

## VI



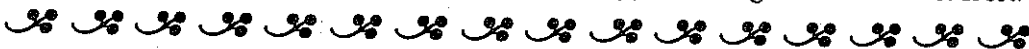
### ❧ MORDRED ❧

**T**he chronicles of the High King's court were sometimes vague about the histories of the sons of Lothian and Orkney. Gawain, of course, was accepted into Arthur's household shortly after the death of Lot and knighted on Arthur's wedding day; throughout his life he stalwartly remained a king's man. Two brothers—Agravain, handsome but of evil disposition, and Caheris—apparently came with him. Another brother, Gareth, arrived some years later, so anxious to prove his worth that he traveled anonymously and served as a page in the High King's kitchens until he had the chance to show his bravery and skill adventuring. He was famous for his sweet temper.

Shortly after Gareth was knighted, his mother, Morgause, followed him to Camelot, impelled, she claimed, by a desire to see her sons. The young men fell on their knees before her when they understood who she was. They had not seen their mother for fifteen years.

Morgause did not travel alone. It seems that she brought along her youngest child in order to present him to the High King. That child was Mordred, as fine of feature as his mother, and as secretive as she, the two were very close. He was unaware of his true parentage; the name of Lot was often on his lips. If Arthur recognized him for the child he had fathered, he did not say so. Mordred was knighted, as his brothers had been before him, and made one of the company of the Round Table. Gawain kept close to him, as he did to all his brothers. Lancelot, too, watched over the young knight, for Gawain's sake.

Morgause stayed at court, held in honor as the King's sister. Except for Arthur and herself, no one knew of the deed of her youth. She had retained her beauty. The white wings that swept through her dark hair seemed no worse than a crown for her delicate features. Her eyes had not lost their avid shine, nor her voice its seductive charm. Within a few months, she had taken a lover younger than her elder sons—Lamorak of Wales, called the third best knight in Arthur's company, after Lancelot and Tristram of Lyonesse. At tournaments, Lamorak wore her favor—a strip of silk, woven with the double eagle of Lothian and Orkney, streaming from his helmet crest.



Her sons were outraged. Descendants of fierce northern tribes, they were not ones to forget a blood feud. Lamorak's father was Pellinore of the Isles, who long years before had slain rebellious Lot in battle. Gawain, no more than a boy then, had sworn vengeance, and he had gained it. Some time after they were knighted, Gawain and Gaheris killed Pellinore in a fight. Now their anger rose again: Their mother shamed them, lying with a man of Pellinore's blood.

The sons of a widow could rule the mother in those days. These sons, led by Gawain, took the matter into their own hands. They removed Morgause from the temptations of the court and established her in a pretty hunting lodge some miles from Camelot. Never given to open conflict, Morgause acquiesced with dignity and sweet smiles, and she praised her sons' solicitude. It was little hardship for her, after all. She had a handsome household and no shortage of messengers to do her bidding.

Within a week, she summoned Lamorak. But Gaheris saw his mother's waiting woman whispering to the Welsh knight in a palace corridor, and when Lamorak rode out from Camelot, he followed, keeping his distance. He arrived at his mother's house in the evening and found her lover's horse tied to the postern gate. Quietly, Gaheris dismounted and moved through the hall, where his mother's serving people slept on pallets by the hearth. He paused at the door that led to his mother's chamber. Lamorak's shield, sword and mail lay on a stool there. Gaheris drew his sword and opened the door.

His mother lay in the great bed, her white face turned toward him, her hair streaming over bare shoulders. With two strides, Gaheris was at her side, hacking at her throat with the sword, screaming in a rage that brought Lamorak to his feet beside the bed. The blood made a fountain that splattered the bedclothes and Lamorak and Gaheris himself. Gaheris straightened, panting and weeping, to face Lamorak across the twitching body.

"Foul and evil, to slay the mother who bore you," the Welsh knight cried. But Gaheris hardly heard these words in his wrath.

**B**eware where you meddle," he shouted. "Your father slew our father, and for you to lie beside our mother is too much shame for us to bear. This is the end of her wantonness. Because you are an unarmed man, I will not fight you now. But beware, Lamorak. When you go abroad, my brothers and I will find you." Then Gaheris strode blindly from the chamber, knocking aside the servants huddled at the door.

