversary. When he spoke, his voice was calm: "I will do no more than I have done," he said. "When I see you on foot, I will battle you, Gawain, and I will fight you as long as you can stand on your



feet." He left the field, with Gawain's voice feebly shouting curses at his back.

So the siege dragged on. Lancelot kept to his stronghold, and no word came from him. Gawain lay in Arthur's tent as before, recovering. When he reached the point where he could sit, he began to talk of fighting Lancelot once more. But a messenger came into the tent, and his words stopped all talk of the duel.

**T**he messenger was a small, lean man, covered with the grime of travel and stinking of horse sweat. He saluted Arthur and handed the High King a folded letter that bore the King's own seal. Then he drank thirstily of the ale that was brought while Arthur read the letter and Gawain dozed. When the King had finished, he said to the messenger, "Is it true what I read here? What more can you tell?" His voice was cold and flat; at its tone, Gawain became alert.

"Sire, it is true. Mordred went among the people and among the knights who were left with him and swore he had letters that said you were dead and named him King. He is a wily man, King. I believed him myself, though your lady said he lied and sent me to you."

"And the Queen?"

"Sire, she was safe at the last word. Sir Mordred said she must marry him because she is the Queen. He could not reign without her. And he told the soldiers that he wanted her. She agreed to all he said, then she fled to London with her household and barricaded herself in the tower there. She cannot hold out long, lord. Sir Mordred and all his host were riding for the city when I left, seven nights ago."

"Gods!" said Gawain from his pallet. "To lust for the wife of his father. My brother is a devil." He gave a child's wail, a cry that came from his weakness and pain, and he added, "It was my rage that brought us to this pass." But only the messenger was there to hear him, to see the madness clear from his eyes, replaced by sorrow. The High King had left the tent, shouting orders.

The camp was struck, the siege on Benwic lifted, the army of the High King rode for the coast of France. Now Arthur was in command, with Bedevere and Lucan beside him. Toward the rear of the great column, Gawain followed, carried on a horse litter.

As the ships of the High King neared Dover, it became apparent that the messenger had been right about Mordred's power. Along the high, white cliffs, bowmen were ranged. The beaches below, where the banner of the double eagle fluttered, were black with horsemen whose body armor glittered in the sun. Warships guarded the shore: Mordred, a man whose spies ranged everywhere, had received word of his father's attack. He sought to prevent Arthur from landing on his own soil.

He failed. In the shallows, on the beaches, the battle was fought. It was led by the High King. In his battle fury, Arthur was a terrifying sight. The men flocked to him, driving Mordred's forces back until finally they broke ranks and fled, scrambling up the cliff paths, leaving their dead behind them on the blood-reddened sand.



Then quiet fell, except for the moans of the injured and the cries of the curlews circling overhead. Arthur's ships were beached. He walked among them, wading through the shore foam, searching for his dead, rallying the wounded.

He found Gawain lying crumpled among the wooden beams of a small galley, half-hidden by the rowing benches. The Scots knight was alone. His face was ashen; his eyes were closed; his hair and whiskers were matted with the blood from his thrice-wounded skull. He opened his eyes when the High King called his name. But he did not speak until the King's squires had carried him to shore and set him gently on a patch of grass above the filthy sand. He licked his lips then, and Arthur bent to listen.

"This is my death day," Gawain said. He paused, gathering strength to breathe, and the High King replied, "In your person and in Sir Lancelot's, I had my greatest trust. Now I have lost my joy in you both."

**W**ait, Uncle," Gawain whispered. "Through me and my pride you have all this shame and trouble. If Lancelot had been with you—as he would have but for me—this wicked war would never have begun. Of all this sorrow, I am the cause." He requested paper and ink and a quill for writing, and from some messenger's saddlebag, these were brought. Then Arthur propped the old knight in his arms, and Gawain wrote a letter that the chroniclers, struck by its gallantry, preserved, a letter in the language of chivalry, whose heartbreaking words still echo across the centuries:

