

## *Foreword*

The bulk of this story is incomplete, with prose left to a barebone describing events, motivations and themes stated directly, with none of the subtlety I hope to one day invoke. You are nevertheless quite free to peruse, to leave any comments you may like. These may influence my writing process, if you emphasize some element as particularly well done or lacking in some manner, or I may decide against heeding your advice, likely to my shame. At any rate, I anticipate your input will only aid in forging this manuscript into a tighter, more consistent story, and for that, you have my repeated thanks. Enjoy!

For context, the following is my retelling of Arthurian legend. All of it. On the left, I hope you can see the rather elaborate table of contents, which ought to display about thirty different tales, several split into parts, nearly every one of which tells a story in its own right while also contributing to a cohesive overarching narrative.

These tales have their origins in a wide array of sources, from Welsh oral tradition, through the French Romances, Victorian poetry, up through relatively modern novels and movies. Naturally, attempting to fit all these stories together was a task significantly less like constructing a jigsaw puzzle than it is throwing a hammer through several layers of masterfully constructed stain glass windows and trying to convince my audience that the jagged shards were always meant to be scattered on the floor in precisely this pattern, and is really quite beautiful.

To that end, prior to publishing, I intend to heavily footnote my own prose, explaining the literary origin of many of my plot threads and character foibles, while also making clear which portions are wholesale creations of my own design, included either in an effort to allow otherwise contradictory versions of the legend to coexist or merely because I thought the end results would be really quite cool.

From you, I'm particularly looking for emotional responses; there will be plenty of time for catching spelling mistakes and grammar issues, but if the character's arcs are confusing, repulsive, or otherwise disappointing, that's the sort of thing I want to catch as quickly as possible.

Enough of my offhand blathering, scroll down and enjoy my carefully constructed blathering.

# The Life of Arthur

*By Ben Kopczynski*

## **The Tale of Wart**

“Again, Wart?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I just remembered something is all.”

“Hrmph. Well, hurry it up. We’ve waited too long as it is!”

“Right!” Wart scrambled to pick up the assorted hunting supplies he’d prepared last night, rushing to catch up with the small hunting party.

Today wasn’t a proper hunt, with half a dozen knights leading twoscore hunters with hounds and hawks at hand to bring down a raging boar, a fierce bear, or a rampaging griffin, with careful coordination, tactics, and strong spears. Today they were hunting small game: rabbits, foxes, perhaps a deer if they got lucky, staying far away from danger with their trusty bow and arrow.

Today’s hunt was only exceptional because it was Wart’s first, a celebration of his ninth birthday. His birthday had been last week, true, but nobody there truly knew Wart’s birthday, so the occasion was rarely consistent, just some time about six months after Kay’s birthday (the boys had decided together that Wart was definitely younger than Kay, but since they acted the same age, they ought to be the same age at least half the year). Six months Wart had looked forward to this day, ever since Kay was rewarded with a hunt for his ninth birthday. Wart had begged Sir Ector for the same privilege for his birthday, but it was delayed first for poor weather and then to coincide with a visit from King Pellinore.

Wart caught up to the cheerful hunters at the small arch which made the only entrance to Marsh Castle. Only the four of them were hunting today: Sir Ector, warden of Marsh Castle and the surrounding woodland; King Pellinore, an old acquaintance of Sir Ector, whose mercenary band was just passing through Ector’s neck of the woods;

Kay, Sir Ector's son, who liked to boast that he'd been blessed by a passing fae at his birth; and Wart.

Wart was a skinny boy, neither as tall nor as strong as Kay, but a better shot with a bow and very skilled in the ranks of tree-climbers. His name was not truly 'Wart.' Such was a nickname, and pronounced like it rhymed with 'art,' which was appropriate, as he was both curious and creative, though this did not stop Kay from mispronouncing it in a manner similar to the skin condition if he was in a mood to be mean, which happened more often than Wart would like.

"What I still don't understand is why you're bringing children along, Ector," Pellinore was saying. "Much less useful than a good hound, don't you think?"

"Hrmph," grunted Ector. Hrmph was likely his favorite word, though some days he favored grnng or fffffrgle. "I'd wager a hound would be better on a hunt than any of us, and the day they realize it is the day we're no longer the dominant species. Let's move."