The reaction at court to the news of Morgause's death was stern, but it was not so intense as it might have been in other, less bloody eras. Gaheris was exiled for a time. Lamorak did not appear; he had ridden, apparently, to his own territory in Wales. But he was a dead man, as Lancelot, having argued in vain with Gawain, told the High King. Within a few months, the brothers – with the exception of Gareth, who would not join them – had found their mother's lover, riding on a lonely road. It was said



that Agravain, Gawain, Gaheris and Mordred together challenged him, and he valiantly faced them all. They killed his horse under him; he fought them on foot. He held them off for three hours, so great was his strength. But in the end, Lamorak fell when Mordred circled behind him and stabbed him in the back.

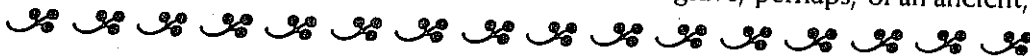
So the feud between the family of Pellinore and that of Lot was ended, it seemed. It was finished by four men fighting one and by a knife in the back—the coward's way. How much of Mordred's part was known at the time is difficult to say. Mordred's reputation was that of a courageous but inexperienced warrior. He had been a knight no longer than two years. The men of the Round Table readily accepted his company on their journeying, if not for himself then for love of his brother Gawain, that doughty lion. Loyalty to Gawain, in fact, saved Mordred from Lancelot once, when Lancelot might have acted against him and thereby altered the pattern of Arthur's fate.

On a May morning a few years after Mordred received the spurs of knighthood, it happened that he and Lancelot set out separately from Camelot to seek trials of their knightly worth. Deep in a wood in Wales their paths crossed. Glad of company in the wilderness, they rode on together, and in the adventures that they had—which do not matter to the story—Mordred distinguished himself by valor and by canny fighting. Lancelot praised him for it, drawing from the younger man an uncommon flush of pleasure. Mordred rarely displayed emotion, which made the events that followed all the more surprising.

By a brook in the wood, a cairn of stones rose—the grave, perhaps, of an ancient,



*Morgause of Lothian and Orkney was a woman of much appetite and little discretion. In her middle years, she took for a lover Lamorak of Wales, son of the man who slew her husband.*

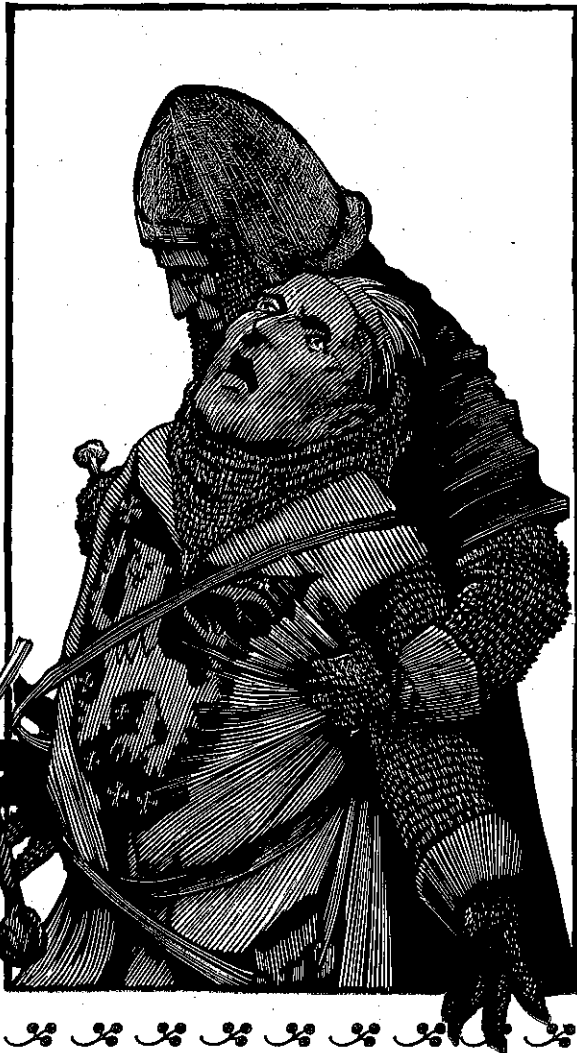


long-forgotten prince. The tomb, it seemed, was guarded. A hut of bent willow branches, such as wood elves sometimes built, rose near it, and by the door of the hut a man sat, nodding in a patch of sun. Elvish he was not: He was bent and old, shaggy white hair hung around his shoulders, and the robes he wore were the tattered rags of the more ascetic of priestly hermits. He appeared to be asleep. When the two men dismounted to water their horses, however, he arose at once and greeted them in a whistling whisper. They courteously told him their names, and he smiled, the seams and creases of his face twisting into a grotesque picture of senile mockery.

