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One Brief Shining Moment

Cycle 1: Kingship

The Lady of the Lake

Arthur stood on a beach of loose stone, listening to the shale crunch underfoot, watching the mild waves as they came to shore. He could not have said which lake it was. Indeed, Arthur saw every detail through a haze, as though the lake's very reality was precarious. His meeting with the Lady of the Lake felt like his oldest memory, somehow taking place even before his childhood as a squire or his time under the tutelage of Merlin. Time ebbed and flowed in his thoughts like the waves on the unnamed shore.

Mists crawled down from the hills and swept over the shimmering water. There, Arthur could see his reflection clearly, but he could see nothing below the water's surface. The vision reminded him of the weight of his crown - as yet undented; shiny and new - the crown of a King who had only recently taken the throne, and was not yet sure of the implications. The crown of a King unsure of his destiny; a King impatient to do great works but not yet prepared for them. The crown of a King with no sword of his own.

Through the dense mist, Arthur thought he could see dim lights on the surface of the lake, moving slowly and gracefully. Stars dotted the black sky above, but these lights were not reflections; they were brighter, like lanterns in the prows of silver boats. Somehow, the music of harps rose faintly from the depths, dampened by the distance and the mists but not muffled by them. The liquid crystal tones swam all about the still figure of the King as his eyes tried to pierce the mist. While the music swelled, the moving lights fell into vague rows, forming an honor guard. The mist parted just in front of the lights as though the great furls of vapor were bowing. A new, divine light glittered in the calm waters revealed by this division. Arthur tracked the azure brightness in fascination as it rose toward the surface of the misleadingly deep lake.

When the light met the cool air above the pool, the water bulged out suddenly, as though a tremendous force was required to break the tension of the boundary between lake and sky. Droplets fanned upward and the sonorous noise of displaced water rang pleasantly through the valley. A steel blade broke the placid smoothness and struck toward the heavens, held by a graceful feminine hand and an arm resplendent with fine cerulean cloth and glowing pearls.

The hilt was platinum and ebony. The pommel sparkled with subtle diamond dewdrops, and sprinkled miniscule motes of frost onto the robes of the great Lady who held it. The blade was long, silvery, and keen, unmarred except for an etching on either side. Held aloft with an unmoving solidity that belied the motion of the waves and ripples around it, the sword gleamed with unearthly light.

Arthur reached for it, knowing it was meant for him, knowing it had always been meant for him and would always be his, and found that the scene was closer than it had appeared. As he approached, the submarine hand casually spun the sword so the hilt faced skyward. The King grasped it. In that moment, it seemed all the stars shone brighter, seemed that clouds were

chased away to reveal the brilliance of the moon. A cold voice rose from the lake, and time stopped so that not a word would pass unheard.

“The name of the blade is ‘Caliburn,’ or ‘Excalibur’; that is to say, ‘Cut Steel’. It will serve you well. It will guide you to the truth; likewise, you may guide the world to your own truth by wielding it. Thus spoke Merlin when he entrusted it to me, to deliver into your hands. Farewell.”

The hand sank beneath the water and all the lights winked out. Illuminated only by the moon and stars, Arthur cried “Wait! What of Merlin? What news do you bring of him? Why is he not here? Come back! Come back!”

But he did not dare step into that enchanted lake to pursue the messenger who had seen Merlin last of anyone on Earth.

Arthur cradled the sword and thought of his lost friend, his ancient mentor. Why had this gift been passed to him? He had learned that Merlin never did anything without a reason. Where had Merlin gone, and why? Arthur felt unmoored, cast adrift in a world with no purpose. If Merlin had sent this sword, then it could be Arthur’s anchor, his way to regain that sense of purpose he always felt when near the sorcerer. He turned it in his hands, and the etching on the blade caught the moonlight. There was writing on both sides. On the first was written, “Take me up,” and on the other, in slightly shallower writing, “Cast me away.”

The King came to grips with his emotions. The shale felt more solid under his feet as he came to the resolution that had been brewing within him. With this blade at his side, he would be the mightiest King ever to reign in England. He felt as if the blade had ridden there on his hip for all time. King Arthur turned his face to the blazing moon and held Excalibur aloft. Moonlight gleamed on the blade like a promise.

“I swear by the sword Excalibur that I will be a new kind of King, the most powerful King in all England. I will bring the best warriors and kings to fight at my side, to follow where I lead,

to overcome the greatest adversity imaginable. I will command respect - respect I have earned like a man, not demanded like a whiny child. I will be a King of honor who forges a great Kingdom, wielding a great army of Knights like a scalpel to cut away the rot of England. This Kingdom will be as just as it is potent, and it will be remembered long after I am gone!”

A bolt of certainty ran through him, as though cast by Jupiter at his heart. The King had a destiny once more.

The Round Table - Prelude

“Arthur. Awaken.” The voice of Merlin could penetrate any dream. It transcended time and spoke to Arthur King, Arthur man, Arthur child - “Wart,” as Merlin sometimes called him.

The lad bestirred himself and sat up in his nightshirt. “What is it, Merlin? I was having the strangest dark dream....something about a sword.”

“There’s no time for that, Wart. I must tell you something.”

“I daresay it could have waited until morning, Merlin.”

Merlin ignored this. “There will be a contest.”

“When? What sort of contest is it? Is it a joust?”

“No, not a joust, nor any test of arms. It is a contest of creation. Your imagination, and your willpower, will be pitted against that of another.”

“So we will both build something, and compare the two.”

“Yes. But I say to you, though you will both fashion many things, it is not a test of the palpable. Remember this always.”

“Is the contest then very distant?”

“Yes, Arthur.”

“Then why do you warn me now?”

“You know how Time sets me adrift, dear boy. Sets me adrift until I float out of sight, lost. I lose track of what was once, and what is to be. I seek to prepare you for what is to come, when I may not be around. It is vital that you come out ahead in this contest, Arthur.”

The Round Table

Without Merlin, King Arthur often despaired of running a large kingdom. Nothing yet differentiated him from the hosts of minor kings all over England, and he had no source of advice on how to accomplish such a distinction. Arthur often went for long walks in the woods of his domain, mulling over all the words Merlin ever told him before his mysterious disappearance. The woods were lonely, for Arthur walked alone, but the castle of Camelot was lonelier still; despite the multitude of pages and servants, there was no one who held Arthur's confidences. No one to advise him - everyone accepted as law the very word of their King. No one to befriend him.

Excalibur held the kingdom together, a powerful boon. Never could Arthur's enemies defeat him in battle, with the King holding the great sword aloft at his army's head. Excalibur clove straight through armor and bone with ease, as though they were mere flesh. Soon the King's opponents learned to retreat from wherever Arthur happened to be, and Arthur learned to take tactical advantage of this phenomenon. Thus, the kingdom survived, and grew, but Arthur was unsatisfied and spent much of his time chasing squirrels and dreams in the mossy forest. The sword at his side was his only friend.

"Merlin!" he cried to the night sky, to the canopies of the dark lit trees. "Why did you leave me now, when I most need your comforting, stimulating words! You told me I was to create, but all the challenges I find before me are challenges of arms. Who will advise King Arthur?"

He struck out with Excalibur at a low-hanging tree limb. The blade separated the thick branch from its tree. As it fell, Arthur brought the sword swiftly back to its ready position, cutting the branch again on the upstroke. This King did his best thinking while swinging a weapon.

It was while engaged in this practice that Arthur slowly conceived an answer to his questions. Who would advise King Arthur? Why, whoever he chose - he was the King! He could choose the best in the land! And wasn't befriending someone an act of effort, an act of creation? "Making" a friend. "Forming" a friendship. Arthur would surround himself with the most renowned tactical advisors, the wisest commanders, the most experienced knights and nobility of England. As his power grew, he would forge a circle of friends from the finest men Europe had to offer, even swaying the champions of other nations to his cause.

He swept Excalibur back and forth as he mused, clearing brush from the road absentmindedly. The urge to build swept over him.

As dawn melted over Camelot, the King staggered through the gates bearing an enormous hunk of roundwood three lesser men couldn't have lifted. The hinges of the banquet hall door splintered in his haste to enter and unload his burden. Without a word of explanation to any of his courtiers, he turned around and strode back into the forest, returning shortly with a piece that was possibly even larger than the first. After several trips, there was a mound of heartwood in the hall, and a crowd of flabbergasted residents surrounding it. The muscled King dropped his final harvest directly onto the long rectangular dining table, fracturing it. Heedless of this destruction, he organized his materials according to some plan only he could see.

The King's arms knotted as he swung Excalibur's enchanted blade into the nearest log. With deft, powerful strokes, he sliced away cants of wood until he had two thick oaken planks, the red heart of the tree revealed. Again and again, sawdust flew until the trees finished their transformation into timbers of different lengths. Careful sword strokes lent angles to the ends of each board.

By this point, an eager and foresighted kitchen boy had run for a blacksmith, who appeared carrying tools and an apron full of stout iron nails. Arthur, the blacksmith, Sir Bors,

and Sir Bedivere began the process of fitting the hefty pieces together according to Arthur's jubilant, shouted instructions. Slowly, a hulking, circular table took form in the great hall. All the knights, in full armor, leapt onto the table at Arthur's command. It held their weight easily, and they laughed together at the absurd picture they presented, and passed around a wine jug.

"Gentlemen," Arthur called. The friendly hubbub, already more familiar and cordial than in times past, died to a lesser level, though the aura of hearty companionship did not fade. "Gentlemen, behold the Round Table. Here you chosen Knights will sit as my council, my advisors. Here, all have the ear of the King; all have equal voice. Notice there are many empty seats. In the years to come, we will fill those seats with the greatest men from all over the world, those who demonstrate the noblest virtues, those who contribute most to our new cause: to make Camelot the greatest seat of power in the world."

"Here in our England, threats to life and happiness will be few, and joy will increase with each passing season. Our military might will uphold the well-being of every citizen, until we are the envy of the world. You will advise me on how to make Camelot the most sought-after sight of all time, a place that is remembered after mountains crumble and the constellations cycle around the heavens. The kind of place you tell your children you were lucky to visit for just a day or two, while Arthur ruled there. A place where it never rains until it is convenient, a place protected from the winds of winter, a place where women and children walk unafraid, where even Knights may pass unarmed and unarmored if they so choose. A castle of blazing glory in a kingdom of riches and amenity! Let us strive to make it a reality, by the power of Excalibur."

Cycle 2: Queenship

Secrets - Part 1

England was a place of many secrets, when Arthur roamed its hills. The land itself held secrets. Nature held secrets, drawn up from the soil through the roots of ancient trees, drawn into rocks formed before the coming of life. The men of the land held secrets too, and discovered secrets, and could even create secrets - man's preeminent ability.

Druids and wizards made it their business to know secrets. They held their secrets close to their breasts, knowing that a secret shared loses something of itself. A powerful wizard might live forever, unless slain, keeping all those secrets locked up within himself and never passing them along to another soul. How indeed could such a master select a mind worthy of sharing the secret? Who could he trust: trust to keep the secret undiminished, to work toward the same purposes as himself without betrayal, to wield its power competently?

And who could he risk changing? Sharing a secret with someone may change the secret, yes, but it also forcibly changes the one who hears. The secret remakes him or her, alters purposes, progresses their personality toward new ends. Just who will emerge from your session of shared confidence can never be known, but they won't be the same person who leaned close to your lips and heard your whispered words.

Recalcitrance

“There is only one way forward,” the weary King confided to his Knights of the Round Table. He propped himself up on his sword; responding to his will, it did not mar the wood of the table. “I must wed Guinevere, daughter of Leodegrance.”

“Do you complain of such a task?” laughed Sir Bors. “The woman is a great beauty, I hear.”

“And it will be necessary to sire an heir. A loathsome task indeed!” shouted Sir Bedivere. He nudged Sir Ector, who grinned at Arthur.

“We must have an alliance with Carmelide,” growled the King. “Their armies muster uncomfortably close to our borders, and their king, Guinevere’s father, has reason enough to hate me. It is in my heart that it may already be too late.”

“Leodegrance hates your true father, not you,” said Ector, softly.

“Nevertheless, he harries my scouts and tempts my anger constantly. You cannot deny it is a problem to be solved.”

“It would be good for you to have a wife and an heir,” said Ector. “I support this plan.”

“The necessity of a clear heir, lest even a successful kingdom be plunged into bloody civil war, is a flaw in the system. I hereby pass a new law!” shouted Arthur over the voices of the Knights, who had begun shouting their own opinions on war. “In the absence of a clear heir of royal blood, the throne of Camelot and the right to hold Excalibur may pass to the choice of a quorum of the nobles of the Round Table. They have three months to choose a new King, through debate and voting. In those three months, the rule of Camelot shall pass to a Regent of my choice, whom I shall name in writing well before my death or abdication. This Regent will

hold only limited powers, to be named later. This new law is not open for debate, gentlemen! Still your tongues!”

The table fell silent. Strange, unprecedented edicts were becoming increasingly common, but the Knights still struggled to adjust to their frequent occurrence.

Arthur ordered the orange beeswax candles around the table’s perimeter be lit. A page scurried forward to set flame to their wicks, and to light the enormous centerpiece that hung over the table. Glass beads, shards of thin red agate, and even precious gems glittered in the fiery chandelier. Once lit, sparks continually cascaded down in cycles, from the inner and upper rings to the bronze outer hoops, then fell brimming over the edge in a golden firefall that somehow vanished a few feet above the heads of the seated Knights.

Arthur looked around the table, meeting each of their gazes in turn, peering into their eyes and watching how each reflected the flarelight. He seemed to learn something from each vitreous reflection. “The matter of Carmelide is serious. I urge you all to prepare your men should anything untoward occur. Bors, you are henceforth in charge of the defense of the kingdom while I am away.”

“Away, Lord?”

“Yes. I go to visit Leodegrance myself, to ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage.”

The King soon reached Carmelide, dressed in his finest glittering mail, a circlet of braided gold upon his brow. His saddlebags were loaded with treasures and intriguing gifts. Leodegrance received him with cold courtesy.

“Your Majesty, you... honor me with your visit. But for the ill your father and predecessor, Uther Pendragon, did me during his reign, perhaps I would accede to your request for my

daughter's hand and to an alliance between our kingdoms. As it stands, I cannot forgive the Pendragon line. I was Uther's right hand, but he insulted my honor by dismissing me from his service and turning to a sorcerer for strength. You, a green king with that trinket of a magic sword, not even backed by the might of Merlin as your father was, can do nothing to restore my honor. So I have ordered your horses stabled in my lots, and fresh horses are being brought to bear you home again immediately. Thank you for the visit, Arthur King."

"Esteemed King Leodegrance, I beg you to give me some sort of chance. This I propose: allow Guinevere the choice. Simply let *her* decide if she will wed me; let the decision and the fate of our alliance rest in her hands."

The old king threw back his head and let his laughter fill the vaulted stone halls. "Guinevere? My daughter's heart is stone. I would have to force her to marry even the strongest, most handsome lord, even should I desire such a thing for the good of my kingdom and the comfort of my daughter. She does not seek the prestige of queendom. She does not seek a fair face, or strong arms. She cares nothing for alliances, and wishes only to ride through the woods on her old mare, and to play at games with her silly ladies in waiting." He laughed again, a callous laughter that chilled the air. "If Guinevere but gives the word, yes! You will have your marriage, and our adverse kingdoms will be allied. Ha, Merlin's most powerful beguiling charm or glamour could not move my Guin's lips to part in a word of assent!"

Contemptuous laughter followed Arthur from the throne room. He did not go to Guinevere's chambers, or ask any questions of the men and women of Carmelide. Arthur mounted his stallion with an expression of grim determination and rode back to Camelot.

Secrets - Part 2

A secret shared is a man's heart bared.

Forsake the path that Merlin dared.

Merlin knew many things about his fate, yet he was helpless to change it. Perhaps it was the very foreknowledge that tied his hands. From Merlin's mutterings and koans, Arthur thought the wizard's insights took the form of tiny circles of candlelight in the pitch dark forest of all available knowledge; that is, he knew some events in detail, while he might be entirely ignorant of the events leading up to them.

Whatever the reasons, Merlin could not avoid his ultimate fate. The wizard knew he had a great task before him, for which he would need every available resource; perhaps he simply needed an ally in Nimue and did not realize the price of her help would be his own fall.

Merlin's descent into the darkness of the Tree began with the sharing of secrets. Nimue came softly to Merlin's shore in her silver coracle with the bright lantern atop the prow. She stepped into his musty hideaway with an air of confident familiarity. That dire Lady of the Lake suaded Merlin to share his skills with her. As though a barrier was breached, a dam burst, Merlin taught her much of what he knew. In his rush to divest his secrets, he taught others as well, though they were not so potent, and none of them secured his love. In this, he betrayed an ancient principle, wherein only the proven could take on full sorcerous apprenticeships.

Nimue seldom visited Merlin after she had drained him of his lore, preferring to hone her magic in private. But Merlin's second protege made the dangerous crossing to his hermitage many times, and divided Merlin's secrets still further, until the two of them were near-equals, and rivals. Merlin was reminded once more of the ancient protocols between magicians, and

began to set events in motion that would bring him into open, sanctioned contention with his rival. Their two powers, their differing theories attuned over decades, would clash in an awesome display of might and mastery. Many would be drawn in, their lives changed without their assent. Many would be changed by proximity to exposed secrets. It was time once more to host the contest which had been waged for as long as there had been secrets, and would be waged until the last secret was committed to paper.

Cultivation

Very shortly after Arthur's return to Camelot, the place was stirred up like an anthill. Merchants, servants, and newly hired hands rushed in all directions, hardly able to avoid each other. Only the will of Excalibur kept the place from complete chaos.

It was possible to discern patterns of thought among the different types of people. Orderly stonemasons drove carts of multicolored rock, from smooth pea-gravel to gnarled boulders, in systematic lines like marching ants. Blacksmiths imposed their presence upon lone fractions of the mess, striding through the crowds holding curled cast iron rods or small sculptures. Landscapers carried their loads of mulch or bundled tree seedlings in single-wheeled barrows, allowing them to dodge around the slower carts, which they did with reckless abandon in weaving, circuitous paths, sometimes forgetting their destination in their haste to outmaneuver everyone else. Even animals could be spotted in the crowds: in addition to horses dragging loads, Arthur had ordered covered cages of small birds, a huge caravan-like wagon decorated with a butterfly motif, and a large barrel of foamy praying mantis egg cases.

Through it all strode Arthur, calling instructions in a voice that carried over the din. The King's respect for his land was palpable in the way his orders avoided the trampling of lawns, addressed the safety of careless children. Once the entire system stopped frozen in tableau to allow a mother cat to proudly lead her kittens across the square to the safety of a hole in the castle wall. Then it was on again, with Arthur running to help an old man carrying too heavy of a load, then a confused sculptor trying to put his artwork in the same place a mossy path was supposed to be installed. Somehow, it all worked, like a graceful mandala pattern of craftsmen and their materials.

Arthur ran ahead, excited as a child. He led the way to a spot on a grassy hill just outside the castle walls, overlooking a thicket of trees wearing their fall foliage. He broke ground with Excalibur, heedless of damaging its edge, which never seemed to dull. The scent of broken earth rose up through the air, infusing the atmosphere with Arthur's excitement at this new beginning. It reached even to the castle's heart, and to the outlying villages, so that anyone not attracted by the commotion finally came out to get a look at what the King was doing tonight.

Men followed behind with shovels. They carefully enlarged the hole Arthur had begun until it was the size of a cottage foundation. The serfs hopped from the hole to make room for masons, who began laying stone, sealing the gaps with smooth white clay and mortar. Someone dropped off a bundle of ceramic tile and pipe. As work continued there, Arthur moved off to a different part of the lawn.

He supervised the installation of trees of all sizes; many would require decades to reach their full potential, while others had been moved from where they'd been grown and trained beforehand. He made adjustments to some fencing that was being installed, and watched in satisfaction as patterned stone walls climbed upward everywhere he looked. In places where bare dirt scarred the land, strips of sod were carefully placed and watered by a bucket chain.

An observer from the castle ramparts would note that Arthur did not lay things out in straight rows. Paths curved to go around obstacles and were met by other paths coming from different directions, and perhaps eventually curved back in on themselves if they had a mind to. The cast iron fences never forbade a wanderer outright from walking in a certain direction, for they had many secret gates or low spots, but seemed to guide footsteps along particular ways that afforded the best views. Even the fruit trees did not form an orderly orchard of military rows, but spiraled around in intermixed blends of various species, so that pinks and whites and purples blossomed in a coruscating promise of fruitful autumn.

The shovel work ended in record time. Women and children armed with trowels assisted with much of the next stage, moving a panoply of plants into the earth. Transplanted vines were draped over stone statues, wound up stone walls, to begin their long growth into thick, beautiful ivy. Flowers lined all the paths, lifting their heads to the sky, delicately scented. Workers began the process of training and twining shady bowers of willow, laurel, and rarer plants.

The most wondrous flowerbed of all was a bank of coarse, fuzzy foliage with transparent, graceful white buds. Through these unopened blossoms, the fragile stamens and other inner secrets of the flower-to-be could be seen. Arthur called these his "moonflowers," obtained from a traveling merchant from Asia who spoke very little of their language and never passed through again. They were set among boulders of milky white quartz.

In a single day, the hardest labors of creation were finished. Every stone encountered during excavation was worked into the final design in some way.

In a week, the last detail had been placed and declared perfection. On that same night, Arthur watched in satisfaction as two spies for Carmelide crept to the stables and rode in the direction of Leodegrance's castle. Sir Bedivere asked, "What is it all for? What have you wrought here, Arthur?"

"Ah, Bedivere, this is a work to rival that of any king! This, good knight, is a Garden, the jewel of Camelot. And, I hope, the bride token of Guinevere."

Guinevere arrived early one morning. Arthur watched from afar as she swept into the Garden without awaiting an invitation. The moonflowers were still open from their nightly commune with the stars, just beginning to fold into themselves when she reached their stones. She paused at every new revelation. She stumbled across a few secret surprises, and he saw

that she kept an eye out for them from then on. When she grew tired, she stopped for a rest on an ornate stone bench where moss grew underfoot, and a trellis of golden trumpet-like flowers stretched overhead. Hummingbirds with ruby throats darted to and fro, seeking nectar.

Guinevere worked out how to dispense a dish of nectar from a device set into the bench, and held very still while three of the emerald birds drank from her hand.

Her smile, at first a tight line etched into her jaw, grew as she explored more of the garden. She erupted with delight when she found the imported silkworms in a grove of white mulberry. The servants on duty allowed her to sit in a comfortable chair and wind a few rods of raw silk from the discarded cocoons. The new generation of fluffy white moths circled about the grove, alighting on the workers. When she left, they presented her with a bolt of finest pure white silk. She insisted on carrying it herself, draped over her shoulders, rather than having a page bring it to her coach.

Guinevere of Carmelide followed the spiraling paths to the center of the garden, longing to take all of them at once. In the center, where Excalibur had performed the original groundbreaking, she came upon a fountain of gleaming springwater, spraying liquid life high into the air to course down a labyrinth of channels in the stone. Water features led out from the fountain to irrigate the rest of the garden and form many trickling brooks or pleasant pools in the shade. Guinevere turned and caught Arthur's eyes across the distance; a powerful connection traveled between them. She smiled benevolently, dipped her fingertips in the water, and made the sign of the cross. Then Arthur came to her in the Gardens, and she kissed him passionately beneath the marble rotunda with its hanging tendrils of fuschia and wisteria.

Secrets - Part 3

“Good luck, Wart. Remember everything I told you.” Those were the last words Arthur ever heard Merlin say. He was not yet King then, though in a few short weeks his destiny would be made clear. The wizard turned with shoulders hunched, cloak dragging over the leaves, and left Arthur all alone. And there were many things Arthur failed to remember.

Far away, Nimue’s magic flared, and Merlin was trapped forever.

Immediately, Merlin’s new apprentice leapt from her hiding place, crying “No!” But Morgana’s words, and her magics, were in vain, for Nimue had trapped Merlin in a web of his own knowledge. Nimue brushed off the mortal woman and walked to the edge of a pool that ebbed from the trunk of a great cedar, as if the tree were bleeding. There, Nimue stepped inside a small argent ship and doused her lantern, leaving the glade in darkness.

The sorceress gave a roar of anger, and power flared around her to light her surroundings. Nimue was nowhere to be seen. There were no ripples in the pool. There was no sign of life other than the massive cedar, which spread out buttressed roots like a small castle in the water. Other, lesser, trees grew from the main bole, connected by gnarled sections of wood. The huge canopy scarcely moved in the breeze, so stiff were its scaly leaves. It seemed to obscure many secrets within its twigs. The impression of a fortress was so strong that the sorceress felt an overwhelming urge to touch it and step inside. As she walked across the water to the ancient trunk, she felt the presence of Merlin within, and felt the force of his warning slam against her like a lash. She was forced to stop a few feet short of the central trunk. Instead, she leaned against one of the sub-trunks rising like a turret from the reflective water.

“I live yet, Morgana,” whispered a tiny voice from the tree. “Our contest goes on.”

Cycle 3: The Rise of Camelot

Elaine

Elaine arrived in a tall wooden ship, its gunwale wrapped in velvet. Upon the lavender sails, a golden talon was emblazoned. Two rotund sailors sat in the crow's nest, knee to knee, drinking or pausing occasionally to look through their shared spyglass. Below them, Elaine herself stood at the prow, plaiting a pattern of white lace and staring at the wonders of Camelot. Her flaxen hair streamed out behind her, trailing on the planks of the smooth deck.

She saw the castle, solid as a mountain, enchanted with sculptures and gargoyles and spiral staircases and roofwalks, and white streamers to celebrate the wedding. She saw the Garden, which had grown faster than one might believe possible; the ranks of tree and shrub and forb had closed until the paths and lawns were the only unused spaces. It blazed with life in the warm sunlight. She saw the field where events were held, bedecked with white silk, demarcated with different areas for dancing, socializing, and eating. It was all organized around an enormous central table piled with pearly cakes arranged in the shape of Camelot itself. Chocolate frosting picked out every detail of window and crenellation. A red velvet cake, slightly smaller yet still grandiose, represented Carmelide.

Lilting minstrelsy filled the air, tripping melodies sauntering overhead from multiple directions, for there were several bands at work in various corners of the venue. They had been instructed to play only songs that would meld together, though they played in different styles, so that guests might saunter from place to place to hear more of their favorites.

Outside the velvet ropes of the main square, the Knights were in charge of the feast. They were currently turning spits, skewered hog and carved venison, so that the smells of seared meat wafted enticingly in the direction of the crowd.

As the ship pulled up alongside this wondrous sight, Elaine vaulted over the side and landed gracefully on the shore. She ran up to Arthur and Guinevere, clasping their hands tightly in her own. "Arthur! It has been so long. My father sends his regards, as well as these four knights, who wish to prove themselves worthy of a seat at your Round Table!"

"I thank him," said Arthur. "The weather is perfect for this joyous day! Just as I ordained." He winked. "Will you be staying awhile? There is room for you and all your men."

"I fear I am only here for the wedding. Guinevere, you look ravishing!" Elaine said, a mischievous look in her eye. Guinevere wore an ivory gown made of silk and taffeta, with glass beads, pearls, and crystals embellishing the edges of the neckline. The bodice was detailed with delicate tiny seeds of glass, and a celtic girdle made of crystals that glistened like dew in the morning sun. The taffeta sleeves fluted to her wrists and flowed elegantly behind her when she moved. Adorning her neck was a darkened, fully bloomed silver rose with a long stem featuring two dainty leaves. Handcrafted from steel, with a chain connected to the blossom and the end of the stem, it rested elegantly across her collarbones, proudly displaying the antiqued silver finish that brought a darkness to the leaves and the petals. Sitting upon her head was a delicate silver circlet created from vines, and adorned with leaves and porcelain flowers that weaved in and out of her hair playfully. She was not yet crowned, but she already looked like a queen.

"You must be so excited," she told Guinevere happily. "My name is Elaine. We actually met once, when we were girls! I remember we angered your father by throwing apples at the guards from one of the towers. They were wearing armor, of course, and I think they actually got a good chuckle out of it."

“I remember that day well,” Guinevere replied. “Have you made plans for a marriage yourself?”

“Oh no. There have been one or two barons Father thought might suit, but one turned out to be a drunkard and the other a lout. Perhaps I’ll pick someone out while I am here!”

“Then you must visit the ballroom!” cried Arthur. He grasped her firmly around the waist and spun her into the heart of the dance. They danced for a fraction of a song, then Arthur introduced her to Sir Bedivere, the most handsome knight in his court. Soon the beautiful, spritely girl had a line of men waiting for a dance. Eventually she excused herself, so that she might watch events without being in the thick of them.

In the forest above Camelot, a tall woman in midnight blue watched Elaine with sharp eyes. A voice in the woman’s ear whispered, “We must take care. Our contests often drag extra participants into the fray. No one who is involved is ever...unchanged.”

“The contest has always gone on regardless, Merlin. And it *always will*.”

“It is hard to disagree, when even my ensnarement changed nothing.”

“I am glad, Merlin. For this is a time of abundance! So much potential in this century, in this land, and their power seems to grow with every generation! So many worthy candidates. And Arthur gathers them all here, seats them around his table and calls them brother. You should warn your student not to squander his strength, not to fraternize with those who are not involved. It will only weaken him.”

“We shall see,” whispered the bodiless voice of Merlin. “Perhaps the sources of Arthur’s strength will surprise you.”

“I think I’ve won already, old man,” laughed the woman. “And my student’s first blow has not even been struck.”

“We shall see...” whispered the voice. “We shall see...”

The Wedding

Dusk fell on Arthur's wedding day. Trumpets sounded as the bands broke off to a prearranged signal. Streamers shot into the air along with fireworks of scarlet and vermillion. Elaine watched with a tear in her eye as King Arthur and Guinevere walked down a broad mossy lane between rows of courtly men and women, all wearing their finest. Young girls ran ahead to bedeck the path with orange blossoms. Instead of Excalibur, Arthur wore a sword of pure gold on a silver chain, with real flowers around the hilt. Chains of woodland flowers circled the points of his crown. Guinevere had added glittering rose petals to her outfit, which occasionally fluttered to the ground.

Beneath the full moon, firebreathers hurled goutts of red flame in crossing paths. These artists fell away, revealing new ranks of firebreathers armed with golden flames, succeeded by silver, then green. Elaine stood within a few yards of them, but she couldn't see how they altered the color of their fire.

A fleet of white doves was released into the air. They settled in the forest to coo warmly. Ice sculptures of birds clutching living olive branches heralded a reign of peace for the new monarchs. They were joined by intertwined dragons and griffins of ice, representing the alliance of the two families.

Arthur and Guinevere walked with pride toward an arch that had been constructed on the lawn. The cast iron latticework had been fitted with panes of colored glass that filtered the various sources of light: the setting sun turned orange, the candles threw green shapes across the dark grass, white moonlight brightened to gold, and the fire was transformed into fractal rainbows that climbed the robes of the waiting priest.

Between the smiling couple and the place they were to be wed, two rows of hand-picked knights guarded either side of the path. At their head, Leodegrance stood proudly gazing at his daughter. Across from him, wielding Excalibur, was Sir Ector, whom Arthur still thought of as a father. Ector would act as best man, personally defending the King and his bride should the occasion call for it.

As the monarchs drew near, every knight raised his sword and formed an arch of blades. Excalibur called forth a glint of might from each blade to join the other lights in the scene. Arthur and Guinevere passed beneath the arch, and each of them could see shimmering tears beneath the helms of their family warriors. The moment they passed under the final two swords and set foot on the wedding platform, a brilliant white light blazed out from the distant Garden. Every moonflower turned its face toward Guinevere and shone with all its might, to be reflected and magnified by the pure white quartz, strengthened by the rising moon.

The music struck up again. Merriment abounded. To the fiery song of the moonflowers, in the presence of God, Guinevere whispered her vows to King Arthur and became Queen. Her face softened and transformed as she smiled beatifically at her new husband, who swept her up in his strong arms and carried her easily into his magnificent castle.

The feast began the minute they were out of sight. When the plates were cleared away, a great roar for cake went up. Sir Ector approached the magnificent cake with an impish grin, still wearing Excalibur. With a roar, he drew the blade and began slicing the cake into neat pieces. A cheer rose from the crowd as they hastened to claim a piece. Sir Ector declared it the best cake he had ever eaten.

When the last of the frosting had been wiped from children's mouths, Arthur and Guinevere reappeared in simple robes. They bade the guests goodbye and handed out ornate

gifts to everyone who remained. Elaine received a filigreed snow globe on a mahogany base, which she tucked away carefully as she left for her rooms in the castle.

“The power of a secret diminishes when shared, Arthur.”

Arthur turned. “Oh. Greetings, Morgana,” he said. He reached into his pouch to find a gift for her, but she stayed him.

“I am not here for gifts or feasting. I am here to warn you about the company you keep. Every time you share a confidence, open your heart to someone - yes, even to Guinevere - you risk everything. You risk their well-being as well as your own. Keep your counsel to yourself!”

Arthur thought back to the first time he had spoken to his half-sister. She was much older than him, being the daughter of Arthur’s mother by her first husband Gorlois. They had not been raised together. Indeed, when they met, he had not know of their kinship, though he now suspected she had long been aware of it herself. Arthur was visiting Tintagel under the tutelage of Merlin. Morgana had swept him away from his mentor and asked him many questions, given him a run of strange tests.

Later, he overheard her talking to Merlin, discussing how well-rounded the boy seemed to be, how much potential he held along so many different paths in life. This fact seemed urgent to her. Merlin had reluctantly agreed, saying the boy (“Wart”) had as much potential to be a warrior as to be a magician, and would have made an equally masterful craftsman or healer.

“Then he is a superb choice,” she had said. And from then on she eyed him with strange looks.

It was no different now. Morgana stared at Arthur adversarially, almost hungrily. Her gaze discomfited him, and his hand twitched toward Excalibur, at his belt once more. He suppressed the impulse; he didn’t believe his half-sibling would actually do him harm. Arthur’s

eyes blazed back at her. "Do not speak of Guinevere that way. You know nothing of her, or of how far I will go to defend what is mine." She backed away a step, smiling.

"Arthur!" barked a new voice. "Arthur, I wanted to apologize." The King turned once more and beheld Leodegrance striding toward him. They clasped hands at the forearm, in the ancient gesture of peace, proving to each other they held no concealed weapons. "Guinevere seems truly happy to be here. Truly! She is a changed woman. She will make a loving wife for you. And that Garden! Magnificent! Camelot is a jewel worth defending, Arthur. Carmelide is your firmest ally from this day forth. Never doubt it!"

As Leodegrance left, Arthur spun back to Morgana, but of course there was no one there.

The Road

By now, the fame of the Round Table had spread far and wide. Arthur had his pick of knights, warriors, and noble counselors to fill its seats. Camelot was an island of order in the chaos of barbarism, as elsewhere in Europe petty kings rushed to fill every gap of power whenever another fell. The King decided the time was ripe to share Camelot's prosperity across the land.

He began by uniting the nearby smaller kingdoms under his rule. Awed by the might of Excalibur, many joined him bloodlessly. In this way, he acquired even more Knights without any loss of life, which was paramount to his next plans.

Through these united baronies, he built a great Road, snaking to the coast and writhing outward in search of new lands. The Road was broad enough for three carriages to pass abreast, built of local stone and soil in a patchwork of colors. Men erected wayside camps at regular intervals, where one could usually find rest, trade, and a good story. In this way, many people met who otherwise would not have. Many traveled for the first time.

Knights and couriers patrolled it, bearing news and assistance. Watchtowers went up to assist them in their defense of the Road. Though Arthur spearheaded all these initiatives, the users of the Road soon began contributing according to their own lifestyles. It became common for knights and travelers to carry letters between the kingdoms brought closer by the Road. Even a casual acquaintance of no importance could be attained cheaply by paying a scribe to write down your correspondence, if you did not know how to write, and then finding someone who was heading that way anyway. Systems sprang up to make this even more efficient, urged on by the creative mind of Arthur. Soon, every wayside was doing a small trade in scribing little wax tablets that could be encoded with a message, delivered, then wiped clean for a new

report. Arthur encouraged people to coordinate their travels by mail, so that many would travel together in caravans for company and mutual protection. Fully armored Knights assisted in this duty whenever they could be spared.

Though the Road cried hungrily for more provinces to devour, there were many who did not trust its merits. Arthur offered to pay for their connection to the Road and allow the small kingdoms to be autonomous, but they refused. The King accepted this until they began sending bands of armed men to waylay travelers on those portions of the Road already extant. Then it was war.

Time and again, Arthur King proved his might in battle. He personally led the vanguard of any armies he traveled with; the power of Excalibur held aloft in a charge called out to his men and gave them succor and wisdom in arms. He found, however, he could put his resources to better, more widespread use by splitting his armies up into self-regulated platoons, led by the many capable generals of the Round Table. Through his example, they learned to be unselfish leaders, sharing burdens and listening humbly to new advice. The most successful units were the ones who synergized together best. In this way, unique strategies spread through Arthur's men, and he took continually decreasing losses, especially among the vulnerable peasant militias.

Soon, of the five nations oppressing the Road, he had conquered four without losing a single battle. The fifth was not so much a nation as a loose alliance of bandits, led by the infamous Sir Bruce. Though Arthur prevailed against each group of warriors who came to face him, still the attacks continued, for a routed enemy simply regrouped and formed elsewhere for a new offensive. The cowardly Sir Bruce could be seen laughing in the rear of each of these sorties, refusing all requests for single combat, even when Arthur offered to leave Excalibur in Camelot. The false knight was especially fond of ambushes, waylaying groups of warriors or

civilians alike as they traveled the Road, until Arthur tamed all the forests along the way into beautiful parklike settings. Though Arthur learned much from fighting this elusive enemy, Sir Bruce learned far more from the inspired King.

Arthur had expected the rising tide of his successive wins to carry a strong hurricane of morale, but he found his fighters dejected by repeated inconclusive bouts with Sir Bruce. The Round Table met to discuss the problem of the renegade knight.

“We must commit all our forces at once, in a single unbeatable attack!” cried Sir Kay, who had recently proven his mettle in carving out new stretches of civilization from the barbarian hordes surrounding Camelot.

“It won’t work,” said Sir Bors. “We will take the field to find Sir Bruce and his men entirely absent. Then they will harry our flanks from unseen hideaways, with archers, until we take such heavy losses that we have to retreat, leaving a trail of bodies behind.”

“I agree with Bors,” declared Arthur. “You are all my brothers, and your support gives me all the hope I could ever need. I count on you to be the bedrock of my new strategy.”

“I shall send you forth individually to posts in the distant lands of my domain. There, you will rule small homesteads of your own, under your own codes of law, while those who wish will stay here with me to defend the central Kingdom. I expect each of you to conduct experiments, unhindered by my advice, succeeding or failing on your own terms. Camelot will be here to support you should you need it.”