*Unto thee, Sir Lancelot, flower of all noble knights that I ever heard of or saw in my day, I, Sir Gawain, King Lot's son of Orkney, sister's son unto the noble King Arthur, send greetings, letting thee have knowledge that on the tenth day of May I was smitten upon the old wound that thou gavest me before the city of Benwic, and through that wound I have come to my death day. And I wish all the world to know that I, Sir Gawain, knight of the Round Table, sought my death, which comes not through your fault but by my own seeking. Wherefore I beseech thee, Sir Lancelot, to return again unto this realm and see my tomb and pray some prayer, long or short, for my soul. And this same day that I write this letter I was hurt in the wound that I had from thy hand, Sir Lancelot. By a more noble man might I not be slain.*

*Also, Sir Lancelot, for all the love that ever was between us, make no tarrying, but come over the sea in all the goodly haste that thou may with thy knights and rescue that noble King who made thee knight, for he is full straitly beset by a false traitor who is my half brother, Sir Mordred.*

He went on to write of Mordred's treachery. Then he wet the quill again, with blood from his wound, and continued: *This letter was written but two hours and a half before my death, written with my own hand and subscribed with part of my heart's blood. Therefore I require thee, most famous knight of the world, that thou wilt see my tomb.*

At that point, Gawain sighed and let the quill fall from his hand. He leaned his head against the High King's chest. Arthur signaled for a messenger and gave the letter to him. He waited. From time to time, Gawain spoke, whispering Lancelot's name anxiously, and the High King nodded. At a little past noon, Ar-



thur lowered Gawain's head to the grass. The gallant heart had failed at last. But the spirit had not failed. The High King's host drove Mordred's armies west, to a great plain that lay not far from the sea. There the two made camp. And Arthur paced through the warm spring night, while the watch fires of Mordred's forces glimmered, small points of light in the rolling dark. At last, he slept. He dreamed then of vipers, the chroniclers said; of a deep pit writhing with serpents, he fell among them and cried out. Startled, the squires who lay on pallets in his tent shook him awake. For the rest of the night, the High King lay watchful while the sentinels called the hour outside and the tethered horses stirred and stamped.

Just before dawn, he sat up, staring. Gawain stood in the tent, stooped and old, a slight smile creasing his face.

"Welcome, sister's son!" the High King cried. "Have you risen from the dead?"

But Gawain shook his head. "If you fight tomorrow, lord, you will die. I know it. You must delay for Lancelot, who will ride from France to you. Make a peace with Mordred. Delay the battle and turn aside fate." He faded from view. Around the floor of the tent, the squires slept on, undisturbed. But Arthur had seen and heard.

So, heartened, the High King thought to alter the pattern of events that he himself had brought about, long years before, when he angered the old ones. At first light, he summoned his warriors and told them of the words the ghost had spoken. He sent his emissaries to Mordred's camp and waited, watching the plain. When they returned, the answer was brief. Mordred would meet with his father on the field. Each man would be attended by fourteen knights only; the armies would stay well back. No weapon would be drawn.

Then, on a late-spring afternoon, when the sun beat down on the battle plain, the great hosts drew into formation. At a herald's cry, the two parties rode out from each line, one under the double eagle and one under the crowns, and Arthur the High King met with his son.

The warriors dismounted in silence, and the two men faced each other. So quiet were they that the creaking of armor and the jingling of harness sounded loud in the field. From a copse of trees a hundred yards away, a cuckoo called once.

"Well, Father," said Mordred, with his narrow smile. Sure of the High King's weakness, he did not bother to conceal contempt. "What have you to offer? That lady the Queen? She has a taste for young men's beds."

A vein beat in the High King's temple, but he would not be drawn. "It is prophesied that you and I will die this day, Mordred, if we do not come to terms," was all he said. It was a wise move. The younger man flinched before his father's level gaze and steady voice. Arthur spoke with power. Then Mordred shrugged, "Well?" he asked again.

"Cornwall and Kent under your rule while I live. All of Britain when I die. You are the son of my body, after all."

Mordred turned to take counsel with his knights. After some moments of





whispering, he said, "Done." He grinned and held out his hand to his father.