"Welcome," he said. "I give welcome to the two most unfortunate knights in the world." He beckoned, and the men, leaving the horses to drink, walked toward him. As they neared, the cracked voice began again, speaking in a rapid, toneless mumble:

"Mordred, you will do great harm. Through you the Round Table will be de-

*Lamorak died fighting four of  
the sons of Morgause. It was Mordred who gave  
the death blow: a knife in the back.*



stroyed. You will kill your own father. Through you, your great heritage will cease to exist."

"This is witless talk, grandfather," Mordred replied. "I cannot kill my father, for he is dead."

But the old one droned on: "King Lot was not your father. Arthur the High King is your father. The night he begat you on Morgause, he dreamed that a serpent issued from him. He killed it. In the dream, he died of its poison. You are that serpent, Mordred, full of evil, without pity. Your father will kill you for it. His spear will pierce your belly, and daylight will show through the wound. After that day, Arthur will be seen no more on earth."

Mordred stared at him.

"And you will kill me," the ancient voice added. So it was. Mordred drew his sword and silenced the old man with one vicious stroke. Mordred wiped his blade on the ragged robe, then he sheathed the weapon and said, "In

the midst of lies you told a truth. Kill you I have, grandfather." He glanced up to meet Lancelot's grim gaze.

"For shame, Mordred, to murder an unarmed elder," Lancelot said. His hand was clamped on his own sword hilt. "If it were not for the sake of your brother Gawain, I would kill you where you stand."

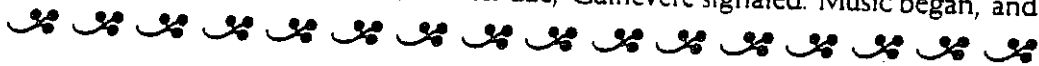
But he did not kill Mordred, and he did not speak of the incident. Even later, when Mordred became a deadly threat to him, Lancelot did not speak.

After that day, Mordred went no more adventuring. He spent his time at court, lurking in corners, skulking in stables, watching the movements of Lancelot, who had heard the old man's prophecy. As if driven by fear of its revelation, he set out to destroy the French knight. He had the weapon at hand. Lancelot's devotion to the Queen was of such long standing that few people bothered to comment on it, but Mordred had seen things—perhaps a figure in the window of the Queen's chamber, a glance held too long between the two, the faintest brush of a touch in passing—that told the truth. The two were lovers still. And Mordred talked. He talked to the other knights—cadets, like himself, too young to have seen the glories of Arthur's prime, who chafed at the old ways of the court. And he talked to his brothers, patiently, over and over, whispering of Lancelot's dishonor and of the cuckolding of the High King. He spoke of the Queen, too, and the words he used were ugly ones. The Queen was sacred. In her person, as in that of the High King, resided the health of Britain, people thought. Her betrayal of the High King's bed was treason, endangering the kingdom.

The brothers' reactions were characteristic: Gawain told Mordred to hold his tongue, and after a while he kept apart from him so that he might not see Mordred's significant looks or hear his tales of evidence, found by hiding in shadows and listening at windows. Gareth ignored him. But hot-tempered Caheris and Agravain, sour of nature and envious of disposition, listened. And they, too, talked.

**S**o a miasma, a cloud of spiteful rumor, spread through the corridors and chambers of Camelot, infecting all it touched. Quarrels broke out, for Lancelot's cousins fiercely defended him, and there were many who still loved the Queen and were prepared to fight in the name of her honor. As for Guinevere, when the whispers reached her ears, she kept apart from her lover for a while. But to see Lancelot always at a distance, never to lie with him in the secret night, never to speak, except in the company of others, brought only suffering to the Queen. She sent Lancelot away from court.

Then, brave and gallant woman that she was, Guinevere summoned the gossips to her chambers and offered them a feast. The sons of Lothian and Orkney were there, and nineteen other knights, some of them grave and silent, some sullen, some almost leering. Guinevere welcomed them and gave her hand to each man in turn. And in turn, each man knelt and kissed it, as he was bound to do in homage. When they had all given her the honor that was her due, Guinevere signaled. Music began, and



pages trooped to the long board, bearing laden silver platters, ivory jugs filled with wine, and dishes of apples as a compliment to Gawain. Lot's eldest son was known for his love of the fruit.