“And in your new domains, you will build mighty strongholds from which to seek out Sir Bruce’s nomadic nation of brigands, and eradicate him from the land. You will report back to me with all that you have learned from your experiments, which I expect to yield a great deal of new tactical knowledge and knowledge of governing. When you run out of ideas, someone else will replace you and you can take on new assignments here in Camelot. This, gentle Knights, is

your chance for unhindered glory!” Cheers greeted this speech, as Arthur thrust Excalibur into the center of the Round Table to shed its light over their faces. Through the window, the light of the moonflowers echoed the brightness, even in daytime.

He did not tell them he was planning a system whereby anyone with a good idea could rise to a place of power in these experimental hamlets. They were the prototype for a new system of government, a new code of chivalry. Arthur wondered how these loyal Knights would react to his plans. Ideas itched and burned within his brain like it was the very fire of creation. He had to make his dreams a reality.

A month later his scattered yet unified Knights had quashed Sir Bruce, and he swung from a noose in Camelot.

Arthur rode out to inspect one of his experimental “mini kingdoms”, as he called them when talking to Guinevere. The Queen actually loved the idea, and spent a two week period at one of the hamlets, issuing orders to the hapless nobleman who was supposed to rule there. Her experiments with different methods of farming and healing actually proved so successful that the Knight in charge kept them as permanent additions.

In the City-State of Borshire, Arthur found the strangest scenery of all. Its unorthodox beauty inspired him, made him proud of the risks his Knights had taken under his command. He was resolved to continue his acts of delegation; perhaps one day his successor would simply be the man who exhibited greatest success in innovation.

Borshire was a city on a lake. A deep stream had been partially dammed up, flooding the valley with clean, shallow water. A three dimensional system of mahogany docks crept over the water; elevated walkways of dark English cherry soared over the docks and even over many of the houses. The dense wood shed water and damage like armor. The walkways could be moved, with some labor, into new configurations, if it was found that a route did serve its

purpose. They were arranged artfully, with many curved shapes and polished balustrades, and smaller paths shooting off from the main highways to serve little personal desires. Cubbyholes and secret places were commonplace.

Tiny gondolas in bright colors sailed between the docks. Laughing men aboard the ships taught new skills to children: fishing, basket weaving, music, knotwork, reading and writing, sailing, painting, knife grinding. The sounds and smells of these varied pursuits filled the air. Many a peasant sent their children along the Road to take on a trade in Borshire and gain new hope of a good life.

Under the sparkling waters, artisans were at work on a mosaic spanning the city. They laid tiny glass tiles, one by one, into shapes which became patterns, which became pictures, which became scenes. In the village square, where hundreds of rafts and boats bobbed in a gentle current surrounded by one looping pier, the craftsmen designed an underwater pebble garden like the ones seen in the East, enhanced by colored chips until it looked like the bottom of a tide pool, complete with currents and starfish and koi that seemed almost alive.

This city-state was the proudest creation of Sir Bors, though he went on to make many others, for it provided a new way of thinking, a new way of building people into strong, competent communities. In Arthur's reign, much of his naval power was designed and crewed by the people of Borshire, and their understanding of the ways of the water contributed much to his naval tactics and lore.

Cycle 4: Kingson

The First Blow

The coming of the Road brought new materiel to Camelot every day. Men of every vocation wished to come to the greatest city in Europe to contribute what they could to the reign of Arthur, who always knew just what to do with a person's talents. However, he found he needed to carve out some time for himself; despite all his delegation, it seemed there were always crowds of people looking for him. As a young Wart, he had always loved traveling the forests with Sir Ector, Kay, and sometimes Merlin. So he now took up hunting, alone or with his adopted family.

He remembered the teachings of Merlin, who taught him everything he knew about creation and wilderness lore. In the old man's hut, he parceled out wisdom, anecdotes, and lots and lots of hands on learning.

"Creation is a subtle science, Wart," he told Arthur. "The creatures of the forest know it. They know there is a power in the Earth, to be unlocked by those who hold the *secret*." Upon that word, *secret*, an ancient hart under a staggering burden of antlers leapt gracefully into the clearing that served as Merlin's lawn. Wherever its hooves touched the earth, incarnadine flowers sprung up instantly. They spread out from these sources like ripples in a pond, until the entire clearing was full of their heady scent. Then the stag was gone as quickly as it had arrived.

"When someone sees you work magic," the wizard said, "the impact is lessened. Some of the *secret*, the mystery, is lost. Listen well, and apply what you hear, for you will have the chance to influence the world some day."

Arthur's reverie was broken by a crashing in the undergrowth. Vision and reality merged as a huge boar burst from the heather before he had time to draw his spear. The King spun out of the way, drew Excalibur, and plunged it deep into the flank of the creature before it left his reach. The boar's lifeblood ran from its side and it fell still immediately. As he retrieved his sword, Arthur commented, "I must hire a huntmaster."

In far off Camelot, the moonflowers blossomed with light.

That evening, as the Knights feasted on boar, the pages announced two visitors fresh from the Road. The travelers introduced themselves as Enoch, a scribe, and William Twyti, a trapper. Arthur welcomed them personally as servants plied them with food, and asked after their talents.

Enoch, it seemed, had a long history as master of coin for various kingdoms, and said he had some ideas for Camelot's expansive treasury. Arthur promised to test his skill on the morrow, and sent a message asking his own learned men to prepare a list of challenges for Enoch. Enoch was a quiet but agreeable sort, dressed in clean yet simple clothing. At all times he wore a black hat with a long black feather. In keeping with his trade, he carried a wax tablet and stylus at all times.

William Twyti was the polar opposite of Enoch's somber personality. He was a chubby man. His bristly mustached danced when he talked or ate, and he was dressed all in leather, decorated with seared brands as though someone had laid hot wire on it. A long hunting knife never left his side, and a leather whip protruded from his rucksack. Laughter was never far from his face. When he was happy, he crinkled his face so his black eyes could not be seen; when he was startled, he blinked about from under his thick eyebrows. He constantly told stories of the people he had met in his travels, the beasts he had seen, the tricks he had taught them.

To the twinkling light of the Garden, as the sun set on their feast, Arthur leaned on Excalibur and asked, "Would you know of any horse breeders? I want to equip my Knights with better war chargers, who are better bred to deal with the long, cobbled Road."

"Oh, yes!" said Elaine. "I would love to see that."

"I know the very thing!" squinted Twyti. "There is a line of horses in the North of great intelligence and constitution. Why, they have no equal in endurance, and they can be trained to any task! Ho, why don't you let me send him a message through that mail system of yours? Together, he and I will train a fleet of horses to carry your Knights. They'll know the way to and from Camelot, they will, and if a Knight finds a maiden in distress, why, he can seat her on the horse and send it back to safety while he slows her enemies with his sword! And should the horse be set upon by bandits, why, I've seen the creatures defend themselves against half a dozen men at once!"

"So be it," Arthur agreed, satisfied. "And if they are as fine as you say, I will offer you the position of royal huntsman and stablemaster."

"We shall be chasing pheasants together within a fortnight," William Twyti puffed.

Enoch solved equations in his head faster than the King's advisors could solve them on a Greek abacus. He demonstrated more complex problems with clever illustrations: heaps of sand representing movement of money, models and theories he had invented himself. The court was impressed; they'd found themselves a new treasurer.

The man set out at once to make a name for himself. The books were balanced. Taxes were levied in a fair system. A torrent of gold flowed into Arthur's vaults and out into the surrounding regions. King Arthur, and his delegates in the homesteads, were able to strike new bargains with other nations founded on the strength of Camelot's new currency. More and more coin came under Enoch's care.

Overnight, it seemed, Camelot coinage became the standard by which all other nations of Europe were judged. A Camelot shilling would buy you a loaf of bread anywhere in the known world. The vaults of the other kingdoms filled with silver and gold from Arthur's mints, shipping wondrous treasures and wagonloads of specialized workmen in return.

Then one night an army appeared on Camelot's doorstep.

Under the black flag of parley, an emissary from Sussex rode up to Arthur. Without a word, he upended the contents of a sack onto the ground at Arthur's feet. The King grunted and, keeping his eyes on the messenger, bent to pick up one of the objects. It was a clammy coin; a quick examination showed corrosion rampant upon its surface. Arthur brushed away the bitter-smelling substance and saw his own face imprinted there, surrounded by the last vestiges of gold color in the coin. The brittle metal crumbled at his touch.

Aghast, Arthur dipped into his own pocket. The coins he found there were solid and pure: gold, silver, and copper. The King dropped his shield and helm heedlessly on the grass and raced back to the castle. There, he summoned his guards and sent half of them to find Enoch. The other half he demanded turn out their pockets. Inspecting each coin carefully, he could find nothing wrong with them. They felt dense and soft as gold. They clinked and chimed like gold. They shone like gold in the torchlight. Arthur could not think what had happened.

Worse yet, Enoch was nowhere to be found. The treasurer had fled unseen into the night, leaving his few possessions behind. The King ordered a search but did not have much hope the traitor would be found. He called the Round Table together, bidding all the distant warriors assemble.

"We know who did this," thundered Sir Kay. "It was that bastard Enoch. I never trusted him."

"We don't know how it was done," said Bedivere thoughtfully. "Alchemy? Sorcery?"

“I know why it was done,” said Arthur in a dour voice. “I know what this is. It is the first blow. The opening move in a game Merlin predicted would plague me. Enoch was sent or manipulated into coming here to sabotage me. Be on your guard, and do *not* underestimate my opponent, whoever he or she may be.”

A day passed, and Arthur was not sure what to do with the army at his gates. So he sent a promise that he would personally see to it that all was made right. The emissary accepted this with a noncommittal grunt. As the armies lingered, poised threateningly, Arthur sent round mead and a roasted ham to each of the camps in the army.

“If you feed it, it will keep coming back,” said an oily voice. Arthur whirled, and saw Enoch grinning, slumped between two burly Knights who held him up by the shoulders. His eyes danced with wicked delight.

“Whom do you serve, Enoch?” Arthur asked with calm dignity.

“I serve my masters: Greed. Envy. And Pride.”

“Who sent you?”

“A red figure with bat wings and the lower body of a goat!” laughed the prisoner.

“Who sent you!”

“I wouldn’t tell even if I knew.”

Arthur drew Excalibur and laid the point to rest at Enoch’s throat. The blade did not tremble in his hand. “Tell me.”

Enoch turned pale but did not speak. “Tell me,” Arthur said again, drawing a pinprick of blood. “Tell me!”

“I...I find...I find I cannot, Your Majesty! I...I wish to...but I am physically unable to describe...!”

The light of the falling moon shone on Excalibur, and it twitched curiously in Arthur’s grip.

Words spilled out of Enoch. "I was approached by a tall man in a dark cloak near Lothian, Lord. He had heard of my cunning and said he had the tools to enable a great rise and fall of the finest kingdom in the land. I never knew his name, nor saw his face, but I know that by his arts he was able to cover my false coinage with a patina of truth. He said this curse would spread to all base metals afflicted with my touch. It is a subtle curse, which does not revert until the coin is out of the owner's sight. In this way, you would lose maximum credibility, and be plunged into debt."

"You have succeeded mightily," sighed Arthur. "I fear the return of what I have purchased with this leprechaun gold will not be enough. I am dishonored to my core. An army plagues my estates. I owe a pile of gold to a hundred different lords. And my vaunted treasurer is a traitor. Lock him up, please, and schedule a fair trial for as soon as possible."

"...Lord? Might I make a suggestion?" whimpered Enoch.

"You may."

"Lock me up, keep me in a box, keep an army of analysts watching my every proposal, but let me contribute! I swear to be true to Camelot henceforth. Only, let my ideas be heard! Let me create, let me relieve this unending pressure in the mathematical side of my head! I am repentant, I am changed. I can redeem myself and Camelot's honor. I swear it...I swear by...I swear on Excalibur!"

"Let it be done," said Arthur. "If my advisors cannot recognize a malignant suggestion, then I am already lost."

Aftermath

As Camelot tightened its metaphorical belt, Arthur's intense need to build did not subside. It redoubled. Made sharp by need, his inventiveness flung him into flights of design. But he could only sketch ideas, or accomplish things that required little in purchased materials. Still, Camelot grew larger and grander as the King grew more tense.

Enoch was as good as his word. The encamped army disbanded after being presented with a full-fledged plan of repayment and a number of treasures as collateral. Enoch levied severe cutbacks against every facet of castle life; for Enoch's crimes against it, the court was forced to live in a time of austerity.

Guinevere put up with these inconveniences with noble dignity. She was seen to walk the parapets of Camelot in a simple brown tunic, unadorned with any jewelry or finery. Her glittering crown she kept locked away to show solidarity with the men of Camelot in their time of need. And often, it was only Guinevere who could calm the King's raging nerves. Her soft touch and unadulterated love made it possible for Arthur to bear anything.

Furthermore, Guinevere's maidenhood had been spent preparing her for marriage to a lord. She was no helpless seamstress, no Queen of beauty alone. Guinevere pored over every missive from Enoch's cell, checking all his sums and assumptions with eagle eyes. She often thought of things to check no one else would have come up with, but Enoch seemed to be on the level.

Elaine came to Guinevere's chambers unannounced, as she often did. Elaine would weave, and Guinevere would read, and they would talk late into the night to pass the time.

"We ought to do something to cheer Arthur up," said Elaine. "I'm tired of him moping around the castle."

“Arthur can turn any blow to his own advantage,” said Guinevere. “He’ll get through this and come out stronger than ever. But what did you have in mind? I’ll help!”

“Well, I think he needs an outlet. You have your Garden - a place you go to retreat, at no cost. A place you can bury yourself in your work.”

“Sadly, a place much diminished of late,” sighed Guinevere. “But I do try. And some of the lads have been helping me for free. It helps them work off their energy, when there’s no one to fight and no money to pay soldiers for a nice war - ha!”

“I’m going to talk to Enoch,” declared Elaine. “I don’t care if he’s scum. He might still have a way to help Arthur fund some sort of project. And he did swear on Excalibur.”

“Best of luck,” said Guinevere, who couldn’t stand the man.

Elaine tripped off to the dungeons. They were mostly empty. In fact, Enoch was the only occupant, and he seemed upbeat enough. Aside from basic comforts, the cell also contained a giant wax board, currently covered in neat columns of large numbers.

“Enoch, I need you. Arthur must have a project. Projects need funding. You collapsed the treasury; now I need you to find enough for Arthur to get out of his rut.”

“Can’t be done,” grunted Enoch, stretching to reach the top of his board. “The King has already commanded that every penny go toward restitution and the assured survival of Camelot.”

“What if we charged a fee to see some of the wonders of this place? Including a new attraction designed by Arthur, one he could sink his teeth into.”

“Pennies on the pound. Wouldn’t help. But this equation,” he tapped the board, “could hasten Camelot’s return to glory tenfold. Leave me alone, Elaine.”

Back in Guinevere’s chambers, the girls put their heads together. “I don’t think there is much I can do about this,” admitted Guinevere. “Arthur will never agree to spend any money this

way. And any scheme I can think of for coming up with money and bringing it to him, why, he would just use that money to pay off his debts faster. And I cannot blame him. It is a matter of honor, and our debts are large indeed.” Dejected, Elaine returned to her own rooms.

Night fell and the castle slept. Through the window, a moonbeam crept slowly across the royal bed, closer and closer to the Queen’s face. The moment it reached her, she sat bolt upright. Arthur mumbled something at her side, and she whispered an excuse in return. Before the idea had quite finished coalescing in her mind, she was out the door, into the stable, mounted on her horse, and riding down the Road. Before the moon slept once more, she was back in Arthur’s arms once more.

When Elaine next came to Guinevere’s chambers to discuss their pet project, Guinevere told her not to worry about it. “It’s all taken care of,” she said with a secret smile.

Elaine waited patiently, hoping for some sign of a change in Arthur, or riding the palace grounds in search of new construction. She found nothing new, only hidden secrets built at the beginning of Arthur’s reign or inherited from Uther Pendragon.

Meanwhile, Arthur was working in the only way that remained to him: politically. He sent countless reams of parchment through his counselors, asked advice from every Knight and wise ally in the kingdom. After much deliberation on each concept, Arthur would address his people from Lord’s Tower, hold Excalibur high, and make a proclamation of a new law for justice and prosperity. Equity was his watchword. He passed laws to increase the consequences for Knights who acted out of order, offered rehabilitation for career criminals, made gestures of partial amnesty toward villains who had managed to escape retribution for years. Excalibur dispensed parity between noble and peasant alike. Camelot took pride in what it had become.

It was not only laws he passed. Arthur and Guinevere made it fashionable to be honorable. Truthful. Chivalrous. Heroic. Few Knights of the Table Round dared to chafe at the

new restrictions. Some threw their heart and soul into living by the new code of chivalry, and others muttered about it in secret. Elaine took notes with interest, and sent long letters back to her father describing Arthur's methods, that he might spread them to Astolat's rule. Still she saw no sign of Guinevere's plan.

Finally, with Arthur's reforms showing no sign of slowing down, an unarmored horseman appeared on the horizon, bearing a standard. He was followed by a half dozen Knights in full regalia, moving much more slowly. Strange bundles and packages were strapped to their horses, and their saddlebags bulged. As they came closer, Elaine could see they bore the standard of Guinevere's father, now loyal to Arthur. Guinevere rode out to meet them, and led them directly to the King instead of to lodgings.

The torrent of edicts slowed. Arthur still found time to work on them, and they showed every sign of succeeding. But he spent much of his time closeted away with Guinevere, working with the materials her father had sent. Temporary wooden walls went up around his work as it became too large to remain hidden. Twenty warriors, led by a Knight of the Round Table, guarded the walls at all times. Elaine thought this excessive for the mere preservation of mystery.

But one day as Elaine wandered past, she noticed the walls and the Knights were gone. She ran to the site, slowing to a stop as she gazed in wonder at what Guinevere and Arthur had wrought.

From the center of a glittering pool rose a massive set of gilded scales. A central pole held a crossbeam on thick silver chains, and golden pans hung from each end of these crossbars. Guide notches held the crossbar ordinarily to the post, tuned so that even should the chains fail, balance would be preserved. Perpendicular to the first crossbar, two more spars could descend on hinges and be hung with more payloads. The four sample pans and additional

steelyards interacted with each other through a delicate system of gears, chains, and bracers that could be set up in different configurations. Crowning the central pole stood a masterful bronze statue of a blindfolded nymph holding a smaller, working set of scales in one hand, and a real broadsword in the other. Her hair was bedecked with tiny living flowers.

Within the crystalline pool, gems cascaded into careless piles from a small chrome waterwheel. It scooped them up and dropped them again, and elicited a mild current that shifted them about even as they sat on the granite boundaries of the pool. Each gem was translucent and cut to sharp perfection, but they were of all different colors: aquamarine, scarlet, russet, periwinkle, or crystal clear. They shone with an inner light, proving their authenticity and value.

Seeing no guards about, and wondering how such a treasure could be left unmolested, Elaine curiously dipped a finger into the bubbling water. Instantly she drew it out, for the water was somehow colder than snow, and it burned her hand fiercely. Yet the water was not frozen. Instead, it gave off an odor of sharpness and clarity, like a still winter's day transported to late summer. This crisp presence could be felt even several yards from the bank of the pool, a warning to all would-be-thieves. And the dire, unseeing gaze of the nymph reminded all comers there was justice in pain and retribution. Elaine winced and straightened.

"These are the Scales of Themis," said the voice of Guinevere. "Designed to the exact specifications of Arthur's new laws. It needs no calibration, for its balance is perfect. During a trial or deliberation, gems may be placed on either pan to represent shards of evidence or factors under consideration. Arthur felt it would lend a certain dignity and weight to the proceedings. And he says it helps him to visualize matters more acutely than he might otherwise. The different gems are all tied to the new Code of Chivalry; not all of them are equal in weight."

"It's so beautiful," said Elaine. "Is it finished?"

“It needs only one thing more,” said Guinevere with a smile. She made a gesture with her hand, and nine maidens in flowing white strolled gracefully to positions around the scales. “Arthur and I, and a secret few among the Knights, each bear a key to the pool. When at least two keys are turned, the pool is raised. As the water flows into this basin, the jewels become accessible. My girls will take turns placing them according to the instructions of the court. We have tried it in secret with a few scoundrels, and found it strikes terror into their hearts to see the scales tip against their favor. All three accepted the judgement of Arthur without question. Isn’t it marvelous?”

Just then, two Knights bearing Enoch between them strode into the courtyard. The mathematician gaped in amazement at the wonderful abacus of justice.

“But how can Arthur afford this?” asked Elaine. “I thought he would simply spend any money on his campaigns.”

“The gemstones are on loan from my father,” Guinevere replied, smiling proudly. “He presented the jewels to Arthur in their current form, so they could not be spent elsewhere. Nor do they truly belong to Camelot, so they cannot be traded. All the trappings arrived partially complete, and ownership is divided between the throne and Carmelide. Leodegrance is proud to call Camelot friend. He acquiesced quite willingly to the messenger I sent, as I thought he would.”

“You are brilliant, Gwen! Camelot is so lucky to have you.” She ran to her Queen and hugged her tight.

Arthur was happy. He had completed another great work he felt would make Merlin proud. Still he longed for the old man’s advice, and wished he knew how to bring him back. But Camelot was recovering, backed by Leodegrance’s show of confidence and the fountain of precious gemstones ensconced within Camelot’s walls. Enoch knew how to take full advantage,

and it was not long before Camelot currency was worth more than its weight in gold. It was time for the next step in Arthur's plan.

A stream of learned monks, long-bearded scribes, and minor wizards flowed through Camelot's gates. Carpenters and stonemasons had preceded them and were hard at work. Arthur was founding a University.

It was a grandiose building, apportioned to rival a cathedral - a great cathedral of learning. The Library at its center was tall and peaked, but taller towers surrounded it, hosting the magicians who represented all secrets too dangerous to be written down. The massive edifice was well defended, perched in the uplands behind the castle. The outer portions looked like a tool of war, with fresh designs of defense against siege: catapults, arrow slits, ladder-slicing mechanisms. Even if Camelot itself should fall, the Library would be able to defend itself against ten enemies for every man inside.

Internally, defense centered around the possibility of fire. All books and scrolls were housed on broad stone shelves that rose to the ceiling or descended into cavernous pits. These shelves lined every surface of the central Library. They could be capped with ancient fireproof oak timbers, and the most precious works were shuttered away at all times. Furthermore, clever engineers had devised a system where a dense, heat-absorbing powder could quickly be sprayed over a fire should one erupt. A veritable moat of this powder ran under the Library floor. The powder tasted salty when Elaine tried it, but it was odorless and too dense to rise up in choking clouds.

The finest teachers from Borshire's floating community came to Camelot to share what they had learned about teaching. Holders of knowledge crept out of the woodwork to serve Arthur. Men began to say, "If it cannot be learned in Camelot, it cannot be learned anywhere."

Stretched between two of the fluted, sound-dampening columns that held up the painted ceiling was a massive map of the known world. Explorers bearing proof of their journeys could petition to update this map; it was held to be the most accurate map in all of Europe. The moonflowers twinkled once for every book added to the collection. In an impossibly short time, Camelot was the greatest concentration of knowledge since Alexandria.

And the kingdom flourished for it. Everyone had something to say, and a chance to be heard. Their King and Queen were happy too; Guinevere and Arthur expanded the Garden. At times, Elaine could not guess which of them had designed a particular aspect. And she found often that paths followed a different course than she remembered, or perhaps a nook she could not recall still seemed like it had always been there. Around Camelot, everyone had plenty, and the Road began to grow again. Peace and prosperity fell over the kingdom like a comfortable blanket.

One more thing did Arthur make, in memory of Camelot's brief time of fallen glory. A long and winding labyrinth of hedges and walls outside the garden gates, which he called the Maze of Wrongs. It had the ability to shift its walls and paths when Arthur arranged it, so that it was never the same from month to month. Three crooked wooden signs greeted you as you entered the maze:

"It's never too late to do the right thing."

"No amount of wrongs make a right."

"Sometimes the only way to heal is to begin again."

These short statements described the paradoxical principles of the Maze. If you grew frustrated with the twists and turns and dead ends, you were sure to be lost, but breathe deeply and you would begin to find the right ways again. Continue in your folly, retread the same old loops, and you would never escape. But often, it seemed, the Maze would allow you to retrace

your steps back to the entrance, or lead you to one of the other entrances, if you intended to start over from scratch. On the other hand, it might offer you a way out just when you were getting close to the secrets at its center, tempting you to quit and lose all your progress.

Elaine attempted the Maze every week or two, for as long as she stayed in Camelot. There were others who knew every inch of it by the time it shifted, but they grew wearier and wearier with each change. For Elaine, it always stayed fresh, and challenging. She only made it to the reward chamber twice. The first time, she was almost blinded by the light from a heavy golden chalice, encrusted with shining gems. The walls of the smooth chamber were studded with rough chunks of off-white onyx, similar to that of the moonflower garden, which reflected and magnified the light so she could not easily make out the rest of the chamber. Bypassing the chalice, she stumbled upon a dry fountain. She could not discover how to activate the fountain until she touched the chalice. At once, the pipes ran with a dark red wine.

Careful lest her senses be fuzzed and she trapped in the Maze forever, she took a small drink. The wine's taste brought memories of expiation. It tasted like the first wine her mother let her have after two days of only bread and water, a punishment for bad behavior. It tasted like the wine of her first communion, a long awaited, divine forgiveness that no subsequent Mass could match. It tasted like a drink from a cold stream after a long day riding in the sun. And when she left the chalice and sought the way back to Camelot, it opened to her at once, with no wrong turns.

The next time she attempted the Maze, it had already grown craftier. At the end she did not find the chamber of wine, but a small garden of lichens and sedums growing over a jumble of raw boulders. Perched on the tallest boulder, an oblong and craggy rock, was a bronze phoenix with intricate plumage and a spout in its beak. At its feet, a tiny chalice, little more than a thimble. When this was moved, a small stream of chocolate poured from the mouth of the

phoenix. The candy tasted of springtime, of the first meal in new house, of waking up with a new idea in your brain. This time, the Maze toyed with Elaine for hours before letting her out into the world again, but the toil was not burdensome. She couldn't wait to see what Camelot did next.

Rigor Mort - Part 1

Lances splintered. Horses screamed, and armor clattered. On rare occasions, blood ran from beneath a breastplate. It was the last day of practice before the little spring tournament.

Camelot laughed and sang. The Garden blossomed. An atmosphere of anticipation prevailed. The air was warm and welcoming.

But not all who came were welcome.

The trees of the forest stirred threateningly, from Boarwoods to Barrowgrove. They stretched their limbs wildly outward in a sudden breeze, an army of desperate madmen clinging and clawing at dark wisps of cloud. On the castle's north tower, a single brick came loose from its ancient mortar and plummeted to earth, where it crumbled to dust and rubble. In the myriad pools of Camelot's many gardens and wonders, waters turned still, glassy, and eerily reflective.

Down the long Road came a lone man, stooped and limping. Elaine glimpsed him from her spot on the parapet and thought he would be tall if he held himself better. As he neared, she decided he was actually quite broad shouldered, but he cowered into himself as though the world made him nervous. When he was within longbow range, she realized his face could be considered quite handsome, if only it didn't wear such a contemptuous sneer.

With a word to the guards, the stranger gained entrance to Camelot. He walked right passed the sentries outside Arthur's door and strode inside as if he owned the place. Arthur surged to his feet from his writing desk, Excalibur blazing with power.

"Hello, 'Uncle'," said the man unapologetically.

"Mordred," said King Arthur.

Mordred inclined his head with a mocking air.

“What brings you to Camelot, Mordred.” Arthur’s voice was flat and tightly controlled.

“And when do you leave?”

“Ah, ‘Uncle,’ that’s no way to treat your only nephew. I expected a warmer welcome. Tis a reunion late in coming, is it not?” Mordred pulled back his hood, drew out a gilded mirror, and adjusted his wavy black hair, feigning ignorance of Arthur’s impatience.

“How did you get past the guards, Mort?” Arthur growled.

“Ah, my old childhood nickname. Mort and Wart! What a pair we shall be. I imagine it’s been years since anyone called you ‘Wart,’ hasn’t it, Arthur? Merlin particularly liked that name, didn’t he?”

“What of it, Mordred of Lothian? Tell me your business, or leave, please.”

“If you wanted to know why I’m here, why didn’t you just say so?” smirked Mordred. “I just came seeking the solace of family. I think I’ll stay awhile. Camelot is *such* a lovely place. You’ve done great things here, ‘Uncle.’”

“You are welcome as long as you choose to stay, nephew, just as courtesy demands” said Arthur stiffly.

“I so hoped you would say that, Wart! Let us rejoice, that *family* might be together again!” He put a strange stress on the word *family*. Poking his head out the door, he called to the sentinels. “Bring us wine! And a roast chicken for me.” When this was provided, he said, “A toast! To family, and the healing of old wounds nearly forgotten.” Mordred drank, but Arthur merely inclined his cup politely. “Come! I have not yet met your wife. I hear she is a great beauty.”

The King fumbled for polite words. “Yes...Very well, I shall see if she has time to meet you.” But the Queen at once took a disliking to Mordred, and cut their meeting as short as possible, even after Mordred presented her with a new bracelet of turquoise and ebony. She

refused to ever wear it, though Arthur would not allow her the discourtesy of giving it to some handmaiden to wear.

Later, after Mordred was settled into his luxurious chambers and had harassed all the servants into giving him what he desired, Arthur visited his wife in their shared room. "I must speak to you about Mordred," he told her.

"That offensive little creature! You ought to throw him out on his ear."

"He is...family, Guinevere. It would be dishonorable."

"And so arrogant! So vain! Always preening in that mirror, or making eyes at my girls. I swear, if he so much as touches one of the maidens in my care, I'll run him through myself, if I have to steal Excalibur to do it!"

"Be very careful when invoking that name!" said Arthur seriously.

"I am sorry. You are right, dear. But that little fiend better stay in line."

"Try to give him a chance, my love. He spoke highly of you."

"He would say anything to gain the ear of those in power. He cannot be trusted."

"There is something else I need to tell you about him," said Arthur carefully.

"You can tell me anything, dear," said Guinevere fondly. "Don't let my disgust of your nephew influence you. Just keep him far away from me."

"He is not my nephew, Guinevere."

"But you said..."

"Mordred is my son."

Guinevere turned white. "Your son? How?"

"It is worse than you might expect, I fear. Mordred's mother, Morgause, is my half-sister. By her obscene magical arts, she bewitched me to her bed, and stole the memory from my

mind. It was only with Merlin's help I was able to recover the knowledge, just before he disappeared. This was all before I met you, but still I wish I could undo my blasphemous past."

"I forgive you," whispered Guinevere. "But God have mercy on us all!"

"There's more."

"I can hardly bear it, Arthur!"

"You must know. I can trust no one so much as you, Guinevere. Merlin told me it was important that I know my memories of Mordred's... origin. I fear that Mordred is to be my opponent in the great contest Merlin prophesied. It is certain he knows I am his father; he hinted as much. He will lean on that knowledge, hold it over me. And it is likely he is the one who sent Enoch. I thank God that particular stroke of Mordred's was turned."

"Oh Arthur! What will you do?"

"I will do as honor demands," said Arthur grimly. "I will allow Mordred to quarter here. And despite him, I will make Camelot such a place that it will be revered long after I am gone."

Rigor Mort - Part 2

Arthur saw that the way to stall any plans of Mordred was to build with honor, to create a system of law so tight a worm couldn't wriggle its way through. But it was important to the King that his system be just, and forgiving, and human. With Excalibur, he knighted three new warriors after Mordred arrived. These were all men who had proven their proficiency at arms in the spring tournament, but more importantly, they were men who most embodied the ideals Arthur envisioned. Furthermore, he gave orders that his Knights should themselves knight others who had proven, in battle and in quest, their devotion to the code of chivalry. Arthur added point after point to these rules, naming his new courtly plan the Codex of Excalibur.

He met with the University faculty to discuss the creation of a fair system where only the competent and kind could rise to power. He called it his Meritocracy. It involved a hierarchy of evaluators with different specialties: combat, politics, godliness. One of noble blood could rise through the ranks of Arthur's administration, and eventually prove they deserved a chance to run an experimental hamlet, serve in the judiciary, suggest laws, or design a great work like the Garden. A man of lower blood could not hold these positions, but those commoners who proved their merit were selected for advisory committees who held influence over the other pursuits.

Mordred simply smiled or sneered at these proceedings, but did not relax his hold on Arthur's hospitality. Guinevere insisted Arthur send him packing, but the King always refused with a hint of sadness in his voice. "I fear that monster is in love with me," she claimed. "Always he stares." Arthur assigned her as many guards as she needed to feel comfortable.

The Queen felt her fears confirmed when a white package in a velvet red bow appeared on her dressing table. She did not touch it, just left it on the counter, until Arthur asked what was inside. With trembling fingers she cut the ribbon and opened the box, tearing it in her

carelessness. Her touch found a card, addressed “To Queen Guinevere, with my compliments: Mort.” She tore it in half and threw the pieces to the floor, ground them with her heel. Then she unfolded an ethereal black gown, impossibly weightless by mundane standards. The dress had been created from soft crepe fabric, slashed with red spirals of lightning that climbed hungrily up the sides of the skirt and bodice. Crisp, sharp embellishments, hidden in thin vines that played host to gossamer mesh butterflies, adorned the top of the dress. The sleeves were long and billowy, made to hover ever so slightly when its wearer moved.

Guinevere was not won by its unnerving beauty. Angrily, the Queen tossed it to the floor with the box, and cut her husband off saying, “I will not wear it! Mordred goes too far!”

“I wasn’t going to suggest it,” said Arthur mildly. “I quite agree. Mordred tempts fate and tests my patience, to see what he can get away with. I will have a word with him tomorrow. Come to bed, love.”

First thing in the morning, Arthur knocked on Mordred’s door. Hearing no answer, he went inside, muttering, “It is my castle, after all.” As he strode squarely into the chamber, his forearm brushed Excalibur’s hilt. He looked at it in surprise, for its touch burned him with cold fire, as though the sword was filled with fury. “Shhh, shhh,” he murmured to the sword. “We’ll find out what game Mort is playing.”

Arthur moved carefully about the room, turning over the debris of Mort’s habitation with the point of his sword. Mordred seemed to have an extraordinary amount of raw materials in his room, what some might call rubbish. Bits of wire, chunks of wet clay, strips of cloth. On Mordred’s nightstand, beside the bed, was the gilt mirror in which he was always admiring himself. Arthur went over to it.

The handle was beset with tiny gems, so fine that the surface was slightly raspy but not rough. The metal was of gold. The surface of the mirror itself was wavy, like the mirrors of a

traveling carnival. Larger jewels surrounded the glass at intervals, and also an inscription: "Aegri somnia vana."

On Mordred

“Aegri somnia vana - A sick man’s dream,” Morgana told imprisoned Merlin. “Clever, isn’t it? Mordred is certainly a sick man. I thought it a fitting match to Excalibur’s inscription. ‘Cast me away’ indeed!”

Merlin’s voice carried as the faintest whisper, weaker than before. “The Mirror Calumni is a fine proxy for your style, Morgana. As Excalibur is for mine.”

“I am impressed by your ingenuity, Merlin. When you taught me of the contest as a battle between two sorcerers’ apprentices, I would never have thought of two magicless proteges using enchanted artifacts as a proxy for knowledge of the magical arts.”

“Truly, the contest may be held between any two players who represent the teachings of their masters, regardless of the nature of their abilities. Our champions’ items, imbued with a sizable fraction of our strengths, hardly break the pattern at all. Each will create according to the principles we espoused in their training, and according to the nature of his weapon, to the limit of their strength. Excalibur is a fitting tool for Arthur’s use, for my designs. It has the power to bind people together, the power of permanence and long-lasting art, the power to enhance and preserve, the power to remake, the power to pierce illusions on its point. Calumni, the tool of your design, the Mirror of Avalon, is a tool of the subtlest illusion, of dreams, of manipulation.”

“That brat practically begged to be manipulated,” said Morgana. “He yearns to be twisted, sculpted with harsh words and brutal practices, so that his blasphemous soul has an outlet of blame. No evil can ever be his fault, no responsibility can fill his heart, for he makes himself a tool of the powerful. His very existence dooms him to hell - not born of free union, as most men are, but of incestuous, seductive rape. Aye, he is a mighty wretch, mere clay in my hands, but fueled entirely by evil drives, by hatred from within that is his very own. It makes him

strong. He is the one who can bring down Arthur and prove you are too soft, Merlin. Though perhaps the tree you are trapped in provides ample proof.”

Merlin responded as he always did, whispering, “We shall see...”

Shining Armor

Arthur escaped Mordred's chamber undetected. Almost immediately, a page ran up to him bearing a message. It seemed that an unknown knight had been sighted on the horizon, followed by his squire. No one yet knew if he were friend or foe; an unusual occurrence in the new, worldly Camelot, where knights from all over England were recognized. The King rode out to meet this new knight, dressed in splendid matte armor, a helm with massive antlers made by Merlin, and a blank shield. Excalibur rode at one hip, and he bore a huge lance as well.

Upon seeing the massive, broad-shouldered figure of the King, the new arrival called out a challenge in a clear voice. Arthur recognized the accent of Gaul. The knight's armor was perfect in every way, of excellent make, ideally fitted, and dutifully polished. His shield bore red and white stripes, but no other identifying heraldry. He was only slightly smaller than the massive King, broad-shouldered and tall but with a smaller frame.

Bristling at being challenged on his own Road, in his own domain, the King accepted the call to arms. Twyti's special mount cantered and pranced to one side of the road, ready for action, as the King prepared his lance. The stranger's magnificent stallion walked boldly to the opposite corner at a mere touch of its rider's knees.

Arthur moved first. His mount shot forward like a slingstone, but the other knight's reflexes allowed him to begin his attack within the space of a single heartbeat. His charger's hooves cut harsh scars upon the Road, spraying crumbled bricks and dust in all directions. The two warriors collided in a forceful dance of rage. The King's lance of ash struck the stranger's peppermint shield with the greater force, but the silvered shaft of Arthur's opponent struck first, and with a firmer blow than any the King had ever felt. Both lances shattered into dust, but only

Arthur was unhorsed. The cobblestones rushed up to meet him, and only his helm protected him from a split skull.

Back in Camelot, Elaine had watched from the ramparts as the duel began. But soon an impenetrable cloud of dust masked the proceedings, and she reluctantly went down to the Garden to experience the impatient spring as it climaxed in the land. To her delight, the moonflowers were blooming, silvery light bursting from their unfurling petals and flitting between the onyx boulders, barely visible in the daylight. She found watching from the corner of her eyes made the ethereal argent light more visible. It traced swirling, triumphant patterns in the air, as if to welcome May and the height of springtime.

Within the veil of dust, the traveling knight heard a sword spring from its sheath. He leapt from his horse and groped for his own familiar pommel. As his hand gripped it, the shadow of a husky figure loomed over him, illuminated through the obscuring grime by a blazing steel blade. "This is Excalibur. Kneel, Sir Warrior, and reveal your name," the figure said loftily, "that I may knight you in the service of King Arthur."