At that moment, a man cried out. From the corner of his eye, Arthur saw the flash of a striking snake and the steely glitter of a sword as it hissed from the scabbard. For warriors on the verge of battle, their nerves strung tight with apprehension, it needed no more than that. Every sword was drawn, the armies at the edge of the field followed suit, and at once the long, loud cry of the trumpet floated across the grass.

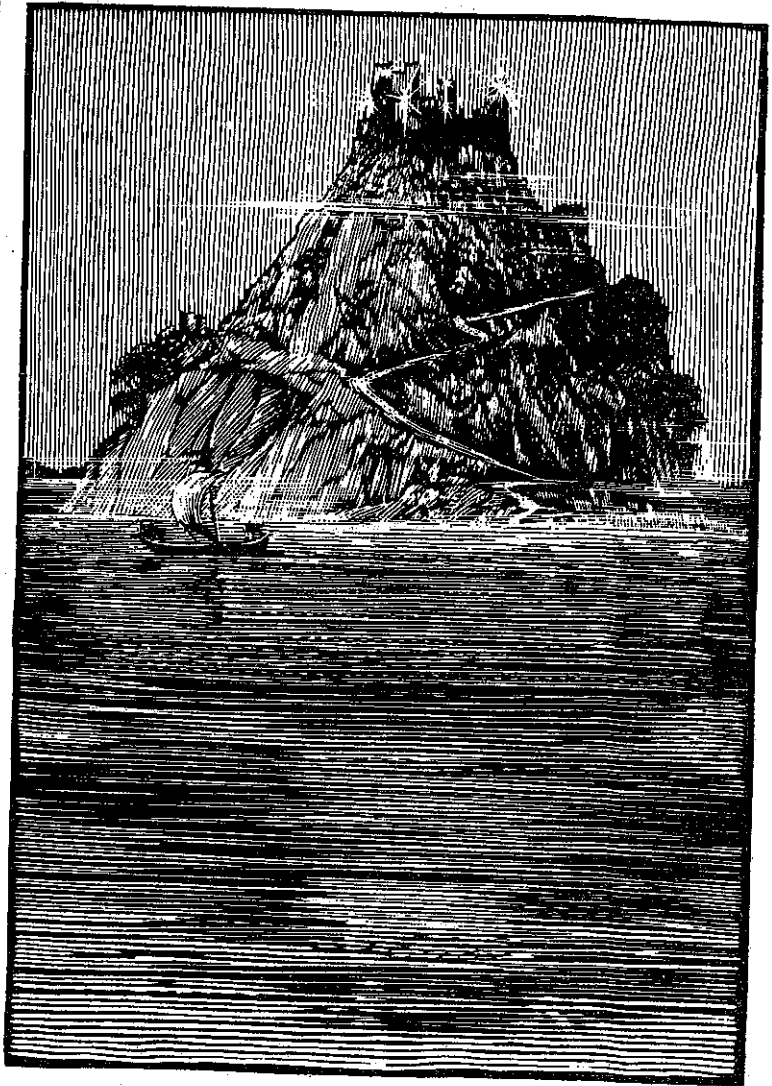
The battle was terrible. Hour after hour, all that afternoon, the armies charged and fell back and charged again. The hordes lost their footing among the bodies on the bloody ground and fell to join the dying. Arthur fought tirelessly, driven by the grief of a man betrayed.

The light faded, the charges grew halting, and at last they stopped. Swaying where he stood, the High King surveyed the field, the blindness of his battle fury lifting from his mind.

All around him lay the warriors of the two armies, stripped of dignity in death, their heads split, their faces torn away, their arms reaching stiffly into the air, their hands curled on nothing. Horses lay among them, spilling guts onto the earth. Besides the High King, only three men moved. Two were his own—Bedevere and his brother Lucan, who had fought by his side all the day. They were wounded, but they were alive, and they called his name. Across the field, standing among a heap of twisted corpses, leaning wearily on his sword, stood Mordred, Arthur's son, the evil seed. His face was creased with exhaustion, but he smiled at the High King with a kind of sour triumph.

"Give me my spear," said Arthur to Lucan.