It seemed that the Queen's grace would put an end to the talk. But partway through the meal, a knight named Patrise of Ireland lurched to his feet and stood swaying, gurgling wordlessly while his face swelled and blackened and his eyes started from his head. Then he pitched forward onto the table, smashing into the food platters and knocking over the wine. His hand clenched in his death agony and then opened, and a half-eaten apple rolled onto the cloth.

**A** crack of maniacal laughter sounded. "Fine food you give your people, lady," said Mordred. Gawain silenced him, but his face was sad and tired. Speaking for the company, Gawain told the Queen to guard herself. She had offered poisoned apples to those who doubted her, he said, and a man had died because of it. There would be vengeance to pay. Then he led his companions from the room.

There was vengeance to pay indeed. Patrise's cousin, Mador de la Porte, accused the Queen to Arthur and demanded that her guilt be determined in the customary way: In his dead cousin's name, he would fight any man who chose to defend the Queen's innocence. Arthur heard him out. He himself could not fight for Guinevere because he was the High King and because she was his wife. He knew her to be innocent: Guinevere was no murderess. But being a just man, he agreed to the trial by combat, and he called for a knight to defend the Queen.

Not one stepped forward. Lancelot was gone from court and nowhere to be found. Not one man, it seemed, believed enough in the Queen's innocence to risk his life against the skill of Mador. Perhaps it was then, when the wife he honored was denied honor, that Arthur sensed the net of fate begin to draw in around him. He sent for Bors, Lancelot's cousin, and himself asked that Bors duel on behalf of the Queen. Bors said he could not; he had been at the dinner, and his fellow knights would suspect him of complicity.

In the end, the Queen, reduced to pleading, begged Bors on her knees to stand for her. Her own knight, Lancelot, was gone, she knew not where. If Bors had even a doubt of her guilt, she said, he must defend her.

Bors pulled her to her feet, horrified at her humiliation. "Madam," he said, "you do me dishonor." But he weakened. He agreed to stand as the Queen's champion unless a better knight than he appeared.

And when his fellows cried out against him and called the Queen a destroyer of knights, steadfast Bors replied that there had been murder done, but the Queen had not done it. "As far as I could know, she was a maintainer of knights," Bors said. "She has been generous and free with her possessions to all good knights, and the most bounteous lady in her gifts and her good grace that I ever saw or heard speak of, and





*A dish of apples presented at a royal feast contained poison that murdered an innocent knight. Guinevere the Queen was the poisoner, said the sons of Lothian and Orkney.*

so I shall prove with my body."

On the appointed day, then, the court gathered at a tournament ground at Winchester. Mador de la Porte, his shield on his shoulder and his lance in his hand, rode to King Arthur and shouted, "Bid your champion come forth if he dares." Bors rode slowly to one end of the lists.

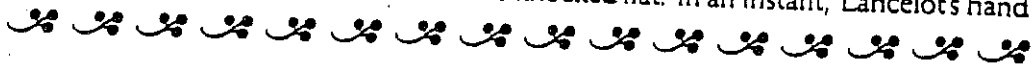
Before the heralds could cry the start, however, another knight galloped onto the field. He was armored in white and his visor was down, hence none could read his device or see his face. He brought his horse around beside Bors and said formally, "Fair knight, I pray you be not displeased, for here must a better knight than you have battle. Therefore I pray you withdraw. I have had this day a great

journey, and this battle ought to be mine. It is a dishonor to the High King and to all the knights of the Round Table that so noble and courteous a lady as Queen Guinevere should be rebuked and shamed among you."

"I am discharged, then," Bors replied without expression. He left the field to the cousin he himself had sent for.

The adversaries turned and couched their lances to face each other down the lists. When they thundered together, Mador broke his lance, but the other man's weapon held, knocking Mador and his horse to the ground. "Oh, well ridden," said Gawain suddenly to the King. "It is Lancelot, I know his style."