So it was that Lancelot du Lac of Joyous Gard obtained his knighthood. The King charged him, with gentle touches on the shoulder from Excalibur, to be the champion of the truth, an avatar of godliness, never lacking in courage or strength, mighty defender of the less fortunate. As Lancelot lifted his gaze, his eyes gleamed with a new light. "I am your unflinching right hand, your servant of undying loyalty, and your most faithful friend, Arthur Pendragon," he swore.

Cycle 5: Spring

May Eve

Guinevere came to Arthur one evening, asking what Knights he would assign to the perilous duty of protecting the ladies of the court as they went a-Maying. Each year, when flowers bloomed in the green pastures beyond Camelot, Guinevere led all the noble womenfolk and their handmaidens out to pick flowers, to braid them into long, sweet-smelling chains, to climb grassy hills and breathe in the pure springtime. Often, they used this outing to find secluded nooks where they brought a man and came out hours later, giggling and covered in dirt and loose grass. These dalliances brought a brief burst of joy to the participants, but often had worse consequences further down the road, when accusations of infidelity flew like nightbirds or a child was born who did not look like his father.

Tomorrow was May Eve, when the lusts of the court broke into their zenith. And carefree, unthinking cruelty rode its subtle horse around the participants, cheering them on in their little frenzies and sins against each other. But ostensibly it was a time to relax and celebrate the return of life to the land, to wear fine clothes, to laugh at Knights forced to pick flowers instead of practicing swordcraft and the bloody arts. Ostensibly, it was a time of the very peace Arthur espoused above all else. Yet every year it set him on edge, and Excalibur ran with tears of sweat from his trembling hands.

Unbeknownst to Arthur, Mordred also had plans for the May Day season. While the happy citizens of Camelot frolicked in the meadows and in the Queen's Garden, the King's bastard son crouched in his hidden workshop in the roots of a gnarled tree. From under the ground he could see much of Camelot using a simple arrangement of mirrors. He had expanded

an old fox's den to a large enough size that he could store a plethora of nasty ingredients for potions, poisons, and illusions. Calumni now had its own place of honor in a notched mantle over Mordred's worktable. It laid its subtle blessings over all he did there. In every nook and cranny of the den, in every bend of the entangling roots that held up the ceiling, Mordred had placed a black candle burning with a dull green flame. These never seemed to go out or need replacing.

Mordred's task focused on three rugged stones the size of large marbles. Each was roughly spherical but unsmoothed, and each had an irregular hole at its center, carved by the natural flow of water over centuries of labor. The three stones floated in a wooden bucket of brackish water. Invisible power flowed between Mordred's fingertips as he reached out with Calumni's will to gather energies for his great project.

On a day of great power, Mordred's enchanted stones could be infused with whatever energies filled the air. Each gamboling courtier above added to the dense vapor of lust and illicit excitement that defined Camelot in the wicked springtime. Mordred could transfer the poisonous lust through his thirsty artifacts.

"Revel of woman, thy gloom shall sing," Mordred chanted over his first stone.

The cheerful infidelity of the men and women above his lair angered him, but he knew how to take advantage of it. Hypocrisy gnawed at his bones. Rejection filled his craw with shame. Misery and envy would twist him from his sinful birth to his spiteful death. All this, too, he poured from his heart into the cold porous stone. A patina of corruption seeped over them from the dark water.

"Sin of the father, thy tomb shall bring."

Druidic legends, the kind of druidic knowledge Merlin had always refused to study, named these items and defined their many uses. They were said to be hardened masses of

snake venom, giving them a remarkable ability to protect the bearer from poison, and to see through lies viewed through the fissure in the stone.

“Lies of the serpent, thy doom shall spring,” Mordred finished. He passed a hand over the stones, and they leapt into his palm. He closed his fingers greedily over them.

Between the Rose Arbors

Under the warm sun, the revelry continued unabated. Soon only a few participants had not paired off, aside from the loyal Knights and maidens who stayed at the castle with the King. This included noble Sir Lancelot, who stood guard over the festivities, and Queen Guinevere, who giggled but declined each Knight who propositioned her. Elaine, ever discerning, wandered the dark Maze instead of the Garden and meadow, far from any suitors. Mordred watched her from his crooked tree until she passed from his sight.

Suddenly there came a squealing, and two half-naked figures darted from an arbor, trailing rose petals, with grape tendrils woven into their messy hair. They were followed by a roaring knight on horseback, the creature's eyes rolling madly and foam flecking its hindquarters. At a glance, Guinevere knew it was not one of Arthur's new breed of horses; therefore, it could not be bearing an ally. Adrenaline coursed through her, blinded her reason, and she raced toward the cackling rider. As she ran, she shouted for help.

With utter glee, he caught up to the disrobed maiden and flicked his sword. He caught her across her unprotected ankle, and she fell, unable to run. Her cowardly lover had already reached the safety of the Garden wall and jumped inside. The attacker lifted his sword for another blow, and brought it crashing down. The sound of steel on steel rang across the meadow. The Queen had scooped up a discarded shield and interposed it between the helpless maiden and the deranged knight. He grinned, and rent the shield in two with one blow.

Guinevere threw it in his face and followed the crawling girl, who was already some distance away, her pink skin raked by rosebushes and brambles. But the girl was too heavy for the Queen to lift, and the barbarian hurled another furious cut at her. The blade shuddered to a stop long before contact, caught in a gauntleted hand that did not even flinch from the impact.

“Lancelot!” cried Guinevere in relief. The dour Knight never removed his armor, except to sleep and bathe, and certainly not for guard duty over a flower-picking ceremony.

He gripped the blade tighter, wrung it from its owner’s hand, and hurled it a hundred yards into the woods. Then with one hand at his lips, he gave a piercing whistle; with his other arm he caught up the wounded serving girl and flung her unceremoniously across his shoulder as he loped away.

The enemy knight, returning with his sword, was quick to bellow a challenge. “I, Sir Carados of Caerwent, challenge you to stand and fight! Cease your flirting and fleeing and come to meet me!”

Sir Lancelot had only taken a dozen strides when his new horse, bred by the brilliant William Twyti, arrived at full speed. Before it could slow, Lancelot placed the girl on the soft saddle and ordered it to take her and Guinevere back to the castle. Miraculously, the horse obeyed this complex instruction, bowing to allow the Queen onto its back and then racing homeward as it was trained. Lancelot swiveled to face the mounted knight, a grim look on his face. “I am sworn to defend the helpless. You wound the citizens of King Arthur, whom I am sworn to serve. You threaten ladies and maidens, whom I am sworn to assist in any way I can. Therefore I accept your challenge, and if I fail, a long procession of Knights will line up behind me to meet you in single combat until you are defeated.”

“I think not,” sneered Carados. “Why, I already slew three of these much-vaunted Knights of the Round Table where they lay naked in the grass, and I saw many more, seemingly bereft of armor, honor, or even clothing!” The man guffawed and raced up to Lancelot, pressing his mounted advantage and swinging from a greater height. Lancelot parried without strain and carried the movement into a circle parry, throwing his opponent’s blade wide. His flashing sword was quick to take advantage of this opening, and he scored a clean hit all along Carados’

breastplate and under the shoulder. Carados groaned and swayed, but recovered enough to kick at Lancelot's head with a greaved foot. Lancelot ducked under the kick, under the horse, and caught the reins to launch himself upward in a precise attack. His thrust opened the side of Carados' head and removed his ear entirely. Blood flowed down the side of horse and man. Lancelot slammed him into a prone position across the horse's back and steered it toward the castle.

The Queen personally tended the wounds of the young lady Carados had hamstrung. While she was thus engaged, Carados came to. Lancelot had carelessly bandaged his head; the cloth blossomed deep scarlet. "I beg your mercy," whined the defeated man with all the humility he could muster. "Take me as your servant. I willingly enter your service if you will but spare my life."

"Speak a word to assure me you know you *deserve* death," spat Sir Lancelot, "and I will consider the matter."

"I do, I do," cried Carados desperately. "I deserve a miserable death, after hours of torture!"

"Fortunately for you, that is not how things are done in Camelot. Arthur is a godly King, and God knows the value of mercy. Tell me, how will you earn redemption?"

Carados thought it over, eyes darting wildly about, seeking escape. "I could...serve as Arthur's Knight? I would forsake my loyalty to Caerwent and instead swear service to Camelot."

"It will go to trial," Lancelot said. "Arthur is a just King. That means, Sir, that he will see through you if you are false, and his justice will mean your death. Perhaps you have some small chance."

As Lancelot was chaining the man's hands to the wall of a dungeon cell, Arthur came to see what the fuss was about. Enoch leaned over from his own cell to watch.

“This man attacked us at the May Day celebration, then threw himself on the mercy of Camelot. He pleads to serve you as a Knight. I told him there would be a trial.”

“Let us not lock up all my supposed enemies-turned-friends side by side, where they can commiserate and plot my downfall,” growled Arthur. The King glared at Carados until he cowered back, broken armor clanging. Then suddenly Arthur drew Excalibur and cut the chain where it met the dungeon wall, so that Carados’ hands were still cuffed and three feet of chain dragged behind. This length Arthur seized and hauled Carados to the Great Hall.

“You want to be a Knight, *Sir* Carados? You will serve here, chained to the Table you serve, until you prove your worth - your worth as a man who does not live by the sword, but lives by a Code. Someone fetch a blacksmith! Isn’t there any at hand?” The attendant pages shook their heads, and one ran to get a smith. “Very well. *This* shall hold you until one arrives!” King Arthur slammed the sword Excalibur through a link in the thick chain, sinking the blade deep into the table. He left in a huff.

As soon as the King’s back was turned, greed lit the eyes of the pitiful Sir Carados. He grabbed Excalibur’s hilt with his chained hands, but could not budge the great sword. The would-be Knight slumped against the great Round Table, subject to the jeers of all the passing courtiers and Knights. He worried constantly at his chains, turning impossible escapes over in his mind.

Meanwhile, in another part of the castle, Guinevere stalked up to Arthur’s bastard, who had completed his work and was now lounging carelessly in his chamber with his feet on the dresser, admiring his reflection in Calumni. “Was this your doing, Mordred?” she snarled. “An attack during the May Day festival?”

“Arthur hardly needs my help to win enemies,” he smirked.

“Arthur may treat you like an honored relative, but I see no reason to do the same,” said the Queen. As she turned her back on Mordred, he grinned and dropped three spheres from his sleeve into his hand. Casually, he flipped them smoothly around and around his fingers like a magician, then one by one he popped them seamlessly back up his sleeve.

“You’ll get what you deserve, my Queen,” he told the empty room.

Time

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Water coursed around mother-of-pearl tracks, bridged the gaps between nearby gilded half-pipes, collected in a porcelain basin tattooed with intricate mythological designs. A whirlpool formed at the bottom of the oddly shaped container, and tiny fleets of colorful wine corks followed its spiraling path, jostling each other, jockeying for position like trade boats in a harbor. A miniscule spout, with an even smaller aperture, allowed one drop of water at a time to escape the basin and splash onto Elaine's waiting hands. She watched the flowing water as though it were horses on a racecourse. This was Arthur's water clock, the first of its kind in the region, and highly accurate.

Because time was told not by the drips themselves, but by the level of the water in the basin that held them, viewers were permitted to stand beneath the gargantuan, complex clock and splash in the waters that fell at various rates, predicting the fall of seconds into minutes into hours, the slow progression of days, the dripping of weeks, unobservable streaming months, the girth of yearly cartridges that had not yet been emptied even a single time. And more complex things were measured, too: things gleaned from the lore of Merlin, such as the cycles of the planets; things prescribed by Enoch, all related to money; and finally, the custom fittings that measured laws passed and measures rejected, the rise and fall of powers, the progress of projects - the measurements of Arthur's Meritocracy system.

Her face tightened as she realized Mordred was due for a promotion. Always he found ways to ingratiate himself with the committees, offering grandiose solutions to problems no one even realized they had. His works, and those of the commoners he led, were starting to rival

those of the other Knights. Together, Mordred's faction outweighed the incessant creative genius of the King himself.

Glancing at the vials of liquid Time made manifest, Elaine realized the hour approached for one of her favorite pastimes: the time when William Twyti fed the King's towering horses and sleek hunting dogs. She changed into a more practical skirt, one that could get muddy, and raced off to the stables and kennels. She found the dogs already chewing on bones, and the horses already munching contentedly on their oats. The King's own mount, a prince of horses, father of the finest breeding lines, approached Elaine and begged regally for an apple or lump of sugar. Elaine patted him and fed him a carrot before going in search of Twyti. Was Arthur's clock running slow?

A thunderous commotion directed her to where the Road met the jousting lists. Elaine could not believe her eyes.

She thought she saw a brightly colored city on the move, far larger than any gypsy caravan, complete with war towers and castles and wandering cottages. Then one of the castles trumpeted, and she realized the constructions were borne by enormous gray beasts, with big floppy ears and long prehensile trunks. Elaine had never seen an elephant before, but from descriptions in the Library she thought these must surely be the half-mythical beasts of the East. Palanquins and silken streamers decorated their broad backs. They wore jeweled armor on their foreheads, and every bone-white tusk was brightly tipped with gold. In the center of the parade, four elephants walked in step, the structures on their back connected by a maze of thick, tightly woven rope bridges with cloth ceilings.

And people ran between these structures, or rode the elephants behind their ears, or ran along beside them, somehow avoiding the ponderous crushing footsteps of the great beasts. All manner of people, judging by their costumes - some from the East, some from Europe, others

she recognized from Camelot. Atop the highest construction stood William Twyti, playing a triumphant tune on a bugle rather badly and waggling his eyebrows at the children who came to watch.

“Fed the beasts early today! Needed time to receive this shipment!” bellowed the King’s huntsman when he saw Elaine. “They’re for the autumn celebration, but it’ll take months to train them up!”

“Could two knights joust from atop such a beast?” wondered Sir Ector.

“The force of the lance could pierce a castle wall!” marveled Elaine. She followed happily as Twyti steered them around Barrowgrove, the gnarled, thorny woods that had recently grown to flank the Garden.

Cycle 6: Summer

The Quest

Elaine chewed her midday meal in the shadow of the ant farm. It was a pane of thick glass covering one entire wall of the Library, filled with a mixture of white sand, the crushed shells of pink and blue sea creatures, and gemstone powder in amber, peridot, and citrine. Through the paper-thin press of minerals scurried little black ants, carrying food or eggs, excavating chambers at a whim. A closer look revealed that this maze of ant paths formed a crude map of England. Neither Arthur nor Twyti would ever reveal how they accomplished this feat, not even when it was discovered the map constantly updated to reflect current kingdom boundaries. Elaine marveled at the increasingly magical nature of Camelot's wonders.

Arthur and Guinevere joined her, bringing their own meal in a large basket. Arthur was explaining the details of his water clock, and his plans for a newer candle-powered clock.

"Merlin always described his existence as outside of Time. Dates meant little to him. The order of things eluded him. This contest took place, to him, at an unknown point in the future. He could never even tell me when he might have to leave me, though he knew it would occur. I hope he would be proud of what I have made, of my innovations. I like to think he would especially like these clocks, being so far removed from Time himself."

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of two men, strangers to Elaine, who seemed to know Arthur. The taller of the two stared about him at all the wonders of the Library and the towering works of art beyond its windows. The other strode directly up to Arthur, clamoring for his attention. "Arthur! Uncle! Well, you've really made a name for yourself, at last!

Risen beyond your station, some might say. But now that you are King, perhaps a certain amount of respect is due!”

“Good to see you, Gawain,” Arthur greeted his nephew. “Agravaine, welcome.” The tall man with awestruck eyes turned and bowed to Arthur. “I hope you find Camelot to your liking, lads. There have been some changes since you were last here.”

“I should say!” said Gawain. “Elephants in the courtyard. Gems lying about where anyone could steal them. Enemies of the throne chained up in the dining room. Fairy gardens taking up valuable crop space. And not a bloodstained floor in sight! What’s been happening?”

“I have been at work,” said Arthur. “With help from your brother Mordred.”

“We came here to see both our relatives!” said Agravaine with a smile. “Whether they be Pendragon or one of the Lothian clan.”

“Not to mention the upcoming joust and festival,” said Gawain. His expression was fierce, as if he were desperate to prove himself.

“Yes! But there will be many feasts and songs before the day of the joust arrives. We have much yet to prepare.”

“What’s there to prepare?” snorted Gawain. “All you need is a big heap of lances and a few long horizontal branches for the lists.”

“Things are a little different in the modern Camelot,” said Arthur happily.

“Modern Camelot seems to have a lot more rules,” said Gawain.

Later, Lancelot and Arthur were at council. To Lancelot’s right sat Carados, now more attentive, but still chained to the Round Table. The smith had forged the pin in the shape of a sword, a tribute to Carados’ original imprisonment by Excalibur.

“There is a grain of truth in what Gawain says,” Lancelot told Arthur. “Your rules are wise, but Camelot is at peace, and a Knight must have something to do. There is no one to

fight. You have won every engagement in the past year with only minimal loss of life, and now every kingdom fears to face us.”

“Perhaps you are right,” mused Arthur. “The Knights need an outlet for their energy. Perhaps some sort of quest might be found for them to pursue. Page! Summon every Knight who will come. Also bring me William Twyti, and the chief scout.”

When the men had assembled, Arthur got straight to the point. “The wondrous abilities of Camelot’s Knights cannot be hidden away from the rest of the world. No, you must go forth and work your miracles across the land, righting wrongs, demonstrating the ideals of chivalry. Unlike every knight in history to this point in time, you will not be stationed here to defend the castle. No, you will be Knights Errant, Knights of the Quest! You shall journey across Europe for weeks at a time, living off the land, allowing one quest to lead to another! I swear by the sword Excalibur, your names shall go down in history, and the obstacles you overcome will ever be remembered!”

This received a burst of applause. Carados sat up straighter than he had in months, seeming excited at the prospect.

“I have asked my advisors here so that they might share any needful tasks with you. I also have a few ideas of my own. To begin with, I am in need of a few seaworthy vessels for my next project. I happen to know a small fleet of fine ships was captured by barbarians in Holland. I will shower honor on whomever can retake the fleet and sail it back to Camelot bearing my flag. Now, who else has news of an undertaking worthy of Arthur’s Knights?”

Sir Pellinore spoke up. “I have lazed around the safety of this castle for too long. I beg of you, Arthur, find a quest suitable for your boldest Knight! Allow me to journey forth to strange lands in pursuit of some solemn goal!”

“Bravely spoken! By Excalibur, it shall be done! Who has a task for this man?”

Carados stood, chains jangling. "I know of a target, a great Beast to be slain, before it should devour the kingdom! It is an evil, sinful creature, a wretched result of incest, begotten of a demon and a lady of some distant court, who desired to share the bed of her own brother. She allowed the demon to sire the beast upon her in exchange for a love spell. The beast has the head of a serpent and the body of a great cat, and it produces a call like a ravening pack of hounds! If you could find such a dangerous beast and slay it, you would win great renown."

Arthur heard a dangerous subtext in this description, and rather doubted the existence of such a beast, but he nodded his approval to Pellinore. Sir Pellinore swore to personally end "the Questing Beast" or die trying.

"Thank you for that lead, Carados," said Arthur. "The next matter also concerns you. Three of my Knights have turned up missing. Scouts discovered they are held at Caerwent by Lord Turquine, brother of Sir Carados. He is angered by Carados' apparent imprisonment, though Carados remains our guest of his own free will. His strategy is to lure knights to his lands, defeat them in single combat, and make them prisoner in a foul-smelling hole. If any among you can overcome such a creature, please pursue this quest. William Twyti!" Twyti stood, looking expectantly at Arthur. "Are there still dragons to be found in the wild reaches of north Scotland or north Wales?"

"Oh yes. Seen many of them myself!" bragged the huntsman. "Always wreaking havoc, dragons. They love the steepest mountains and darkest caves."

"Good. And is it true, as the legends say, that each dragon possesses a vast hoard of gold?"

"Truly, sire! Vast beyond measure!"

"Then any Knight slaying a dragon and freeing the countryside of its tyranny will be permitted to keep the principal part of the dragon's treasure. One quarter will be sent to the

rebuilding efforts, and the remainder will be taxed fairly. But even greater than the treasure shall be the honor accompanying this great deed.”

“Indeed,” said a dry voice. “The slaying of a dragon will be worth great progress in the Questing Cup.” Mordred advanced on the Round Table, his ever-present mirror reflecting the sudden burst of argent light from the moonflowers outside. He was followed by a courier bearing a broad oaken chest.

“The Questing Cup?” asked Gawain keenly.

“Yes.” He gestured, and the courier popped the lid, revealing a huge golden trophy in the shape of a chalice, embedded with gems and so sizable a strong man would need both hands to lift it to his mouth. Dragons, nymphs, and harts, three dimensional and wrought of gold, decorated every surface. Silver trees and vines caressed every curve of the Cup, every frolicking sculpture. “This is the Questing Cup, the glorious prize for a fantastic contest I am instating.” All eyes fell on the fabulous treasure so casually admitted to their presence. Gawain actually licked his lips. “And every one of you is invited to participate!”

The courier dipped into the bottom of the chest and brought out an armload of smaller chalices, cast of bronze. These he set with a twist on the Table in front of each Knight, while Mordred preened in the mirror. Even chained Sir Carados received a goblet. Agravaine reached curiously to touch his cup, and found it could not be moved. It was fixed firmly in position.

“How does one win this trinket?” said Gawain.

“A wise question, my lord,” said Mordred. He gestured, and the courier moved to pour a miniscule measure of wine into Gawain’s goblet. “Bold deeds and cunning strategies will be rewarded with a dash from this official decanter. Cowardice and conventionality will cost you.”

“And what if ordinary wine is poured inside?” asked Gawain.

“Try it and find out,” suggested Mordred. Gawain tipped his wine flask into the goblet provided by Mordred. Blood red wine seeped from its base immediately, staining the wood of the Round Table. The other Knights laughed at Gawain’s empty chalice. Mordred smiled. “You see, only awards approved by my jury of three nobles and seven common folk are accepted by the game pieces. The contest will continue until one of your glasses brims over.”

Gawain rose triumphantly. “I will win this competition!” he said. “I will seek out the largest dragon in the furthest reach of the kingdom. And if I see Pellinore’s Questing Beast along the way, why, so much the better!!”

Pellinore leapt to his feet, slamming his gauntlet to the table in a ringing challenge. “That Beast is mine!”

Gawain swiveled until he was nose to nose with Pellinore. “The victory goes to whichever Knight first completes the task! It is immaterial who is assigned the task.” Mordred nodded.

Arthur opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by Agravaine. “Peace, Pellinore. I’m sure your fervor will bring you triumph. There is glory enough for all. My brother can be rude, but he bears you no ill will.” Pellinore sat, and Gawain followed his lead.

The King seized his chance. “I do not approve of this base rivalry,” he said. “Remove your trinkets and leave us to our deliberations.”

Mordred gave him a slow smile. “You forget, I enact this system under your authority. Within the Meritocracy, I rank highly enough to create without prior approval. Or is that not what your own proclamation says, my king?”

Stony faced, Arthur met Mordred’s nefarious gaze for a moment. Then he nodded begrudgingly and bid Mordred continue.

“My creation is elegant in its simplicity,” said Mordred. “There is nothing further to explain. I simply bid you strike as fast as you can, as hard as you can, that you are not overtaken by some other Knight with a bit more ambition. To glory, my friends! To honor!” Mordred raised the final chalice from the trunk in a toast, and tilted it so that sparkling wine poured over his upturned face. The Knights roared and applauded, whistled their approval, stamped their feet. Arthur felt Gawain and the others chafing at the demands of chivalry, but he felt the tension of overzealous rivalry sprouting among them. He knew in his heart that although the archetype of the Quest might be a good idea, there would be only grief as a result of the Questing Cup. But he could do nothing about it, and the meeting soon adjourned.

Barrowgrove

In the rear of the King's Garden, Elaine found an inlet of black and twisted trees, with clubbed whorls of twigs like hands contorted into claws. She followed this uneven row of trees, about three or four stems wide, until it poured into the stunted woodland of Barrowgrove. The tree canopies grew so closely together that the forest darkened by degrees, until the girl found herself in a strange and misty land of twilight. Tiny lights, morbid will-o-wisps, seemed to swim alluringly in the distance, a few feet off the ground like a lantern calling her to follow. She shuddered and turned directly back the way she'd come. But she should have been only a few strides away from the safety of the Garden proper, and when she didn't reach it right away, she knew she was lost. The wisps winked out. Near darkness enveloped her. She found herself splashing in a flood of shallow water between the trees.

Suddenly, a tall shape loomed out of the darkness; she nearly ran into it. The figure was nearly ten feet tall, and wore a hood shrouding its features and build. With the crook of its right arm, it leaned on a long wooden pole. It stood on the edge of a crude raft, which was half-buried in the muck, unmoving. The figure, too, failed to show the slightest hint of movement. Elaine could make out its silhouette because of some light source seemingly tucked away under its black robes. As she backed away in terror, her heel scraped the forward log of the raft, and it bucked in the mud. The figure swung a stout stave out from under its robes, pointing straight at her, clutched in its skeletal hands. A spiky lantern hung from the end, blinding Elaine even with the unreal murkiness of its light. Immediately, the figure became motionless as a statue once more. She flailed backwards, fell with a splash into the unseen water. It was cold, with a chill to pierce the flesh. Still she floundered away from the phantom oarsman.

When Elaine regained her footing, she found herself in another part of the wood. Darkness reigned completely. She noticed a constant humming noise to her left, and crept in its direction fearfully. She rounded the massive trunk of a short, squat tree, and beheld a pattern of fire floating in the air. The long loops of flame were somehow insect-like, living, and the noise seemed to issue directly from them. Without changing its form, the pattern began to close the distance to Elaine. Heart hammering, she bit off a yelp and retreated in a random direction.

She broke into a circle of dying firs. From the dry needles came a cloud of tiny, winged individuals, each with a hooded face exuding a vapor. Clutched in delicate little hands were miniscule lanterns, no bigger than a firefly, and glowing with green light. As the fairies crashed through the brush, scratchy hemlock needles rained to the cold earth. Elaine was too shocked and out of breath to yell for help, but she managed to stumble away.

She feared she might be heading back toward the eerie raft, when she came across a thin path. The track led her through the dark to a desolate clearing, glowing with red light. Occupying the center of the clearing, an ebony-skinned man kneeled, arms cocked and head thrown back like an effigy of pain. Its mouth was open in a soundless scream, eyes wide with terror, and its black skin was crisscrossed with livid scars. From each of these lesions or apertures, red light streamed forth. The trees cast long evil shadows away from the fearsome light of the tortured figure. Elaine's resolve shivered into splinters, and she gave voice to the effigy's wordless shriek. She dashed heedlessly away, tearing through dense underbrush and wicked thorns, leaving wisps of clothing on the grasping barbs. In the woods around her, she saw the other witch-lights moving slowly to surround her.

Finally she broke out into the open, lit by stars and a half moon. The Garden began a few yards south of her, bigger than ever, and the castle rose only a stone's throw to the north. The moonflowers in the Garden were dull. Elaine fled to the safety of her chambers, and the

sympathetic ear of Guinevere. The Queen surmised that Elaine had simply stumbled upon some of Mordred's disturbing sculpture work, but she did not understand how real it all had been.

Even in the sunlight of the next day, Elaine avoided Mordred. There was plenty to see and do. Though Mordred introduced a constant flow of proposals, solutions, and artwork, there were many creations that did not suggest his hand at all. These were made by nobles, farmers, artisans, or even travelers passing through. And Arthur never ceased to submit blueprints, order craftsmen, and orchestrate great movements, gesticulating passionately with Excalibur all the while. Elaine grew to take for granted the sudden bursts of moonlight from the Garden, at all hours of the day or night.

A steady and increasing stream of visitors poured into Camelot, until the Road seethed with movement like the ant farm with a dollop of honey dropped in. It seemed everyone wished to live in Camelot. Many, like Elaine, had intended to come for a visit and ended up staying. Some were nobles in their own lands, and received special gifts from Arthur: estates, knighthoods, honors. Many kings who had been Uther's enemies joined their forces with Arthur's, won over by his consistency and justice. The new order of chivalry proved popular with all who were new to its demands, though some of the Knights who had lived under its yoke the longest bristled at every restriction. In secret, they met to complain and relive the good old days. Arthur's foresighted invention of the Quests was all that kept the crudest Knights from mutiny.

The Armada

Elaine awoke to the sound of herald's trumpets. She leapt from her bed and ran to her spot on the battlements. All the watchmen gazed southwest along the bay, and she joined them curiously. The trumpets blazed forth again, and a murmur of excitement ran through the small crowd. King Arthur's banner appeared over the sea, followed by a hulking black mirage beneath that soon resolved itself into the shape of a massive ship. Lord Agravaine stood triumphantly at the helm, one foot on the gunwale, sword raised high. More ships followed, until an entire fleet was poised in the harbor, ready for Arthur's orders. Proudly, Agravaine regaled the court with his tales of brave deeds against the pirates of Holland, of the innocents he had saved from their tyranny, of adventures on the sea. Arthur plied him with honors, threw a feast in his name, and gave him the captaincy of the largest of the new ships. Mordred, leering at the other Knights, poured a healthy measure of wine into Agravaine's Questing chalice while the jury applauded.

Arthur and Excalibur raged through the decks and holds of the ships, excising all that was unpleasant or evil about them. The cavernous brigs were converted to holds, the bloodstains sanded away, the cruel instruments of torture chopped to scrap. The King refitted the ships, one by one, in different motifs and with different strengths. Some became fast clippers, others vast man-of-wars. All bore Arthur's proud standard, bordered in gold. Other colorful flags conveyed a variety of coded messages as to their well-being, destination, and mission. For a naval force, the armada was exceptionally cheery and brightly decorated.

Agravaine had the clever idea of working the armada into Arthur's justice system. If judge, jury, and defendant agreed, a criminal could receive a lesser sentence if he served for a time aboard ship. Many a tilt of the Scales of Themis condemned a man to the gallows, but converted him into a productive member of Arthur's navy. Lives were spared, justice was

served, and Arthur obtained the labor forces he needed to become a naval power on the world stage. Agravaine dubbed it the Armada of Redemption, and added a gilded sculpture of Themis as a figurehead to the prow of his ship. He proved a tough but fair taskmaster to the forgiven criminals working his sails.

Crime became almost nonexistent in Camelot. Riches overflowed from every corner of the castle. Flocks and droves of visitors came to see even the least creation of Arthur, the eeriest creation of Mordred. The latter continually pushed the limits of gruesomeness in his sculpture and art, while maintaining a semblance of fairness in his more political suggestions. Still people wished to explore under the eaves of his woods, live in the shadow of his taloned beasts, play in his elaborate, cruel games with living pieces. The depths of their tolerance seemed to frustrate him. At times, he made attempts to turn this into a blow against Arthur; he tried to overpopulate Camelot beyond its capacity to feed, house, and police the hordes of new guests. But this was exactly Excalibur's strength, for it was an artifact of preservation and bonding, for the sharpening of relationships between dissimilar peoples.

Mordred's careful thrusts did not succeed, and Camelot continued to grow. The Garden grew vast, invading the gnarled woods with violets and soft moss. Guinevere spent hours in the sunshine, barefoot on the moss, or even in the moonshine, delighting in the unpredictable bursts of moonflower light. Elaine accompanied her on many of these excursions, unless she was out watching Arthur build. She did not know how Arthur found time to sleep, for he was in a constant frenzy of creation. Mordred, too, was seldom seen in the castle, preferring to spend his time in his dank workshop, plotting Arthur's downfall in secret. He was the topic of many of the girls' frustrated conversations.

"That Mordred will not stop giving me gifts," Guinevere complained, seated on a bench of white wire. Flowers grew between the lattices, framing her hair. "Yesterday he brought me a

little yapping terrier, a veritable mop of an animal. It doesn't listen to any commands. It can't be made to shut up. And it follows me everywhere like a magnet. I hate accepting gifts from Mordred, but I feared what might happen to it with Mordred as its owner. It'd wind up in a burlap sack with only rocks for company, at the bottom of a stream - and that's if the poor creature were lucky."

"And Arthur still won't see what Mort is truly like?" said Elaine.

"Oh, he knows. He just feels his hands are tied. Mordred is family, like it or not."

"Speak his name, and the devil comes," Elaine observed. Indeed, Mordred had casually emerged from Barrowgrove and was headed toward the Queen. Perched on his bare wrist was a jet black falcon, cruel talons digging into his bare flesh. The hooded bird turned its head this way and that, then bent to taste the blood running down Mordred's forearm. Mordred ignored his wounded wrist and kept his eyes on Guinevere.

"Good evening, my Queen. I bring a gift for your majesty."

"Go away, Mordred. I have no use for your flattery, or bribery, or whatever you think you are doing."

"Nonsense," said Mordred. "I only bring gifts to my Queen because I am a man possessed by an undeniable urge to create, to improve. Yet only one of high station is worthy of the gifts I bear. Your lapdog, for example, holds the highest of pedigrees - he is descended from the King's finest hunting dogs."

"Leave it to Mordred to corrupt a noble animal," said Elaine disdainfully.

"I quite agree," sniffed Guinevere. "And what have you done to this poor falcon, steeped him in soot?"

"Nay, my Lady. This fine bird is a melanistic tiercel. A merlin, in fact, the falcon of queens. He was born this way. He, too, is of fine breeding - descended from a god among birds.

Note his fine ebony plumage, his proud bearing, his size; though a male, he is larger than the largest falcon in Twyti's mews. And he belongs to you." Mordred produced a fur-lined leather glove and slipped it over Guinevere's fingers. The bird immediately abandoned Mordred's ichor-stained hand and hopped onto the glove.

"Thank you, Mordred," said Guinevere. "Now get lost."

"There's more, my Lady. Watch." Mordred removed a small silver whistle and blew four short blasts. The merlin leapt to the skies. A wispy ribbon unfurled from its leg as it climbed for altitude. Then the bird began to swoop and dive rapidly, faster than Elaine believed possible, defying the earth's pull. The ribbon trailed wherever it went, falling ever so slowly, unspooling with every stroke of the black merlin's wings. Soon the ethereal thread formed a picture in the sky, a swiftly melting image of two swans with necks intertwined. In moments, the breeze carried the bright streamer away, dissolving the image.

Before the hawk could land, Mordred blew thrice upon the silver whistle. Like a black dart, it dove into the Garden and returned with a red rose. It landed on the astonished Guinevere's glove and dropped the flower into the crook of her arm.

"Mordred, I wish you would put your twisted mind, your horrid genius, toward the betterment of society. Then maybe I would have more to say to you."

"Oh, your every word is a treasure, my Queen. I savor every biting insult."

"Come, Elaine, we have better things to do elsewhere. Let me dump this presumptuous gift into William Twyti's capable hands, then we shall go to the bazaar. *Goodbye*, Mordred."

Guinevere swept off with Elaine in tow.

"Do you think you ought to be so rude to him?" asked Elaine, after Twyti pronounced the falcon healthy and set it on its perch.

“I’ll be as rude as I like,” said Guinevere. “He gets all the tolerance he needs from my husband.”

The bazaar rang with voices, an overwhelming crescendo of different speech, a vortex of cries and exclamations and haggling. The weekly market, guarded by a new breed of Knights, created an atmosphere of fashion for the wealthy, but an economy the common class could afford. Crispy loaves of fresh bread and fresh, fragrant fruit were for sale beside priceless brooches of solid diamond. Such trust, and such mingling of different perspectives, would not have been possible even a year ago.

Elaine stopped to look at a baby monkey in a stall hung with colorful paper lanterns, a hunk of jagged blue crystal, a thick leatherbound book as tall as she was, a long and sharp dagger that weighed less than a rose petal. Heady scents from entire bales of rare herbs filled her nostrils. Across the aisle from each other, two storytellers competed loudly over the correct version of an ancient tale. Likewise, at opposite ends of the market, twin fortune tellers had set up booths depicting the constellations; visitors to both of these two women heard entirely different fates for themselves. You could pay extra for them to throw animal bones into their scented fires, billowing with dull green smoke, and hear further details of your future. Elaine once asked both soothsayers about a path through the Maze of Wrongs. The elder told her, “Ye cannot forgive lest ye forget.” The younger said, “The Maze is bootless. The Maze does not suffice. The Maze offers no solution.” Elaine decided she had asked the wrong question.

She saw Agravaine and Gawain at a seamstress’ booth, gearing up for their next quests. Agravaine had wrapped himself in a billowing cloak, custom embroidered with protective sigils in golden thread. The stall’s owner stitched the finishing touches as Elaine walked by. Elaine and Agravaine exchanged a friendly wave. Gawain, however, had a face like a stormcloud as he pondered which tabard and banner best suited the slaying of a dragon, or the beheading of a

serpentine Questing Beast. He settled on a red tabard, the color of blood, with fearsome, gory scenes on it, and a banner to match. He also purchased a long, thin streamer designed for use on an arrowhead. It was supposed to stabilize the shaft and make an eerie, intimidating whistling as it traveled through the air.

“You had best make haste, Sir Gawain,” Elaine teased. “Sir Pellinore has been after the Questing Beast for some months now. He is sure to stumble across his quarry soon - or better yet, stumble across a dragon!” The arrow shaft in Gawain’s hands snapped in two as he glared at her. She left in a hurry.

Lancelot, too, had embarked on a quest. As a godly man, he cared more for the lives of innocents than the glory of the Questing Cup. Thus, he targeted the biggest threat to life and livelihood: he went searching for a dragon to slay.

From Cornwall to Cantia, from the steep mountains of Moreif to the cavernous inlets of Wales, all over the Scottish Highlands and the swampy moors of Walweitha, he sought their lairs. But every high, rocky cave and craggy pile of boulders turned up empty. Not a dragon could be seen. He found a few treasures hidden in the stony places of the world: a small chest of gold doubloons, bolts of silk tapestries in a heap, sacks of jade, ruby, and diamonds. These he dutifully carted back to Camelot for Arthur to divide fairly. He felt he should have come across a dragon scale, chipped fang, or jeweled egg by now, if he couldn’t bring back a dragon head.

The first person Lancelot saw upon his unsuccessful return to Camelot was Mordred, who was absorbed in contemplation of his mirror. As far as Lancelot could discern, Mordred made no attempt to fix his hair or improve his appearance. He simply concentrated, occupying a bit more of the path than was polite. Sir Lancelot turned his horse another way and came to the

castle from a different route. He gained the ramparts on foot, seeking Arthur. Instead, he came across Elaine, casually spinning a large brass rooster on a fletched weathervane.

“Isn’t it nice?” said Elaine. “I think Arthur put it here, to commemorate the spot I always stand. And look! It has a spyglass at the base, so I can look out over the ocean, or the Road, or the Garden.” She smiled at him. Lancelot turned away to look out over Camelot.

“It is a good gift,” he said.

“Tell me everything, Sir Lancelot! Did you slay a dragon? Did you bring back its hoard? Were you wounded?”

“Nay, Lady. I begin to think there are no dragons in England anymore. I did find treasures, but all were the sort of thing a smuggler or bandit might cache. I will have to get more advice from William Twyti, or give up.”

“You should take your treasures to Enoch for appraisal. He might be able to tell you about their source.”

“You give good advice, my Lady.”

