

II



❧ MORGAUSE ❧

Hrom the battlements of Caerleon, high on a spur of rock above the River Usk, stirrings in Arthur's territory could be detected at great distance. Along the valley track that cut from the coast of Wales to its heart, royal parties, bright in silks and gold, came to pay tribute to the High King. Heralds rode hither and thither on Arthur's business. And many lesser folk moved through the valley: shepherds driving their flocks toward the mountains, wandering friars in dun-colored robes, merchants bound for trade fairs, grouped for safety in long caravans of heavy-laden wagons. The sentries called these everyday travelers *pieds poudreux*—dusty feet—and gave them no more than idle glances, for they posed no threat to the High King's peace. But that peace was more vulnerable than they knew, and the road would bring its undoing. In its varied traffic one clear August day was a woman who served the forces that determined Arthur's fate.

Her party was a small one. Two heralds preceded her, one bearing a standard blazoned with a double eagle, one carrying the white flag of truce. The woman herself rode astride a black horse, she was straight-backed and slender, and the golden circlet of royalty adorned her dark hair. Behind her, flanked by a small guard and followed by a string of pack mules, rode four squires, all of them young, and one so modest in years that his mount was only a shaggy pony.

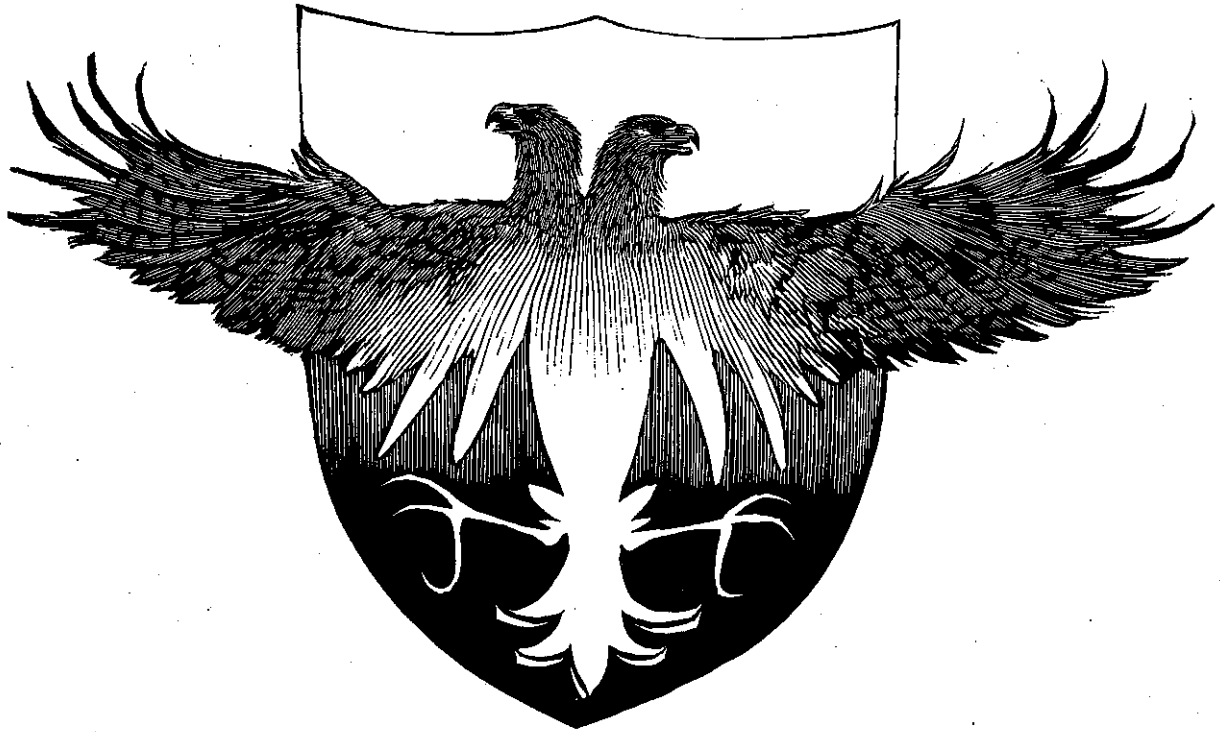
The crown and the standard told the story: The woman was the Queen of Lothian and Orkney; the white flag meant that either she or her husband sought Arthur's protection. On the walls of Caerleon, the sentries called to their officers, and by the time her little party had wound its way up the hill to the fortress, the gates stood open in welcome. Kay, the High King's foster brother, awaited them, the keys embossed on his signet indicating his office as Arthur's seneschal.