A skillful fighter, Mador extricated himself from the tangle of horse and harness in short order, drawing his sword as he surged to his feet, shouting for his adversary to dismount and face him. Lancelot did that, and the two men swung into the ponderous and deadly dance of broadsword battle, "rushing and crossing, slashing and thrusting, and crashing together"—the chroniclers wrote—"like wild boars." They fought for an hour, until Mador was knocked to the earth. Lancelot moved in, but Mador was on his feet again, dealing a great, slashing stroke to the thigh. And when Lancelot felt the blood rush out, his battle fury came upon him. He hit Mador so violently on the helmet that the man was knocked flat. In an instant, Lancelot's hand



was on the helmet, to free the head for the death blow. But Mador cried mercy and asked for his life. He yielded up his charge against the Queen.

The Queen's innocence was held proved by Lancelot's victory, but it was proved again, when the true poisoner confessed. His had been another move – the last – in the feud between the sons of Pellinore and the sons of Lot. A knight called Sir Pyonel le Savage, cousin to Lamorak, had poisoned the apples, hoping to kill Gawain in revenge for Lamorak's death. When Gawain heard this news he sighed, but he said to his brothers, "Now you know of the innocence of our lady Queen. So shut your whispering and your gossip."

But Agravain – the chroniclers called him Sir Agravain the Open-mouthed – snapped, "Innocent of murder, yes. But Lancelot lies nightly with the Queen, and it is a shame to us that we let the King be so dishonored. We must tell him of the evil that is daily done him."

"You have been listening to Mordred, fool," said Gawain. "Cease your talking, I say. I do not believe you, and I will not be party to your plotting, brother or no."

"Nor I," said Gaheris.

"Nor I," said Gareth. "I will speak no evil of the man who made me a knight."

"I will," said Mordred softly.

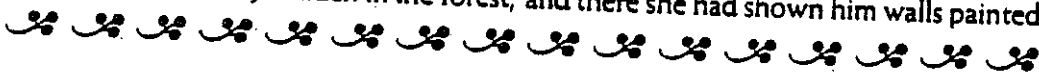
Gawain swung on him. "Aye, Mordred, I believe you well. Ever to all evil will you agree. You forget – and you, Agravain – how often Lancelot has defended both King and Queen and how he has stood beside you in battles you were not skilled enough to win. For my part, I will never be against Sir Lancelot, for that he saved my life. And I tell you, you will destroy the kingdom if you go on with your talk."

"Befall what may befall," replied Agravain with a shrug. "I will tell the King indeed." And Mordred smirked in assent. Gawain looked long and hard at him. Then, with Gareth and Gaheris at his heels, he left the courtyard.

So Agravain and Mordred asked for privy conference with the High King. He received them in a tower chamber, bare except for piles of shields and swords, and as they talked, he stared out the open window at the silver river that wound past Camelot, at the fields that flanked the river, at the rich forests that lay beyond.

Agravain laid the family quarrel before him. He said in tones of piety, "My lord, I may keep it no longer. I and my brother Mordred are your sister's sons, and we may suffer this outrage no more. Sir Lancelot holds the Queen and has long done so. We all know that he is a traitor, and we will furnish proof of it."

The High King did not reply at once. He continued to look upon the rich and peaceful countryside, golden, waiting for the harvest. He had heard those pious tones weeks before, from his sister Morgan le Fay. She had appeared in his track one evening when he rode out alone, she had begged his forgiveness, she had led him into a little lodge that lay hidden in the forest, and there she had shown him walls painted





with scenes of Lancelot and Guinevere walking alone in a wood, lying in a field of flowers beside a stream, entering a chamber where a great bed stood. He had said nothing about it, nothing of the nights filled with bitter imaginings that followed the meeting, nothing of the sorrow and the love he felt for his wife and for the finest of his warriors. It came to him that the old ones had made their final move. Now the magic that they used was no longer needed. The fate that had been woven would be tightened by human hands.

Arthur said, "You speak foul treason, and you speak without proof."

"We will furnish proof," said Mordred.

The High King regarded him with cold eyes, and at last told what he knew. "You are the son of my body, Mordred," he said, "sent to destroy what I have made. I warn you, you will find Lancelot resolute." Then he left them.

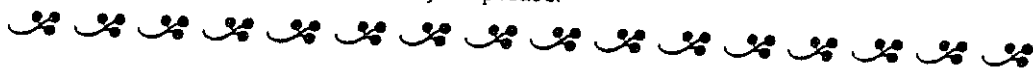
But that could not be the end of the matter. By the law, if treason were charged, it must be investigated and, if proved, it must be punished. He himself, the embodiment of the law, could not flout the rule. If he did that, his own justice was dead.