“I have another piece of advice, Sir, if you would hear it.”

“I would.”

“Take a break from seeking dragons, and seek out Sir Turquine instead. While you were gone, another five Knights fell to his lance. They languish in his dark prisons.”

“Ah, I am shamed! I am needed there. Those Knights are my sworn brothers. My first duty is to them. Thank you for your words, kind Lady.”

Lord Turquine

Sir Lancelot rode boldly to Caerwent, where Lord Turquine lurked. On the border of that kingdom stood a black tree bearing no leaves. On each branch, a knight's shield was affixed; Lancelot recognized the sigils of several of his friends. Each could be found imprisoned somewhere in the subterranean bowels of Sir Turquine's dungeons. Lancelot almost imagined he could hear their howls beneath his feet, emanating from the cold ground.

Turquine's guardsmen had standing orders from their lord to accept challengers, bring them to the battlefield, bring water for their horses and wine for the knights. Lancelot partook of this sustenance, knowing it created a certain obligation on the part of Sir Turquine: he could not in honor slay one who had taken food and been treated like a guest, except through a fair duel. The men led him on his horse to the challenger's side of the field where so many of Arthur's Knights had been defeated.

Lancelot's keen eyes beheld Sir Turquine riding right past the field, in the distance. He raised a Round Table shield over his head, laughing, showing Lancelot he needed to visit the taunting tree before their engagement. When he reappeared, he rode directly to stand opposite Lancelot.

"My brother writhes in chains in Camelot. As the knights of my family are worth any twenty Knights of Camelot, I issue the same challenge to every warrior who visits my domain. Unhorse me, and all the knights in my prisons go free. Fall from your own steed, and you join them. Do you accept?" This last sentence Sir Turquine roared above the clatter of armor and hooves.

"By Excalibur that knighted me, and by King Arthur whom I swore to serve, I accept. God shall bring me to victory, for mine is the cause of right!" The horses charged.

Immediately, Sir Lancelot knew something was wrong. His horse moved a hair too sluggishly, and when Lancelot rode he felt as one with his animal. And this was no ordinary beast; this was of the royal line of horses, trained fiercely each and every day without fail, just as Lancelot himself trained. Lancelot quickly accepted that his mount would not perform to the standard he was accustomed, and changed tactics. He leaned slightly forward at the last minute before impact, focused on getting a perfect angle between his shield and Turquine's lance. At the same time, his strong right arm went through motions practiced a thousand times until they were inviolate second nature, and thrust his own lance with mighty precision against Turquine's armor.

Every thw in Lancelot's toned body screamed at the blow he received from Turquine. The man was moving faster at impact, and had an unearthly strength and skill. Still Lancelot stayed on his horse, through sheer force of will. Lancelot began to wonder if his opponent possessed an enchanted lance, for Lancelot's own was shattered, yet the other remained whole. They rode back to their corners for another pass.

This time, Lancelot paid attention to the ground underfoot. It was far muddier on his side than on his opponent's; a significant disadvantage. Every few feet, between stiff stems of heather, steel spiderwebs hung like tiny tripwires. No single wire could stop a horse, but the combination slowed him immensely, and Lancelot now saw his mount's shins had received several tiny cuts, just a touch of red staining the white hair of its foreleg. Curious, Lancelot issued a command to his mount, and it performed a half-bow, a difficult task for a horse. He made it seem like a sardonic bow to his opponent, hoping to enrage him and throw him off balance, without stooping to unchivalrous insults.

From this vantage point, he could see the steel threadlike traps clearly, as well as something far more evil. Miniscule, rootlike serpents wormed through the mud, each only the

size of an earthworm. When the horse stamped its feet, the tiny vipers struck upward to bite at its flesh, leaving nearly invisible purple fang marks. Soon, he sensed, the poison would overwhelm his horse and make a win impossible.

The other knight was charging, perhaps realizing Lancelot perceived his deception. Lancelot guided his mount's actions with his legs, eyes focused on the enemy. The mighty steed of Camelot, lord among horses, gave two tremendous forward bounds, hooves barely touching the ground. It accelerated intensely in the final few feet, nearly matching the surprised Turquine's momentum. Sir Lancelot knocked his enemy's lance upward and connected well with his own thrust. Turquine twisted in the saddle but somehow did not fall.

As Lancelot rode carefully back to his position, he suspected treachery he had not yet uncovered. As the third charge reached its climax, Lancelot's horse took one step back. In a moment of brief panic, Turquine's horse turned ever so slightly to the side, presenting a tempting flank to Lancelot's weapon. The demands of chivalry and honor were clear, despite the treachery of his opponent. Sir Lancelot du Lac stayed his hand, did not slay the horse when he had the opening. But he glimpsed something important: his opponent's armor was cinched directly to the saddle, which was reinforced with extra straps of leather.

The fourth tilt ensued, with Lancelot keeping his mount out of the serpent-infested mud as much as possible. He longed to pull out his sword and cut those thin leather straps, but this was a duel of lances only. Instead, he leveled his weapon at the joint where Turquine's armor met saddle, and thrust it forward with all his might just before impact. He was rewarded with a faint pinging sound as the metal clicked out of place. To disguise what he had done, he levered his shaft upward to clip Sir Turquine's shield, make it look like he had mistimed the blow. But a moment later, Turquine's lance breached Lancelot's shield and nearly stabbed into his flesh. The ruse had cost him. With a twist, Turquine jerked Lancelot over his saddle. His weight

longed to draw him to earth. He clung with all the strength of his legs, clucked to the great horse, and it maneuvered to keep him in the saddle. As Lancelot's enemy passed, he gave Lancelot a ringing blow to the helmet with the butt of his lance. Cold, righteous fury at the dishonorable move kept the brave cavalier on his horse, and he swung around to face Turquine again.

"The time has come! We ride once more, and you will fall!" raged Turquine. Mighty Lancelot said nothing, just squared his shoulders. The two undefeated warriors clashed. Mud met hale grass beneath them. Two horses pushed themselves to the limit, kicking up a spray of earth and foam, seething with the anger of their riders. With a cry of "Lord, guide my hand!" Sir Lancelot's dire thrust flung Turquin bodily from his seat. He landed in the grass, ten paces from the serpents and wires. Lancelot rode up to press him.

"You are unhorsed. By the terms of your challenge, all your prisoners go free."

"No! To the death we fight!" Turquine drew his sword and leapt at the mounted Knight.

Lancelot turned the blow easily and said, "Further bloodshed is not necessary. I have proven my mettle and the righteousness of my cause, before God and man. Release the Knights of the Round Table at once." Turquine danced with rage and flung mud over Lancelot's shining armor. At once, Lancelot leapt to the ground, drawing his sword in midair and striding to Turquine. Steel met steel, and the battle began.

Lancelot's purity succored him. His cause was true. He fought for his friends. His training was more intensive, and he was in peak physical condition. Furthermore, Turquine had come off the worse in their joust, taking several battering blows as well as the fall from his mount. And here there were no serpents, no mud, just good firm earth under summer grass. But Sir Turquine was in his home, and fought with fury over the mistreatment of Sir Carados, chained to the Table Round. He was broader in the shoulder than Lancelot, with a low center of mass that

lent itself to cheap headbutts, kicks, and underhanded charges with his broad blade. After several exchanges, they had not received satisfaction.

Still they fought. The sun crept across the sky. Sweat crossed their brows. The soil turned to muck beneath their dancing feet. Lancelot drew first blood, but when he made an offer of mercy Turquine responded with a harsh cut to the calf, saying, "To the death!" Back and forth they moved, stance after stance, matching brilliant swordplay until their blades were notched and their armor scored with hundreds of lines. The sun reached the lower branches of Turquine's black tree; the sky turned orange, painting the stolen shields with blood. Sir Lancelot moved noticeably slower, with a slight limp, but Sir Turquine moved slower still. His left arm streamed with ribbons of flesh and plumes of blood.

Finally the sun vanished, dousing the earth in darkness. But it could not quench the fire in Lancelot's eyes, borne by holy fervor, and his gaze pierced the murky night until his blade found a gap in Sir Turquine's defenses. Joints popped in Turquine's armor as the sword found its mark and sank deep into his bowels. He slid off the blade and allowed his blood to water the damaged grass, saying, "My brother...!" Lancelot stooped to close his eyelids and make the sign of the cross. Then he leaned on his sword and prayed, thanking God for his victory. He whistled for his horse, and together they found Turquine's dungeons, freed the tortured knights, and had a great feast on Turquine's food stores, slept a restful sleep in his beds.

Then the Knights bore their splintery shields from the black tree back to Camelot, where Elaine was the first to spot them. She summoned Guinevere, and Guinevere ordered another feast, and Elaine ran to hug Lancelot and bathe his wounds. Sir Carados bowed his head at the news of his brother's death, but accepted it with good grace, for he knew his brother had been overzealous and offered little choice to the Knights of the Round Table.

Arthur's Table felt whole and boisterous again. But Mordred, grinning wickedly, drained points from all the captured Knights' goblets and transferred the liquid to Lancelot's cup. Even among the Knights he had saved were some who threw him dirty looks. Guinevere's favorite Knight, Sir Dinadan, had not been captured, and he had been in the lead before Lancelot's great deed. The Queen and her favored warrior bore no little malice toward the victorious Sir Lancelot's righteous victory, her first emotion that King Arthur did not share or understand.

Cycle 7: Competitions

Fingers of rancor drove their way into the Garden, manifest as bitter, fruitless trees, scions of the dark wood where Elaine had encountered the statues. At other points, the Garden blazed upward toward the sky, with towering obelisks and tall, beautiful monuments to the great works of Arthur's Knights. Elaine could not keep track of all the changes Arthur somehow had time to add, though she and Guinevere walked the Garden every day.

"I think Mordred is watching me strangely," said Elaine nervously one day.

"Nay, the monster still watches me," Guinevere responded. "He still sends me romantic gifts. Trains that black falcon in more and more grand tricks. Nearly half of them involve roses! I took his silver whistle, but he just made a new one. He also gave me this necklace." Guinevere indicated a band of delicate hematite bricks, each brocaded in gold foil and bound together by links of different metals.

"If you dislike his gifts so, why do you wear that?"

Guinevere looked angry. "It is just a bit too useful to put aside. One of the soothsayers showed me how to use it, after Mordred hinted it had prophetic powers. Look, you simply ask it a question, such as 'What does Lancelot seek?' and, if it is feeling helpful...yes, look!" The gray blocks of stone in the necklace were sliding out of place before Elaine's eyes, cascading on their pivots of thread like a Jacob's Ladder toy. Quickly they spelled out the word "DRACO," then stilled, then finally slipped back into their original places as Guinevere shook it. "It does not always answer, and often it answers quite vaguely," she explained. "Never more than a single word."

"If he woos you, why does he watch me so?" wondered Elaine.

Just then Lancelot appeared in the Garden, carrying a big marble sphere. "Excuse my intrusion, ladies. Mordred asked me to deposit this in the fountain: a new addition." Lancelot slotted the sphere into place. It fit tightly within a large cuplike structure on the fountain's surface and began to spin gently, its red surface now slick with water. The effect was magical, impossible.

Elaine reached out to touch it, but just then a spray of water erupted laterally from the sphere as it shifted into a more exact position. Elaine was drenched, from her long hair to her bodice and the sash at her waist.

"My Lady Elaine! I apologize profusely. I am at fault; I should have been more careful. Allow me to accompany you back to the warmth of the palace," said Lancelot. He led her away with a bow to Guinevere, one muscular arm around Elaine's shoulder comfortingly. Guinevere followed a few steps behind. Beyond the Garden walls, she caught a glimpse of Mordred slipping away into the forest.

"He was watching us. He was watching Elaine, just as she said," she muttered to herself. "What does he plan?"

Wind and Melody

It was a thing of sunshine. Green fields unfolded around it, soaking up the sun's rays just as the gleaming metal and rows of pearls did. Warmth radiated from it, and the day seemed brighter in its presence. Elaine had found time at last to come visit the Harp of the Winds.

A path of simple flagstones, brown and tan and off-white, led to the little patio where the harp lived. Every heel to strike these stones made them light up in hot reds, oranges, and yellows; every hue resembled the tone that played forth from the radiant rock, lasting just a moment, just long enough to meld into the next note. Happy blades of grass poked up between the stones and remained green all year long.

Vast, sweeping forms and golden strings made up the complex instrument. White golden metal was molded with mother-of-pearl inlay along every rich curve. Though the instrument was shaped much like a traditional harp, every line suggested sunshine. Warm pearls, raised along its perimeter, were beads of dew greeting morning sun. The fine strings, nearly invisible unless defined by the catch of moving strands of light, were ephemeral sunbeams. Platinum and gold alloyed together made up the frame, which was the rounded form of the sun itself. The sun's fiery majesty was incarnate in architectural offshoots from the main body of the harp: smaller armatures strung with more working strings, ostentatious and densely looping ornamentation, offset platforms constructed wherever the frame leveled out. Upon the platforms, sunbathers relaxed, heated by sunshine above and sunshine below.

All this struck Elaine, warmed her heart, and made her marvel at the heights to which Camelot had ascended. And this was all before the wind picked up and filled her being with a warm outpouring of peace and ecstasy.

As the wind plucked the strings of the Harp, mellifluous delight filled the air. Every note was rich beyond belief, and somehow the wind selected precisely the right combinations moment after moment, as if Apollo himself played this magnificent lyre. Small tones from the lesser harps supported the great twangs of the larger strings, resonated with them in complex, flawless chords. Sonorous melodies filled each second, fast as the wind. Elaine's ears picked out tunes to match and accentuate the richest parts of her mood, lifting her up into cloud-tops bathed in eternal sunshine.

Elaine attuned herself to the pitch of the Harp more and more with each passing strum of the onrushing gods. She came to realize sunshine was not the only light at play among the diaphanous harp strings. Wherever the wind caressed the harp, soliciting eager notes, strands of translucent light accentuated the path of the breeze. Invisible stirrings from the west entered the plane of the harp and emerged soaked in every color imaginable, tracing the lines of force which plucked its strings. Amber predominated, but it would not have stood out so much without mild rays of beryl, indigo, and scarlet. A few feet away from the harp's area of influence, the color died away, but Elaine liked to imagine the wondrous sound never stopped; it only lessened with every passing yard until it passed beyond human hearing. It never truly died.

A few smaller works had grown up around the harp, including a children's swing that streamed a constant sheet of rain - only pausing at the exact moment the rider lurched through its path.

Searching for a spot among the sunbathers, Elaine climbed to the top of the massive instrument. She reflected on Arthur's cleverness in providing an alternate way for people to interact with the harp, aside from competing with the wind for the privilege of playing it.

Many came to hear the music of the harp: a mathematician seeking esoteric knowledge of musical science, visual artists, and scores of minstrels, including a blind bard who sought

ways to communicate without knowledge of sight the strange mental visions that plagued him. The King declared a festival for these comers and for all the people of Camelot. It centered around the Harp, so all could enjoy its melodies and visual beauty. Though many dancing feet trampled the turf that day, the grass remained as green and vibrant as ever.

On the Existence of Dragons

Arthur and Lancelot, working by the light of a candle set in a crystal cage, sat at a worktable, consumed by a small mountain of books and scrolls. Elaine occasionally joined them if she stumbled upon a useful book, but mostly she flitted from section to section, desperate to see every sight and know all there was to know. On her way to the worktable bearing an armload of books, she passed two botanists arguing over a map of the Garden. Elaine smiled, knowing no map of the Garden lasted more than a day or two without needing an update.

The two men concentrated on their work, delving through every bestiary in the great Library. Arthur was determined to prove the existence of dragons, for he knew the Knights needed this quest. Lancelot needed it because without someone to protect, he was adrift in the world. The other Knights needed it because they had energy to burn, lest the world need protecting from them.

William Twyti was no help. He spun grander and grander tales about dragons, about the people he knew whose relatives had seen dragons, about sages he swore had told him dragon-related facts. So the King and Sir Lancelot had banned Twyti from the Library hall until his claims could be substantiated.

Arthur was sure Merlin had mentioned something about dragons. Lancelot was sure he had heard of a warrior who'd cloven a dragon in twain. But neither could find much to distinguish a dragonless land from one infested with the things.

“Arthur, do not despair. The Round Table shall always find objectives worthy of our errantry. There is much injustice in the world to be righted. Even in this time of peace, Mordred fills our chalices with the wine of many victories.”

“Mordred’s championship brings unrest and envy among my Knights. I dislike the way he handles things, the way his jury eggs him on. He means something evil by it, I am sure. As he does with all his works.”

“If he is such a serpent in your Eden, why not cast him out?” said Lancelot.

Arthur shook his head. “Mordred is family. Mordred is a guest. Mordred is of noble blood. Mordred has done nothing that is outright illegal, by my own laws. And I do not think it would suit Merlin’s purposes if I crushed Mordred with my heel. Nay, and I forbid all you Knights to do it. Guinevere thinks he is up to something...but when is Mordred not up to something?”

“He is a slippery one,” Lancelot agreed. “Now what about this: ‘...*the dragons were hereof, entangle and snarle his feet and legges first with their taile....*’ Never mind, Arthur. This is about dragons as an enemy of the elephant.”

That night, Arthur climbed the highest tower of Camelot and gazed up at the moon and stars. He leaned on his sword and prayed, prayed that Lancelot would find a dragon to slay, whether actual or allegorical. A sudden brilliant luminescence from the moonflowers he took as affirmative answer to his prayer. He went to join Guinevere, feeling a bit more at peace with himself and his plans.

The next day found Lancelot and Elaine on the castle wall, by a string of coincidences. Guinevere had a suspicion Mordred might be somehow behind it, but she kept her thoughts to herself. From her chamber window, she saw Elaine point suddenly toward the darkening sky.

Lightning crashed in the distance. A cold chill pierced the air, guided by harsh currents of sudden wind. On the Road’s horizon, men fled in terror toward the castle.

Through tenebrous clouds of mist, a scaly creature appeared, soaring effortlessly on wings rigid with anger. Men were overcome with terror when exposed to its shadow. Its wingspan measured at least thirty feet. Guinevere quickly shrouded her windows with its

curtains lest she be forced to look upon the horrid creature. Still she could feel its terrible presence emanating over the scene.

Lancelot rushed Elaine inside, and took the stairs two at a time up to rally the archers. His presence steadied them, and they loosed a torrent of arrows at the beast, while the Knights of the Round Table readied their shields and swords. The wyvern pulled its wings tight about itself and executed an evasive, rolling twist through the sky. Then it stooped to rake the ramparts with its two sets of talons, presenting a scaly flank to the main body of archers while it fed on a slain victim. Again Sir Lancelot ordered his men to fire, as blood pooled from the dying man. Arrows clattered harmlessly off the dragon's armor, and it laughed with a gargling roar.

"Where is Arthur? We need Excalibur!" cried Lancelot.

One wing snapped out and knocked a dozen longbowmen from the castle wall. Then the beast saw Sir Lancelot. "You! You are the one who raided my lair!" it rasped. "You shall DIE! Your kingdom shall SUFFER! My treasure I will recoup a hundredfold from the vaults of Camelot!" Folding its wings about itself like an enormous bat, leaning forward to balance its weight with long neck and barbed tail, the wyvern charged along the castle wall. It smashed stone, scattered men like ninepins. Their lines broken, the preternatural terror exerted by the dragon rushed over them again. Lancelot was left alone on the ramparts with a lunging dragon.

"Excalibur-" he began, and then he was washed away in the tide of the wyvern's rage. Three times it slammed him against the central keep wall with all its weight, until his armor was crushed and bloody. Lancelot's face was a bloody pulp; white bone splinters protruded from his ankle. His body lay blighted and limp, limbs at awkward, forced angles. His ruined sword was bent around a crenellation. And the dragon's teeth gnawed at his armor, seeking tender meat.

"Lancelot!" came a cry from the upper levels of the castle. Arthur leapt through a stained glass window, his armor askew from a hasty donning. The colored shards of glass fell with him

to the lower level of stone, but he quickly left them behind as he leapt from that rampart to the next, then the next, flying across fifteen feet of empty space each time until he came level with Lancelot. Still the King was a dozen yards from Lancelot's body. He began running, Excalibur already in hand and blazing with glory and vengeance.

Suddenly the dragon screamed in pain. Arthur leapt onto the thin battlements for a better view, without slowing his advance. Gore sprayed forth from the wyvern, and its tail lashed vehemently. From its back, a spearpoint sprouted in an eruption of ichor. On the other end was Sir Lancelot du Lac, leaning on the spear. Only this prop supported him; it was clear his legs could not bear his weight without grating on splinters of bone. But he continued to drive the spear with all his might, all the weight of his armor and his muscular body. The beast, summoning its last reserve of strength and will, gripped Sir Lancelot in one scaly foot.

As the dragon tottered, Arthur reached the fight. He was in time to see the fiery light go out in the wyvern's eyes; he was only a few yards away when the great neck slumped over the wall, followed by the massive torso. The dragon's corpse fell from the ramparts, dragging the exhausted Lancelot with it.

"Lancelot!" howled Arthur. He flipped over the rail, propelling himself after the falling Knight. With a single one-armed stroke of Excalibur, he cut through the spear shaft and the wyvern's thick leg, freeing his friend. Arthur's other hand hugged Lancelot close to him. He hit the ground, armor crashing, right knee bending to touch the ground at impact so that he kneeled eight inches deep in the sod, with Excalibur driven halfway to the hilt clutched in his right hand. Then the King stood and rolled the Knight gently away from the poisonous breath and venomous, thrashing tail of the dragon Lancelot had slain.

"Sir Lancelot! Sir Lancelot!" Elaine, rushing to the scene with a healing kit, was the first thing Sir Lancelot saw when he opened his eyes. "Mordred told me what happened! Oh, Sir

Lancelot, you must live! Think of the songs they will sing in your honor! Think of the glory for Camelot!" She busied herself addressing his wounds.

"Mordred told her?" said Guinevere to herself. She had followed after Elaine with a bevy of healers in tow. "What does he care for the loss of Arthur's finest Knight?"

"You wrong me, my Queen," said Mordred's oily voice from just behind her. She whirled around. "Besides," he grinned smugly, "I thought Lancelot might like to see a pretty face as he awakened. They would make a lovely couple; don't you agree?" Mordred signaled to his panel of jurors and stalked away with a flourish.

Lancelot soon recovered enough to walk on crutches into the great hall, where a feast was prepared in his honor. He was hailed as a Dragonslayer, and given a very generous splash of wine from Mordred's enchanted carafe. William Twyti gifted him a braided leather belt, buckled by two sparring dragons, the symbol of Wales. And he had brought a friend, a silent warrior from a far off kingdom reputed to be the slayer of more dragons than anyone living.

Sir Lancelot was as humble as ever, acknowledging all honors with a smile, a bow, and sometimes a modest wave. Arthur was proud of this Knight among Knights, whom the repute of Camelot had called from far off France.

But Arthur soon had cause for redress with Mordred: encouraged by the jury, Mordred was doling out liquid honor for the other Knights engaged in the skirmish with their mighty fallen foe. Some Knights were receiving double or even triple the wine given to their fellows, though not a one of them had landed a blow or entirely resisted the dragon's frightful aura. The King immediately noticed angry looks upon those who were slighted, and fierce needling from those who came out ahead.

"Mordred," he said quietly when his bastard son passed nearby. "I warn you. Play fair or not at all!"

“Fair, dear Father?” said Mordred, addressing him in this way for the first time. “The jury has decided. I follow where they direct. That is justice, my King. If you have issue, take it up with them.”

“You must learn to take responsibility for yourself,” growled Arthur. “As a lord at my table, I feel it is my duty to give you this advice, free of charge.”

“Reflect well on your words,” grinned Mordred, holding up the mirror Calumni so Arthur could see his own face. “Responsibility? This whole idea, this Meritocracy, these rules and committees and trials - they are all your creations. They are *your* responsibility.” He tapped a final drop of wine into Lancelot’s chalice and left the room.

Arthur snorted and went to join Elaine, who was engaged in conversation with William Twyti and his foreign friend.

“Have you started chronicling Lance’s victory?” she was asking.

Twyti looked vaguely uncomfortable. “Oh yes. He, ah, he already promised me a full morning of discussion.”

“And I suppose you’ll have questions for Arthur, too,” Elaine said wisely. “He was very up close and personal with that dragon.”

“Yes, that is true.”

“And your exotic friend! Ask him if he would like to give a speech! This is a feast for a fellow dragonslayer, after all!”

“Why don’t you ask me yourself?” said the foreigner in a clear voice. “Besides, this wyvern, it was just a youth. A wyrmling. I have slain larger dragons in their own lairs.”

“Please,” said Arthur, “You two simply must write something for my Library. I did not find a single credible word on the subject of dragons.”

“Ah, if it please your majesty, I will see what can be done after the feast.” Twyti twitched nervously.

“What is it you’re not telling me, Twyti?” Arthur said.

“They... they... hells, they never existed! Not a one, I’m sure of it!” blurted William. The foreigner shot daggers at him with his eyes. “Every tale was made up. There has never been a dragon in England, not even in my great-great-great-grandfather’s time. I’ve never seen a dragon until Lancelot killed this one. No one has. They’re a...a...a myth.”

“What about all those attacks on villages? The burning and looting?”

“Brigands, my Lord, I’m sorry to say. I’m sure of it. Barbarians, hungry for violence - and mutton. Enoch agrees. All wealth bandits would relish. Still a great service to the countryside, slaying bandits.”

“It is true,” said the swarthy man in his deep voice. “I have not truly glimpsed a dragon, much less slain one. But I am a great destroyer of bandits. Their treasures are a great incentive. The villagers, they love to see me return covered in gore and ashes, bearing heaps of gold. There are many wondrous things in the world. But no dragons. No.”

“No such thing as a dragon? Then what did Lance kill?” asked Elaine.

“That is what I came here to discover,” said the stranger. “And to my surprise, it is clear he killed an actual dragon. Perhaps somewhere in the deepest depths of the earth, dragons still slumber. Where else could it have come from? They may yet be found, and slain. I will go and find them. Do not tell of my secret, please.”

“I shall be sure to tell no one that you are a charlatan who has discovered his myth really existed all along,” said Arthur.

Wheels Within Wheels

A silver drummer, who moved to play only when presented with a coin. A statue of a knight in shining armor so brilliant it reflected his surroundings, offering him effective camouflage until he shifted slightly in place. A copper man sitting very very still in thin air without the support of any bench or chair, feet resting lightly on the ground. Seven statues of nearly indistinguishable twins, sashed in the seven colors of the rainbow, who somehow managed to be everywhere you looked, despite being only seven copies. A marble woman draped in marble sheets carrying a tray of real, steaming meat pies that filled the air with their smell; she gives you a wink as you walk by.

These and more had become common sights in Camelot as summer lingered well past August. They were Mordred's creations, and they were as beautiful as they were eerie. Mordred had somehow made it fashionable for minor nobles to dress up in metallic paint and stand completely still for hours at a time, an extravagant testament of how much time they could afford to waste. Arthur didn't mind; it kept those nobles busy, kept their minds from war and dissent. Some of the more extravagant living statues made him uncomfortable, but it was a small cost to bear.

"Guinevere. I know you dislike Mordred, and he rubs me the wrong way too. In fact, if anyone in the world is my enemy, it is Mordred, and he lives within my very stronghold! But don't you find it rather strange that Mordred, the poisonous son of a horrendous sin, committed to evil at every turn - sometimes creates works of beauty or great utility? What is his game? And why so many tangible works of art, in addition to his moves on the chessboard of politics? That is not how Merlin presented the contest to me."

“Perhaps he is driven by the same beautiful fire I see in you,” said Guinevere fondly. “Just twisted and envenomed until his goals are wretched, unworthy, and envious. Oh, how I hate him.”

“Is he still giving you gifts?”

“Indeed. But I have decided to simply invert his every suggestion. If Mordred wants me to go left, I go right. If he wants me to adore a present, I begrudgingly use it for whatever could least serve his purpose.”

“That is wise. Thank you for keeping the peace, Guinevere. It means so much to me, my love.”

Guinevere, Queen of Camelot, was a radiant beauty. Arthur considered himself lucky every day to have such a lovely, loyal, and capable wife. As Camelot grew more glorious, she did not grow vain, exactly, but she felt that more was demanded of her appearance. So she bought fine clothes at the bazaar, and jeweled combs, and large dressing tables. On this fine, late summer day, just after she had called the servants to draw her a bath, Queen Guinevere found a note from the hated Mordred pinned to her soft bath towel. It was a map, which she reluctantly followed to the royal courtyard, a place not accessible to most residents of the castle, where the very best horses were kept, as well as some rare plants and enough stores of food for the royal family to outlast a siege in their own chambers.

There she saw a new work of artifice, a construction of green marble and soapstone. It was square in its outer dimensions, but at the center was a smooth, round basin, big enough to lie down in with room to spare. Overhead, a stained glass ceiling of greens and blues cast a pleasant light over the stonework, held up on poles.

Pipes had been jammed into it haphazardly, pumping water from the dark forest into a reservoir beneath. Guinevere stepped up to it and fiddled with the pipes and faucets. Each of

the pipes, fitted one inside the other, was drilled with holes. Rotating them allowed different pathways, different combinations, to connect. When Guinevere worked the pumps, creating a siphon effect after very little effort, she found that each combination produced a different sort of waterflow: hot and cold, bubbling or misting or spraying, fast or slow. And there were spigots full of unusual oils, scented like candles, something from every booth of the bazaar, every corner of the world. Some produced a frothy foam, or colored the water in rare colors. The heat rising from the reservoir tank, the sounds of trickling water like a brook, the minty scents of the oils and fragrances, all made Guinevere feel relaxed long before she stepped into the tub. Calling her attendants, the Queen resolved to bathe for a week.

In the bottom of the basin was a dense glass disc, decorated with sea life and swimming serpents. Beneath, she could see a spherical stone pierced by a rough hole. And tied to one of the tub's many drains was a note: "Enjoy. --Mort." Guinevere frowned, shrugged, and filled the basin with hot water and streaks of a lucid blue oil. The water felt divine.

Guinevere did not have a week long bath, but she bathed so long that she missed the ceremony whereby Lancelot's armor, shield, and spear were invested as holy objects. The archbishop of Camelot presided over the artifacts: spearhaft still stained with dark ichor, shield splintered and warped. The armor Lancelot refused to take off, for no ceremony could suade him to set aside his duty as protector of Camelot. Instead, he stood next to shield and spear, under the auspices of the archbishop's blessing.

Someone had taken the time to patch his shield. Really, it ought to be replaced, but there was only one shield in all the known world that had participated in a dragonslaying. Boiled leather thongs held it firmly together, and iron patches were riveted all over it until it was almost a new shield. A green-tinted, spherical stone, which did not appear to be any kind of gem Lancelot was familiar with, had been stuck in a gap between the warped wood. It gave the

shield a studded look. Lancelot had repainted the shield in the same bright red stripes as before.

After the blessing, the archbishop delivered a speech or sermon, praising Lancelot's godliness. "God guides your right arm, Sir Lancelot du Lac. He lives in you like a holy light. Every battle you win gives further glory to God." Lancelot knelt with hands on his reforged sword and bowed his head with grace. Others in the chapel that day claimed they saw an aura of holy moonlight cradling Sir Lancelot's head as he knelt.

Afterward, Elaine ran into Guinevere, still in a dressing gown and wet hair, a relaxed smile on her face. "Where have you been, Guinevere? You missed the ceremony."

"Oh...I was having a bath. There is a new bath house, the most elaborate you ever saw. I think Mort built it."

"I am surprised you decided to use this luxury of Mordred's," said Elaine.

"Yes, I really should do more to discover what he is planning. But if Arthur caught me spying on Mordred, he might be angry."

Just then, the girls noticed Lancelot behind them in the corridor. "Good evening. Pardon my discourtesy, but I am in a rush. Mordred says the King must see this missive before he rides out to see Sir Gawain off on his newest quest." Lancelot held up a scroll and shrugged. "Perhaps Mordred wastes Arthur's time, but it could be important, and so I go to deliver it, as duty demands." He bowed to them quickly and left.

To Guinevere's thoughts, Lancelot's gaze lingered overlong on the Lady Elaine.

After they had all waved farewell to Gawain, who was off in search of glory from his various Quests, Guinevere took Elaine aside. "I think Mordred is trying to pique Sir Lancelot's interest in you. I don't trust anything Mordred has a hand in. You should be careful."

“Not to worry,” laughed Elaine. “Sir Lancelot is a handsome fellow, but his heart belongs to God. He is too pure to take any maiden as lover. Often, he refuses to even carry a favor in games.”

“Be wary anyway,” said Guinevere.

Three days went by, and now Guinevere was certain that Mordred favored an alliance, or at least a romance, between Joyous Gard and Astolat. Her feelings were conflicted, and she spent many hours pacing and back and forth in her room, turning her thoughts over in her mind, chewing the gristle of conflicting desires. Finally her passion came to a head, and she broke into Mordred’s rooms while he was away.

It was immediately clear that Mordred spent as little time here as possible. The earlier debris had been cleared away, all moved to his workshop in the woods. The bed was made, but might have been slept in. No luggage or boxes commemorated Mordred’s presence. Only the Mirror remained, though from the dust on the rest of the furniture compared with Calumni’s smooth surface, it appeared Mordred often took it out with him.

Guinevere, knowing nothing of Calumni, sat beneath it at the abandoned dressing table. She sighed and fingered her necklace from Mordred, gazing at her reflection in the Mirror. “A question for you, morbid Necklace,” she said. “What fair lady is most the object of Sir Lancelot’s attention?” The Necklace remained still, forming no words of its gems. Instead, to Guinevere’s surprise, the surface of the Mirror rippled and condensed to show the face of Elaine. Guinevere put her face in her arms and sobbed.

In his chambers, Arthur was writing. He wrote down every word he could remember Merlin ever speaking. He tried to capture the way in which each word was spoken, knowing any hint of inflection could be important. Arthur was certain Merlin had mentioned Lancelot, and

something about Guinevere, and a great many things that indicated Mordred's presence in Camelot.

"There is a contest that has been waged for as long as there have been secrets," Arthur wrote. "No one who is involved is ever...unchanged."

"The effects of the contest linger long after a victor is declared, in stories inspired by the contestant's actions," he wrote. But how was the victor decided? Who kept track of the points? What infernal jury could call a rest to Arthur's fevered creation? The strain of holding such a great kingdom in place was beginning to tax Arthur, to stoop his mighty shoulders. On the fourth day after Gawain's departure, a new burden dropped him to his knees.

It was the buzz of every hamlet, the gossip behind every line of washing, the talk of the castle. Sir Gawain had slain Sir Pellinore!

According to the coordinator at the Library, generally a very trustworthy source, the murder happened in the forests of Sussex. The weapon: not a sword, as honor might have demanded, but an arrow in the back. Gawain was said to have killed Sir Pellinore in a fit of anger, fearing Pellinore was closer on the trail of the Questing Beast than he.

At once Arthur sent a message into the wilds: Gawain was to stand trial; his life was to be spared until the courts could find verdict. A scroll, sealed in green wax, arrived the very next day, saying simply: "I come." Two days later, Gawain was in chains in Camelot's prison. "Give me some tremendous penance for my sins," he said. "I am filled with remorse. I beg King Arthur's forgiveness."

"It is not only I, but the court also that you must convince," said Arthur.

Came the reply, "I throw myself on their mercy."

Gawain's sins, incarnate as gleaming jewels, were stacked on the Scales of Themis by the ghostly attendant maidens. They formed a tremendous weight of grievance; many came

forward to give evidence, including witnesses from Sussex, and the priest who had examined the body.

“We find there is not enough to balance the weight of your vast crime,” said the court. “We sentence you to the loss of your right hand, the hand releasing the arrow that killed brave Sir Pellinore.” The viewers reacted with glee, especially Mordred and his sycophants. “Yet you came to trial voluntarily. You appear repentant. You admit your treachery and seek a penance. This court is prepared to grant it to you. You are hereby exiled from Camelot until you bring us the jeweled head of a dragon slain by your hand.”

Gawain accepted their ruling without complaint. “I am not a worthy man until I fulfill this debt,” he said. “The loss of my hand is only the beginning of the price I shall pay for one moment of careless rage.”

Alone, on foot, he set off in search of a dragon no one was sure existed. His kind brother Agravaine was the only one to bid him farewell and good luck. And it was Agravaine who dug a grave for Sir Pellinore at Terrowin’s Tomb. He dug nonstop, without a break, singlehandedly completing the pit at a rapid pace.

Terrowin’s Tomb was not a single mausoleum, but a site containing many of the honored dead. It was one of many creations in the new Camelot that were not produced by Arthur or Mordred, but by a citizen inspired by the creativity of his lord. Terrowin was a peasant conscript in Arthur’s armies, a farmer and woodcutter. Before the army marched on Sir Bruce’s domain, Terrowin proposed a monument honoring the fallen, whether they be rich or poor, brave or ignoble, or even those whose names were not known. He conceived it as a visualization of the costs of war. Before Terrowin could break ground on his monument, he was slain by Sir Bruce himself. Other citizens completed his grand design and named it after him.

A central vault dominated the old potter's field, where Terrowin himself was buried. Bricks of warm colors were always stacked in a heap beside it; one was added to the vault's towering obelisk for each battle death. Anyone in England could add a brick for a loved one after confirming with the rolls kept by holy men of God onsite, and many fallen heroes were buried there as well. Arthur required his military leaders to visit Terrowin's Tomb before embarking on each campaign to remind them of the consequences of their decisions.

Agravaine wiped dirt from his hands, stepped from the grave, and gently lowered Sir Pellinore's shrouded body into it. Only then did he cry for his lost brother.

Cycle 8: Autumn

The Joust

The leaves in Mordred's cruel woods had fallen long ago from withered trees. Knotted and gnarled, their wood remained strong despite their misbegotten forms. Rosy red apples decorated the branches of Mordred's orchard, but many had found to their detriment that some among the bright apples contained a harsh soporific poison.

In the Garden, delicious pears had ripened on thick, squat stems. There always seemed to be enough of them for any amount of visitors, and even as the pears fruited, more beautiful white blossoms appeared to thrill any eyes that beheld. Under the tender care of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, the Garden had grown to greater size than ever before, pressing far into Mordred's dismal forest, surrounding the Maze of Wrongs with tender new growth. And one warm autumn day, Elaine glimpsed the Garden's greatest secret: two graceful unicorns with silver hooves. They tossed their heads and swiftly hid themselves away, but Elaine would never forget the gleam of their horns and their impossibly bright eyes.

William Twyti was filled to bursting with pride. Not only had he managed to find unicorns at Arthur's order, he had fulfilled Mordred's unusual request as well. Now, at the center of the tournament grounds, a huge cage loomed over the earliest festivities. Three stories tall, and wrought of heavy iron bars, the cage dominated every other tent at the autumn games. There was no door to this cage. Inside, a monstrously huge golden beast paced back and forth frenetically, occasionally leaping to the air and gliding up to its perch in the upper portion of the cage. Its hindquarters and tail were feline, like a lion, with ebony claws and silky golden tufts decorating its feet. From there, it grew aquiline, with taloned, scaly forelegs and a long,

feathered eagle's head. The ivory beak was hooked and cruel, and on occasion the beast gave a cry that pierced the hearts of men. No one came within twenty feet of this cage, not even brave Knights. Huge cow haunches were hurled between the bars and devoured by the griffin, bones and all.