At a little distance from the gate, the Queen reined in her horse. Her heralds rode forward, they halted before Kay, and the standard bearer said, "Morgause of Lothian and Orkney greets the High King and craves audience with him. She bears messages from Lot, her husband."

"The High King sits in his hall," Kay replied. "She may attend him there." Mor-

A decorative horizontal border featuring a repeating pattern of stylized flowers and leaves, similar to the one at the top of the page.

Fierce and vigilant, a double eagle formed the crest of Lot of Lothian and Orkney.

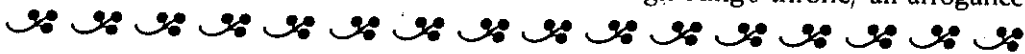


gause raised her brows at this brusqueness, but she said nothing. She set her horse forward at a stately walk, gesturing to her companions, and the little company passed into Caerleon. They followed Kay across the grassy castle yard, with its long tilting field where the quintain used for practice hung idle in the noon heat, past archery butts, past barracks and armories, past kennels and stables and mews, all of them built into the fortress's inner curtain wall. The place was busy with animals and people. White-wimpled serving-women gossiped at a well, under the eyes of lounging soldiers, a smith stood sweating at the door of his forge, framed by the fireglow within. A lymerer passed with a pair of leashed hounds, squires held horses ready for their masters. They regarded Morgause without interest. They were used to supplicants.

At the door of the King's hall, Kay paused and said, "No foreign guard may enter. You go to the King alone, lady." The stammer that flawed his speech was prominent.

Morgause looked down at him from long, green eyes. She shook her head. "I will leave the house guard and the heralds, although my honor is due them. But my sons will stay by me." She held out a hand, and Kay, after a moment's hesitation, helped her to dismount. When she stood beside him, she added in a hissing whisper, "They say, Ector's son, that your speech was crippled by envy when the High King took your place at your mother's breast." And before the seneschal could reply, Morgause glided by him into Arthur's hall, followed by her sons.

In that cool and lofty chamber, where only thin shafts of sunlight broke the gloom, the Queen fell on her knees before the High King's throne, all arrogance



masked and melted into softness. She begged forgiveness for her husband's rebellion, she offered a promise of his fealty. She asked that Arthur take her sons under his protection and train them for knighthood at his court. Behind her, the boys stared at the golden King and stood as still as stones while she gave their names – Gawain and Agravain, Gaheris and Gareth.

With the grace peculiar to him, Arthur raised the suppliant to her feet and accorded her the kiss of peace. The dark head tilted back on the long neck, Morgause held the King in her green gaze and gave a small, red-lipped smile.

The invitation was unmistakable. And Arthur was not displeased. He was, after all, a conqueror. Tales of his valor had already spread – of his vigor in battle, of his delight in adventure. What the Queen's smile offered seemed no more than his due.

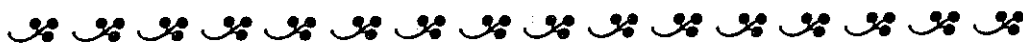
So the High King took the wife of his old enemy for his mistress. Morgause and her sons rested at Caerleon for a month. But if the bedding was pleasant, the price was high. Terrible dreams haunted Arthur's sleep – dreams of serpents, of perverse, misshapen beasts whose screams were louder, said the chroniclers, than the baying of thirty hounds, whose stench was that of death. Morgause in that month grew rosy and sleek, Arthur acquired a strained and ashen look, as if he were wasting.

Kay the seneschal watched all this, sullen but unspeaking. He sent messengers in search of the High King's guardian – not heralds, but huntsmen and woodsmen, who knew the secret byways and retreats of Arthur's realms. Late one evening, a cool breeze arose and blew through the great hall, the torches flickered and blazed up, twisting the shadows of the company so that they danced grotesquely on the walls. Then one shadow was added to their number. It was that of the Enchanter. When the breeze died, the old man stood enfleshed, a bent figure by Arthur's chair. He scanned the King's gaunt face and that of the woman who sat by him at his table. "Well, lord?" was all he said. At that moment, Morgause laid her white hand on the High King's arm. As if drugged by his passion, he rose and left the hall with her, acknowledging Merlin by no more than an absent nod.

In the morning, however, he sought the Enchanter's chamber. He did not mention the woman. But he asked Merlin for ease from his dreams, and he freely told them.