On the morning of the next day, he took a small party and rode out into the mountains to hunt. On the night of that day, Lancelot walked through the darkened lanes of Camelot to meet his lover. Guinevere welcomed him as she had many times before. She drew him into her firelit chamber and bolted the door behind him; she took his cloak and sword from him and laid them aside; she spoke with him of indifferent matters as old lovers do, but she sparkled with all the pleasure of a young bride and laughed aloud for delight at his presence.

Even as they spoke, fists pounded the door and voices called for the death of Lancelot the traitor knight and of Guinevere the false Queen. The two stood motionless, trapped in that instant. Then Guinevere said, "This is the end of our long love."

**L**ancelot looked about him for armor and shield. There were none; the Queen kept no weapons in her chamber. The pounding at the door ceased for a moment, then resumed, more heavily and rhythmic. Something was being used as a battering ram. He put his arm around the Queen, speaking quickly. "You have always been my good lady," he said. "And I have never failed you since the first day the High King made me a knight. If I fall, pray for me. Whatever comes to me, seek shelter with my kinsman Bors. He and the others will deliver you from death, and they will see that you live as a queen upon my lands."

She shook her head, but she smiled at him in her old way, and Lancelot said, "I would rather have my armor than be lord of all Christendom, so that men might speak of my deeds after I was slain." He picked up his sword. "Lady, take heart," he said. "Since the day has come that our love must end, I shall sell my life as dearly as I can." He turned to the door and shouted, "Lords, leave off your noise. I will open the door. Then you may do with me what you please."





*Burning was the punishment for a traitor Queen, said Mordred, and saw with satisfaction Guinevere chained to her funeral pyre.*

vain, you shall not imprison me this night. If you have wisdom, you will leave the door now and let me go. I swear by my knighthood that if you depart I will appear tomorrow before you and the High King. Then I will know which of you accuses me of treason, and I shall answer you as a knight. I came to the Queen with no evil intent. And that I shall prove on your bodies with my hands."

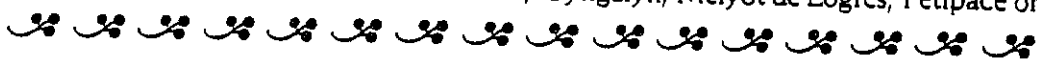
"We will take you and slay you if we wish," came the answer. "For understand, we have the choice from the King, to spare you or slay you."

"It is a lie," shouted Lancelot. "If there is no other grace in you than lying, guard yourselves." He threw open the door and in an instant was among them, his blade whistling in the air. The first blow killed Agravain the Open-mouthed. And then Lancelot slew the rest—Mador de la Porte, Gyngalyn, Melyot de Logres, Petipace of

The rhythmic hammering stopped. Something crashed onto the stone stairs outside the door, and Agravain's voice shouted, "Open then! It avails you nothing to fight against the fourteen of us. We will spare your life until you are taken before the High King."

At that instant, Lancelot unbarred the door and held it cracked with his left hand so that only one knight might enter. An arm reached through the crack. He seized it and pulled the man into the room, slamming the door behind. Then he turned to face the man. He was a knight called Colgrevaunce of Corre, he struck at Lancelot, but Lancelot stepped lightly aside and brought his blade down, knocking the warrior's helmet from his head. Colgrevaunce crumpled to the floor, killed by the force of the stroke. At once, Lancelot turned to Guinevere, and without a word she came to him. Together they unlaced the armor from the body of Colgrevaunce, and Guinevere helped her lover to arm, as she had done years before, in their youth.

The deed was done while the enemies screamed and pounded at the door, and when it was finished, Lancelot cried out, "Sirs, leave your noise. Understand, Agra-



Winchelsea, Galleron of Galway, Melyon of the Mountayne, Ascamore, Gromerson Erioure, Cursesalyne, Florence, Lovell—all of them Scots, all of them companions of Mordred. Only Mordred escaped: He took a wound from Lancelot and fled.

Standing triumphant among the bodies, Lancelot entreated the Queen to come with him. She refused. She would not leave the High King, she said. But she added with a smile, "If you have word tomorrow that they will put me to death, you may rescue me as you think best."

"While I am living, I will rescue you," said Lancelot. He kissed her and was gone, leaving her to wait in the bloody chamber.

Before long, Arthur's men-at-arms appeared and dragged the bodies out of the chamber and down the stairs. They told Guinevere that the High King had ordered her arrest. Then they shut the chamber door. She heard their spear butts strike the stone as they settled at their posts.