Arthur, too, held his head high with pride. Camelot was a joy. No one barred their doors at night. No one lacked for food. His enemies had all turned to fight amongst themselves, or surrendered to King Arthur. Even commoners expected to live to a ripe old age. Beauty could be found on every corner. Best of all, Mordred wore an angry scowl on his face and avoided Arthur's eyes. Mordred's only significant thorn in Arthur's side was the Questing Cup, which created a lot of tension between the Knights in light of tomorrow's grand autumn tournament.

The King had his own secret favorite for champion. Sir Perceval was the newest Knight of the Round Table ordained by Excalibur. Perceval was strong, and kind, and skilled, though not as skilled as Lancelot. Best of all, Perceval had never known the old days of Camelot, when Knights were encouraged toward cruelty and rapine, often in the name of justice. Perceval did not seem to care about the Questing Cup, giving Arthur hope that Mordred's invention was fast falling out of favor.

Queen Guinevere did not have a favorite, but she knew she did not want Lancelot to win. She told Elaine Lancelot was rather thick and maybe a bit quick-tempered, but Elaine laughed the warning off. Guinevere even overheard Mordred suggest to Lancelot that he wear Elaine's favor in the joust, but Lancelot, still wearing his battered and stone-studded shield, refused to bear any favor at all.

In the last light of dusk, Guinevere started the fires of her bathhouse without her attendants. The flames under the reservoir tank licked upward with graceful, strangely-colored tongues, curling and breaking against the stone of the tank. Aphrodisiacal scents wafted up

from the water as the Queen readied herself to look presentable at tomorrow's joust. She disrobed and sank into the balmy water.

Then the Queen heard a small thud, and a little noise as of something rolling briefly along the floor. The door to the royal courtyard creaked open and someone stepped inside with a clatter of armor. Guinevere sat bolt upright in her bath. The figure came a few steps inside the courtyard, forbidden to all but the King and Queen and her attendants, then stooped to pick a translucent green stone from the floor. By the red and white shield and the chiseled jaw, she recognized Sir Lancelot. At a tiny gasp from Guinevere, he looked up and saw her.

"My Queen! I...I did not...forgive me, Your Majesty!" He turned from her. She could see that he was trembling as she swiftly covered herself with a linen cloth, sinking back into the water for good measure.

"Leave at once! You know this place is forbidden!"

"A thousand pardons, Guinevere!" cried Lancelot, still facing the door. His ears were a vivid red. "I only sought to recover the stone that fell from my shield. I should have left it lie. I do not know why it was suddenly so important to me."

"Begone!" she shrieked. He fled, closing the door behind him.

A night and a morning passed, with the Queen avoiding Lancelot at every opportunity. Guinevere was to preside over the opening of the festival. As she looked over the crowd from her high platform, she anxiously sought Lancelot's position with her eyes. She chewed her nails, overwhelmed with nerves to the point that Arthur and Elaine both noticed something was wrong, though she shook them off. Lancelot did not seem to be in attendance.

Guinevere stuttered a few words to the crowd, followed by a more gracious speech from Arthur. As they seated themselves, the show began.

Six elephants circled the parade grounds, towering with elaborate constructions on their backs. They trumpeted loudly and performed tricks, balancing on two legs, then dropping like thunder to grasp the tail of the elephant in front of them with their trunks. Knights in their armor darted in and out of the line on fleet horses, bearing proud streamers affixed to pikes. Sir Lancelot was not among them. A hundred acrobats dressed in silver scales sprung between the backs of horses and elephants. Minstrels played a quick-paced march. Lights flared into life, and soaring fires filled the sky. And all the vendors flung open their tent doors at once on a prearranged signal.

Guinevere and Elaine wandered among the many stalls. Guinevere was intrigued by the patent tent, where hundreds of varied inventions sat on display. A long line of people waited patiently for their turn with the officials in the tent, clutching strange objects of unknown purpose. Arthur had invented his own patent system, which functioned like a bounty. Bring an innovation that is in any way novel or useful, get paid a reward, along with certain merchandising rights. Discover the solution to a certain set of predetermined problems, and the reward was tripled. Mordred had even set a few innovation challenges for the Questing Cup, though few of the Knights were mechanically minded.

Elaine preferred the artist's tents. The citizens of Camelot had created many delicate works both large and small. Some of the tents themselves were works of art, such as one hung with delicate, dripping glass globes in woven baskets. They oozed with pale lights and sprung minutely up and down in their flexible cages.

Guinevere gasped. "Oh, how marvelous!" Elaine turned and saw a cloud of tiny black fairies holding spectral lanterns, whirling about a central point. Her face paled.

"What's wrong, Elaine?"

“Those are the fairies I saw in Barrowgrove! They belong to Mordred!” Elaine backed away. She almost ran into a completely still figure behind her: the ebon-skinned creature covered in glowing scars. Immediately upon being nudged, it winked stiffly and began emitting a high-pitched eerie buzzing sound. “No no no no no...” whimpered Elaine.

“Calm yourself, my Lady. They can do you no harm in the light,” said an unctuous voice.

“Mordred!”

“The very same. Allow me to uncloak your fears!” Mordred showed the women how clever tricks of mirrored light and hidden lanterns could create the bizarre living statues. An actor hid beneath a deep coating of black clay, cracked at strategic locations and lit from below by a bright lantern, to create the screaming figure. He made the strange noise with a metal device like a cicada wing, rasped over its mate. The whirling pattern of fire in the air was made by masterful strokes of burning oil, contained in bladders and tied to strings, thrown in an intricate fire dance. And the cloud of porcelain fairies were all hung on a man in a shroud, black at nighttime and reflective in the daytime. “There is no mystery so deep it cannot be explained by a few mirrors,” smiled Mordred. “Ah, here is Lancelot! I’ll leave the two of you alone.”

“The three of us, you mean,” said Guinevere.

“Just so.” He left, and Lancelot bowed his way into their presence.

“I pray you will excuse my lateness, Guinevere. I sought confession at St. Stephens.”

“No matter,” said Guinevere shortly. “Excuse me, I find I forgot to ask something of Mordred.” Lancelot left to prepare for the games, and Guinevere hurried after Mordred. She saw him duck behind a tent and followed. Guinevere surprised herself by grabbing Mordred by the collar and hauling him face to face with her.

“Do me just one favor, Sir Mordred,” she said. “Use your arts, whatever sorcery or guile you possess, to ensure the humiliation of Sir Lancelot during the tournament.”

“Is this how you normally request a favor of someone, my Queen? With violence and affrontery?” She released him. “Thank you. It shall be done as you command.”

The tournament began with mounted games. The knights tossed banners between themselves in elegant patterns, tilted at ring targets, threw javelins at a run. For every game in which they triumphed, Guinevere would drop them a red, pink, or white rose. Upon winning your second game, you received two roses, then three, and so forth. During their victory lap, each knight tossed his roses to ladies who caught his eye. Agravaine, Perceval, and Lancelot took victories in every event with equal facility. Sir Lancelot tossed all his flowers to tiny children. Guinevere did not see Mordred so much as look in Lancelot’s direction, but when she caught his eye he grinned at her.

After the games came the melee, a time for showmanship and posturing. No victor was ever declared, and the blows were far from lethal, though a brave fighter could still garner much honor, especially if he was among the last men to quit the field. This year, the fashion was flamboyant, gaudy costumes that preserved the anonymity of the fighters. Again Arthur wondered why Mordred wasted his time inspiring such irrelevant creations.

The combatants swirled in their mock-deadly dance. Sir Lionel threw a living copper statue bodily from the arena. A team of goblins, kobolds, and trolls ganged up on him to take him down, and were soon scattered themselves by Sir Bors. Quickly, most of the costumed fighters were eliminated; they seemed to be largely nobles rather than true warriors. Black armor filled the arena, running and jumping in a frenzy. They circled each other in step, surrounding the battlefield with muscled metal. The combatants near the center parted briefly, revealing two final characters. They wore stiff wings of white and crimson, and their skin was dyed to match. They were naked from the waist up. Handsome, proud, expressionless masks covered their faces. The red angel bore a fiery sword, and his opponent wielded a frosty saber

of brilliant white. Sparks flew as they clashed in dramatic, choreographed movements, as fierce as any blows on the entire field. Around them, black and silver plate mail formed a vortex of darkness, concentrated on their own battles, knowing somehow that this confrontation between heaven and hell was not their fight.

As the melee wore on, fewer and fewer knights maintained their stamina. Flares of bright phosphorous streamed from the energized blades in the center, spitting fire and clouds of green smoke. Some of the other knights coughed; some even had to quit the field. The battle rose to a crescendo; all eyes were on the two angels as a blaze of smoke and fire roiled around them, engulfing them, masking them from sight. And when the black cloud cleared, the two immortals were gone, leaving a pillar of fire and a finely wrought knight carved of ice. The spectators leapt to their feet, applauding; even the others in the melee paused to clap.

Finally, the melee wound down, and it came time for the highlight of the festival. The joust was the most exciting event, where everyone cheered their favorites. It was said that the cheers of the crowd could impart victory to a knight, if the margin between him and his opponent was sufficiently thin. The joust was also the bloodiest part of the tournament. Broken bones and bleeding faces were quite common and always evoked an excited frenzy from the crowd.

Each participant was allowed only three lances. A bevy of officials checked each lance to make sure the tip was blunt and no illegal alterations had been made. If all three lances splintered, participants immediately carried on using swords, each still seeking to unmount his opponent.

Arthur gave another speech before the joust, wishing each participant luck and giving Excalibur's blessing to the event. A great roar went up from the crowd. Elaine realized they were chanting for Arthur to join the joust, a great honor. Only a king trusted by his citizens and knights

would ever be asked to participate. But King Arthur had a reputed willingness to get his hands dirty, and so he smiled and went to his tent to prepare.

“Be very careful, Arthur!” said Guinevere. “And do try to unseat Lancelot, won’t you?”

“My people know I shall try my best,” chuckled Arthur, “though of course I must leave Excalibur in my tent, in case I shiver all three lances and I am forced to fight with the sword. I suspect even to bear it sheathed would bequeath upon me an unfair advantage.”

The King asked to fight only in one tilt per round, combats that would not be counted toward the official standings. In this way, he said, knights would not fear embarrassing the King when it counted, and Arthur could also try his hardest without influencing who became champion. The crowd roared their approval of his words, and again facing Sir Bors. He took the field wearing his bulky armor that would fit no other man. Not even a blacksmith could have filled Arthur’s gigantic pauldrons. Arthur knocked Sir Bors from his horse at first contact, then regally dismounted to help him to his feet. He embraced Sir Bors, the earliest Knight to join his Table, shook his forearm. They left the field jovially.

Perceval rose quickly through the ranks, unseating Sir Bedivere and then Sir Kay. Agravaine defeated Sir Ector, Kay’s father, and a foreign knight whom Elaine did not know. In the first round, Sir Lancelot rode against Sir Dinadan, a difficult opponent who took the full three lances to unseat. Guinevere glared at Mordred, who was calmly shredding a rose he had stolen from a little girl, paying no attention to the joust. And Lancelot’s second ride did nothing to assuage Guinevere’s anger, for though all three lances blew to splinters on Sir Lionel’s shield, the brave Sir Lancelot stayed calmly in his saddle through it all, and eventually unhorsed Sir Lionel with a quick blow to the abdomen from his blunted sword.

“Do something, Mordred,” hissed Guinevere, but Mordred simply picked his teeth with a long dagger, feet up on the seat in front of him. Guinevere began to wonder if Mordred even had the sorcerous powers rumored of him.

The third round was the penultimate one. All but four knights had been eliminated from the tournament: Sir Lancelot, Sir Perceval, Agravaine, and Sir Sagramore the Impetuous. Agravaine met the splendid fury of Sir Sagramore with abandon, spinning in his saddle but staying upright as Sagramore crashed to the ground. He groaned as he sat up; several ribs were broken. Agravaine nobly helped him to the healer’s tent. Arthur stood right at the lists, cheering as wildly as anyone. His unofficial favorite, Sir Perceval, would now ride against Sir Lancelot, who was a crowd pleaser and the top contender.

These two noble Knights, among the kindest and strongest in the Round Table, saluted each other with good humor and rode to the opposite ends of the field. Perceval looked marvelous on a chestnut stallion with golden ribbons and tiny luminescent gems woven into mane and tail. His mien was calm and peaceful, the very symbol of Arthur’s new order of chivalry.

Lance in hand, Perceval cantered down the lists, dancing in the saddle to catch Lancelot’s blow at the ideal angle. Both shields split with a loud crack, audible over the noise of armor and patron. Lancelot tossed splinters of his Dragonslayer shield to the joyful crowd. Mordred somehow managed to stand exactly where the translucent green stone was tossed. Elaine saw him roll three such stones over the back of his hand, palm them, spin them together on his fingertips, and finally vanish them from sight.

Guinevere saw this too, and thought to herself, “Now he acts!” But as Lancelot’s squire brought him a new peppermint shield, and Lancelot quickly dethroned Arthur’s favored champion, Guinevere despaired of ever seeing Lancelot hit the ground.

Every face in the crowd watched with bated breath as the two triumphant warriors rode to their places for the championship round. Every merchant had locked up and come to watch the finale; there were no customers to cater to. Peasant, freeman, noble, and knight: all were watching to see whether kind, curious Agravaine or dire, upright Sir Lancelot would take it all. The horses sensed the excitement and pawed the ground, snorting. Then they were off, using every last reserve of speed and strength.

Finally, Guinevere saw Mordred move. He lazily pulled out Calumni and caught light from the blazing aurora of the pillar of fire, reflected it right into Lancelot's visor at the critical moment. But Lancelot did not flinch in his saddle. He thrust with the surety of long daily practice, turning his head away from the blinding light. Guinevere moaned as Agravaine fell from his saddle.

But something was wrong. Lancelot's weapon followed Agravaine to the ground. Blood pooled from Agravaine's body as Mordred performed a bow in Guinevere's direction. Somehow, Lancelot's blunted weapon had pierced Agravaine through hide and armor alike. Physicians rushed onto the field, stripped Agravaine of his breastplate. Murmurs filled the crowd. "He's dead!" shouted the healer taking his pulse. The lead physician at the library confirmed his diagnosis with a mirror. Guinevere looked to Mordred again, but he had vanished in the confusion. "No, no...not like this..." wept Guinevere, staring at the gaping hole in Agravaine's torso. She felt buzzards circling in her mind. Guilt poured over her like hot lead.

"Did you not command Lancelot's downfall? His humiliation?" said the voice of Mordred behind her. "What bigger shame than slaying a fellow Knight? Dry your tears, woman!"

Guinevere lunged at his sneering figure, but found herself passing right through. Mordred shook his head and wavered, vanished. Down on the field, Lancelot had slid from his horse and was kneeling at Agravaine's side, helm thrown to the ground, tears staining his face.

He prayed feverishly and held Agravaine's cooling hand. Suddenly Mordred trotted from King Arthur's tent, bearing Excalibur. The blade shone cold green in his hands. He watched the action intently. Arthur spun and saw him, said warningly, "Mort..."

But as he moved to recover the great sword, Lancelot cried, "Help me, God!" and fell prostrate over Agravaine's body. His hands scrabbled, tortured, for the wound. His lips kissed Agravaine's clammy forehead. Suddenly a pale emerald light shone around Lancelot's head like a halo, outlined his hands. Agravaine coughed up blood and sat up, throwing Lancelot aside as he gasped desperately for air like a man who had been plunged into cold water.

"He lives!" came the cry from every mouth. "A miracle!" Suddenly everyone was kneeling and bowing their heads to Lancelot. Arthur wrenched Excalibur from Mordred, then gaped at what was happening. Then he, too, bowed his head and knelt. The field was awash with praise and astonishment. Agravaine was dragged off to the healer's tents, where the physicians marveled at the hale skin where his wound had been. Slowly, each citizen of Camelot walked up and shook or kissed Lancelot's hand, while tears rolled down his cheeks.

Hours later, the shock had worn off. People trickled home without buying anything from the colorful stalls, without chatting about the results as they normally would. They talked only of the miracle. At each of the fair's gates stood one of the angels, frost or fire, standing guard like a promise of banishment from Eden.

Brotherhood

“Merlin would know what to do,” said Arthur. “A miracle in Camelot! Can we trust it?”

“I don’t know, beloved,” said Guinevere fondly. “Lancelot is your best friend, is he not?”

“He is a brother to me, more so than any of my Knights. I believe him to be beyond reproach or mistrust. But Mordred was there...What if he did something?”

“You bear Excalibur. Mordred is no match for you, if you actively oppose him.”

“Yes, and I believe Merlin is the one who sent Excalibur. But Mordred has his own artifact to oppose me...and those green, carved stones he is always playing with. I just wish I could bring Merlin back. I keep thinking if I can only pin down the time...”

There came a knock on the door. “Come in!” called Arthur.

A page entered. “Sir Gawain has returned, Your Majesty.” Arthur leapt to his feet at once, followed by Guinevere. Elaine joined them as they raced to the front gate. At first they could see only the bustling commerce of trade, but at last a big wagon pulled out of the way, revealing the exiled Knight.

Gawain stumbled along the Road, dragging a huge sack behind him. Arthur sent two horses out to him, but Gawain appeared to refuse the help of the intelligent beasts. Each burdened step was part of his penance.

Arthur met him in the courtyard, just inside the moat of Camelot. Once past this threshold, Gawain slumped to kneel prostrate before his King. Arthur greeted him warmly, but withheld any sign of honor until it was known whether Gawain had met the conditions of his exile. The Knight hauled the sack between him and Arthur and tore the cloth away. He held the head of a dragon.

The dragon's terrible eyes rolled madly even in death. Fine green scales glittered like jewels. Thick blood oozed slowly from the mouth and the base of the neck, like tar. There could be no doubt this was indeed the head of a great dragon, freshly slain. Wordlessly, Gawain tugged his sword hilt from its sheath on his right hip. The blade was corroded and pitted, crumbling into corruption as they watched. "Our God forgives," he said, "but in dragonslaying there are no second chances."

After embracing Gawain, Arthur escorted him to the great hall for a feast at the Round Table. Gawain insisted that his penance was not complete, that he serve for a time in the Armada of Redemption, but Arthur claimed he had other plans and signalled for the feast to begin. Even Sir Carados cheered him and drank to his honor, clattering his chains enthusiastically. Only one man did not participate in the toast. Gawain's own brother, Sir Agravaine, just sat in his place with an empty stare. Sir Gawain noticed, asked, "What ails you, brother?"

Agravaine leapt to his feet. "You are no brother of mine! When I buried Sir Pellinore, I buried Sir Gawain as well. I have labored to harden my heart, to put the loss of my brother behind me. I cannot forsake that labor now." Agravaine upended his wine onto the floor, dropped his cup, and left the hall.

Gawain looked almost as though he could cry. "What has happened to my brother, the kind and forgiving man I grew up with? The Knight of infinite patience? What has changed within Agravaine?"

Sir Mordred clucked his tongue and shook his head. "Our brother Agravaine has not been the same since Sir Lancelot slew him," he said. Seeing Gawain's reaction, he continued. "Oh, did no one tell you? Agravaine was pierced by Lancelot's spear at the joust, and only a miracle did bring him back." Lancelot said nothing. "Agravaine throws himself into his questing.

Behold! His chalice is nearly as full as brave Sir Lancelot's, and Lancelot's is near to brimming! Soon, perhaps, this will all be over." Every Knight looked enviously at the chalice of their neighbor or glared at Lancelot with real acrimony in their eyes.

"Tell the whole story or do not tell it at all," Arthur growled, and proceeded to fill Sir Gawain in on all that had happened, including the miracle. "So you all can see, this is the very height of Camelot's fame and glory. Surely, God blesses us. Our own Sir Lancelot has worked a miracle to undo a grave accident. Sir Gawain has returned from exile with the head of Cuélebrax. The signs are clear. The time is ripe to begin a quest spoken of by Merlin and by holy priests across England." Here Arthur swept Excalibur high into the air and leapt up on the Round Table. The sword blazed with light, echoing Arthur's passion. "Gawain - and any others who feel worthy - you must seek the Holy Grail."

The windows flared with moonlight from the Garden, though the sun was high. It was a more brilliant blast than any before, even on the full moon; many Knights shielded their eyes. All began to examine their consciences and came up wanting. "This quest does not count for the Questing Cup. It is an end unto itself. The Grail, the holy vessel stained with Christ's very blood, can heal any wound. The very sight of it brings great glory and honor, for only the purest of heart can glimpse it. No object in all the world exceeds it - not Excalibur, not the staff of Merlin, not the enchanted castle of Morgana. Go forth and seek the Grail. We know not where it may be found. Search high and low, seek even a glimpse, or bring it back to Camelot if such a thing may be done. If you do not seek the Holy Grail yourself, I beg you give your support to those who do. To glory, men!"

For that moment, the rivalries of the Questing Cup were forgotten. No one shot murderous glances at Sir Lancelot during this holy excitement. Mordred slunk away,

overwhelmed for a time. Enthusiasm reigned, and the warriors went to feasting and drinking with a will.

Gawain accepted the Quest as part of his penance. He seemed excited by the prospect, success or failure notwithstanding. Sir Bors, one of the eldest Knights, felt himself hale and hearty enough for the Quest, though he planned a seven day fast and holy vigil to ready his soul for the daunting task. And King Arthur was delighted to hear his young protegee Sir Perceval, who had never known the old days of duplicity and cruelty, was also willing to undertake this great task. He confided to Sir Perceval that he was considering the young Knight as his successor, if a male heir was not born to Guinevere by the time of Arthur's death. Sir Bors was next in line. But when Sir Lancelot was pressed about seeking the Grail, he bowed his head in sorrow and gave no comment.

In the two days since the miracle, he had ignored Elaine, even avoided King Arthur's gaze. He wandered in the Garden all day, ate little food. Always he fled if anyone else came to the Garden. At these times he buried himself in the Maze of Wrongs, frustrated with his own conscience, never coming near to the secret mercies at its end.

On midnight of the third day, as the moon waned its last, Lancelot remained seated on his bench when Guinevere approached him. Moved by the poisonous lust in his heart, he dropped to his knees and intertwined his fingers with hers. Lancelot du Lac forced himself to meet his Queen's eyes as he said, "I love you, Guinevere. I want you."

Her body was trembling as she said, "I want you too." Around them, the Garden began to wilt as the Knight and the Queen moved beneath the slender veiling boughs of a weeping willow. At its gate, a single thorn tree sprouted.

Venom

While Gawain struggled alone through thorns, enemies, and mires in search of the Grail, the other Knights squabbled jealously over the amount of liquid in their golden cups. Even Lancelot joined in, defending his arbitrary measures of wine as his fair and justly won share. No one shouted louder than Sir Agravaine. Sir Perceval and Sir Bors spent their time preparing themselves for their holy quest, for neither was as ready and experienced as Sir Gawain. There was fasting to be done, confessions to be held, retinues to gather, and horses to train. Though they sought the advice of Sir Lancelot, it seemed he was often missing. Finally, Sir Bors set off without the innocent Perceval.

The dreams of Camelot were shattered when Sir Perceval was murdered.

It was Sir Bedivere who found him, Sir Bedivere who served as the primary witness in the trial that followed. A feeling of dread came over him one evening as he passed a certain storeroom door. Twisting the knob off, for the room was locked and he had no key, he saw a vestige of green vapor escape the room. Inside, Sir Bedivere saw the prone, lifeless body of Sir Perceval, a purplish tint to his skin. Leaning against the opposite wall in a sitting position was Mordred. His fist was clenched tightly around something held before his lips like a rosary. There was little else in the room. When Sir Bedivere noticed Mordred breathing, only the timely arrival of Sir Lancelot stopped Bedivere from running Mordred through.

“You know the law! You know what Arthur has said! There must be a trial!”

King Arthur found a jury and arranged for the trial to commence at the earliest possible moment. He looked at his nephew, his bastard son, and shook his head. “I treated you as an honored guest in my house, welcomed you into my stronghold, made you a lord...and you repay me with venom and the murder of a fine Knight.”

“There’s no proof of that, Uncle dearest,” said Mordred. “I am innocent until proven guilty, under your own laws.”

“Do you truly intend to plead not guilty?”

“Oh yes. Tis the truth. I am as much a victim as Sir Perceval.”

“No other king in all the world would show forbearance such as I have shown,” growled Arthur.

“That is why I choose to live in Camelot, dear Uncle. It is such a wonderful place.”

“Yes, it is clear my laws are too lax. I shall take steps to tighten them when this is over, and you hang.”

“Do not presuppose the outcome, Uncle. You are supposed to remain neutral.”

“That is why you yet live.” Arthur turned from Mordred and addressed the court. “Let us begin. The clerks will begin taking notes now. Mordred, our laws require us to offer you a chance at a vastly reduced sentence if you serve for a time on the Armada of Redemption under Sir Agravaine. The judge, the jury, and the defendant must agree. The evidence against you is quite overwhelming. Does serving aboard the Armada interest you, Mordred?”

“Not at all.” There was a hubbub in the court. For charges of this magnitude, with this much evidence, serving aboard the Armada was very common.

“Anything to say as to why you refuse?”

Mordred grinned. “Water is not the element of redemption. Only fire can make that claim.”

“So be it.” Arthur turned the trial over to the judge, who had been recruited from far enough away that he did not know Mordred or Sir Perceval personally.

“Sir Bedivere, it appears you are the primary witness in this case. Please tell us what you saw. You are ordered to indicate if anything you say is not substantive, firsthand knowledge.”

Sir Bedivere told his story, and added that he believed Mordred set off some manner of poisonous trap. "How else could Mordred survive when Sir Perceval was slain? He was prepared in some way, or administered some sort of poison after locking himself in the room with Sir Perceval." Words were exchanged between jurors, and gems were added to the Scales of Themis to represent Bedivere's testimony.

"Now, Mordred, please take the stand and share your side of the story."

"It is quite simple. Sir Perceval asked to show me something in the storeroom. The door locked behind us; probably an accident. That door is a menace of its own accord. Continuing. Sir Perceval and I were locked in the room. Immediately, some sort of trap went off, and the room was filled with a choking green smoke. I could not see Sir Perceval. I was as much a victim as he. Let me repeat that: the attack targeted me as well as the deceased. I survived not because I was the one to design the trap, but because of this."

Mordred unfurled his fist, revealing a green translucent stone with a hole through it. Guinevere choked back a gasp. It was exactly like the stone hidden under her bathhouse.

"This is an adderstone, given to me by my aunt Morgana. It protects against poison of all kinds. Sadly, there is no way to share it with another, and as far as I know, Sir Perceval was slain within moments of breathing the gas." Gems clattered on Mordred's side, tilting the Scales along one axis, indicating Sir Bedivere's evidence did not prove Mordred's culpability. Guinevere ran off unexpectedly to observe the stone in her tub, but found only emptiness beneath the mosaic.

"This is a possibility. Next witness, please."

A physician came forward to confirm that Sir Perceval was indeed dead and now lying in state. He had other information of interest as well: with the help of every alchemist in the Library, he had managed to identify the poison. It was a slow and tortuous poison, which could

take minutes, hours, or even days to kill. Prices were very high, for the requisite venom needed to be imported from the East. In gaseous form, it did indeed choke the victim beyond speech; alone, this description of the poison supported Mordred's story about being unable to sense Sir Perceval as he died. Emeralds decorated the pans of the Scale in complicated arrangements, each placement holding a world of meaning. An inch of placement could mean life or death here, and the attendant maidens were under close scrutiny from both sides.

"We ask Enoch of Anglia to the stand. Enoch, we are given to understand you are mathematically inclined, and you believe you have discovered something of import to the case."

Enoch had been granted an indefinite release from his cell. He had long ago proven himself a loyal servant of King Arthur. Arthur secretly thought if Enoch's presence led to an honorable and just conviction of Mordred, he would make Enoch a Knight and shower him with estates and treasures.

Enoch hauled a heavy clothbound book to the stand. "Observe carefully. My numbers are sound. They are beyond question! But you will wish to verify them for yourself. Please feel free to do so. Observe! In this book, a renowned monk-physician shows the spread of poison through the bloodstream. Now, the poison does not kill at a predictable rate. The willpower of the victim, and the grace of God, seem to be large factors. However! We do know, from this monk's gruesome experiments, exactly how long it takes for the poison to enter and then fade from the blood of a victim. By the hue and concentration of poison in someone's blood, I can tell you with mathematical precision how long ago the victim was exposed to the poison."

"That has no bearing on this case," said Mordred. "By the tollings of the cathedral bell, I can tell this court exactly how long Perceval and I were in that deadly closet, and Sir Bedivere will be forced to verify my claim."

“I beg you, do not speak the number,” said Enoch. “For I have been in my cell, and I was the last to hear the news. I have not been informed of even the approximate time these events took place, as my guards can vouch. Therefore I intend to prove my methods sound, and thereby prove beyond any reasonable shadow of a doubt whether Mordred is lying!”

At this, Guinevere almost started applauding. She had returned just in time to hear Enoch’s proclamation of confidence. Elaine stilled her with a touch.

“It would boot little for me to show when Mordred and Perceval inhaled their doses of poison. You would only say I wished to show a discrepancy, to discredit Mordred. It is well rumored I have shifted loyalty from him to King Arthur. No, the Scales of Themis would scarcely shift were I to do that. Instead, I intend to prove that my formulae are objectively verifiable, and then to test whether Mordred’s story fits the data.”

“You cannot prove that,” Mordred sneered. “Only two of us breathed the poison.”

“Correct! Fortunately, as described in this worthy tome, mere contact with the poison allows it to permeate through the skin. In this guise, it is nonlethal, but the formula is the same. From concentrations in the *three* witnesses I can determine when each of you first encountered the poison: Sir Mordred, Sir Perceval, *and* Sir Bedivere.” Enoch ordered his iconic wax board rolled into the courtroom. He had soon scribbled his complex equation for all to see.

“Observe. If the alchemic test of Bedivere’s blood produces *this* result, he was exposed to the poison twelve hours ago. If instead we see *this*, sixteen hours. And so forth. Shall we begin, Sir Bedivere?”

Court physicians drew a small measure of blood from the back of Sir Bedivere’ hand, performed the requisite test. Enoch scribbled momentarily, then announced his conclusion.

“Remember, I had no prior knowledge of when Sir Bedivere discovered the deceased. With that

in mind, I announce my verdict: Sir Bedivere, it was between twenty-eight and twenty-nine hours ago you discovered the corpse.”

A page was sent to check the water clock and confer with the priests in the belltower. “Precisely correct,” said Sir Bedivere seriously when they had returned. “Just short of twenty-nine hours ago.”

“And the deceased’s blood reveals...” More tests were performed. “Almost thirty-eight hours ago.” It was a testament to Arthur’s fantastic Library, and Enoch’s mathematical skill, that this number was about as accurate as Arthur’s water clock could pinpoint. Members of the audience and jury actually applauded, though few of them were learned enough to follow the maths. But every noble was used to doing accounts, and they could confirm what Enoch said once it was explained in such clear words. The fae maidens waited with handfuls of gemstones, waiting for the final result of Enoch’s suppositions.

“Mordred? We will need a sample of your blood, please.”

“Give me his mirror, first,” said Arthur suddenly. Calumni was taken and given to the bailiff for safekeeping. “Good. Continue.”

“It will prove nothing,” said Mordred haughtily.

“That is possible,” said Enoch and the judge together. The crowd watched with bated breath as Sir Ector gently drew a few drops of blood from Mordred’s hand, and the alchemists performed their tests.

“Thirty two hours,” announced the vice treasurer. Enoch nodded. The Scales rang as heavy stones were poured onto the evidence pan.

“Here is what I see!” said Enoch above the noise of the crowd. “Mordred threw Sir Perceval into the storeroom with the poison gas. The gas is slow acting, so Mordred went back

six hours later to check if he was dead. During the process, he was himself locked inside the storeroom. He must be telling the truth about the adderstones-”

“Merlin mentioned such a thing to me once, though he could not elaborate,” said Arthur. One more small gem clattered on the Scale’s pan.

“So the adderstone sustained him through the poison, though he had not intended to be exposed for so long. Then along comes strong Sir Bedivere, freeing Mordred and discovering the corpse. That is the story as I see it.” The jury deliberated, the jewels were dispatched with the maidens, and the Scales weighed the evidence symbolically as the judge and jury weighed the case in words. Guinevere could have danced, and she was sure Arthur was holding in his own glee.

The Scales came to an equilibrium. Mordred’s pan hung just lower than the evidence against him. The foreman of the jury nodded. “The Scales of Themis and this court are in agreement. There is not enough evidence to convict Sir Mordred.”

“Now wait just a moment!” Arthur thundered. “Enoch-”

“Enoch’s evidence, while quite thorough, is mere conjecture. It cannot be weighted as heavily as a witness. The one direct witness, Sir Bedivere, did not observe the murder. Sir Mordred’s testimony provides an alternative to murder. In this case, the real murderer is still out there somewhere, and this court heartily recommends further investigation. Until such time, the finding is ‘not guilty!’”

Arthur was furious. His face turned beet red as he strove for something to say. Enoch shrugged at him. By his own laws, he was obligated to accept the finding of the court. And what the jury said was true, in a certain twisted light. “You’ve sentenced men to hang on far, far less,” he muttered.

“Are you then so bloodthirsty for noble blood? The blood of family?” asked Mordred.

“No...no, I will abide by the decision of the court. The systems are in place for a reason. I know not how to improve them. Merlin...” This last word was muttered under Arthur’s breath, and only Mordred heard it.

As autumn waned, gardeners raking the golden leaves into neat piles, bad news continued to pile up. Hawthorn thickets invaded the Garden triumphantly. Knights sustained many injuries during their practices. Several works of art were vandalized or abruptly ceased to function. Lancelot and Guinevere continued to act strangely. War brewed on the edges of Arthur’s domain. The King’s posture became less upright, nearly a slouch, as he struggled to survey all that had occurred, starting with Perceval’s death.

Only one word of good news rang out. Sir Bors had sent word that he was returning from his sojourns in the land of the Grail. Soon, the rumors said he was nearing Camelot, then within Camelot’s borders. And finally, Elaine spotted him coming up the Road toward Camelot’s gates. He appeared tired, haggard even, but a joyful light shone in his eyes, and his features showed him to be a man at peace.

“I have seen the Grail!” he shouted. “I have been bathed by its presence. Never again shall I feel a downtrodden man. Always my life will have meaning, for I have seen the Grail!” Sir Bors, that honest and straightforward Knight, described to Arthur and Elaine and Guinevere how a procession of maidens bearing the Grail had welcomed him, and lifted the soft satin covering from that holy vessel, then proceeded onward until they vanished in what seemed to him a haze of divine light. He had gleaned that the maidens tended the Holy Grail in a mighty castle somewhere in the distant wilds. Some said they bore it across a rainbow to the mystic isle of Avalon, outside of time, or perhaps to some castle in the sky. Sir Bors’ triumphant return gave Camelot hope that their present trials would be overcome, the Grail might someday be brought

among them. That Quests might succeed and God was listening to prayers. That, as before, Camelot would soon be a brilliant gleam of glory crowning a fruitful, blessed England.

Cycle 9: Winter

Drifts

Mordred grew unbearable as drifts of snow silently enveloped the December hills of Camelot. His successful trial seemed to have invigorated him, and he constructed many obstacles in Arthur's way. There were days Arthur wanted to blame the very chill winds on Mordred's machinations. Calumni was always in Mordred's hands, and Excalibur was always a twitch away from Arthur's. The two of them clashed in a flurry of creation, play and counterplay, their faces furious and scarcely civil. Minarets rose around Camelot; silken cobwebs enveloped them. Birds of Paradise roosted in the Garden, but enormous slugs oozed along whatever branches made contact with Barrowgrove. Finally the cold drove the birds and their bright plumage away, as suddenly as they had appeared.

It was an especially cold winter. When Arthur pulled the village drunk from a snowdrift and shook the icicles from his beard, the man decided then and there to turn his life around. He submitted a beautiful proposal for a fantastic winter palace, carved in glittering ice out of the frozen cliffs of Camelot. Snow crested every delicate detail of the sweeping architecture. Sharp points arced from graceful curves. Twists and bends in the harsh ice became elegant decorations to the cozy holes excavated in the thick, fluffy snow. Supported by the power of Excalibur, the designs of the town drunk became a thousand charming burrows for any resident of Camelot without sufficient shelter of their own. The community was like a fairytale castle unto itself, frosty tinsel winking at the castle across the snowfields. Guinevere was particularly enchanted, and took several trips there. Lancelot also occasionally went to inspect the caves for stability.

Elaine felt certain she had been transported to an impossible world of magic and delights. Her home city of Astolat had been considered a wonder of England until King Arthur took the throne. Even in its struggles, Camelot put wondrous Astolat to shame.

The creative battle grew to a higher pitch. Soon, no one could keep up with the mad ferocity of Arthur and Mordred. Elaine scarcely had time to visit all the new miraculous sights, the innovations of Maze and Garden and Barrowgrove. No commoner, noble, Knight, or committee could create anything worthy of standing beside the pinnacle of Arthur and Mordred's art.

In a cold cavern under Camelot's dungeons, Arthur worked hard to perfect the timekeeper's art. Surely Merlin would feel the partitioning of Time into perfect sections and appear, advise him once more in his furthest hour of need.

He watched through the stained glass as thousands of tiny flames traveled along a woven net of special wicks. The fires traveled the interlaced fuel in patterns like the lights of a village winking in the night. It was always dark in this chamber, except once a day when the entire network had been consumed, leaving only the wire base of the lattice. This signaled the arrival of noontime, and the immediate automatic shift to a secondary net. The original wire was then lowered on pulleys into the uncovered reserve of fatty fuel beneath, a miracle of alchemy that dried into consistent shapes over the interwoven steel guides. This fuel burned at a predictable rate with a very small tolerance, and the little racing sparks policed their neighbors in a complicated dance. The cavern was sealed against all drafts or changes of temperature. Many had said it would never work, but it kept accurate, precise time, predicting the sunset to within a second or two.

"You've lost a minute and a half this week," said Mordred, appearing behind him.

"And how would you know that?"

“Come with me,” said Mordred. He led Arthur up to one of the highest towers of the castle, where he unlocked a simple wooden door. “I’ve been keeping this a secret until it was ready.”

Black smoke billowed out of the room, accompanied by a wave of heat. Big, toothed discs dominated the room, like the wheels of a mill. Four pillars held up the high ceiling; strange thrummings emanated from their surface. Half a dozen burly men with black sack-like masks over their heads shoveled coal into an iron furnace, the source of the pouring black smoke. A hole in the tower floor revealed running water far below, diverted from the river. An enormous paddlewheel and several bladed vertical rods mixed black dust into the water and released it on its way again. These shafts turned bigger wheels above, all working to tighten gigantic coiled springs in apertures around the room. A massive, sharply-bladed pendulum swung rhythmically over the water. Great hunks of metal teetered back and forth on a fulcrum or clashed together with sounds like an eruption. Occasionally, Mordred’s henchmen poured water or oil onto each moving part to keep them cool and lubricated, adding more sooty steam to the air.