In scant minutes, the quartet passed through the small town surrounding Marsh Castle. The truth of the matter was that Sir Ector's keep was neither especially swampy nor all too impressive of a castle. A mere dozen soldiers would likely overwhelm its defenses with ease, finding its garrison empty and its armory poorly stocked. Sir Ector had only managed to avoid being conquered a dozen times in the fifteen years he'd served as warden of Marsh Castle and the surrounding Forest Sauvage by being too remote to be worth holding, too poor to be worth sacking, and too unpleasant for anyone to want to visit. In sum, and probably by accident, Ector had achieved the minor miracle of keeping his tiny corner of the British Isle entirely safe from a truly brutal war of succession, which had bloodied the land for more than ten years.

For today, Ector only wanted to annoy Pellinore enough to get him and his hundred knights to move on for good, without insulting him enough to make the petty king ever want to come back for revenge. This strategy had never worked yet, Pellinore seemed incapable of disliking Ector.

"You're still hunting the, er, Quilting Beast then Pellinore?"

"What? You mean the Questing Beast?"

“Hrmph. How should I know, it’s your beast, isn’t it?”

“It is my family’s beast, or was, before it was lost. I haven’t thought about the thing in years. War keeps me busy. Not easy keeping a hundred knights fed, paid, and pointing in the right direction.”

Wart, who always enjoyed a good story, asked, “But what is the Questing Beast? Is it a boar or maybe a bear? And why must you hunt it? Is it dangerous? Are you protecting people? Is it near here? Is the beast the quest, or is it on a quest?”

“Wart!” Ector barked, “Let the man answer if you’re going to pester him with questions.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“Well, it’s right nice of you to be so interested, no matter what Sir Ector says, I think you have just spiffing manners.” Wart got the distinct impression that King Pellinore was feeling awkward, but wasn’t sure why. Perhaps kings were often awkward when they weren’t wearing their crowns. Wart had never met a king before. “You must have a right wonderful tutor.”

“No sir, your highness,” Wart said. “We, Kay and I, I mean, have never had a tutor.”

“My Dad taught us to ride though,” Kay cut in, “Every Wednesday and Saturday. And he teaches us to fight with swords Mondays and Thursdays, and with the bow Tuesdays and Fridays. I win when Wart and I fight.”

“Not always,” Wart protested.

“I always knock you down,” Kay boasted, not untruthfully.

“I’m better with a bow, though,” Wart insisted.

“Up close, maybe,” Kay admitted, “But I can shoot farther.”

“But children, you miss my point!” cried Pellinore, “If not a tutor, was it perhaps your mother? Who else could have taught you manners, courtesy, chivalry, numbers and letters, that sort of thing?”

“Letters?” Wart looked at Kay, but the older boy was looking at clouds, and so was no use at all. “What are letters?”

“What?” Pellinore looked terribly surprised, but Wart wasn’t sure why. Were these letters something he ought to know? “Ector, you can’t mean--”

“Hrmph. We can speak of this later, Pellinore.”

“What? But, reading and writing--”

“Later. Just know a father can teach many things when he isn't fighting wars or out hunting. But I can’t teach what I don’t know.”

“But--”

“Hush.”

“Now, I say--”

“Shh!” Ector motioned for everyone to stop moving and pointed.

Only now did Wart properly take stock of his surroundings. They had walked quite a ways while talking, past the meager grain fields where Ector, Kay, and Wart worked most afternoons and into the light forest that surrounded Marsh Castle. Much further and they’d reach the deep forest, where bush, vine, and thorn obstructed movement, where leaf and branch kept out the light of the brightest noon, where beasts preyed upon man. Even this outlying forest could prove dangerous, as it was easy to get lost, and wild beasts would hunt wherever they liked. Kay had once dared Wart to spend a night in the forest, and mocked him mercilessly for a week for his cowardice until Wart returned the dare. Both were too wise, even in their youth, for such recklessness.

Ector was pointing to a doe a hundred paces away who had not yet noticed the hunters. He motioned to an overgrown root nearby which was holding up half an eroded hill, creating a natural blind. To find such prey so quickly, and in such an advantageous position was a tremendous stroke of luck.

“Hrmph. Well Wart, it’s your birthday that has us out here, the shot is yours if you can make it.”

“Heh, Wart’s made shots like that hundreds of times, haven’t you?” Kay said. “I can taste the venison already. Go on, take the shot!”

“What? A shot like that? From this far? Not a chance boy, get closer!” Pellinore urged. “Don’t go scaring the quarry with a foolish shot!”