**I**n the morning, Arthur's company gathered in the High King's hall. They found their numbers much decreased. Bors had gone with Lancelot, as well as Lionel, Ector de Maris and twenty-one others. They had been mounted and waiting, the gate guards said, when Lancelot left the Queen's chamber, having been warned by the fighting at the tower. Someone else said no, they had been warned by a dream that Bors had had. In any case, it was Lancelot they followed, not the High King. The Round Table was broken.

Mordred, even more white-faced than usual from loss of blood, heavily bandaged but still in his armor, brushed this impatiently aside. "The woman must die for the treason," he said. His voice was shrill, his eyes glittered. "She must die by the fire." It was true, and all of them knew it. So sacred was the person of the Queen that if she were slain for treason, danger would cling to her dead body; she must therefore be reduced to ashes that could be carried away by the wind.

"Faugh!" said Gawain. "You are bloodthirsty enough for one who ran away from a fight." He turned to the High King and continued in his slow and earnest way. "My lord Arthur, do not be hasty. Delay the judgment of my lady the Queen. She is beholden to Lancelot, who defended her when no other man would take her part. It is true he went to her chamber, but it may be she sent for him with good intent and with no evil purpose, to thank him for his deeds. I daresay that your lady the Queen is to you both good and true. And as for Sir Lancelot, I daresay he will make it good on any knight living who accuses him of treason and villainy."

"So he will," replied the King. "He can trust in his matchless might and fear no man. But the Queen will die. And if I capture Lancelot, he will die, as it says in the law."

"May I never see it," the old knight replied.

"Gawain, what is this? You have no cause to love Sir Lancelot. Last night he slew your brother Agravain, and almost slew your brother Mordred. And two of the other men he slew were your sons."



"My lord," said Gawain, "I know it, and it grieves me. But I told my brothers and my sons beforehand what would happen, and inasmuch as they would not act by my counsel, I will take no revenge for their deaths, which they brought upon themselves." He crossed his arms on his broad chest and stared stubbornly at Arthur.

**S**o Guinevere was judged by the High King and condemned. When the day came, a pyre was made in the great courtyard of the palace. In the hall, Arthur turned to Gawain and asked that the brothers of Lothian and Orkney escort his wife to the place of burning to hear her judgment and receive her death. Gawain refused for himself; he would have none of the judgment of the death, he said. Mordred, he added, with a sneer, was too weak from his wound to attend. Gareth and Gaheris, junior as they were, must obey the High King's command if he made it, but they would not wish to see the shameful deed.

"Sir," said Gareth, "we will go if you command it, but it is against our will. If we go, we go unarmed and unarmored."

"Then, go. Make you ready, for the thing will soon be done," said the High King. Gawain, his face a mask of sorrow and pain, left the hall.

In the courtyard, many of the onlookers wept openly, but Guinevere did not weep. She walked, pale and straight, between her guards. At their command, she stood quiet while her ladies stripped away her veil and unbound her hair. Next, they removed her cloak and overdress and underdress, until she stood before her judges clad only in a white shift. She did not resist when they lifted her onto the pile of fagots. She even raised her arms to take the chains that would bind her to the stake.

Just then, a wild bugle sounded, echoing high and clear over the roofs and around the towers. Huge on their great horses, a host of warriors descended on the courtyard, blades flashing, voices loud in their battle cries. In the fore could be seen the white horse and armor and red-and-silver-blazoned shield of Lancelot du Lac.

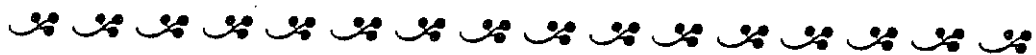
The fight was over in moments. Most of the people present were unarmed, as Gareth and Gaheris were, and put up little resistance. Lancelot rode away with Guinevere sheltered in his arms, her shining hair streaming out behind. The warriors left behind a pavement littered with wounded and dying. Among them were Gareth and Gaheris, their heads split open to the chin.

When Sir Gawain saw his brothers, he raised his hands to heaven and gave a howl of grief, quickly stilled. "Who did this?" he cried. And a page told him Lancelot had killed the young men where they stood.

"I will not believe it," Gawain said. "Lancelot would not kill an unarmed man."

"Lord, I myself saw it."