“What is all this, Mort?” said Arthur. In answer, Mordred lit two enormous hooded lanterns. Flood beams burst forth from apertures in the hoods, setting the center of the room awash with light, rushing by to blanch out the sunset in ugly effulgence. In their lurid light, Arthur saw a circular bronze timepiece suspended from floor to ceiling, much like the face of a sundial expanded to massive size. Numerous marks surrounded its outer perimeter, picked out in alabaster. Four rods spun at different speeds, radiating from a focus to point at each mark in turn.

“Like it? This is my mechanical spring-powered clock. I invented it, earning several bounties from the patent office in the process. My ‘clockworks’ will make life easier in hundreds of ways, and it practically runs itself! Aye, it needs coal and moving water, but the exact

amounts of these materials are not important to its precision. What do you say? Think this will bring Merlin back?" Mordred laughed. "Look how neatly it parcels out the minutes, the seconds, the hours! And of course it tracks the position of sun and moon as well."

"Useful, for these floodlights wash the moon and sunset right from the sky," said Arthur. "I don't think Merlin - that man so in communion with the magic of nature - would ever be caught dead near this blasphemous device."

"Face it, Wart - your mentor *is* dead! Or have you received word from him of late?"

Mordred's laughter followed Arthur as he spun and strode from the chamber.

###

The great cedar's needles remained stiff and green in the harsh winter. Roots encircled the bases of the smaller trunks that made up the behemoth's massive girth, creating round paths and troughs like a garden.

"Your pupil does well," whispered a voice from the great tree.

"Yours seems to think he can't go on without you," sneered the sorceress.

"Mort does not know how to count the costs of his work," said the hushed voice of Merlin, with a shaking of boughs.

"It is of no consequence. The contest will vet out the greater of the two contestants. Then we will know who to share our secrets with. We will see who holds these great powers in their minds, who has the greater willpower, focus, and control. And the other will perish in the attempt."

"It has always been so," said Merlin quietly.

###

"Sire, we have reports of great sinkholes in the Road, even within a day's travel of Camelot. Two horse owners have pressed suit over their lame mounts."

They sat around a small table in one of the Library's many meeting rooms. Arthur had his feet up on a chair, casually, but his body was tense. "He has no grounds for his suit. The Road makes no guarantee of safety. Still, I shall patch the sinkholes - or exaggerated potholes, more likely. Draw me a map and I shall send someone to look into it."

"Oh, Camelot cannot be mapped these days," said Elaine airily, dropping a grape into her mouth.

"Really?"

"Oh yes. Everyone in the Library has given up, and just accepted their older maps. You can hardly hold the shape of what you want to draw in your mind anymore."

"Strange. I shall have someone look into that as well. Is that all?"

"Yes, Sire." Arthur waved the clerk away.

"Are the Knights still fighting over their Questing Cup, Guinevere?"

"I am afraid so. Worse than ever, it seems to me. There have been fistfights, which Lancelot and some of the others break up when they can. And Sir Kay pulled a sword on his own father. Several Knights have come to me, asking me to have a word with the jurors. I decline, of course."

"In truth they should be coming to me," said Arthur, "asking me to abolish the Questing Cup entirely. Mordred may have his poison wine. I will take my Knights back, sober and uncompetitive once more."

Days later, Guinevere rode to a distant hamlet, ostensibly to offer advice to its lord. Without his wife by his side at night, Arthur suffered terrible dreams. In sleep, he called out Merlin's name, constructed soaring, mirrored pillars hoping to espy the great sorcerer. But he saw only darkness, punctuated by the gruesome, unending ticking and straining of Mordred's clock. Every dream ended in the same way: evil winds rushing by as Arthur plummeted

hundreds of feet to the ground. He woke up covered in sweat, tangled in sheets, throat hoarse from panting and screaming.

On Guinevere's journey, she found the Road slippery with ice, and the harsh winter had driven frost into every crack, prying apart the very substance of the Road. Lancelot, too, was on a mission taking him north. They met, disguised, in an inn along the way, where they shared a bed, shared each other's warmth against the cold. A week passed in this way before they were to part.

By this time, the Road had crumbled even more, and was barely passable in this most distant stretch of its majesty. Guinevere begged Lancelot to give up whatever quest he pursued and to instead escort her safely along the bumpy Road back to Camelot. This chivalrous task he was happy to undertake, and the hours passed them by in happy conversation. They shared secrets, as intimate as any shared bed. Guinevere bared her heart to Lancelot, and he did likewise. Bit by bit, tendrils of trust infiltrated their guilt, assuaged it, until their first thought each night was only for the other. No longer did they think of Arthur even to dismiss him, not until they regained Camelot and were forced to meet his eyes each day.

Week after week, Arthur sent men out into the cold with wagons, wheelbarrows, and shovels to repair the Road. "The work will keep you warm," he chuckled, and they laughed with him. But soon the pleasure of labor turned to despair, for the Road resisted their attempts to patch it up. Arthur employed new techniques and new materials, but still men struggled to traverse its length. The sinkholes he had been warned of earlier increased in frequency, until at least one of the horrible pits yawned somewhere between every camp along the way. Great labor was required to seal off these holes, stabilize the area around them.

As winter initially clutched the land, few travelers feared to brave the snow to reach the wonders of Camelot. However, with the Road in bad shape, there was a noticeable stemming of

the tides, and for the first time Arthur lacked for scholars with new ideas, for experts and advisors on the many topics a good King must consider. Great drifts of snow covered the Road's surface, clinging to the slick ice, especially as springtime began to gleam in the distance, melting and refreezing the frost.

When the land began to warm, Arthur redoubled his efforts. But some perverse force harried him, crushing stones to dust, splitting the very earth with great cracks and chasms. Every wagon or horse's hoof increased the strain on the wounded pathway. When February began and the Road was less complete than ever, Arthur had to admit defeat. He formed a committee to do the best they could, ceased to spend personal attention on the problem. Under their utmost diligence, the flaws in the Road grew greater than ever.

Before February could reach its zenith, on the eve of the Feast of St. Valentine, a cold green light washed like a brief aurora over the fields of Camelot. Something blotted out a vast swath of stars, and did not relax its grip on their light. Those few who were awake roused the Knights, who leapt to their feet enthusiastically, eager for a chance to become Dragonslayers. But no dragon swooped down upon them, though there were a few flashes of green lightning.

In the morning, everyone discovered the source of their fears. Between the sparse cloud cover, a castle hovered half a mile in the air without so much as a cloud to support it. It cast no shadow, but blocked the sky behind it from view. Crenellated towers rose like talons from the cursed keep; lightning crackled between the pointed roofs. Haze poured continuously from the open portcullis, forming a poisonous moat. Some claimed they could see tiny archers walking the battlements. Siege engines were quite evident on the flat towers. The structure was twisted, distorted, as though its whimsical architect had made it of wet clay and given it a hearty wrench. But overall it was hulking, square, and bulky, as though it had been designed to loom with the greatest possible shadow. Large windows and mirrors, some covering entire towers, punctured

the walls at thousands of locations. Some of them drooped with the liquefying walls of the castle. Clouds above and fields below, any object of a certain size, could be seen reflected in the glossy windows. The dark brown bricks, almost black, gleamed with an even darker liquid, as though the castle bled pure night.

The castle in the sky seemed to have everything a lord might need. Dovecotes honeycombed the pointed roofs, flocking with dark birds too small to be identified. Lanterns hung in some of the windows. Black banners flapped in the high wind, indicating weavers and seamstresses. The baying of hounds would sound whenever dawn broke, or whenever the castle was downwind of Barrowgrove. The palest of green coronas appeared to hold it all together, and a cold chill filled the hearts of any who stood where its shadow ought to be.

Mordred rode like triumph over the land, reveling in the despair his mighty creation brought. An indefinable blackness followed him like a shrouding cape. He wore a circlet of corroded copper serpents, entwined together in green hatred. Dozens of villagers grew sick on the day the castle appeared, though none could prove it was not a coincidence. Still they ascribed their sickness to Mordred's ride.

When Lancelot pulled Mordred from his horse, declared him under arrest, and hauled him off to Arthur, Mordred was outraged. Madness gleamed in his eye as he shouted, "Unhand me! Am I not a Pendragon, just as much as you, Arthur? Do I not deserve to rule my own castle, by the mandate of arbitrary sorcery?"

Arthur remained calm. "I rule by the mandate of God, the people, the Codex. I rule by right of conquest, by right of birth, and by proof of leadership. My Codex spells out precisely how the new King will be chosen when I die, a bloodless relocation of Camelot's power."

"One of the many lies you tell yourself," said Mordred enigmatically, sneaking a glance at Lancelot. Arthur's voice tightened.

“Release Sir Mordred, Sir Lancelot. I am not sure this is a crime...though it is certainly a travesty.”

Lancelot nodded. “You are right, Arthur. Your laws are clear. After all, we do not even know this was Mordred’s creation yet. I should not make assumptions.”

“Oh, the castle is mine, most assuredly,” said Mordred. “Allow me to present...Caer Delirium! The castle in the sky! You talk of laws, Arthur - but how high does your kingdom reach? To the very heavens?”

“You cannot expect me to believe that castle truly flies, Mordred. It must be some sort of illusion or trick.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps an assault will pour forth from Caer Delirium, the very skies decrying your grand empire. Perhaps...perhaps it is all a trick of mirrors.”

“That seems likely,” said Arthur, fingering Excalibur. “The parts of the castle could be arranged in Barrowgrove somewhere, hidden from the world while the power of mirrors - or a Mirror - project them into the sky.” Mordred cackled.

“You seem to have lost your gift for subtlety,” observed Lancelot with ire.

“This problem will sort itself out. Mordred, go on your way,” said Arthur.

“But Arthur! A trial- ” said Lancelot.

Arthur erupted. “Am I not still King? Who are you, of all people, to question me? Begone!” They left.

Alone with his thoughts, Arthur grappled with terrible knowledge. Excalibur gave him a certain capacity to read people, and he had seen the truth in the eyes of Sir Lancelot du Lac, heard the truth in the voice of his wife. He knew, just as he knew the power of corruption and hysteria loosed by Mordred’s Caer Delirium. Discord and alienation were the demands of the chaotic castle in the sky, ordained by its invisible shadow. If Arthur were to act on his secret

knowledge now, he would lose not only his wife and his best Knight, but possibly all the loyalty and order in his kingdom. "I will not be the one to unleash this disaster hidden in my heart!" he shouted. "But I know not how I will cope. There is no one I can turn to. Ah, Merlin! Where did you go, Merlin?"

That night, after a long day of dealing with minor rebellions and dissent, Arthur experienced horrible dreams of seeking, hiding, falling. He found himself in a maze of crystals, dotted with dark trees. There was no light, yet he could see the outlines of certain shapes, terrain that impeded him and creatures that sought him, sniffing in the dark. "*Aegri.*" A slow chant echoed in his head, rose up through the land through which he ran. He stumbled whenever it throbbed. "*Somnia.*" Arthur sought Merlin, the single thought in his mind, but black vines dropped before him like serpents. Moss drenched him in moisture from head to toe. "*Vana.*" He reached for Excalibur, intending to cut his way through, but the sword was not there. "*Aegri. Somnia. Vana.*" The inscription flowed like a living thing in the dark, surrounding the crystals and tree limbs. "*Aegri.*" Arthur came to a cliff of crystal, moss, and dark rock. He skidded to a halt. "*Somnia.*" Stumbled. And he was falling, plummeting off the cliff into a darkness so black he could not even voice his fear without being choked. "*Vana.*"

Arthur started awake, scrabbling for Guinevere. She was there, but her skin felt like treachery to his clammy touch. Rather than infect her with his nightmarish unease, he wrapped himself in the goose down comforter, but it did nothing to warm him.

By day, Camelot felt no safer. Something about their King's mien or the threat of illusory Caer Delirium heightened the tension in the kingdom. Arthur called on his Knights to restore order, as they had been trained and drilled, but they were too busy squabbling over the nearly full cup of Lancelot. "With one word, I do believe I could drain that chalice of yours," said Agravaire dangerously. Lancelot grimaced and left the room.

At one point, the din of metal on metal brought Arthur rushing to the great hall, where he found two Knights standing on the Round Table with bared steel. "Stop!" he cried with all the authority he could muster. Blood sprayed from the shoulder of the smaller Knight as his opponent found a chink in his armor. Red fell, splashed on the Round Table to stain it as surely as acid. Elated by first blood, the bigger Knight pushed his victim forward until he tripped over one of the chalices bonded to the table.

All of Arthur's vitriol at his unfaithful wife, his disloyal Knights, reared up within him. He roared and drew Excalibur. Instantly the Knights froze at his wordless command. Arthur opened his mouth to speak, but just then the broad oaken doors of the great hall were flung inward with a loud retort. A figure in shining armor, brighter even than Lancelot's, strode into the room as though untouched by chaos and Delirium. A golden light obscured his face, somehow different from the argent light of the moonflowers or the green penumbra of Mordred's castle.

"The Quest is complete," said a noble voice. The visitor strode closer, but his iron boots made no sound on the marble floor, as though his feet scarcely touched the ground. "The Holy Grail...has been found." Instantly, every knee in the room bent to touch the floor. Every head was bowed. Every heart was touched, all thoughts of the Questing Cup forgotten. The Knight reverently placed the Grail in the center of the Round Table, though some of its divine light remained in the contours of his features. It was Sir Gawain, brimming with energy and radiant with peace. He rested his hand on his unblemished sword and bowed to King Arthur Pendragon.

"Camelot is truly blessed," whispered King Arthur. "Thank you, Almighty God, for Sir Gawain. Thank you for touching humble England with this holy artifact. We, your devoted servants, praise you." Every Knight rose and saluted Gawain with his sword. Excalibur blazed triumphantly as it came to rest above Arthur's tearstained eyes.

“With this sign, this MIRACLE,” said Arthur, “I cannot be daunted by any act, no matter how great the effort.” He left the castle and walked to the Garden, and half of Camelot followed him. Guinevere and Lancelot looked at each other with new resolution, squared themselves, and followed the crowd. Verdancy had unfolded even in the dead of winter. Crocuses popped through the snow, showing their golden hearts and purple robes. Vines were already sending tendrils up the trellises, choking out the thorns. Green, living things seemed to surge forth from the King’s feet; his lands echoed his emotions. Arthur smiled at the dawning springtime, then gestured to the Maze of Wrongs. “You are all invited to a magnificent Masked Ball, personally designed by your King, to be held in the Maze of Wrongs on the first day of Spring, two weeks from today.” Arthur’s gaze lingered on some of his closest friends as he said, “On this day, I ask forgiveness from those I have slighted. Harder still, I forgive all those who have wronged me. I offer a clean slate and a chance to start anew.” Whips of thornless roses spread from the Garden and over the Maze as if to emphasize his words.

Overture

With the Holy Grail itself seated on the Round Table, guarded constantly by a dozen Knights and tended by thirty priests and holy sisters, Camelot still struggled to hold itself together. The burden of maintaining the power of every creation still burdened Arthur, though the very presence of the Grail lessened the amount of strength Arthur's contingents need expend on each work of art. Most importantly, the Grail put the Questing Cup to shame, effectively ending that campaign in chagrin for the Knights who had anticipated it so vehemently.

Still, Mordred's hand was visible in every step backward for Camelot, and still Arthur did not slay him or throw him out. Instead, he just looked at Mordred sadly, with an immeasurable sorrow in his eyes. He did not realize, but it was the same look Merlin used to give Wart.

Much like his old mentor, Arthur found himself filled with forebodings of doom, though he could never put his finger on the details. The future was closed to him, but enough hints crept through to allow him a few preparations.

"Gawain," said Arthur in a secret meeting between just the two of them, "I have decided you shall be my Regent upon my death or abdication. The Council of Nobles has three months to select someone to replace you, if they desire - it's all worked out to be as bloodless and fair as possible. But I have no doubt you will show them you deserve the title of King."

"I am not worthy," said Gawain. "May your reign be a long one, Arthur, that I may spend the time in pursuit of wisdom." Arthur clapped him on the shoulder fondly.

"Sir Gawain! You are the one who found the Holy Grail, a task unequaled by any man in my kingdom! Not only found it but brought it back to bless us. Already it has saved hundreds of

lives no amount of Library doctors and scholars could save. One glimpse of this holy artifact brightens the spirits of all who stand in its presence.”

“A Quest that forever changed me,” said Gawain. “But no matter the powers of this artifact, it seems it cannot restore my brothers to their days of patience and kindness.” Full of pity, Arthur embraced his friend.

King Arthur had many meetings to halt the decay of Camelot, or in preparation for the Masked Ball: two goals that ran together in Arthur’s mind. He met with William Tywti to arrange the presence of certain beasts and plants. He met with all manner of laborers. He offered meetings to Guinevere and to Lancelot, for any concerns they might have, though they admitted none. And he met with the scourge of his days, Mordred.

“How did we come to this, Mort? Are we really so different?” Arthur sighed.

“You were born in light. I was born in darkness. I grew to be a sycophant of a King. You grew to be King. Your master gave you a mighty sword and a bevy of powerful secrets. Mine gave me a common household item fit for a woman, and forty lashes.”

“You wrong me, Mordred. Merlin was loathe to share even the smallest secret with me. He always said I must prove myself first. And now he is gone. As for my birth, why, you forget that I am a child of treachery as surely as yourself. My father enchanted himself to look like my mother’s husband. It was a rape as sure as any other, no matter how pleasant a disguise the minstrels put on it. Much as your mother Morgause wronged me.”

“Ah, sorcerers,” said Mordred. “How quickly they lend their power to evil. I am proud of what we have wrought here, Arthur.”

“Then why must you thwart me at every turn?”

“My dear aunt was vague. But the fundamental rule of the contest is clear. I must oppose you wholeheartedly, creation after creation, never slipping, never ceasing, until it ends. And

truth be told, I love to build in darkness. Morgana told me she would teach me manipulation, while Merlin would teach you the way of the sympathetic. So I must oppose you, and I do it my way. But I will offer you one chance to make things right, the way they should have been the moment I arrived in Camelot. List me as your Regent, swear by Excalibur that I will take the throne when you die. You must admit I am crafty and more cunning. I offer many great alliances to Camelot's advantage. Am I not a Pendragon too? We are both dragon heirs. Think carefully, Arthur."

"It can never be," said Arthur without hesitation. "Mort, you are nothing but a snake in my Eden."

"Then every time you are happy, each time you smile, I'll be there to tear it all down. That is a promise."

"You're a black stain on history, Mordred!"

"And history will remember YOU only as the one who stood in my way!"

"I should send you crawling back to Morgana!"

"Oh Arthur. Are you truly so blind? This contest will not let either of us leave Camelot. You cannot dismiss me from our battleground without voiding the contest. Surely Merlin sees a reason for all that has been done?"

"Then just get out of my sight."

Mordred leered and turned to go.

"Oh! Mordred. One thing more!"

"Yes?"

"I have been very lenient with you, and I will continue to allow your works. But if you defile the Masked Ball, this one last chance to celebrate, I will have your head for it!"

“As you command, Arthur. I give you my word as a villainous snake: I will leave you to your own purposes in this.” He offered his hand to Arthur. Arthur extended his own, and they clasped forearms. Mordred left.

But Arthur could not ignore the a dagger he’d felt concealed within Mordred’s sleeve.

Masquerade

Elaine raced ahead to the Ball. She wore a lacy white mask with a burning ruby at the center. Horns stretched from her forehead, like those of the dragon. Around her neck was a matching component, extending a few inches over her shoulders, which were otherwise bare. The lace curled gracefully in three dimensions.

Behind her, at a more refined pace, came Guinevere with Lancelot, her guard. He had refused to remove his armor, as usual, so she had helped him decorate it in a thick layer of goose down, dyed a cheery red. Tall plumes had been added to his helm. Guinevere matched him in a pure red gown, speckled with tiny gems. For a mask, she used an ivory eyepiece surrounded by peacock feathers. Together, they followed the strings of little lanterns to the Maze.

Arthur had sealed off the Maze with a smaller, simpler, less loathsome version of Mordred’s clockface, cranked by hand for this one occasion. Decorated with lanterns, it counted down the hours to the Masked Ball, blocking the entrance until the time was right. Hundreds of characters had already gathered in the meadow before the Maze, feathered velvet and insectoid scales and expressionless ivory. No two outfits were the same. Most of the courtiers were unrecognizable. Mordred and Arthur, two of the most distinctive men in the kingdom, were unrecognizable in secret disguises of their own.

With a pleasant chiming, the clock rolled aside, allowing light from the Maze to spill into the meadow. Anxiously, the guests wandered into the labyrinth. It was warm in the first stretch of the Maze, and as you walked past a row of copper hands mounted to the wall they reached out to take your coat. Beyond this, the path split into three choices, but guests found all three ways reunited in a large chamber set for a feast. Blue gauze draped itself over windows and furniture, spilling onto the floor in ethereal puddles.

The floor of the chamber drew Elaine's eye. It was crystal clear; beneath the hard surface, water gathered in a pool extending from one side of the room to the other. Two serpentine forms twisted about each other, locked in a submarine dance. Their claws and scales glittered as with moonlight. Huge jaws gulped water and gnashed long ivory fangs. One was scarlet red and the other pure white. They grappled with each other beneath the floor, a brilliant sight for the reveling crowd. Elaine could not discern if they were real or illusory.

Wreaths of woven grapevine surrounded every plate on the long banquet tables, already set with hot dishes. Each cloth napkin had been folded into a different animal or shape.

Elaine sat to eat immediately, for she found the aromas mouthwatering. She was loathe to unfold her beautiful embroidered mouse, but when she spilled a bit of soup on her dress, she had little choice. "It's hard to eat in a mask," she said defensively as Guinevere chuckled. Dabbing at her skirts, she noticed writing stitched across her napkin.

"THE MIND IS NOT A VESSEL TO BE FILLED, BUT A FIRE TO BE KINDLED," it read.

"It describes me perfectly, ever since I came to Camelot! Open yours!" she urged Guinevere.

"LOVE PROSPERS WHEN A FAULT IS FORGIVEN," read Guinevere's swan. A strange expression flitted across Guinevere's face, and Elaine thought she saw mists gathering in her eyes.

“And you, Lance?”

“THE FAITHFUL MAN CANNOT DENY WHO HE IS,” said Lancelot.

“How nice! Each one is different,” said Elaine. She ran about, checking with everyone who had already unfolded a napkin. Almost everyone had a psalm or proverb appropriate to their station in Camelot.

Soft music began to filter through the walls of the room, signalling the end of the feast. Porters came to clear everything away as the guests wandered into the Maze in search of a dance floor. Elaine joined the searchers. She was delighted to discover that there was no central dance area. Instead, every corridor had been widened enough for a few couples to dance, and the music permeated the entire Maze. Thus, guests were encouraged to explore and find the atmosphere suiting them best.

Personally, Elaine relished the areas that reminded her of all she'd found in Camelot. She wandered past glass panes guarding delicate trees moved from the Garden, where every leaf was veined with pale light. A room where books lined every surface, even the ceiling, reminded her of the great Library. An abstract chandelier of cascading sapphires, each brimming with light and held up by invisible threads, echoed the gems of the Scales of Themis. And where the walls had been widened, some material had been left behind in careful reliefs or half-sculptures of unicorns, chargers, Knights, and dragons. And at the furthest reaches of the Maze, far from the secret center, she saw the symbol of Barrowgrove's invasion of the Garden: two tree stems bursting through floor and continuing through the ceiling, raining constant rubble and dust. Thorns spewed in angry clusters from the darker stem, while the lighter was smooth and white as silk. The two trees coiled around each other, each straining to destroy its opposite.

The Maze had expanded to such vast size that guests only ran into others near the entrance. When this happened, they would usually laugh, make small talk, and try to guess who

was under the masks. Every part of the maze seemed warm and welcoming, brightly lit with torches and lanterns of every size. Shadows flitted everywhere as the torches guttered and lanterns swung to and fro on their tethers.

Guinevere and Lancelot soon found an unoccupied corridor, far from the entrance and with plenty of shelter. This took the form of hundreds of staircases, some huge and some tiny, with white kittens leaping about on them. The stairs were twisted one about the other, or bent at odd angles, or constructed to branch off of other stairs or even run upside down on them, where not even a cat could go. All this in spite of the fact that the Maze was laid out in only two dimensions, and every one of the staircases, whether alabaster and gold or wood and sandstone, led nowhere.

Elaine, meanwhile, wandered in a forest of fairy delights, slowly looking for the center and whatever secrets it held.

Guinevere sat on a staircase, where she could see along the corridor but was unlikely to be spotted herself. Lancelot clattered to a seat opposite her.

“Do you think Arthur knows?” she asked.

“I would hate to think of his pain if he does,” said Lancelot sadly. “Were I truly a noble man, I should leave Camelot forever and give myself to a life of penance. But there is much I may do here, and I simply do not have the strength to leave you, my Queen.”

“But think of the messages on the linens,” argued Guinevere. “He must know. This Masquerade is a gesture from him.”

“It is not like Arthur to be passive in an accusation.”

“No. No, this Ball is not an accusation. It is an offer of forgiveness. This is the Maze of Wrongs, and at every turn since knowing each other we have made the wrong choice, yet still we have refused to start anew. Arthur promised a blank slate. I think that was directed at us.”

“Then our task is clear. We must return to the entrance of the Maze and hunt for the finish with new resolve.”

“Yes. And our next meeting must be our last. Our farewell.” They hugged, simply hugged, and wended their way unimpeded back to the glowing clockface.

Arthur, meanwhile, found himself struggling with his own creation. The Maze did not seem to want to let him advance, nor would it allow him to go back. He wanted to check on Guinevere and Lancelot, wanted to see if they had changed, wanted to make sure they were safe. For hours that seemed like days, he roamed unfamiliar corridors, each one crafted by his own hand.

He turned a corner. It felt like the right direction to go, the path indicated by his memory. But the angels of frost and fire were continuing their duel, blocking the path, and he found he could not disturb them. He turned and retraced his steps, but once again he found the way barricaded by living statues. A silver drummer wordlessly pressed him for a coin. Digging in his pockets, he came up empty. “That’s strange,” he thought. “Surely I had my purse with me earlier?” Unable to face the unblinking stare, he backed away once more, and almost ran into three of the identical women. They had replaced their rainbow sashes with pure black clothing. Gently, they pushed him away. Arthur felt as though their dark fabrics sucked the light from the room; it seemed to be dimmer and dimmer, and there was something ill about the air. Though Arthur outweighed the three of them together, he succumbed to their gentle prodding and shuffled gratefully toward a left turn that revealed itself.

This turn soon forked, and in his muddled state he gave a cry of joy upon seeing a passage he recognized along the left fork. He stumbled toward it until he met resistance in the form of a shimmering ball of air. The shimmering unfolded itself, revealing the knight of

impossibly polished armor. Once it gained its full height, it froze into statue form again, sealing off the familiar corridor. Resignedly, Arthur took the right fork instead.

The light dimmed further until he could barely make out the walls around him. The warm lanterns disappeared, replaced by ebony chandeliers like thirsty roots. They did little to light the way; he fancied they actually made it darker.

The passage did not fork, and Arthur felt he was descending slightly, though the Maze he'd designed never changed elevation. Thinking of his lost purse, Arthur checked that Excalibur still hung at his side. The sword gave him some reassurance and cleared his head somewhat, though he did not draw it. He advanced onward through the darkness, still descending, until he thought he must be hundreds of feet beneath the earth's surface. To either side of the passage in front of him, he glimpsed shadowy statues, made of marble this time rather than flesh, draped in cobwebs. Arthur shut his eyes and broke the strands of sticky webs, brushing them out of his face, when suddenly he felt himself spinning with such rapidity that he experienced a moment of vertigo. He had lost all sense of direction and depth. In his confusion, he believed himself transported some great distance over the course of a single heartbeat.

The moment the spinning stopped, Arthur, filled with trepidation, broke into a run. Everything around him was dark, his choice of direction a mere guess. He blundered about in the darkness for some time, tracing his way forward with one finger on a cold wall. Eventually he fell into an easy, measured stride, and began to walk with a little more confidence and purpose. Still he could not see his hand in front of his face, much less any way out. The feeling of trepidation continued to increase.

Unexpectedly, Excalibur leapt into the King's hand. A chance glint off the blade briefly revealed two shining pinpricks of light in the darkness. Immediately, Arthur dropped into a defensive stance, brought Excalibur to bear in readiness. Five unlit forms descended upon him,

unseen blades whistling. Sparks flew when their steel met Excalibur's edge, and Arthur witnessed two living statues holding sharp blades, now shorn off near the base, useless. Arthur recognized the copper statue, still floating a few feet above the ground, and the marble figure draped in marble sheets. In their moment of surprise, he countered with his braced sword. The enchanted blade sliced the floating man in two pieces, his legs falling to the floor while his torso continued to levitate aimlessly as though still held by invisible strings. Excalibur kept going, carved through solid marble until it bit flesh. The second statue dropped with a thud.

Again Arthur was plunged into darkness, but not before he identified his opponents: a swarm of fairies holding unlit lanterns, a man with metallic skin traced with cracks and an anguished steel expression, and most frightening of all, a hooded man bearing a long steersman's pole and robes that trailed in murky water beneath his skeletal feet. The King heard all three start forward at once. He focused on the largest first, the horrifyingly scabbed metal man, but this was a mistake. The move left Arthur's sword embedded deep in the alloy of the living statue's costuming, allowing the real threats to move in.

Moaning, the oarsman tripped Arthur with a neat stroke of his staff. The cloud of tiny sprites rushed in, and Arthur felt a not-so-tiny dagger pierce his unarmored ribs. The three of them held Arthur's shoulders, tried to pin him down, but half a dozen men would have failed to hold the broad-shouldered King. He came roaring to his feet, slammed two of his assailants against the wall before they could draw a final breath. Kicking blindly in the dark, he felt his foot connect with something fleshy. The living statues stayed eerily silent through this abuse. Arthur found all his limbs free, so he resumed his blind dash into the depths of the Maze.

Torches flared into life. He found himself at the foot of a spiral staircase, laid with plush black carpeting so thick as to entangle his feet. But halfway up the stairs, a whirling vortex of blades guarded his way forward. Knives, swords, axes, and razors filled the air, racing back and

forth in a barrier promising the most exquisite, bloody death. Arthur watched the blades carefully, hypnotized.

“Calumni is an artifact of illusion,” said Arthur musingly. “Could it be...?” Hesitantly, he reached out with his left hand, brought it barely within range of the vortex. He felt a cold resistance, but no pain. Withdrawing his arm, he saw no blood. He smiled and strode confidently into the whirlwind of blades, then screamed.

Arthur was falling; his feet had found nothing but empty space beneath the illusion where the stairs should have been. He landed awkwardly, twisting his ankle so it hurt just to stand. Peering up through the darkness, he thought he could discern the outline of a pit high above him. It was too high for a jump. Intuitively, he pressed the blade of Excalibur against the reopened wound in his side. A brief pulse of heat seared the wound, cauterizing it and sending soothing waves of warmth into him. He then groped about in the darkness until his questing hands found a wooden door and a locked doorknob. Shrugging, Arthur unsheathed Excalibur and sliced the door off its hinges. He kicked it inward and stepped through the doorway into a swamp.

It was a brightly lit swamp. Everything seemed to glow faintly, from the algae to the vines crowning out in the dead treetops, to the shining eyes of creatures mostly submerged in the putrid water. Pillars of sandstone smoldered here and there in a nauseating array of shifting pastel colors, like the spots a man sees upon pressing his eyes firmly. And half-hidden behind the ferns, or behind the knobby surface of the stone, in the knotholes of a floating log, or on the back of a slimy bullfrog, Arthur kept glimpsing actual fluttering fae with iridescent wings and inexplicable fangs. Some of the logs looked like they might be the backs of biting, swimming creatures. Arthur broke off a branch and carefully poled his door across the water, which sucked at the makeshift raft with every surge.

Through a bank of thick green fog, Arthur drifted slowly until he came to a sudden stop. He waved the haze away and found himself staring at a pair of gauzy pastel curtains, floating in midair. Curiously, he pulled them aside. Beyond a pane of glass, all the fields of Camelot stretched out underneath him. He appeared to be hundreds of feet up in the air.

“I am in Caer Delirium?” he wondered. “Impossible.”

Craning his neck, he could see a dark coign of the Caer to one side. There could be no doubt. “Somehow, Mordred transported me to his floating fortress. And perhaps this is a series of obstacles designed to slow me.” As he turned the scene over in his mind, he noticed a long shape speeding toward him in the water. He leaped from his raft just as gaping jaws closed on it, crunching right through the thick wood. Arthur was up to his knees in foul-smelling water, vastly outsped by the toothy monster. He took two splashing steps, wincing at the pain in his ankle, then paused. A wolf howled in the distance.

Slowly, carefully, he drew Excalibur. The point he placed against one of the pulsating stones. He pushed.

Dark ink bled from the stone around Excalibur’s tip, rippling like water flicked on a fresh drop of paint. The swamp began to fade, bleeding darkness from every fiber of the scene. Excalibur blazed happily in his hands as the sky melted slowly, viscously, toward the ground, leaving bare stone walls. Excalibur had pierced the illusion, revealing the truth. At one end was another door, which Arthur pushed open.

The newly revealed room was sparsely lit. Shadows detached themselves from the walls and came to stand in front of a tall, striking figure, dressed in an elegant suit and wearing a velvet black cape. Diamonds glittered on both cuffs, and white gold traced its way up the black sleeves. A wrapped black scarf adorned his head, trailing in the back. His face was covered in a smooth white mask, expressionless, held covering his face on a slender rod. From the mask’s

mouth, Mordred's voice issued, giving orders to four of the identical living statues. One hand gestured, while the other held Calumni close at his side.

"Mordred!" Arthur called. "Release me from this castle of the damned." The man turned and dropped the mask from his face. Where it had been, only the back of the black turban was visible. Emptiness stared where the leer of Mordred should have been.

Calumni flashed in the dim light, and thick black smoke began to billow from it, obscuring Mordred's dark form. "Not while I draw breath," growled Arthur, and he leapt at his nephew. They met. Mordred staggered, but brought Calumni around to face Arthur. The King closed his eyes and grabbed for the mirror. He felt his fingers close around the filigreed frame, wrenched it from Mordred's grip. With his shoulders, he slammed Mordred into the wall and took off running. Once clear of the smoke, he raced through the empty swamp room. Excalibur leapt to hand once more, and Arthur nodded. Wielding the dire blade, he sliced right through the masonry of Caer Delirium and flung himself into the empty air. Four stories of wall rushed passed, then nothing.

Time slowed. The wind whistled passed Arthur's ears. Cold air flung itself against his face, abrading his skin. The fields of Camelot were at least a half mile below the falling King. Tumbling wildly, bucked by air currents, he sheathed Excalibur and gripped Calumni instead. It flared to life and a voice emanated forth, or perhaps it only echoed in his mind. "Delirium is an illusion," it said.

"I do not trust you, foul artifact of treachery," Arthur said, frowning into its depths. Slowly the light of the mirror faded from green to silver.

"Do not let my voice fool you," said Calumni. "I am a mere tool. I serve whatever hand holds me."

"You would betray Mordred? Then you would have no trouble betraying me."

“Let me show you how you may be saved.” Images appeared in his mind of how he might escape his impossible fall, the one place he might flee to.

“I think not,” said Arthur. His fingers felt the embossed letters, “*Aegri Somnia Vana.*” “You offer only a sick man’s dream. I have another solution, Calumni. The only way out of a dream is to wake up.” Calumni flashed brilliant silver moonlight, acknowledging him.

Arthur braced himself to strike the earth. He crossed himself, thought of the glorious kingdom he had built, the pride of his life. Then, knees flexed, he impacted.

He landed, not in some farmer’s field as expected, but in the depths of dark Barrowgrove. He rolled, amazed he was still alive. It felt like a fall from thirty or forty feet, like a leap from a high battlement rather than a fall from the very heavens. Still, his ankle flamed with agony, and the other leg felt even worse; it was definitely broken. The ankle could bear weight.

“Calumni,” said Arthur, and the mirror flashed argent. The pain faded from his legs, especially the ankle. He knew it was only a trick of the mind, a blanket of illusory comfort or apathy. He hopped slowly, grabbing for support at brittle tree branches that crumbled under his hands.

“Mordred comes,” said the Mirror of Avalon. “He has murder in his heart.”

“This is the fastest I can go,” said Arthur. Then his eyes fell on a stout stave across the path. It had a crook for a handle, a solid length of wood below, and was even shod with metal at the end. Arthur frowned at a sprig of holly growing from the handle as though it were still alive. “That was Merlin’s symbol,” he thought. Even more strangely, the base of the cane was wrapped with a splint and bandage. It was too unlikely to be a coincidence. With this bandaging and the crutch, he was able to hobble much faster.

Arthur burst from the eaves of Barrowgrove. Morning broke around him. In the half-light, he felt safer. With so many wakeful crowds of people within hailing distance, he suspected

Mordred would not attempt to harm him. He limped to Camelot's courtyard, where a small crowd of early risers was gathered near the Scales of Themis. He recognized many who had been in attendance at the Masked Ball. The King was glad that they did not seem to have suffered.

"Perhaps I built the Maze a little too close to Barrowgrove," he muttered. Then suddenly the crowd had parted for him and he was staring at the Scales of Themis with an expression of horror.

The silver pans had tarnished and corroded. Daylight gaped through crumbling holes. Rust covered the iron caps, and the chains were frayed or cracked. Hairy vines climbed the central pole and tore at the metal with vicious suckers. The statue of Themis bore a tortured rictus instead of her benevolent smile. Part of her skull was missing, and the blindfold was askew, her scales woefully out of balance, one side piled with the skulls of tiny animals. Real blood seemed to drip down her legs.

The lake protecting the gems had boiled away, leaving a sticky film of algae. The sparkling sapphires representing truths and virtues were pure no longer. They had clouded over and were pitted with rough chips and jagged cracks. Some were cloven nearly in two. The air smelled rank around the mocking symbol of Justice. Serpents hissed in the pit. And leaning casually on the tattered pan was Mordred, making the whole construction creak warningly.

"It can't be real!" Arthur panted. "You can't possibly have replaced my work with this monstrosity. I don't believe it!"

"Oh, it is too late for that! This is real, Arthur! Pierce it with Excalibur if you disbelieve."

Arthur brought his sword into contact with the ruined device. Nothing happened.

"You see. You are right to suspect illusion. But the illusion has been in place for months, ever since my farce of a trial. It has now been removed. Justice has corroded under your rule, Arthur. The Scales were only a symbol of your ideals, of course. The real justice - or lack of

justice - rests in your people. And I have wormed my way in among the hearts of each juror, each judge. If I could turn them so easily, how weak your much-vaunted system of justice must have been!" Beside Mordred, Agravaire snickered cruelly.