Wart made no reply to the king except to ready his bow. Kay was right, Wart had made shots at this range before. There were difficulties here in the forest that were never there when he was aiming at targets--branches to avoid, shadows masking the target--but Wart knew he could make the shot all the same. Breath steadied, he checked for any sign of a crosswind in the leaves, or hint of movement from the doe. Finding none, he selected his favorite arrow, nocked it, and pulled until the feathers tickled his cheek.

Nothing was new. Same as every other Tuesday and Friday. Different trees, different ground, but that didn't matter. Same bow. Same arrow.

Different target.

The bowstring slipped from between Wart's fingers, soaring through the air on three tiny wings, quieter than the heartbeat it might snuff out.

But the arrow missed its target, falling to earth between the deer's fore and back hooves, skipping past it and through a bush, out of sight.

The doe bolted.

"By Jove, that was an absolute bear of a shot, and this your first time hunting! Never fear that you missed, there's sure to be more prey to be found, chin up and keep hunting!" Pellinore encouragement flowed on, but Wart was not listening.

Wart looked to Ector looming over him, and knew he couldn't keep the truth from his protectorate.

Ector's face flashed with anger, but a moment later Wart wondered if he had imagined it. Ector sat on the ground, feet crossed.

Kay and Wart mimicked his motion.

"Hrmph. When we fail..."

"We learn." The two boys finished the well-worn sentence together.

Ector nodded. "Wart, why didn't you hit the deer?"

Wart looked to the ground, "I held too long. My arm got tired of holding up the bow, and my aim dipped."

Kay giggled, "Sorry Wart, but you're a terrible liar."

Ector turned to Kay, "Why didn't he hit his target?"

“He did hit his target,” Kay said. “He didn’t want to hit the deer. I could see it in his eyes when he released. He just aimed close enough to spook her.”

Ector turned back to Wart, “Is he right?”

Shamefaced, Wart gave the ground the tiniest of nods.

“Hrmph. Then I’ll ask again. Why didn’t you hit the deer?”

Wart exhaled, willing the emotion out of his voice, “It just seemed too cruel. The deer hadn’t done anything to us, she didn’t do anything to deserve to die. And we could eat other food. And then I thought, what if she has any fawns, and then they’d have to grow up without a...” Wart stole a glance at a stony-faced Kay and fell silent.

None of them spoke for a moment.

“Idiot...” Kay muttered.

Ector gave him a reproving glance, which was enough to extract an apology from the older boy.

“Kindness is not foolishness. Compassion is not weakness.” Ector said. “A good person can be a fool, and a good person can be clever. Just now, you were not clever Wart. You acted on impulse when you didn’t have to, you didn’t think things through when you could have. No, we don’t need that meat, but someone under my care might. We hunt for more than we need to prepare for the winter that goes too long, in case of the crop that fails. You understand me?”

Wart nodded.

“Good. Now, Kay, why is Wart’s compassion good?”

Kay looked up in surprise. Then his brow furrowed, his fist came up under his chin in a pose he often assumed when his brain was working extra hard. “I don’t think it is. It kept him from thinking, made him miss the shot. A family might miss a meal over some dumb deer.”

Ector seemed to reflect on these words for a moment. “I think you are wrong. I want you to consider why I think you’re wrong. But not right now. I think King Pellinore is getting annoyed at us for interrupting the hunt. Wart, go retrieve your arrow, it was well crafted. Kay, go along with him. I’ll see if we can’t pick up the trail of that deer.”

Wart and Kay popped up to their feet and had covered half the distance to where the arrow had disappeared before Ector managed to get his thick legs underneath his considerable weight.

The bush turned out to be more of a bramble thicket, and it wasn't long at all before Wart's small size saw him outpacing Kay. Wart's arrow was fletched with brightly colored feathers, so Wart was confident that he had not missed it as he pushed deeper and deeper into the underbrush.

Wart's eyes and sense of direction proved true, and he found his arrow half buried in a pile of dry leaves. Wart knelt down to carefully extract his best arrow when he heard it.

Wart wasn't entirely sure what 'it' was. A hushed shuffling of leaves. A change in the birdsong. A slight tang of blood on the wind.

"Kay! Come here, quick!"

Almost immediately, a great choir of snapping twigs announced Kay's arrival, sleeve torn and arm bleeding from a thorn's cruelty.

"What is it? Wolves? Oh, you found your arrow, good." Kay's protective instincts evaporated from his posture. "Let's get back to dad."