Then Gawain turned to the High King and said, "Lord, now prepare yourself for war. Lancelot killed my young brothers, who always stood by him, and they were unarmed. Now he is my family's enemy. I will pursue the man, and I shall never fail until one of us has slain the other."





*Robed in white and gold, Lancelot surrendered his lover to Arthur, while Gawain watched and thought of vengeance.*

So, on a spring day, the Queen's procession wound across the countryside to the High King's fortress at Carlisle. Lancelot brought Guinevere home with all that was her due. A hundred knights, liveried in green and carrying green branches to signify

Thus was declared the war that would rend the kingdom Arthur had made and destroy the finest knights in the world. With Gawain at his side, Arthur led a great army north to Joyous Garde, where Lancelot had taken Guinevere and the knights that had flocked to his side. They besieged the castle for fifteen weeks.

Lancelot held out against them. The chroniclers' records of the siege are a collection of brief, sad anecdotes – of angry parleying between Gawain on the ground and Lancelot on the ramparts, of sorties from the castle and furious battles in its shadow. In these battles, Lancelot refused to encounter the High King whom he had served. It was said that Bors once struck Arthur from his horse with a lance. Having the advantage, he drew his sword to strike off Arthur's head and shouted to Lancelot, "Sir, shall I put an end to this war?" But Lancelot forbade the killing. He himself dismounted and saw that Arthur was horsed again. The courtesy brought tears to the High King's eyes. But Gawain was at his right hand, murderous, implacable. No courtesy would ease his rage for vengeance.

Week after week, the bloody, futile siege dragged on. Word of Britain's misery spread across the English Channel, the chroniclers wrote, and reached the ears of the Pope in Rome. He put an end to the fighting for that time. He sent his bishops to the High King and to Lancelot, threatening interdiction on the realm if Guinevere were not restored to the King in safety and if the fighting did not stop.

"She may come back, for aught I care," said Gawain, when he heard of the judgment that had been brought by the bishops. "But the murderer must go. I will kill him if I can, for the sake of my young brothers."

So, on a spring day, the Queen's procession wound across the countryside to the High King's fortress at Carlisle. Lancelot brought Guinevere home with all that was her due. A hundred knights, liveried in green and carrying green branches to signify

peace, rode in her train. Beside her, Lancelot sat on his white horse, and both Queen and knight were clothed in white and gold. At the entrance to the hall, Lancelot dismounted and helped Guinevere from her horse, he led her through the ranks of waiting courtiers to Arthur's throne, and he kneeled beside her before the High King. Then he raised her and spoke for them both. For her safety, he declared her innocence, then he told the High King of his own devotion. He spoke of the battles he had fought beside Arthur and his companion Gawain, of the fellowship he had served so long. His words fell into a hush, painting again the picture of the High King's company when it was at its zenith, making his bid for peace.

But these words had no effect on Gawain, who stood beside the High King. He said to Lancelot, "The King may do as he will. But understand, sir, you and I shall never again be in accord while we live, for you slew my brothers treacherously and pitilessly, and they unarmed and unarmored, and I shall kill you for it."

"I would they had been armed, for then they would still be alive. Gawain, I slew your brothers all unknowing. I did not see them in the fray. You know I loved Sir Gareth better than my own kin, it was I who knighted him. I will bewail his death all my life, and not from fear of you, but because of his valor and devotion. And I will do this, Gawain, in his name and for the sake of peace. I will walk barefoot, in my shirt, from Sandwich to Carlisle. Every ten miles I shall endow a convent, where masses will be said for Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris, to redress the wrong."

A murmur ran through the hall at the offer from the proud knight. But Gawain said, "I never will forgive my brothers' deaths, and if my Uncle, the High King, should accord with you, he will lose my service." He turned his face away. Lancelot waited. At last, the High King shook his head, refusing the fealty of the man who had served him so long.

Lancelot made his departure with formal grace. He kissed the Queen and placed her hand in her husband's. He said for all to hear, "Madam, now I must depart from you and from this noble fellowship forever. And since it is so, I beseech you to pray for me, and I shall pray for you. And if ever you are hard beset by false tongues, send word, my good lady. If any knight's hand may deliver you by battle, it shall be mine."

Guinevere made no reply. She stood motionless by the throne as Lancelot strode from the High King's hall. All his green-clad knights marched with him, away from Arthur, heading for Lancelot's lands in France. Mordred gave a white-lipped smile.