Merlin listened, his bony hands resting on his knees, his shadowed eyes contemplating the King. He remained still for some moments. Then he said, "I will tell you a tale. There lived once a princess who had some skill at magic, but not enough to give her all she wanted. She lusted for her brother, and there her spells availed her nothing, for he cast her off. Then she took for her bedmate a demon or, say some people, a man of Faerie. And when she was with child by this being, she told her people that the child was her brother's, got on her by force. The people had him chained and cut. They loosed packs of dogs on him, and the dogs tore at his flesh until he died.

"The woman's time came. In agony she brought forth a monster, a thing part



serpent, part lion, part leopard, part lascivious hare. Its cry was that of the dog packs that had devoured her brother's flesh.

"The princess, thus betrayed, was killed for her deed, but the beast she bore, no man could kill. It ran free, destroying the work of men." His strange story done, Merlin fell into abstracted silence.

"Well, then," said Arthur. "Unfold the meaning of the tale."

"The woman you lie with is half your sister. She is one of the three daughters Igraine of Cornwall bore before she became the Queen of Uther Pendragon. Each of the three has some skill that is more than mortal. But Morgause is the vessel chosen to hold the sword that will destroy you."

"What is the sword?"

"The son she will bear you. She carries him now. The people will call him the child from the sea, but he will be the beast that ravages the works of men. He will destroy you and, with you, all your knights."

"Who chose her as the vessel?"

"That I cannot say. Envious creatures, full of mischief, older far than I, my King. But in taking Lot's wife, you also chose. All men have a fate, and it is men who cause that fate to unfold."

"You did not warn me of this sister."

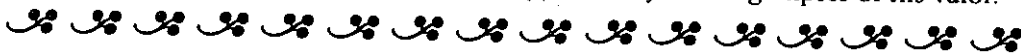
"I cannot always see clearly. I thought there was no need." Then Merlin, according to the chroniclers, added in his riddling way, "I may well be sorry also, for I shall die a shameful death, and you shall die a worshipful death."

Without another word, the King strode from the chamber, heading for the tower where Morgause was housed. He found her room empty, stripped of the furs she had brought, cleared of tapestries and cushions. Her boys were gone from the barracks. "She took them away," said Kay the seneschal, when he was summoned.

"Back to the empty islands where she belongs." But no sight of the Queen's party was seen on the valley road, no trace of her ships appeared in the Severn ports. It seemed that enchantment speeded her way and shielded her from the High King's wrath.

A time of waiting followed. The country was quiet. In the southwest, a castle slowly rose on a hill by a river. A thousand workmen—clerks, carpenters, smiths, quarriers, masons, carriers, barrowmen, pickmen—labored there. Although the Welsh bards claimed that Arthur had three principal courts—"Caerleon-on-Usk in Wales, Celliweg in Cornwall and Penrhyn Rhionydd in the North"—it was Camelot, this splendid fortress palace, built in the first years of his glory, that would live on in the minds of the chroniclers.

As for the High King, afflicted with the idle warrior's restlessness, prevented by the peace with Lot from pursuing Lot's wife, he went adventuring. The chronicles of the time are fragmented, mere shards of history, but they afford glimpses of his valor.



One story tells of a rogue King, a giant man called Ryons of Norgales, whose habit it was to ornament, or purfle, the borders of his cloak with the beards of lords he had conquered. Ryons' boast – widely reported – was that he had already captured eleven beards and that Arthur's would be the twelfth. When a messenger told Arthur of this prediction, the High King commented that his beard was "full young to make a purfle of it." He added, "Before long Ryons shall do me homage on both his knees, or else he shall lose his head. Tell him I will have his head unless he does me homage." Then he set out after Ryons. According to some accounts, the High King and two of his knights waylaid the man and killed forty of his warriors. Ryons, rather than be slain himself, yielded to Arthur and offered allegiance.

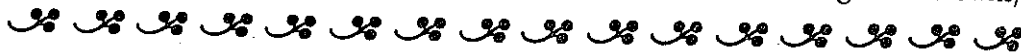
The chronicles also speak of other-world enemies, among them a cat, pulled as a kitten from a lake in a fisherman's net and taken to his cottage as a pet. The animal grew to monstrous size as soon as it was given shelter. It tore the fisherman to pieces and fled to the mountains, where it laired in a cave and laid waste to the countryside. Hearing of these things, the High King sought out the beast, with Merlin for his companion. The Enchanter whistled the animal from its lair, and Arthur braced himself to take its charge on his spear. So enormous was the cat, however, that it broke the King's spear in two. Then Arthur, "with his sword in his right hand and his shield at his breast," fought for his life. The cat's claws tore through the shield, through the King's hauberk, piercing his shoulder. With a desperate swing of the great sword Caliburn, Arthur severed the forelegs, and still the beast fought, rearing on its hind legs and snatching at the King with its great teeth. But Arthur delivered the death blow at last, and it retreated on bloody stumps to the shelter of its cave.