*Far across the western sea, an island  
fortress floated — the stronghold of the old ones who had  
woven the fate of the High King.*



but the knight shook his head. "Sire, we have won the field," he replied. "Leave off now and end this wicked day. Do not tempt fate further, lest you die."

For answer, the King seized a spear that lay among the bodies. He lifted it and, with a shout of rage, assailed his son. Mordred took the point in the belly and staggered back, but he did not fall, nor did he lose his grip on his sword hilt. He fixed his eyes on his father, and step by step, while Arthur stood unmoving, he pushed himself along the spear shaft, until it projected far behind his back and his belly pressed against the hand guard. With deliberation, he swung the broadsword up and brought it down upon the side of Arthur's helmet, so that the blade bit through mail and skull into the brain. Then, still spitted on the spear, he toppled to the earth. The High King's weakening hands released the spear, and he, too, fell.

He lay motionless for long moments, but he was not dead. He opened his eyes when Sir Bedevere bent over him, and he said, "Sir Lucan?"

"Lucan is dying."

**T**his is my death wound," the High King said. "Carry me to a place where I may hear the sea." When Bedevere lifted him, he fainted, but the labored breathing did not cease. Half carrying him, half dragging, Bedevere bore the High King to a knoll that lay between a small pool of fresh water and the shore, and set him down on the grass underneath a tree. There Arthur rested, eyes closed, while the waves whispered on the strand and dusk faded in the sky. Beside him, Bedevere sat wakeful, watching the moon on the water and listening to the muffled cries and rustlings borne from the battlefield by the night wind.

Presently the King said, "What is the noise?"

"It is the looters," Bedevere replied. "They are robbing the bodies of the warriors and killing any man who breathes. It is always so, after battle." The High King nodded. Then, it seemed, he slept through the night, while Bedevere kept watch.

At first light, Arthur awakened. He gazed at the morning sea and appeared to listen. Then he said, "It is now. Take my broadsword Caliburn and cast it into the pool. It must return to those who forged it." Bedevere unbuckled the sword and walked away with it. When he returned, the High King said, "Tell what you saw."

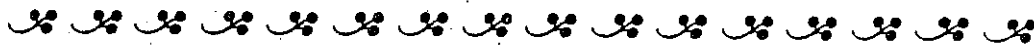
"Nothing, lord, but wind and wave."

"Bedevere," Arthur replied, "Give my sword into the hands of the old ones."

"It is the sword that made you conqueror and King. Why should we surrender it? I hid it in a safe place."

"Obey me in this last thing," said Arthur. With reluctance, Bedevere left him once more, and once more returned, having seen nothing but wind and wave. The third time he was sent, however, he obeyed the High King's command.

"Lord," he said, and his voice was hushed, "I cast the sword upon the waters. A hand arose from the pool, it grasped the hilt. It brandished Caliburn three times, as if in victory, and then it vanished."



And the High King said, "It is well done. See, even now they come for me." That was true. Bedevere gave a gasp of fear and made the sign that averted enchantment. Pacing over the crest of the knoll, their long robes trailing in the grass, their golden crowns gleaming, were three tall women. One had almost the solidity of a mortal, and her features were those of Morgan le Fay. The others trembled in the sunlight, fading in and out of vision, and all around them, more figures shimmered, transparent as dreams. Hands fluttered among the tree branches, clasping gold that might have been the Grail; on the shore, an old man robed in black swayed as if blown by the sea wind. This man had the white beard and long hands of Merlin the Enchanter, and he bowed his head to hear the words of a slender creature that floated beside him.

Morgan kneeled beside the High King. "Brother, the old ones await you," she said. "Now give yourself into their hands, for the fate you set in motion in your youth has completed its course."

Arthur turned his eyes to Bedevere. The look was farewell and command. Helpless to refuse it, the knight lifted the King and bore him down to the sea and placed him on the deck of a small sailing ship that floated there. The ghostly company clustered around the King; a high voice sang in the wind. Then, while Bedevere watched in wonder, the ship turned, as if blown by the very light of morning, and sailed west toward the ancient sea realm of Faerie, where lay an island adorned with apple trees and crowned by a castle of glass.