"Then I know what must be done." Arthur swung Excalibur, and dropped the Scales of Themis in one blow. "Haul this slag to the furnaces. Distribute the precious metals among the poor. Leodegrance must be repaid in other gems than these." He sent pages to summon Guinevere and Lancelot to the Round Table, and was relieved when they came from different corners of the castle. Gawain and Enoch came as well, and Sir Carados was still chained to the Table.

He smiled at his wife. "Guinevere. Sweet Guinevere. The beauty of Camelot has begun to fail, though many wonders still thrive here. Corruption must not touch you."

"Lancelot. You were my purest Knight, perhaps the first of the new order. Hold fast to your ideals."

"Gawain. You were reborn in penance. Your sins were carefully, painfully, washed away. You proved this by bringing the Holy Grail back to us. We meet in its presence. It, and you, can do much to help us."

"Enoch, I do not think there is a more clever man in this kingdom than you, unless it be Mordred. I need your help in designing contingency plans, ways to keep everything on track. I need your mind."

"Sir Carados," Arthur began. Carados startled at finding himself included in the council. "I believe you to be a man who is honest with himself. That honesty is what I want. Has your loyalty to me improved?"

"It is an unquestioning loyalty," said Carados. "Were you to ask me to leap from Caer Delirium, I should do it."

“Then I need the help of all five of you. You are the only ones I can trust to help me rework the justice system. I envision a court, bound by straiter laws and guidelines than the old courts, and founded on a group of proven, honest jurors, hand selected by the people in this room, and protected from corruption by us through all that is to come. I want this system encoded and executed as soon as humanly possible. And remember - Mordred will be watching; he is a problem we cannot solve by stooping to barbarism. Thank you all. I could not ask for better friends.” Arthur led them in prayer, then dismissed them to go about their new tasks.

Cycle 10: The Ambitions of Mordred

Agravaine

Gawain worried about his brothers. Agravaine was spending a lot of time with Mordred, hidden away in the secret places of Barrowgrove. At council, he had led several worrisome propositions, including a dismissal of the fact that the river was now a sickening black color, and made ill any who drank of it. He was, in fact, becoming a regular sycophant.

Arthur, in stark contrast to Gawain's feelings, brimmed with confidence in his new justice system. He brought it in gradually, starting with minor squabbles over land boundaries and working his way up to the rare murders that took place in Camelot. It was in full swing within a week. Satisfaction was high on all sides, and Arthur had grown to like many members of the jury. They seemed fiercely loyal to his ideals, and were quick to defend the new system in front of any who questioned it.

The Garden was another matter. It continued to shrink, no matter what Arthur and Guinevere did to tend it. On advice from William Twyti, who knew a huntsman who knew a botanist who knew three elderly gardening masters, Arthur set out on the dangerous Road to the northern quadrant of his kingdom. He took only a few Knights for escort.

Guinevere and Lancelot shared a look. They knew this was their chance to say goodbye the way they both yearned to do. Each slipped away after Arthur left, at separate times so as to avoid suspicion. The sharp eyes of Mordred watched them go, but they were too wrapped up in their own fantasies to notice.

They met at an unused training ground. "Are we sure this is what we want?" said Guinevere tentatively.

“What else would we do?” said Lancelot. “We cannot remain here and continue to betray Arthur within his own walls. That is Mordred work. Too many oaths have been broken already.”

“We could run away together, now, while Arthur is away. We could live in the wilds like barbarians. Live by the sword!” Guinevere picked up a discarded weapon and swung it fiercely, one handed. She nearly overbalanced.

“How will you live by the sword if you don’t know how to use one? Let me show you.” He stood behind her, wrapped his arms around her body, showed her how to fold her hands on the pommel. Tenderly, Lancelot adjusted her grip, the angle of her arms, showed her the correct arc for a simple strike. He wrapped his leg a quarter turn around hers, applied gentle pressure to widen her stance. “Like this,” he said, then he pulled her body close to his. She leaned back into him, turned her head for a kiss. He returned the kiss, caressed her bare arms. “One last time,” he said. “This is our goodbye.”

Back at the gate, Mordred waved a sardonic goodbye to Arthur’s retreating back. Then he nudged Agravaine. “Come, brother. I think I forgot something in the castle.” Agravaine grinned evilly. Together they slipped away and crept into Camelot. Whenever they found themselves unobserved in the castle, they opened closets and peered into abandoned halls. “Somewhere in this castle, treachery is afoot,” said Mordred in a mock-serious tone. “It is our duty as Arthur’s friends to expose that betrayal.” Agravaine snickered and led the way to the royal courtyard.

“No one here. I am a bit surprised.”

“Perhaps Lancelot’s quarters,” said Mordred. Just then Elaine ran by, clearly in a hurry. Mordred reached out to stop her. “Dearest Elaine. Have you seen our beloved Queen or the bold Sir Lancelot lately?”

“Yes, they went into that old training room, with all the straw dummies. Why? Oh, and do you know if Arthur left yet? I wanted to tell him goodbye before he left. I just had the worst feeling about this trip.”

“Just missed him,” said Agravaine. “He mounted his horse not ten minutes ago. But perhaps you should stick around the castle - I have a feeling there will be some festivities.”

Elaine gaped at him, then ran off with her face much paler than before. Agravaine and Mordred laughed to each other, then raced for the abandoned training yard. Along the way they ran into Sir Kay, whom they swept up with a quick word. The three burst into the half-open courtyard without warning; the door was not even locked.

Lancelot and Guinevere looked up from a pile of straw, fear in their eyes. Both were in their underclothes. Their position left no doubt as to their intentions with each other. Mordred threw back his head and laughed while the clock far above chimed eleven doleful bells. “Go,” whispered Guinevere. Lancelot gave her one last look, an eternity of meaning conveyed in one glance. Then he leapt to his feet and headbutted Sir Kay. While Kay was bent double, groaning, Lancelot freed the man’s sword.

“Let us go,” said Lancelot. “I am not so fallen that I cannot take on all three of you at once.”

“I beg your mercy,” sneered Mordred. “As you see, I am unarmed.” Something in Mordred’s stance told Lancelot otherwise. Agravaine, fully armored and wielding his broadsword, felt confident enough to rush the unarmed Lancelot. Sir Lancelot sidestepped easily, a move he had performed hundreds of times in training.

“I do not wish to hurt you, Agravaine,” he said. “But I will not allow myself to be taken captive while Arthur is not here.” Agravaine swiveled and cut at his head. Lancelot ducked the blow and swept Agravaine’s feet out from under him, bringing him to the stone floor with an

almighty crash. Instead of performing the finishing blow, Lancelot raced from the room. When he had passed Mordred, he turned and addressed Guinevere. "I will be back for you, my love," he promised.

When Lancelot had vanished and the fallen Knights had regained their feet, Mordred led them toward Guinevere, who had not moved from where she lay. "I suppose we could test Arthur's new order of justice," he mused. "On the other hand, Sir Lancelot did say he would be back to steal the Queen away. Perhaps Arthur would prefer we simply perform a public execution right away. For the good of the kingdom, of course." Mordred drew a long, wicked dagger from his clothing and licked the edge.

The three paraded Guinevere through the streets of Camelot. She wore only a disheveled shift; her hands were tied behind her back, and her skin was powdered with dust where she had struggled against her captors. Sir Kay walked behind, the most reluctant of the three. His face did not come close the shame Guinevere's showed.

The party walked beside the black river until they came to the gibbets, a raised platform where the worst of convicted criminals were hung. Under Arthur's reign, imprisonment was much more common than hanging; only those considered irredeemable were given the penalty of death. A crowd quickly gathered.

"Citizens of my beloved Camelot," said Mordred. "These two witnesses and I discovered your Queen Guinevere in the very act of treason against King Arthur. All those who are loyal to him, I ask you: should she remain unpunished?" The crowd roared, bloodlust filling their hearts. "The law is clear. The penalty for treason is death!" He raised his dagger to Guinevere's throat. "Let us prepare the gift of Justice for Arthur's return!" Mordred's arm tensed, drawing blood from her white throat. He savored the moment, reveled in the crowd's approval.

“Unhand my wife!” came a roar. Arthur rode through the crowd on his mighty stallion, followed closely by a worried Elaine. He held Excalibur aloft. Such was the force of his command that Mordred dropped his dagger and stumbled backward, almost falling from the platform. Arthur’s horse leapt up beside Mordred, glaring at him while Arthur moved to sweep Guinevere up behind him in the saddle.

“Not so fast,” said Mordred, his voice dripping with regret. “Unfortunately, your arrival changes little. There has been a crime: the crime of treason. We have sufficient evidence, and three noble witnesses. Guinevere’s betrayal must go to trial, as your own rules dictate.”

“The new system is not quite ready. I shall handle this myself.”

“That is not what you said three days ago. Or did a ‘not quite ready system’ send that drunkard, the one accused of manslaughter, off to the executioner? His widow shall weep anew when she realizes the injustice.”

Arthur looked at Guinevere’s haunted face. She clung to him desperately.

“I love my wife, no matter what,” Arthur said. “Guinevere is innocent. The court will not find her guilty. Then we can put this behind us once and for all.” The crowd murmured among themselves, voicing a hundred different opinions and interpretations of this event.

“Our King deserves better!” shouted one.

“Let justice prevail!” yelled a Knight. Elaine was not sure whether he sided with Guinevere or with Mordred.

“The courts must decide,” muttered the two women nearest the platform.

“She will NOT, however, be left in the custody of her accusers, who will pay for their rough treatment of an innocent woman. I look forward to that moment immensely. The jury shall say ‘Not guilty!’ and I shall smile grimly, and I shall reach out and grab Agravaire and Mordred by the scruff of their necks, and I shall drag them away to a trial of their own. Sir Ector, Father, I

commend Guinevere into your capable hands this night. Sir Bors and Sir Gawain, my two Knights who were worthy of the Holy Grail, shall assist you.” With a glare at Mordred, Arthur ordered the jury and the witnesses to be watched as well. Then he marched off with Bors, Gawain, Ector, and Guinevere. Elaine tried to follow, but Arthur rebuffed her with a look.

Morning found Arthur curled up outside the door where his three most trusted Knights guarded Guinevere. His fingers were locked around Excalibur, and deep grooves scarred the stone floor around him like recrimination. When he awoke, he nervously went over all the statutes governing the selection and duties of a jury, looking for any flaw in his rules, any loopholes or exploits Mordred might use. Three witnesses was a lot of evidence, though they had not quite caught Guinevere in the act. Sir Kay was well-liked and trusted, but opinions on Mordred and the new Agravaine were mixed. The standard of evidence would be higher for the Queen, as befitted her station, and the jury would know the King himself hoped for a favorable verdict. All it took was a shadow of a doubt, and Guinevere would go free. He longed for her. His heart ached at a brief separation made eternal by danger. But soon he would hold Guinevere in his arms once more.

When the King could worry no more, he went and roused the jury and the judge, explaining the trial had been moved up. The sun was rising, pinks and golds reflected in the polluted water of the river, and Mordred’s horrible clock rang six bells.

Aside from the early start, the trial ran according to Arthur’s careful laws. Mordred gave evidence, careful not to exaggerate anything that might be contradicted by later witnesses, but craftily omitting anything that did not provide the context he wanted. Then he returned to his seat, where he kept licking his lips as if he already tasted blood.

Sir Kay reluctantly took the witness stand and gave a curt, vague explanation of his part in the proceedings, as though nervous he would be held accountable for his actions. Arthur

seemed uncertain how to feel about Sir Kay; his face expressed alternate sympathy, appreciation, and anger.

Finally, last of the witnesses for the prosecution, Agravaine stood to give his testimony. As though he relished every detail, he told of the Queen's treachery with a bright gleam in his eye. Often, he looked at Arthur while he spoke. Every moment was spun to give grief to the King, who appeared in pitiable straits - a fact Agravaine drew attention to as proof that Arthur had suffered greatly by the actions of Guinevere. Every word was a dagger thrust into Arthur's vulnerable, law-bound mortal flesh. The court recessed. Witnesses for the defense would be heard after the break.

Arthur scarcely moved from where he sat. He only turned his head to confirm that Guinevere was well guarded by Sir Ector and Sir Bors. Hearing Mordred's trio of sickening testimonies felt like confirmation of all the months of near-certain knowledge that Guinevere was involved with Lancelot, but he hoped the jury would see it differently, lacking his long awareness and insight. Objective proof was what they required.

Meanwhile, Gawain had cornered his brother Agravaine with entreaty in his eyes. "Brother! I beg you to recant! Can you not see what this trial is doing to Arthur? Think of him! If you withdraw your testimony, Guinevere will walk free! I know it boots nothing to ask Mordred to abandon his words, but I know you still love our King, Agravaine!"

"That is precisely why I must stand firm, brother Gawain. I call for the execution of Queen Guinevere that Arthur might be made whole for all she has done to him. Vengeance belongs to Arthur. It is his right." Agravaine said the words woodenly, as though they had been rehearsed, but a fire of malice burned in his eyes.

"You have learned something of the silver tongue of Mordred," said Gawain. "And you have the eyes of the serpent. But I know something of the old Agravaine is in there. We have

both changed, you and I, since coming to Camelot. I know you will do the right thing before this is all over. I love you, brother.” Gawain clapped his brother on the arm and turned back to guarding Guinevere, making sure she was warm enough in the crisp spring air.

The sound of the gavel brought the court back into session. Witnesses came forward with tales of Guinevere’s goodness, her unwillingness to hurt anyone or anything, her ministries to the plants of the Garden. Most importantly, men and women of every station regaled the jury with accounts of how much Guinevere truly loved her husband. Soon a long line of people wanting to give witness formed, expressing Guinevere’s constant attention to Arthur and his works, the way Guinevere looked at the King when she thought no one was looking, how her feelings had formed and grown in the weeks leading up to their marriage. The fealty of his people brought a tear to Arthur’s eyes. They loved their Queen. Her release was unquestionable.

Then the King himself gave his plea, announcing his faith in his wife with a tremble in his voice. Guinevere could not quite meet his eyes. He told the court he expected she could not be convicted of wrongdoing, and asked mercy if she was somehow found guilty.

“I have one burning question that has not yet been addressed,” said the judge, a man trained by Arthur’s team to uncover truths. “Where now is Lancelot? If he has fled, that surely implicates him in some crime. What other crime could he be guilty of?” No one had an answer to this. The jury looked grim.

The jury met behind closed doors. Voices rose in passion, muffled beyond recognition by thick walls, then gradually subsided as their peers made successful arguments. All it would take was one single juror who did not find sufficient evidence of guilt, and the Queen would walk free.

Finally, after an interminable wait, the jury issued forth. Their foreman stood. Mordred leaned forward in his seat, a crazed look of anticipation marring his face. Arthur tried to appear stolid, but he was sweating.

“We have our verdict,” said the foreman. “We find Queen Guinevere...oh, Arthur. I’m so sorry. We find Queen Guinevere guilty of the crime of treason. She is sentenced to burn at the stake.”

The Pyre

The execution was scheduled for five bells the next morning. Arthur had no recourse to change the jury's verdict without destroying every principle he had espoused, every hallmark of Camelot's glory, but he was permitted to select the time. He watched from Elaine's usual vantage point as men set up the stake, pounding it deep into the ground with heavy blows from a maul. They carefully piled kindling and larger wood at its base. Only a small circle of moss and soft grass, and the moonflower garden, remained around the stake. Beyond, everything lay in shadow. Once-proud statues were now draped in clinging vines. The fountains were clogged with scum and fallen thorns. Spiky saplings bristled everywhere, breaking through the little paths and overwhelming the other plants. Not an animal made a sound during the day; at night, the silence was occasionally pierced by a howl or an owl's screech.

Mordred did not brag about his part in the verdict. Rather, he dogged Arthur's footsteps, bearing constant reminders that the King's regrettable system of justice was the cause of all this, needling Arthur about his duties, even switching tactics to pit Arthur against his own laws. The King, he said, had authority absolute. He could grant a pardon for no other reason than he felt like it, justice be damned. Arthur, conflicted, was reduced to a shuffling, silent man, with bowed head and trembling hands. He could not damn the structure of his free kingdom; he could not damn the woman he still loved.

His night was filled with agony and harsh green dreams.

As King, Arthur had a duty to oversee any execution personally. Sorrowfully, he crept to the little pulpit constructed at the border of encroaching Barrowgrove and the Garden. Mordred took up a position behind his right shoulder, just out of reach of Arthur's fists. Mordred's smile never faded as the dawn's scattered light rose on the stake.

In the swiftly growing forest, living statues watched the proceedings through the trees. Some danced and capered, as though this were a carnival. The flashes of colorful garments and flitting lantern light were another spike through Arthur's sanity.

Arthur delayed things as long as he could. Five bells had sounded from Mordred's great mechanical clock, but Arthur's wax clock made it almost an hour early. The King was sure Mordred had purposefully fixed his clock to hasten the execution. Mordred opened his mouth to needle Arthur once more about his duties, whereupon Arthur turned on him angrily.

"Mordred! Order your jesters to leave this place at once, before I have them carted off by force."

"They are not in my employ to command. They perform at their own will, free of all payment."

"I am not impressed by your lexical conjurations, Mort."

"You call me a conjurer? Arthur, the King who surrounds himself with illusions, calls me a conjurer?"

"Explain yourself," said Arthur darkly.

"Why, I refer to the power of Excalibur, of course! Calumni creates external illusions, like the Caer Delirium, which exists in its way within the world for all to see. But with Excalibur, you have created illusions that exist within your very court. You have fallen in love with these illusions, called them brother and more."

"Excalibur is an artifact of preservation, not illusion." The sword glowed within its sheath, as if to agree.

"Merlin gave you no such thing. He gave you a tool, born of the forge and capable of reforging. It is an artifact of remaking. When you remake a work of art, it becomes a new work of art. But rework a man or woman, they become an illusion. They are not the person they were.

Look at Lancelot, a bumbling provincial knight. One crowning touch from Excalibur and he becomes the impossible, flawless figure we know and love so well. Look at Gawain, my once-murderous brother, slayer of dragons that did not even exist until you took the throne. Look at Sir Carados, who does not complain at his mocking imprisonment, even offers advice, when once he sought the end of all Camelot. And the greatest example of all is Enoch, whom I sought out with the very power of Calumni. He was a man of evil through and through, a man who sought only to bring others down, a man designed solely to ruin. Not a builder at all. If you can corrupt such a thoroughly unredeemable man, you are not changing him. Nay, you slew cruel Enoch and replaced him with an illusion wearing his body.”

“Merlin would not use me so! The holy Excalibur, brought to me from Avalon by the Lady of the Lake, would not stoop to such murky usage.”

“You persist in thinking our tools have alignments of their own? They are not even aligned with us. Or did I not use Excalibur to resurrect a clever Agravaine from an unbreathing corpse? Have you yourself not taken counsel with Calumni?” Mordred brought out the Mirror. “Calumni, too, is from that fae isle of Avalon. Our tools are merely tools, guided by the nature of their wielders.”

“Impossible! All of Camelot endorses the works of Excalibur.”

“Yet one illusion came to trial yesterday, and walks to the stake even now.”

“You DARE proclaim Guinevere an illusion?” Arthur roared. Excalibur responded to his passion, limned his body in faintest moonlight. “I love her, damn you! She loves me, even in her extremity! Those who cannot see that have no place at this scene from the deepest Hells. Be gone!” Arthur lifted Mordred bodily in one hand and threw him an impossible distance into Barrowgrove. “Those who wish to make of Earth a Hell will soon find themselves in Hell.” The sound of Mordred cursing fifty feet away in the briars failed to assuage the wracking of his guts.

“Bors. Ensure Mordred does not regain entrance to this clearing. Gawain, did you bring what I asked for?”

Gawain slipped his cloak aside, revealing a glint of gold and a gleam of divine light. Arthur nodded, and checked Excalibur at his side.

“I am as ready as it is possible to be to watch the burning of a lover,” said Arthur. “Light breaks. No one comes to gainsay my word. I can delay no longer. May God and my people forgive me.”

Sir Ector, unable to share the pain of a man he'd raised like a son, had slipped away with tears in his eyes. Sir Gawain led Guinevere to the unlit pyre while Arthur forced himself to watch. The Queen kept her head bowed. She avoided looking at Arthur, except for one brief agonizing moment when their eyes met, and all their mutual pain crackled across the distance. Gawain carefully helped her up onto the tiny wooden platform and gently bound her to the stake by the wrists, a gentleman even to the last. The actual lighting was performed by a hooded man whose identity was unknown, to avoid acts of vigilante retribution against him. It took him three tries to light the dry tinder.

“An ill omen,” muttered Gawain. Yet flames leapt up, consuming the smaller twigs and turning them to ashes. Larger flames caught hold of increasingly sizable fuel, sending the conflagration soaring toward the heavens. Guinevere shrieked as her hair and burlap robes caught fire, then she was hidden from Arthur's sight by a wall of cruel scarlet consumption. The remnants of the Garden visibly writhed in agony, mirroring the pain and conflict of those who had poured so much love into it. Trees and benches shuddered and wrenched at their moorings to join the despairing cries of King and Queen.

Elaine, watching from her parapet, buried her face in the metal rooster bolted to the stone. Its cold surface did nothing to dispel her tears. But then she thought she heard something

and looked up, toward the distant northern boundary of Barrowgrove. Something was there, a ripple of waving trees, an occasional spurt of dust. Was it Lancelot, come to rescue Guinevere? If so, would he be in time, as flames even now engulfed the Queen?

The next moment, three men broke into the tiny clearing. Lancelot's armor was begrimed and scratched by cruel Barrowgrove, but his sword was keen as he spurred his mount toward the pyre. Behind him rode Leodegrance, grimly sworn to save his daughter, and Sir Ector, who longed for an end to his King's pain. The army Elaine had glimpsed was still some way behind, but their battle cries could now be heard.

"For Joyous Garde!"

"For Lancelot du Lac!"

"For Arthur and his Queen!"

But Agravaine had appeared at the gates of Camelot, shouting for the Knights of the Round Table to defend Camelot against this attack. In the confusion, many of the Knights followed him without pausing to take stock of the situation or to decide on which side they belonged. They charged heedlessly into Barrowgrove, still shrouded with dawnless night.

Lancelot rode into the flames without fear for his own safety. Though the fire concealed Guinevere's position, he expertly judged a blow that severed the stake along its length and cut her bonds at the same time. She leapt onto his horse, hair still alight, and Lancelot turned and fled the battle.

Arthur watched sadly and did nothing.

Gawain leapt into the woods, seeking to staunch the bloodshed before it could escalate. The Knights of Camelot and the men of Lancelot's army clashed under the boughs of the dim, spiky trees. As the battle mounted, the sky grew darker in defiance of the dawn. Only one red

swath of morning cut the darkness, echoing the blazing, empty fire as it reached vainly for the dry trees of Barrowgrove.

The forest seemed to have an agenda of its own. Fallen trees and sudden thickets of thorns blocked the way and separated men from their armies, or funneled them together again. Gawain found himself shepherded relentlessly into the path of his brother, Agravaine, who was firing arrows through the trees at Lancelot's retreating back. Meanwhile, Sir Ector had retreated before the advance of Sir Kay, son of his blood, giving ground down a sudden incline until they were back within the walls of Camelot itself.

Arthur watched sadly and did nothing.

Battle raged all around. Warriors who tripped on a root or stumbled in darkness were not given a chance to get up. The rules of fair engagement were forgotten, and many noble lives were lost. Many accidentally slew their own comrades or people fighting under the same banner. Barrowgrove thirstily drank up their blood. The death rattles and wounded cries of these Knights, once dear allies, filled the air with regret and suffering.

Arthur was forced from his trance when Leodegrance shouted an accusation of betrayal and rushed him. Unable to find the strength to deny this accusation, Arthur turned and fled back toward the castle on foot. He ducked into a stable, hoping he hadn't been seen, and leaned against a post.

Lancelot had pulled well out of range and out of sight of Agravaine. He found himself near the northern edge of the woods, alone with an exhausted horse. "Guinevere," he said, holding her. "We must return to Camelot long enough to acquire a fresh horse. We can avoid the battle if we go the long way around. Take my hand, and we shall ride like the wind!"

Gawain reached Agravaine's position as Lancelot disappeared into the brush. Agravaine turned and, surprised at his arrival, and loosed an arrow deep into Gawain's left shoulder. He

grunted. Agravaine looked briefly shocked at what he had done, then his eyes narrowed. There was something very different within him. "You shall tell none who slew you," Agravaine said, and leapt for his brother. Gawain defended himself one handed. Being much the better swordsman, he soon parried a wild blow and returned it with full force. His blade chewed through Agravaine's armor and spilled his life onto the ground.

Elaine followed Sir Ector and Sir Kay into the great hall, where blows rained on their shields without ceasing. Their battle took them onto the Round Table itself, son against father, each certain that he fought for King Arthur's desires. Elaine shouted for them to stop, railed against them in verbal assault, trying to make them see reason. But the bloodlust had settled over Sir Kay's eyes, and he slew his own father there on the very heart of Arthur's brotherhood. Blood stained the wood with the evil poison of kinslaughter.

Elaine gave a great cry as Kay collapsed into a chair, appalled at what he had done. She raced forward and leapt onto the table, saying "Don't you see? The Grail can undo this wrong!" But as she reached out to grasp its handle, Ector's blood reached its base and the holy vessel vanished entirely. The Round Table gave a groan and split directly down its middle, shattering each timber in turn until it fell in two great halves. "No, no!" Elaine moaned, cradling Sir Ector on her lap.

Lancelot came to the stables. No one was present; they were all deep in the woods or slain. He stepped inside, leaving Guinevere with the horse. There he saw Arthur, who had condemned his lover to cruel death, enchanted sword in hand. There was no time to think. Sir Lancelot cocked his arm back and threw his spear in a practiced throw that never missed. In the next heartbeat, he had turned and was remounting his weary horse in front of Guinevere.

The spear was interrupted in its flight as a rotten rafter above gave way. A tall tower shield dropped to intercept the spear in a flurry of hay. Arthur stared at this improbable stroke of

fate. Rather than pursue Lancelot and Guinevere, he bent to examine the shield. The shield was old, possibly as old as the rafter and stable itself. Burned into it was a rune Arthur recognized as Merlin's.

"I need you back, Merlin," whispered Arthur.

By noon, Lancelot and the remnants of his army had escaped with Guinevere. Arthur forbade any pursuit; too many unready Knights had already been lost. Instead, he called a vigil at Terrowin's Tomb. Corpses were carried from the ruins of the Garden and Barrowgrove and laid to rest in graves pitting the ground like the progress of rot in solid wood. As much of the surrounding land was put to rights as possible, but many hills and fields still stank of blood and fire. Mordred scoffed at "the fleet of fallen saints" and did not attend, for which almost everyone was grateful. The tide had turned for him. Mordred had stepped out of the shadows and found that he was no longer wanted.

The chimney of the Tomb rose to heights Arthur had never expected. Every fallen Knight of the Round Table, whether they had served Lancelot or Camelot, received a steel brick in the Tomb to represent his valor. Innocent civilians or peasant conscripts were represented by red clay bricks. Each brick had something to represent the fallen man: a bit of their armor or weapon for the Knights, a few grains from their crop for the farmers. Of all the wonders outside Camelot's walls, Terrowin's Tomb was the most glorious creation remaining.

Dreams Within Dreams

Arthur's nightmares worsened as memories of the Garden's destruction replayed themselves in his mind, carving deeper ruts in his psyche. In his dreams, he sought Merlin: to the edges of the fields, along dark paths, deep in the forest, to the borders of a swamp - then, suddenly, everything would go awry. Trees fell. Corruption dripped from the canopy in steaming, deadly gobs. Arthur found himself running slowly, as if he were already immersed in the murky swampwater. Then the earth crumbled under him and he was falling in eternal breathlessness until he woke up.

Immediately, he reached to Guinevere for comfort, but his arms found only emptiness.

The task of rebuilding Camelot went slowly, with unending delay and despair. Though Mordred seemed to have vanished, hidden himself away, it seemed people were still inclined to simply give up on their tasks. Sometimes they would just cease whatever they were doing and sit down with a look of bewilderment. Arthur questioned many people with this affliction of ennui and found they had all experienced nightmares in various forms. There seemed to be no cure for the epidemic.

It lasted for weeks, while Arthur struggled to hold Camelot together through sheer willpower. It seemed whenever his mental control lapsed, whenever his effort flagged, something vital would tumble to the ground or wither and slump. Arthur would have to head to the site with Excalibur and prop it up, make repairs that lasted only as long as his next lapse in conscientious maintenance. And those nightmares were wearing down his mental strength to dangerous levels.

It was on an excursion to maintain the once-glorious Road, now broken and unwelcoming, that Arthur glimpsed Mordred for the first time in many weeks. They met in the

absent shadow of Caer Delirium. Mordred's usual sneer was ready for Arthur's advance, and the King consciously kept his hand from Excalibur's hilt.

"Mort," said Arthur wearily, "Do you ever tire of tormenting my kingdom? Does your heart or your mind ever ache from the effort of keeping it all together?"

"I will never cease. I am not tired," said Mordred, but there was a hint of sweat on his forehead and the suggestion of permanent creases in his brow.

That night, Arthur had worse nightmares than ever before, until he thought his head might split. When Guinevere did not appear to save him, he began calling out for Merlin, but neither came to help their King.

Arthur tried to walk the Maze meditatively, determine where it all went wrong, but he found himself trapped in endless loops. Though the decorations from the Masked Ball were still in place, they did not evoke the same sense of wonder that had once been rampant in Camelot. Perhaps it was the people; maybe something fundamental had changed in the relationship between King and citizens, some facet Excalibur had been unable to preserve.

The King meditated on his clocks, watching the flames burn rapidly along their network of wicks in the darkness. He felt no closer to an answer than he had before. Every now and then, the chimes of Mordred's great clock interrupted his thoughts. He had tried to dismantle it, but found it impossible; even when its servitors were removed, the clock kept ticking with unnatural inertia, kept turning the river deeper shades of black. It had been going over a month since Mordred or his minions had last touched it.

When Arthur returned to his locked chambers, he found a stack of items on his desk that he had not placed there. A crisp white parchment had been folded into a swan with incredible detail. Upon its back was a white gleaming onyx stone, nearly spherical, with a silver cast to it and a hole running all the way through it. The tilted cross of an M-rune adorned one corner in

silver ink. Careful not to touch the stone, Arthur unfolded the swan in precise movements. A poem in gilt letters burned on the page.

“Hollow of stone, thy mind shall mend

Revel of river, thy nightmares forfend

Tooth of the serpent, thy dreams defend.”

“Merlin,” whispered Arthur. “You live yet. And without nightmares to assault my sleep, I shall find you in the realm of dream.”

Before he could finally give in to sleep, a knock came upon his door. It was a scout, bearing news of a massive army gathering near southern Scotland, a two week ride from Camelot. Armed men were streaming along all roads to the muster. Arthur roused himself to attention.

“Is it Lancelot?” he asked.

“Nay, Your Majesty. They do not seem to be rallying at Joyous Gard, but in Lothian.”

“Mordred,” said Arthur. He shook himself, pondered for a moment, then addressed the scout. “I leave in the morning for a scouting mission of my own. Bring Gawain to me. He is to be in charge while I am gone. If I do not return, he shall be my Regent until a new King is chosen.”

Arthur arranged things with Gawain, then finally fell into the deep, peaceful sleep he had been longing for. In dream, he walked fields once mordant with blackness, but now lit by starlight and the full moon. He wandered into the woods, near a cliff, where once he had been choked by vines and scratched by barbs. Yards and yards fell under his boots until he reached a point high on the cliff, where all brush had been cleared aside for a round, flat stone, the size of the Round Table that had once been the heart of Camelot. A rocky gnomon was fastened to the surface, creating a sundial - but the shadow was cast by moonlight, and Arthur could not

make out the engraved numbers. Not knowing which point represented noon, he could not determine the hour.

Merlin's voice echoed across the landscape, calling to him; Arthur knew if he could only find his friend, everything could be explained. "There is much to tell you, Wart," the voice called. "Find me, and I can explain the purpose of the contest. It nears its end, Wart. Only one can survive. The weak, the unambitious, those lacking in willpower - they are culled from apprenticeship, Wart. We all become stronger this way, with many secrets left unshared. Find me, and I shall explain. Find me, and you shall survive. I can teach you whatever you must know. I am just beyond the horizon."

Arthur leapt in the direction of the voice and woke up. His sheets were not drenched in sweat this time, and he had gotten closer to Merlin than ever before. The adderstone worked. Secure in the knowledge that the wizard he sought also sought him, Arthur returned to dreamless, comfortable sleep.

Upon waking, the King informed no one of his travel plans. Gawain bore his signet ring, a letter of proof, and the knowledge he needed as temporary Regent. Camelot would be safe in Gawain's blessed care.

Arthur put on simple traveling clothes and a brown cloak, with the hood drawn far over his face. He left his beard untrimmed and allowed his massive shoulders to give in to their weariness. In this guise of a tired old peasant, he left upon the north Road. Each night of his difficult journey, his dreams came closer and closer to Merlin's hiding place: he was on the cliff, on the stone clockface, in the thicket of greenbriar and blueberry shrubs. Each night, Merlin whispered advice to him.

When he was a scant few days from his destination, Arthur finalized a decision. The artifacts of the sorcerers were potential weaknesses, tools able to betray their owners. Excalibur

was a double-edged sword. He had to face this fact and come up with a plan. Hopefully, his actions in the north of England would help him replace the legendary sword. And he would need a replacement blade.

With a few silver coins, Arthur persuaded a local blacksmith to leave him alone with the forge and ten pounds of good steel. Arthur's big frame easily persuaded the craftsman he could be trusted with a smithy. As Arthur worked, he thought of all the fallen beauty of Camelot, all the wasted time and wasted love, his fallen friends and his lost brethren. With angry strokes from Excalibur, Arthur parceled the steel into workable lumps. He worked the bellows himself until the forge fires were hot as possible, folded the red steel in a few intuitive movements, brought the hammer down with powerful blows until the new sword was ready for immersion in cooling water. The power of the blade turned the water into a cloud of vapor, but it was a power dedicated only to cleaving, to a blade that was a keen extension of its wielder's arm and nothing more. It could not imbue a man with the ideals of knighthood. It could not enchant a lover. It could not carve through steel or raise a towering work of art. It could not hold a kingdom together, but it could separate heads from shoulders.

That night, Arthur came closer to Merlin than ever before. In a great clearing, surrounded by thorny vines swarming up thin branches of laurel, he found he could hear Merlin clearly, as though the magician were scant feet away.

"Come to me again," said the voice of Merlin, "bearing the sword you wish to wield in battle. I will teach you a spell in which you will speak three names. The first: the name of the blade. The second: the name of God. Finally, you shall speak the third and most crucial name: the name to whom the sword shall be *loyal*, a loyalty beyond death. Come to me again bearing these names."

I will, Merlin, Arthur tried to whisper. But his throat was full of molasses and his senses betrayed him in fog as the dream dissipated.

Arthur now had a plan in mind for nighttime and a plan for daytime. He organized his bedroll with a will, with new hope and energy. By noon he was knocking upon the great doors of Joyous Gard, the castle of Lancelot on the southern border of Scotland. He introduced himself to the guardsman as a master swordsmith and thus gained audience with Sir Lancelot.

A page showed him into the Knight's chamber. Arthur inclined his head to the page, the bow given to an equal. Then, as the page retreated, Arthur gave the same bow to Lancelot. The Knight leapt to his feet with sword drawn. "Arthur!"

The King threw back his hood and drew Excalibur. As Lancelot sank into a defensive stance, Arthur tossed the blade flat on the ground at Lancelot's feet. "It is good to see you again, Lance." Carefully, they advanced and shook hands.

"Arthur. Whatever apologies are possible, I offer them to you now."

"Nay, Lancelot. I owe you a debt for saving Guinevere. Only you could cut the knot of impossible complexity that so entangled my hands. I owe you a grave debt, yet I come here asking boons."

"Name anything."

"I need your help in rebuilding Camelot."

"You have it, and the help of all my men."

"And before we can rebuild Camelot, we must defend Camelot from the army Mordred builds in Lothian and elsewhere."

"We march to Camelot at your word."

"There is more. I need your help convincing Guinevere to come along."

“Ah, that may be more difficult. She is not at Joyous Gard, but at a nearby convent. She forswears her finery and her titles and lives a life of penance.”

“Tell her, firstly, that I forgive her without qualm. Then you must get her to understand that what I ask of her will not be easy. It shall serve as a penance of its own, but it could save the kingdom. This letter explains her task.” Lancelot took the letter.

“I will do what I can,” he promised. “Did you know she thought about going back to Camelot, facing justice? Even if it meant her death.”

“She is a brave woman.” Arthur brooded silently for a moment, then continued. “One last thing. You must take Excalibur.”

“Impossible! That blade belongs to the King, as much as the King belongs to the land.”

“You will need it to rebuild Camelot.”

Arthur turned the blade in his hands, looking at the dual etchings: “Take me up” and “Cast me aside.” Cast me aside.

“And it must be safe from Mordred and his manipulations during our battle,” Arthur continued. “The last battle, for one of us.”

“Very well. I will keep it safe for you, or your successor, until your return.”

“Thank you, Lancelot. Go on ahead with whatever fighting force you deem fitting. I have a task I must accomplish tonight, and then I shall rejoin you.”

“Do you not wish to see Guinevere before we depart?”

“Not...it is too soon yet. I need time.” I need Merlin, he added silently. He’s the one who told me I would have a beautiful Queen. It all comes back to Merlin.

Arthur took a room in Joyous Gard for the night, and hurried to Merlin in his dream. Excalibur remained with Lance. The new sword hung at his side in its place; it was broader and

longer than Excalibur, but its power echoed less mightily. Arthur knew he needed the advantage of a spell-bonded blade, loyal to him, pledged not to harm him.

Merlin's outline appeared, dim and nebulous, but his voice was strong and confident as he spoke words of power and made gestures with his hands. A fire sprang up between Arthur and his mentor, into which Merlin cast colored powders and scented herbs that made Arthur feel his head had been stuffed with cotton. As he had been instructed, he mimicked Merlin's movements precisely, knowing his unwaking body would do the same.

"By the power of the God who shields you, we enchant this blade. In God's name you imbue this sword with the utmost loyalty. What name do you give this sword?"

"I name it 'Muse.' For it is a sword enchanted in dream and inspired by dream."

"And to whom is Muse sworn to protect? To whom shall Muse be bonded? Speak the name!"

Arthur opened his mouth, but found difficulty speaking. His hand twitched to the sword, and he gathered his strength against the sudden force surrounding him. A haze descended over all his senses, smothering his voice and dragging out his movements. Muse in hand, he tried to pierce the fog with its point as though it were one of Mordred's illusions. He could not feel his lips move, or hear his own voice, as he shouted his own name. But Merlin smiled and completed the incantation. Arthur echoed him dully. The fire blazed up, granting a small measure of its scarlet light to the blade. Arthur felt the strength of its awakening loyalty, felt the enchantment taking hold. A shiver ran up his entire body. Then slowly, gradually, peacefully, he rose into the waking world, where he found a ruby fire slowly descending into orange embers. Muse felt just different enough to be noticeable.