It was said, too, that Arthur pressed beyond the boundaries of his territories, that he invaded the realms of the old ones and braved their magic. People said that he ventured to lands where the fortresses were made of glass and robbed those lands of their treasure, that he journeyed to countries where unicorns ruled. No one knew whether this was true. The records of the ventures were written in riddles, and the treasures – if any indeed had been won – were hidden away or lost.

But all such encounters with magic were overshadowed by the dark enchantment that threatened the High King's life and people. On a day in late spring the year after Morgause had arrived at Caerleon, Merlin stood before Arthur in his hall and said, "My lord, the child I warned you of was born on the first day of May. I can see no more than that, for he is hidden from me. I cannot tell where he may be found."

The High King was not ready to let the old ones make a mockery of his power. He ordered that every male child in the realm born on the first day of May of that year should be delivered into his keeping. He did not say why. He did not have to: The power of the High King was absolute then.

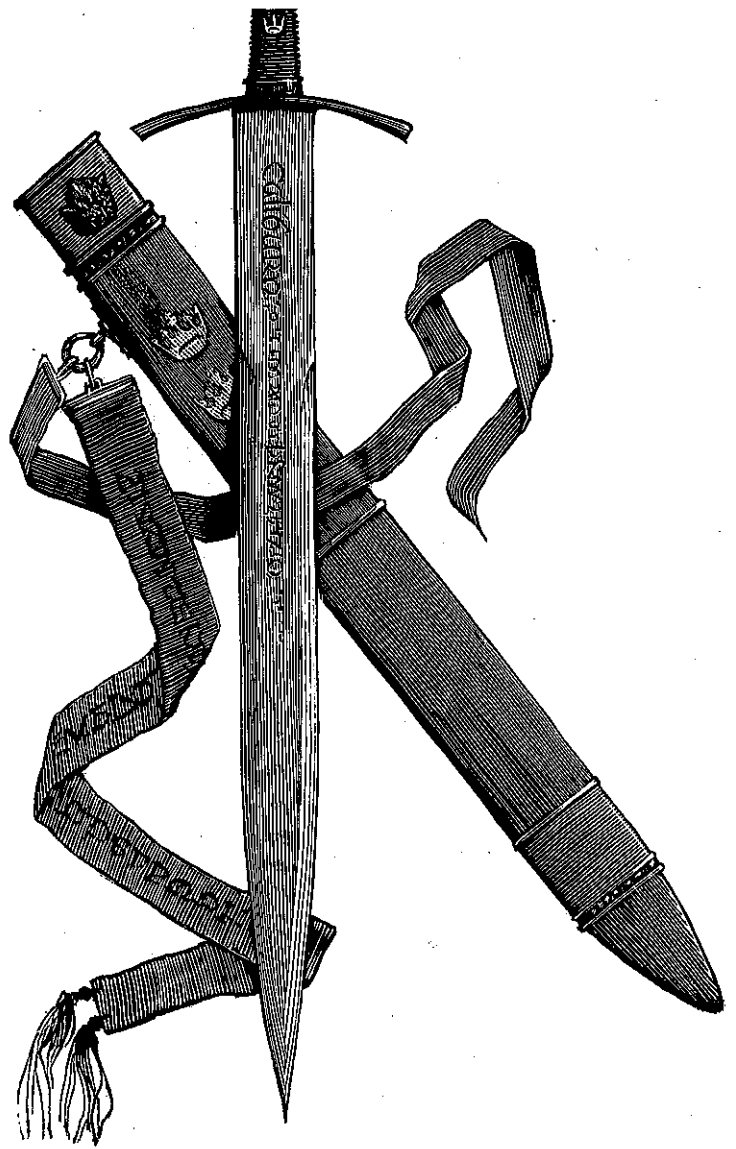
The riders of the King, bearing on their surcoats his device of golden crowns,



fanned out across Britain, hastening to every little kingdom—south to Lyonesse and Cornwall, into the Welsh lands of Gorre and Sugales and Norgales, to the island realms of the west. To Candebenet they rode, and Strangore, Northumberland and Carlot. And they traveled to Lothian and Orkney as well.

In the hamlets and villages, in the towns, on the manors great and small, in the castles of the princes, the scenes were the same. The High King's messengers would summon the people together and show his seal and read his command. Sometimes the mothers would deliver up their infant sons readily, believing perhaps that the King would give them good fortune. As for those who might disobey the command or fail to hear of it, Arthur's men were skillful questioners, and it took them little time to discover what boy babies had been born on May Day. When they learned of infants who had not been offered freely, they took them. In the night they strode into reed huts, into cottages of wattle and daub, into the small stone houses of the poorly wooded north, where even the sleeping benches were made of stone. They knocked aside angry parents and lifted the children from their wooden cradles or pallets of straw. The babies were already bundled up, whether in bleached linens or in silk or in the coarse rags of the poor; people swaddled their infants tightly in those days, to keep their limbs straight. The messengers placed them gently in the hollows formed by the high pommels of their saddles and rode away, down the narrow dirt tracks that led from the villages or the stone highways left from earlier days, when Rome held the land, and disappeared from view.

At Caerleon, Merlin said to Arthur at last, "The son you made has been found among these you have gathered. He was put to nurse at a farm on an out-island. I can tell you no more than that; my sight does not show me which of the children is he."



Caliburn, the fairy sword, was the weapon of King Arthur. The flaming blade was invincible, the scabbard had the power to heal the cruelest wound.

He paused, waiting for Arthur's response. When the King remained silent, he said, "Shall we then complete this work?" The High King nodded.

Lord and knights, farmers and fishermen, beggars and thieves, none of them knew where their infant sons had gone, and nothing was said to them. But after some months, whispers spread through the countryside, and they gave an ugly picture. They told of a stormy night when Arthur's soldiers carried the May babies to a seashore none could identify. They told how the children had been stripped of their swaddling and, naked, laid in a hide-covered ship. Its sail was set, and the ship was pushed off the shingle into the angry sea. As it sped wildly away from the shore, the soldiers turned and rode off. One watcher remained, however—a white-bearded man who stood by the water's edge, his robes rising like wings around him, until the wailing of the infants was lost in the storm and the ship disappeared in the sea spume.

It was Merlin who did the deed, the whisperers said, but Arthur who commanded that the deed be done.

But at Caerleon, after the whispers had spread, Merlin stared one autumn night into the hearth fire and said suddenly, "The child lives, lord. The sea gave it back, it thrives in some peasant's cottage, but where I cannot say."

Arthur's reply was strained and weary. "How can you tell?"

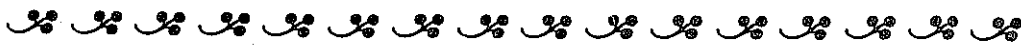
"I saw him for a moment in the flame, I heard his cry in the wind at the door."

"Those deaths are on my soul," said the High King. "And for nothing."

Merlin shrugged. "How many perished? Fewer than die in a siege or a sack. Fewer than would have starved. Fewer than the wasting sickness would have taken. Your race is a frail one."

This was the old Enchanter's only comment on the slaughter of the innocents. But its meaning was clear enough to those who knew the age. That Arthur was King had been shown by a sign from the gods, and something of divinity clung to his person. In him resided the safety of the kingdom: He was the sword that defended it and the font of its health; some believed that the very fertility of the land depended on his vigor. A threat to the King was therefore a threat to his entire realm, for if the King fell, strife and war, disease and famine would surely follow, destroying the fragile order that humankind imposed upon the world. It was clear enough to Merlin, from the circumstances of the child's conception and from the way its whereabouts were shielded from his vision, that the old ones were at work, clawing at the foundation of Arthur's power. In Merlin's terms, any weapon that could be used against them was justified, no matter how terrible that weapon might be.

The chroniclers, understandably, had little to say about the wicked deed; they simply recorded it without comment and passed on to other matters. No account of theirs, for instance, records the lament of the common folk to the slaughter of their offspring: The commoners always suffered.



The reaction of the nobility of England was another matter, and this the chroniclers did record. One of the children Arthur had taken was under the protection of Lot of Lothian and Orkney, accorded the honor due Lot's sons. By the date of that child's birth, Lot knew that the child was not his: It had been conceived at Caerleon, and he either suspected or knew who the father was, which gave him real cause for anger. But he was willing to claim the son as his own rather than repudiate his wife. And the child's disappearance gave him excuse for rebellion against his old enemy, who had dishonored him.