It was a long journey back. Arthur met with Lancelot and his fine army, made sure everything was taken care of. Lancelot answered in the affirmative.

“What of Guinevere?”

“She did not wish to see me, but I convinced her to read your letter. She goes to seek Merlin, for advice and for an enchantment to mask the power of Excalibur.”

“Does she know to avoid my sister?”

“Yes. Morgana’s whereabouts are known.”

“Good. I am glad Guinevere, Lancelot, and Arthur can remain allies, even if we struggle with a morass of conflicting feelings for each other.”

“Guilt foremost among them, Arthur.”

“Lancelot. While I yet live, no one in Camelot must know you are there on my sufferance. You will have to mask your identity.”

“I understand. There would be many who call for war between us.”

With many grim songs and practice bouts, the troops soon reached Camelot. Sir Gawain, now recovered from his injuries, gathered with King Arthur and a fleet of servitors to see what task Arthur had in mind.

“It is in my heart that any work of Mordred will be dangerous in the coming battle. The most dangerous of all is the griffin, an evil beast confined within a frail iron cage. I fear the scent of blood and the sounds of fierce battle will rouse it to escape. Still, I am loathe to kill such a rare creature who has done no harm. Therefore, I propose that we chain the beast.”

Four sections of bedrock were chosen as footers. Hooked steel shanks were sunk deep into the stone. Smiths forged tremendous chains from the best metal available, with links as thick as a man’s head, then exchanged chains to check the work of the other smiths. Two teams of ten horses pulling in opposite directions could not stress the links, even when Arthur joined on one side and four Knights joined the other. The same test was performed once the chains were forged to the steel shanks; it was time to chain the beast.

Each chain ended in a clever metal cinch, which could be tightened easily but loosened only with a special key. "We will get only one chance to affix each chain. If the griffin gets a foot free as you are tightening it, you will be unable to put it back on. So choose your timing carefully." Steely eagle eyes watched them curiously as the warriors let themselves into the griffin's cage.

Immediately, it flung itself upon Sir Gawain, who wielded a heavy iron rod. With this, and a steel shield, he fended off the creature's attacks, acting as a distraction. Arthur crept around behind the creature, marveling at the transition between feathery crest and coarse tufted fur. The griffin roared, a deep, gravelly sound wholly unexpected from a bird's beak, as Arthur swept it into a headlock. Long talons raked the ground, but as it backed up Arthur was able to stay in step with it. "Now! Hurry!" he cried, muscles straining.

Aides passed chains through the bars of the cage to Gawain. He allowed the griffin to claw at his reinforced vambraces as he hauled and cinched the cuffs into place around thick, feathery forelegs. Before the second set could be locked into place, Arthur was dislodged with a fierce kick to the sternum. He sprawled in the mud, Muse pinned underneath him where he could not reach it. As the beast swung to attack its tormenter, Sir Gawain grabbed it by the tail with his left hand and hauled sharply. The cry coming from the cruel mouth was piercing and high, more avian than mammalian this time. Gawain pushed the griffin sideways to the ground, pinned it with his hand buried in warm, musty fur and silky feathers, and all his weight pressing down. At last, Gawain managed to chain its hind legs, and the two men fled from the cage.

Cawing and straining, the magnificent creature found it could not escape. Its tail lashed furiously as it struggled toward the bars of its cage, forever a body length out of reach. Digging his talons into the cage floor, he observed his ensnared body with keen golden eyes, paused to preen. Abhorrence and vanity showed clearly in its face. He tossed his great head with a rustle

of bone-white feathers and gnashed a long curved beak that could slice skin and armor with just the lightest of touches. The griffin screeched with promised retribution. The court trembled in fear. But the chains held.

Adventurer

Her hair was tangled and dirty, matted with soil and grime. Mud had splashed over her heavy leather boots, which rose to her knees. Her black scapular, cut in the fashion of the abbey, covered fine ringmail. A scrap of fur covered her shoulders; it was flecked with fresh blood. The woman moved with serenity and grace, though she was clearly weary from travel and battle. The sword in her hand had a keen, well-tended edge, though its hilt was free from decoration. It, too, showed evidence of bloodshed.

Agents of Morgana were everywhere. Morgana could do nothing to strike directly at Arthur, but Guinevere sought Merlin, and that made her a target. The bulk of Morgana's attention rested on Mordred and the coming battle, brewing so tangibly that all England could feel its advent, but Morgana knew few pawns would be required to stop one former Queen playing at knighthood. But Guinevere's iron will was comprised of resources Morgana had failed to imagine: the point of stability in moving toward neither of two lovers, the heavy burden of effective forgiveness, the allure of Camelot's fallen glory, the resilience of a Queen who had been pushed too far too many times, the grit that came of passing through deadly fires. And Lancelot had been a good teacher, for the short weeks she had traveled with him. She had followed paths that could not be undone; Guinevere was forever changed. With the power of these experiences, Guinevere eluded every attack from Mordred's mentor and came ever closer to Merlin.

She sensed him one day, trapped within his tree with its wide-spreading canopies, flooded by mysterious waters. Guinevere knew nothing of Arthur's present dreams, or she would have realized his illusions did not match the reality. As she crossed a fallen log to lay her hands upon Merlin's trunk, the leaves of the tree whispered warnings to her; when she touched

the living wood, Merlin murmured softly to her in words a mortal might hear. She told him things he knew: the coming battle, the decline of Camelot, the passing of Excalibur from Arthur to Lancelot. Merlin knew he must speak quickly, and taught her the enchantment that would hide Excalibur from magesight, mask its power even as that power became more limited.

“Guinevere,” Merlin whispered. “There are so many things Arthur needs to know. You must bear as many warnings to him as may be borne. And you must bear knowledge of your own destiny: when Excalibur fails Lancelot, you must tell Sir Bedivere to send it to Avalon; you must guard Arthur in his place of rest, that he might come again one day. You must warn him of-”

“Merlin!” came a voice from the pool, at once vast and slender, powerful but full of feminine grace. “This visit does not befit you. Begone, visitor. Merlin’s mind must be focused on greater things than the rise and fall of kingdoms. This contest is nothing but an amusing diversion for him. Begone!”

“It’s not true,” whispered Merlin, but Guinevere was flung from the copse by a great wind springing out of nowhere. She landed on her feet in a crouch. Her first thought was to speak the words of the enchantment, to ensure she had not forgotten them. To her surprise, she felt the enchantment take hold immediately, reaching across the distance from the ends of the earth to Excalibur’s location in Lancelot’s hands, at Camelot. Armed with scant words of warning, she set off in the direction the spell had flown.

Lancelot sensed the spell too. Excalibur trembled in his hands, and it seemed somehow duller. Curiously, he flicked the blade through a stone pillar, which fell cleanly in two. Excalibur was still “cut-steel,” still the sword of legend, but Arthur’s plan to hide it from Mordred seemed to have worked. The griffin had been chained. Arthur was warned; his allies had gathered about

him. Arthur and Lancelot continued to innovate. Camelot was ready for whatever Mordred could throw at it.

The Strife of Camlann

Armies flocked to Mordred's call. They sensed his power. They sensed his twisted charisma, his cunning, his ambition. They sensed Calumni, the Mirror of Avalon, which made no effort to mask itself. Every unaffiliated fighting man in England and Scotland wanted to serve the man who would be King. When the cruelty of the barbarians, the impatience of the mercenaries, the vigor of the unwanted brutes from armies all over Europe - when these energies could no longer be contained, they broke from Lothian like a raging wave and flowed toward Camelot. The storm approached.

Arthur insisted there be no conscription, though he made sure everyone understood what was at stake for their beloved kingdom of wonders. He felt a bit safer issuing commands without Excalibur in his hands. Sometimes he still believed, deep in secret places within him, what Mordred had said about Arthur surrounding himself with shades. And Arthur was sad to see that his warriors looked forward to the coming slaughter with excitement. After all he'd done, all he'd said, they still associated glory with killing rather than protection of the weak.

All Arthur's surviving Knights were wary. They had done all they could, bulking up the armies under their command with recruitment, incentives, and the best in equipment in training. Now they awaited only news of Mordred's movements. Would he march directly from the Highlands to the North, daring the forests, launching a guerrilla campaign? Or would he circle round from the South, protected by the river, gathering allies all the way, to fight on the plain? Arthur thought the latter more likely, for he knew Mordred had troops waiting on the southeastern coast. Furthermore, he had a suspicion Mordred might meet with Morgana near the Isle of Avalon, seeking its fey power.

Finally, he made the decision. He would march south with the main body of his army. Lancelot would remain at Camelot in disguise, shoring up the castle's defenses with Excalibur and his own battle skill. Gawain would appoint officers of his choice to lead Camelot's defenders, but he would march with Arthur, knowing nothing of Lancelot's involvement.

From far afield, riding ahead of his army on his horse, Arthur could see Mordred's forces stretching from one end of the valley to the other. More men poured steadily through the highland pass. Mordred had clad them all in black, including their armor and sword blades. Their commander was nowhere to be seen, presumably skulking somewhere he could run things from behind the scenes.

A briny wind from the south carried a black hawk in challenging loops overhead. Then, as though the hawk had summoned a strong tailwind, thousands of dark birds streamed over the hills to blacken the sky.

Arthur's armies were not daunted. The King had amassed them on the gentle hills just north of the Field of Camlann, a fertile field peppered with tiny white flowers and velvety mullein leaves. Though darkness gathered overhead, points of light blinked bravely within the army, for every high-ranking officer wore a suit of blazing armor, emanating bright light in warm colors. Helms and breastplates and even horse's barding flashed with patterns of brilliance. Through these combinations of color, the officers could communicate with each other across the distance, conveying information about troop movements, status, and tactics. Burgeoning morale was a fortunate but unforeseen effect; Arthur had been inspired by Elaine's description of the blazing, tortured monster that attacked her in Barrowgrove, and had later blocked Arthur himself in *Caer Delirium*.

Elaine, back in Camelot, worried about the land. Already the sky darkened here too. What would happen if Mordred were slain? Could Camelot really heal from the wounds he had

dealt it? Would Caer Delirium come crashing to the ground, no longer supported by Mordred's arts?

At that point, the first arrows flew between the two armies. The bulk of each army was separated by too much distance for many men to be slain, but by this exchange each was better able to gauge its enemy. Atop her parapet, Elaine gave a cry as the brass rooster atop Camelot split with a resounding crack. Birds in Barrowgrove's depths shrieked in reply. At the edge of the gnarled woods, the chained griffin strained and strove to free itself in response. Soon, the tremendous chains burst, their links falling to rust. Its cage could not hold it either. Soaring free of both prisons, the monster flew toward Camlann. Every wingbeat felt like another note of doom upon the land.

In Camelot, every chain was loosed. The chain holding Sir Carados to the Round Table fell away, and he rode like hell to fight for Arthur, if he could only reach Camlann in time.

Mordred's army twitched forward, completing their descent into the valley, aiming spears and lances for an attack. King Arthur and Sir Gawain led the vanguard as they charged into Mordred's front lines. Arthur's disciplined soldiers broke through the first wave of spearmen and cavalry, wheeled to slice the scattered ranks apart. Still no one had glimpsed Arthur's nephew anywhere in the fray. As blood began to make the grass slick, the army of Camelot continued to hold the upper hand; their numbers were equal, but Mordred's training, equipment, and passion paled beside even the waning might of Camelot. Every fallen man, on either side, sent a pang of regret through the weary King, though his sword bit through many a hauberk and his massive strength contributed much to the blood on the green.

At last, a report flashed from officer to officer: Mordred had been sighted. Moments later, an update concluded he had been slain at the hands of a minor officer from Scotland. Arthur struggled with conflicting feelings of relief and sorrow at the loss of his greatest enemy, his only

son and his closest kin. Such thoughts were soon buried by an avalanche of battle. Sorties from the hill demanded his attention. The loss of a great wedge of warriors, surrounded and separated from the main army and now slaughtered, required a host of brand new tactics. Many among the fallen were Knights; each Knight was so valuable an asset that the loss of one single Knight changed the entire battle. Gawain fought on with passion and fervor, still seeking redemption for the sinful acts he had committed against his brothers at arms, or the immense evil that had lurked in the hearts of his two kinfolk.

As Arthur carved his lone way through the enemy, he paused to look into each dying face. He wondered what caused a man to give up peace for such foolhardiness as war. Greed should not be an answer so overwhelming that it was worth the risk of death. These men desired the castle of Camelot, the treasures of Arthur's lands, or whatever else Mordred had promised them. Yet they fought on even with their leader dead and victory far from assured.

Arthur swung toward the perimeter of the army, seeking a better vantage point. He rode past scenes like the battle between two dream worlds. Knights in fiery armor fought knights dressed in black so absolute it looked like a hole in the world. Huge horses bore the wounded from both sides out of the battle; some would serve as prisoners of war, but all would have their wounds tended so long as supplies held out. Men from all over Europe, dressed as their culture dictated, filled the gaps like a raging ocean of steel. Here and there, the silver-hoofed unicorns appeared to fortify a Knight with a touch of her horn or to hypnotize an enemy with her gaze. Atop a grassy knoll, seven gleaming unicorns faced off against the dark griffin, clashing again and again like bolts of light into a stormy sky. The griffin responded like angry clouds rolling across the face of the moon.

Tearing himself from these sights, the King pursued more favorable terrain. Suddenly, he pulled his horse up short, for he thought he had glimpsed Mordred in the roiling mass of men.

“You’re supposed to be dead,” said Arthur. Clucking to his steed, they leapt over the heads of the intervening men and landed beside the man Arthur had noticed. It was undoubtedly Mordred. He clutched Calumni in one hand and three green adderstones orbited the other. When he saw Arthur approaching, the stones disappeared, only to be replaced by a barbed dagger. Arthur dropped from his horse, landing beside Mordred. He aimed a blow too powerful for any paltry dagger to parry, but Mordred danced out of the way. He flung the dagger at Arthur’s head so Arthur had to shuffle back awkwardly. Capitalizing on this misstep, Mordred summoned another dagger from within his clothing and skipped behind some of his men. Arthur cursed, shoved sweating bodies out of the way, and found himself uncomfortably close to Mordred’s grinning face.

Before the poisoned dagger could lash out, Arthur flicked downward with Muse, was rewarded with the sight of blood as Muse sliced effortlessly through flesh. Mordred cried out, for he seldom engaged in a fight he could not dominate. Then Mordred stabbed one of his own mounted men, pushed him aside, and hopped upon the dead man’s roan to escape. Arthur whistled for his own mount and leapt forward in pursuit. Soon he came upon the red horse, but it held no rider and was wandering aimlessly amidst the melee.

Sir Gawain rallied a troop of Arthur’s best surviving Knights and warriors. He led them into the jaws of Mordred’s cruel mercenaries, who delighted in desecrating the dead and torturing the wounded. The fighting was fierce, for Gawain was outnumbered heavily, but he knew the mercenaries fought only for their pay and could be easily routed when the tide of battle turned.

“This is the one,” said the lead mercenary to his bannerman. “Sir Gawain! Heir regent to the throne.” His tone was mocking and his words dripped with greed. “Here is our key to untold riches. The bounty on this man’s head would be enough to buy an army of our own! And if the

Regent is dead, no man may know who might take the throne, eh, lads?" At this, masses of Mordred's troops surrounded Gawain hungrily. Gawain gave a great cry and rattled his shield, daring the multitudes to come for him. They closed in, pressing urgently on Gawain's position, trying to pick off his men that they might have an opportunity to strike down Arthur's finest Knight. Gawain wrenched a javelin out of a fallen man and flung it into the nearest soldier, who fell, screaming.

"Forward! For Camelot!" Gawain's men followed him with a will, inspired by Gawain's love for Arthur and the great trust their wondrous King had bestowed upon him. As long as Arthur led them, their loyalty knew no bounds.

Arthur's horse trotted cautiously up the root of a mountain, seeking high ground from which to observe the battle. Armor glittered below, filling Arthur's mind with information and intentions. He felt in touch with his men. The King and the land synchronized. Suddenly he spotted Gawain's plight. Looking out over the battlefield, he glimpsed Sir Gawain's furious charge. Gawain struggled to break from a noose of many, many furious enemies. "This, at the least, I can do for Gawain!" said Arthur, and turned his horse toward his outnumbered Knight. But something further up the spur caught his eye.

High above his current position, a sheer cliff loomed. Through a tangle of vining briars and shrubs, Arthur thought he could see a tall, thin spire of stone, like the gnomon of a sundial. "Could it be?" he whispered. Forgetting Gawain, Arthur charged up the mountain.

Soon, the laurel grew too thick for his horse. Arthur dismounted and made his way more slowly through the blueberries and other shrubs, occasionally slicing a path for himself with Muse. Eventually he found himself walking the edge of the cliff, two hundred feet above the battlefield, a spire from which he could see all that occurred. But he remained high above the feuding men; he was not truly a part of this battle. The gorse gave way to level grasslands, and

in the distance he glimpsed a flat, circular stone with a rocky needle rising from it. It was real, then. The place where Arthur found Merlin in his dreams really existed. Arthur had little choice but to continue.

He shouldered through the thick brush until he reached the sundial. The smooth face marked one edge of a large clearing, while a cliff marked the other, exactly as he had walked it in the realm of dream. But it was not Merlin he found there. It was Mordred.

“Calumni weaves many illusions,” said Mordred, “including those found in dreams. I am glad you follow the path I have so graciously laid out for you. Our contest has been long, and wide of influence. Our mentors have laid their final moves. We apprentices meet in the final battle as our creations squabble below. I have brought Calumni, my finest resource, symbol of my part in this contest. Where, then, is Excalibur?”

“Somewhere you can never find it. Somewhere you can never cause it to betray its wielder. This sword at my side is Muse, the blade of inspiration. It owes its existence to no manipulative sorcerer.”

“Yet Calumni senses some enchantment upon it,” said Mordred, pretending to think. “Perhaps you had help from a sorcerer after all? Perhaps...is this the work of Merlin?”

“It was Merlin who taught me the incantation. It was I who performed it. The blade serves strength alone; there is no way for you to turn it to your advantage, unless you prove yourself the better swordsman. And if you are, why that cut upon your leg? For you have already met Muse, and come off worse.”

“What cut?” Mordred hitched up his trousers, showing unbroken skin on both sides. “Perhaps you mistook someone else for me. I did wonder at your tactics, from my high vantage point. Could it be you thought me wounded or dead?” Mordred snickered.

“Calumni,” said Arthur.

“This is not a contest of strength at arms, Arthur. It is a contest of creation, of perseverance, of endurance - of magic. I would be a fool not to use Calumni. Just as you are a fool for casting Excalibur aside. Your moves have been nothing but foolishness since that day Excalibur ceased to grace your hand.”

“If this is to be the final battleground of our contest, here atop this cliff, I must assume you have come in person. No doubles, no reflections, no tricks of light - I believe you are Mordred in the flesh. Flesh that shall pay for all you have done to my kingdom and to those I love.” A light, akin to the gleaming of moonflowers or the glint of Excalibur’s blade, shone in Arthur’s eyes as he advanced grimly on Mordred’s position. Fearfully, Mordred gave ground, clutched Calumni to his bosom.

On the field below, Camelot surged forward in simultaneous victory; the entire vanguard of Mordred’s force lay dead or dying. Arthur’s purebred horses trampled the fallen, and outnumbered the cavalry of the enemy two to one. The survivors, still numbering in the many thousands, knitted themselves tightly around their leaders, conserving their assets.

Mordred cried, “Father! I am unarmed!”

“Then perhaps I shall not kill you. However, I fear before I do anything else, I must cut out your serpent’s tongue.”

Mordred shrugged. “Maybe I underestimated you, Arthur. You are not always so blinded by honor and goodwill you let a serpent into your paradise.”

“I knew you would be my opponent from the beginning. What could I do? It was Merlin’s will, and you were family. I took what precautions I could and proceeded to play with fire.”

“Just so.” As Arthur reached him, a long rapier appeared in Mordred’s right hand. Green fire blazed along it, and Arthur noticed an adderstone set into Mordred’s pendant. This rapier,

then, would bear poison. Mordred capered madly about Arthur, weaving rapidly with his emerald poison. Arthur rotated on the spot, confused and wary of any openings.

The black army suddenly retreated at a prearranged signal. Moments later, a mountain of rubble fell from the cliffs, consuming the place mercenaries had just vacated, crushing a score of Arthur's men in a vile trap. As Camelot's defenders charged over the fallen boulders, the rogue army braced spears and swords to receive them in a bloody embrace.

Neither tableau could hold for long. Arthur fainted lightly at Mordred's calf, but Mordred called his bluff and moved to bind and misdirect Arthur's blade with his light rapier. The King was entirely prepared for this. He turned his feint into a rapid one-handed spin and brought Muse crashing down on the green rapier with full force. Its tip rested against the ground. Its hilt remained firmly in Mordred's grasp, steeled against a lighter blow. When the full weight and strength of Arthur and Muse came crashing against the fiery steel, Mordred's weapon snapped in two pieces. Under his boot, Arthur ground the flaming weapon into the earth as though it were a viper.

Sir Gawain led a maneuver on the blood-wet fields below. While Mordred's army stood on the higher ground behind the boulders, pelting Gawain's men with arrows or slaying any who clambered over, Gawain backed one of the smaller catapults up against the center stone. These catapults were a backup plan should Camelot find Mordred's forces holed up in the highlands somewhere. Mordred's mercenaries continued to enjoy their advantage as the catapult's arm was slowly winched down. Men paused in their climbing to heave the siege weapon forward until its bladed scoop slipped under the central boulder. Then Gawain loosed the catapult's arm, firing the boulder safely behind his army. As the dust settled, his men came surging through the chokepoint to take the awaiting mercenaries by surprise.

But the King's bastard was not yet finished. He skittered back in a crouch, just as his army cowered in the rubble-strewn dirt, until he reached the opposite end of the clearing from Arthur. Then he raised both his arms triumphantly. Calumni gleamed. From the high wall of the cliff, a monstrous form arose, swaying the thick shrubs with the wind of its arrival. Mordred brought one hand down in a chopping motion and the griffin soared at Arthur. As though he rode the griffin's mind, Mordred's movements synchronized with those of the great beast: his fingers hooked into claws, ready to rend and tear. His teeth clicked like a greedy beak. And the griffin burst upon Arthur with talon and beak and fury, so ferocious that Arthur could scarcely block its nails and mouth with his blade.

Gawain's troops were pushed back by a huge wedge of highlanders. From hidden places in the mountainside, from steep sloping paths, more men rushed around in a pincer movement, poised to decimate Camelot's army.

Mordred thrust both hands forward. The griffin sprang at Arthur with all four sets of claws, wings beating the air furiously. Arthur ducked, but knew he could not take much of this continuous punishment. The next time the griffin swooped over his head, Arthur reached up and caught a paw. Under his hands, he felt the last rusty remnants of the manacles he had installed with Gawain. Tucking his body in, Arthur pushed on the griffin's paw and, borrowing momentum from the beast, let himself somersault backward out of the clearing. Here, a secondary peak rose from the gorse; within, Arthur had spotted a small cave. His borrowed momentum carried him just to the lip of the cave, and he hurriedly crept inside. The griffin could not follow, and Arthur heard Mordred laughing. Then he heard the griffin winging away, dismissed, and saw Mordred striding confidently into the cave.

"Calumni gives me the gift of sight," said Mordred. "Always, the dark places of the world suit my purposes."

“But you are unarmed.”

“Wrong.” A flurry of daggers swept upon Arthur, but he managed to dodge them all. The look on Mordred’s face told him there would be no more daggers, no more weapons brought to bear.

Far below, under the scant sunlight penetrating the fleets of dark birds, one of Camelot’s lookouts shouted, “Ware!” Gawain’s men were able to take cover just in time from the enemy archers who had appeared on ledges high above them. In their excitement, the archers loosed all their arrows at the retreating men. Very few found their mark.

Arthur counted each slow step toward Mordred, exulting as he felt his army move with him below. He and England were one; Excalibur was only a tool to amplify that relationship. This moment, these next few decisions, would be the true final battle. “May God forgive me,” said Arthur, and he unleashed an overhand blow straight at Mordred’s skull.

Mordred grinned and caught the blade barehanded.

It should have sliced his arms in two. He should have been dead or at least crippled. But Mordred just stood before Arthur, grinning, holding Muse by the blade as though it were a broom wielded by a washerwoman instead of a deadly weapon held by the strongest man in the kingdom. Then Mordred wrenched Muse away from the shocked King and twirled it absentmindedly.

“You see now how all plans benefit me,” Mordred sneered. “All snares baited for Mordred come up empty. And sometimes they capture Mordred’s enemies instead.” He swung recklessly at Arthur, sliced a shallow cut across Arthur’s chest. Arthur put a hand to his bosom, stared in surprise at the blood. “Ah, you thought Muse was sworn to protect you? I told you, Calumni weaves illusion even among dreamers. Muse is a sword of dreams.” He casually nicked Arthur in the ear, beaming as blood ran down Arthur’s face.

“When you discarded Excalibur, that wondrous tool, you discarded your only protection against deceit. When you held the adderstone I sent - oh no, it was not sent by Merlin! He would never have anything to do with something so venomous! - I removed the outermost layer of nightmare, but left the core of Calumni’s dream. Thus you were led to me here, and thus you bound Muse with an oath never to harm the man you named. And in that dream, as in reality, you called out not ‘Arthur,’ but ‘Mordred!’ Now this blade, your only weapon, is sworn not to harm me. As a mere tool, it has no qualms in drawing your lifeblood.” To demonstrate, Mordred swung again. Arthur scrambled back, his entire body rigid with shock. Mordred swiped at his feet and Arthur stumbled. He found himself unarmed, with nothing to put his back to, retreating with no hope of recovering.

Below, his army’s success became a sudden rout. Mordred’s men suddenly blazed with confidence and ingenuity, snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. As Arthur slipped, found nothing behind his heels, and fell into a lightless chasm, some of his own warriors plotted treason against Sir Gawain their leader.

“He would be King after Arthur falls? Well, Arthur has vanished in the height of battle! He has either abandoned us, or he is slain. In either case he no longer deserves to be King.”

“I am as good a leader as any other man here. Perhaps I should be King!”

“Arthur leaves no heir. The throne is any man’s to claim. Such has been tradition for all eternity. The mad rules of a dead King have no mandate.”

“Then let Gawain feel the sting of my dagger!” One of the younger warriors, scarcely of noble blood at all, leapt upon Gawain and dragged him from his horse with the suddenness of his attack.

“What are you doing, man?” bellowed Gawain, snatching the man up by the throat. “The enemy is out there!”

“You can’t hold the throne against all of us,” said another, with a wicked smile. He produced a short hooked weapon in each hand. Behind Gawain, a lad of fifteen or sixteen years snuck up and hit him over the head with a fragment of Arthur’s banner stave. Gawain swiveled, and struck the youth down where he stood. The mutineers pressed in from the other side.

“Arthur desired a bloodless succession!” shouted Gawain, laying about with the flat of his sword. “Any man who does not respect that never bore real love for King Arthur. And who dares say Arthur is dead? Show me the body and then such a thing may be believed.”

“See how he tries to defend his throne!” cried the leader of the rebellion.

“Usurper!” cried another.

“Mordred should be King!” shouted a knight in black, taking advantage of the chaos around Gawain. Swordsmen surged forward, forcing Gawain to cut them down or perish himself. A half dozen men attacked from his flanks, but he dodged and slew them all, two by two. More angry voices surrounded him, lashing out with weapons until Gawain was bleeding from a hundred wounds, surrounded by scores of corpses from both armies. Finally, when too many had piled on him, he fell under a press of bodies and steel and gave up his spirit to Heaven.

Arthur fell through darkness. The fall into the chasm was only thirty feet, far less than a fall from castle ramparts, but Arthur was not prepared for it; the face up landing could have killed him. Instead, he found the wind knocked out of him by a firm but yielding surface. A quick investigation revealed this to be a small straw mattress, bound in rough-spun cloth. It was just smaller than Arthur’s own body; a few inches right or left and Arthur would have found his spine shattered.

Hearing noise above him, Arthur struggled into a sitting position. He rolled off the mat in time to see Mordred land catlike beside him.

“I came to gloat,” said Mordred, “but I see you are not yet dead. Muse shall soon remedy that.” With an agility Arthur had not expected, Mordred thrust for his heart with the tip of Muse. The point dug into Arthur’s chest, now protruding from the straw tick Arthur suddenly held protectively between them. He wrenched the pillow and blade to one side, then brought his elbow sharply against the flat of the sword. It twisted in Mordred’s grasp long enough for Arthur to find his feet and get under Mordred’s guard. One strong hand found Mordred’s throat.

“You...may be...the better knight...” gasped Mordred, swinging Muse into Arthur’s side with a sickening crunch, “but I have...the better...weapon.”

Arthur felt his consciousness failing. Before he could slip into darkness, he said, “A true Knight... does not rely on enchanted weaponry. He needs...honor alone.” With that, he reached up with both hands, slamming one into either side of Mordred’s head, gripping him with iron strength. Muse clattered to the stone floor as Arthur twisted sharply. Mordred’s neck gave a sharp retort as it snapped. The cave reverberated with the fateful sound as Mordred slumped lifeless to the ground with his head at a disturbing angle. The link between them, between the leaders and their followers, shattered tangibly. Both armies collapsed into chaos, and Arthur collapsed onto the mat.

“Arthur,” whispered a voice in his mind. “Your wound is fatal.”

He put a hand to his chest, felt the hole there, then to his side to assess the deep gash. “Yes. I go now to join Ector, Pellinore, and Perceval. To Lancelot and to Gawain fall the task of rebuilding Camelot from the ruins.”

“Gawain has fallen,” said the voice. “Naught is left of what you have built. Your treasures are corroded into rust, your throne shall fall to the man most steeped in gore. All that is left is your legacy - the stories that shall inspire others, the ideas planted in fertile soil. Look to your

future, Arthur Pendragon. Take refuge while your wounds heal. Step into the Mirror of Avalon, and be preserved.”

“Merlin? What should I do, Merlin. I need your advice....”

No answer came.

“I built something, like no other before it. I made a change, a difference in so many lives. For one brief, *shining* moment...”

Still Arthur’s plea was unanswered.

“All gone now. So I shall go unto Avalon. I shall return when I am healed, someday when the world needs a bit of wonder.” The Mirror of Avalon widened until it was as broad and shimmering as a lake of water. It was Calumni no more. A chorus, as of angels on harps, settled around Arthur’s physical form, supported him as he stepped into the mirror. He felt himself sailing over the calm waters like a swan. Then the mirror shrank in on itself, becoming an ordinary hand mirror once more. The gilded inscription rippled, settled into a new form.

“Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus.”

Epilogue

The entire eastern wing of Camelot Castle crumbled with a groan heard across the land. Pitted with catacombs housing Mordred's experiments, laden with treasure, corrupted by treachery, it could no longer stand without constant support.

Across the farms surrounding Camelot, in the old potter's field, Terrowin's Tomb was growing of its own accord. Brick by brick, every player in the great contest who had given his or her life came to be represented in clay and steel. At the capstone of the crowning obelisk, two gaps formed, just large enough for two final bricks. A slab of jade formed within the north slot. The south slot remained empty.

Treasures fell into dust across the land, until the fields were a patchwork of jeweled shards and broken gold. Elaine watched her favorite wonders decay until they were little more than mud and rust, broken skeletons of gleaming glory. She saw Twyti arguing with the griffin, wheedling and begging it to return until it submitted to him in a huff.

Lancelot announced his presence publicly, now that Arthur was gone, and began using Excalibur to put things to rights as much as he could. Many other kingdoms pressed in on the borders of Camelot, making his tasks impossible, for he was no Arthur.

The Garden could not bear the passing of its master, the unresolved heart of its mistress. Only a few ruined sculptures remained, and scattered moonflowers growing among dead thorns. Elaine sorted through the bits of pottery: a finger here, a jeweled brow there, the smooth stem of a rare and favored tree elsewhere.

Guinevere arrived in Camelot, stained with the ills of a dozen fateful adventures. Her heart was weary, and it nearly ceased to beat when she heard Arthur had fallen and all her

warnings from Merlin were too late. Her purpose left her then, and she sat down on a chunk of masonry like an empty husk of a woman. Then Elaine came running up to her, with joy in her eyes, exclaiming “Guinevere! You must come! I have something of the utmost importance to show you!” Elaine led her to the heart of the garden, where she brushed away some vines to reveal a raised stone frame containing a set of stone stairs.

Guinevere and Elaine tripped down the stairs into a vast underground cavern, nearly the size of the castle itself. A million tiny shafts pierced the ceiling, creating a million pinpricks of light bright enough to smooth away the darkness and dampness, the terror of a million tons of earth above your head. Moisture also dripped from these holes, falling onto acres of fertile soil bounded by rough, rocky cavern walls. Miraculously, a rich verdure spread over the cave floor, plants of every description. Moonflowers bloomed fragrantly. Morning glories crept up the cave walls. Roses flowed like a carpet between gravel paths beginning to succumb to soft moss. Gone were the vain statues, sculptuaries, fountains, and benches made by men; this was a place of nature’s miracles alone.

“The Garden lives,” breathed Guinevere. “And so must I. This is the true heart of Camelot. Elaine, this is the very symbol of Arthur’s love, in my darkest hour. How can I deny him in my heart any longer? I must do what I can to preserve what he loved. Will you go with me to the battlefield?”

Together, they rode to Camlann. In the cave, Guinevere found Calumni, with its inscription promising the future return of the King. She took it to her breast and swore to protect it always. With Elaine, she found a safe place in the wilderness where she could guard it in solitude, preserving Arthur’s last promise.

Elaine moved on, knowing she was well equipped to spread the ideals of Camelot. She had seen more of its wonders than anyone, compared them to other glorious cities across

England and the world. Wherever she went, she spread the word of the things Arthur had stood for: mystery, honor, defense of the less fortunate, the sharing of love. Elaine became a famed adventurer, a seeker and sharer of treasures. She learned swordplay, sailing, and leadership, until her words and her arts moved entire nations to greater heights. It was rumored that she possessed an artifact of her own to help her work such miracles. Some said she had sought and come to possess the Holy Grail itself.

Guinevere dwelt in the heart of the wild woods, far from any cities. In her penance she found peace. The train of maidens bearing the Holy Grail passed her tiny hut one day, added its blessing to her meagre protections, strengthened her soul. Calumni went wherever she did, from hut to garden to woodpile, guarded against any resurgence of malicious magic until Avalon gave up its secrets.

Elsewhere, in wilderness far, far away, a tree rose from a shining pool on many roots and stilted, bifurcating trunks. A presence dwelt in the tree, remembering the future, ruminating on the past. He dwelt in the crux of Time, always, and in this way he experienced the present. Merlin remembered.

He remembered ages past, when warring magicians had proposed the great Contest between apprentices as a proxy for their own destructive might. As man grew wise, he learned that secrets could not be freely shared without diminishing their power, without losing something quintessential to the secret's being. So the Contest repeated itself throughout history, forward and backward, as a way to select only the most fitting apprentices to receive secrets. As befitted something of such grand importance, the contest was always fatal.

He remembered days not so long ago, as mortals remembered it, when he had tutored a young boy named Wart and seen the utmost potential in him. Remembering ahead to the future,

Merlin saw fatal perils for the boy as he grew into his crown, and took steps to mitigate them: a crutch, a shield, a pile of straw in the right place.

In the crux between past and future, Morgana came to Merlin to discuss the contest.

“Did you foresee this result?” Merlin asked.

“Oh, it is most unusual,” Morgana replied. “One contestant dead, another imprisoned forever in the Mirror of Avalon. You might say that no one wins.”

“I might say you planned every result down to the detail,” whispered Merlin. “For some reason, you wished for Arthur to be preserved in your mirror. You have wished for it since the day you met him and judged him to be highly adaptable. Tell me why.”

“Why? Because we have made too many mistakes. Oh, not just you, someone trapped in a tree by his own lover. Not I, though I was the first to lose an apprentice in this particular contest. I speak of sorcerers throughout history. Someday, the world might not be what it is, and the chain of secrets might be broken. Arthur is my plan for the future. Trapped in the Mirror of Avalon, he is not so fragile as he seems. He is safe from the ravages of time. He can return some day bearing great knowledge and experience when the world needs it most, just as he desires.”

“A clever plot. Manipulative. Cruel. Torturous, I am certain. But clever.”

There was little gloating. Both magicians were above such mortal trifles. There would be another contest in a few decades, and the score could be evened out once more.

Merlin remembered the future. In a plane of mirrored surfaces, infinitely refracted and shining in a mystifying array, the once and future King did battle with an army of doppelgangers. He fled through piles of shining glass, bled a kaleidoscope of noble blood onto the incorporeal mirrors that beset him at every turn. Every surface was a puzzle, every turn a part of a greater maze. But Arthur had all the time in the world, and he worked his way back toward the surface

of the mirror with a fierce patience. His fatal wounds were healing, though not in the environment he had expected, and he was a proven King in search of a kingdom.

Merlin remembered a day when Lancelot saw his obstacles could not be overcome with Excalibur, and gave it to Sir Bedevere. Bedevere at last fulfilled the inscription entirely: "Cast me aside." He came to the shores of loose stone on a lake that glistened with faerie lights, and he threw the sword within.

Merlin remembered what happened within the mirror on that day. Arthur, beset on every side by unreal and unkillable enemies, suddenly found himself clutching Excalibur once more. The cold steel felt right in his hand. When the time was right, he would return and work new wonders, the legendary King with legendary sword in hand. Arthur smiled a grim smile and resumed his quest.

THE END

Acknowledgements

This book draws inspiration from the fabulous “Night Circus” by Erin Morgenstern. If you have read it, you will recognize the contest of competing creations and the story of Merlin trapped in a tree over the secrets he’d shared. If you have not read it, I do hope this book was enjoyable as a standalone work - please let me know if I did not explain something adequately. And please do yourself a favor and go read Night Circus.

I got the idea for this book during a [Jonesborough Repertory Theater](#) show of the musical “Camelot,” by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, starring my good friend Mike M as King Arthur. He and his cast did such a wonderful job that I was absorbed into that world. I was moved by the paradox of Mordred: kin and enemy, a known opponent Arthur was forced to invite into his very stronghold. I started scribbling ideas on my playbill. By the end of the show I knew the broad outline of the book I wished to write, complete with silver unicorns, the fall of Camelot, and the wondrous Garden. I was so inspired I had to go back and see the show again, despite the hour-long drive.

I am convinced Mike M is the real King Arthur. All other Arthurs are shadows of him, cast by the mirrors of inspired creators.

This book uses the more traditional Arthurian timeline, the one ending on Camlann in 537 A.D. The technology and vague geography follows this idea. However, it draws much inspiration from the “Camelot” musical and by extension, “The Once and Future King” by T.H. White.

A special thank you to Marian Fitzwalter, who viewed every chapter as it was being typed. Marian was my muse for this story. She also contributed many descriptions, paragraphs,

and many ideas, and most of my own ideas reached their final form through discussion with her.

Also, Marian is the one who introduced me to Night Circus in the first place!

My playlist:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLhVTkNAsaeJOO0Co_JHqNJME9YHFI-6Un

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