He had abundant allies. Some, indeed, were even then readying a blow against the High King. Ryons of Norgales, "wroth out of mind," the chroniclers said, was massing a host along the northern marshes of Arthur's Welsh territories to avenge the deaths of the children. His brother Nero marched beside him.

Lot called nine other allies to the rebellion: the Duke of Candebenet, Brandegor of Strangore, Claryaunce of Northumberland, the King with a Hundred Knights, whose land no one could name, Idres of Cornwall, Anguisshe of Ireland, King Cardelmans, the King of Carados, the King of Scotland. The forces assembled and moved southwest toward the marshes, sending heralds ahead to Ryons' armies.

But instead of joining Ryons and Nero they halted within a day's march of the Norgales host. Chroniclers later said that Merlin had appeared and beguiled Lot with false prophecy, but none told what that prophecy was. After a day had passed, however, a messenger arrived, bloodied and exhausted, he slid from his horse and gave his report to Lot: Ryons and Nero had been slain by Arthur's armies and all their warriors killed.

"Alas," Lot replied. "Had we been together, no host under heaven would have been able to match us." Nevertheless, he sig-

Near the Welsh border, Arthur met the forces of Lot and his rebel allies. As in every battle he had fought before, the High King won the day.





Wrought in gilded metal by Merlin, the twelve rebel rulers of Britain stood in effigy, bearing tapers that perpetually burned. The figure above them was Arthur, baring his implacable sword.

naled his companions and, with his son Gawain riding as squire by his side, he led the armies of the north toward the field where Arthur waited.

On a great plain embraced by bare mountains, the armies met. At the dawn of that day, rain had fallen, now the field lay dull and brown under a weak winter sun, muddy with the blood of battle, overhung by wheeling ravens. Along the northern edge of the plain, under the double eagle of Orkney, stretched the long line of the rebel forces, their lances upright, their great horses shifting restlessly, held in iron check while the warriors waited. Far across the field, in similar array, the helmets of Arthur's chevaliers gleamed, in the center of the line, a beacon for his people, floated the gold-crowned standard of the High King.

The rebel banners dipped and rose. The lines of knights trembled and began to move. They advanced, lance points wavering above their heads, at a walk that quickened to a trot, a canter, then a full gallop. The ground trembled as hoofs drummed out the rhythm of the charge. Lances swung down to battle position. Then, amid the ululating battle cries of the men and the shrieks of the horses, the armies crashed together.

Lances by the hundreds were shattered. Men and horses tangled in a wilderness of broken bodies and flailing hoofs. In the confusion of battle, the heralds who record-



ed it could see only isolated images: of Caliburn flashing fire as Arthur laid about him, of the brothers Balin and Balan, knights of Arthur who the heralds said fought so fiercely that none could tell whether they had been sent as angels from heaven or as devils from hell. And the heralds spoke always of Lot, the cornered bear, ferocious and unflinching, rallying his men to the double eagle again and yet again. "Alas," said the chroniclers. "He could not endure, which was a great pity, that so worthy a knight as he should be overmatched."

The heralds saw his death. Arthur's fellow, Pellinore of the Isles, pushed his way to the fore of the warriors who were pressing Lot, he raised his broadsword and swung. The blade was deflected, but it sliced into the neck of Lot's horse. The beast's lifeblood poured forth in a scarlet fountain, and the horse sank to its knees and rolled onto the ground.

In a moment, Lot was on his feet, swordless, facing Pellinore. And Pellinore swung again in a great stroke, "through the helmet and head unto the brows," splitting the northern King's head.

When Lot fell, the shattered remnants of the Orkney faction fled, all except young Gawain, who stood over his father's corpse, guarding it in death and crying vengeance on the killer, Pellinore. The field was left to Arthur and the carrion eaters that waited in the winter sky.

The High King walked among the bodies of his enemies, each of the rebel chieftains lay on the field in his own blood. Arthur had the bodies taken up with honor and borne south with his armies to Camelot. There they were buried with all that was due them. The tomb of Lot was placed separate from the rest and carved more richly to honor his valor, for Lot had brought himself glory by the manner of his dying, and Arthur was always generous in victory.

Merlin fashioned a token of that victory. From brass and copper gilded with gold he wrought images of each of the twelve chieftains who had fought Arthur. He clustered them together as they had died together, and over their heads he placed an image of the High King with his drawn sword raised in triumph.

Each of the rebel rulers held a lighted taper in his hand, each taper burned steadily day and night. They would burn, said the Enchanter, until he himself was dead and gone and no longer watched over the reign of the High King.