"No, no, listen!" Wart hissed. "Do you hear that?"

Kay looked skeptical, but fell silent for a moment. "No, I don't."

"Hello?" Wart called.

Nobody answered.

"Help me look."

"We're going to get lost if we just go wandering."

"Then stay here and yell so I know where you are."

Thinking his plan quite clever, even though Kay didn't bother with the yelling, Wart slipped deeper into the Forest Sauvage.

Fortunately, he tripped over the source of his uneasiness just twenty feet away.

A body.

Wart had never seen a dead body before, and wasn't entirely certain how to tell whether or not it was still alive, or how long it had been dead. Even discounting the



scarlet stains across his armor and the way his light hair hid his face, there was something Wart found terribly disquieting about the way the body lay, though he couldn't quite place what it was. With a start, Wart realized that though the corpse lay on its side, it laid all too flat on the forest floor. His left arm was missing, naught but dirt, moss, and leaking blood below his shoulder.

Hoping to give the body a more dignified resting place, Wart grasped the whole shoulder, rolling the body onto its back.

The body groaned.

Mostly dead eyes opened a fraction, tried and failed to focus upon Wart. Dry lips moved, the quietest voice speaking with a strange accent.

“Good afternoon.”

The effort seemed to have cost everything the young man had left, eyes fluttering shut, breath coming slow and shallow.

Wart immediately resolved to save this stranger, though he hadn't the faintest idea how to go about it.

“Kay!” Wart rushed back to where he found his arrow, “There's a fellow back there, injured bad, needs our help. We need Sir Ector!”

Kay seemed incapable of doing anything but check this oddity for himself, moving past Wart to check on his story.

Wart left him to it, rushing through the bushes and briars to the lighter forest where his guardian was waiting with King Pellinore.

“Sir Ector, Sir Ector!” Wart called. “There's a man in the woods, hurt bad, he needs our help!”

Sir Ector didn't ask for clarification. “Lead the way.”

Precious minutes later, Ector knelt beside the maimed body, and despite his prodding at the many injuries, the eyes remained shut, and the mouth mute. Wart couldn't even take solace in the rise and fall of his chest, as his tarnished breastplate hid any sign of breath.

“That is the emblem of Lord Brandin of Dolorous Gard.” Pellinore was pointing to the bloodstained coat of arms on the injured man’s breastplate. His voice was different, more like the kings in the stories.

Ector spoke firmly but quickly to the boys, “Run back home. Kay, get Big Bucky and ride back as quick as you can.”

Kay darted off.

“Lord Brandin has sworn allegiance to the usurper Vortigern.”

Ector ignored Pellinore. “Wart, get some water boiling, quick as you can, then collect as much yarrow as you can find. If you see anyone in town along the way, tell them to start picking them too.”

“If you aid this soldier, and word of it gets to High King Uther, he will see it as betrayal.”

“Oh, shut up Pellinore,” Ector said, firing up. “These are my lands, so I’ll do as I please. If Uther cares to find me, I’ll tell him the truth: there is no war here. No man calls me their ally, so I call nobody an enemy except they that hurt me or mine. This boy has done neither.”

Ector turned towards Wart, who hadn’t moved, “Did you have a question?”

“No, sir,” and the boy was off like a jackrabbit.

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Wart collapsed onto his bed, weary from a long day made more exhausting by its unpredictable course. Kay echoed his movement across the room. The two shared a bedroom in the upper levels of Marsh Castle, a place they visited as rarely as possible, usually only for sleep.

The pair had spent more than twelve hours focused upon a single task, a record length for both, doing all in their power to save the injured man. Once Kay brought them horses, Sir Ector set to cleaning the man’s wounds in one of the many empty rooms in his castle (Sir Ector did not keep a large staff, but liked to have enough room for all the people from his village to stay there in case an army got very lost on their way

to London and decided to attack them). While Sir Ector struggled to remember everything he had learned as a young man in old King Constantine's army about healing and herbs, Kay (who could not tell one flower from another) plucked up half the small plants in the village, while Wart managed to motivate every pair of legs able to walk into picking the other half. Very few of them knew what yarrow was either, so Wart spent as much time afterwards sorting out the useful herbs from the weeds as everyone else had spent collecting the plants in the first place. Kay, meanwhile, seemed to recognize that he wasn't being very helpful despite his best efforts, and set to making sure Sir Ector had plenty of boiling water to work with.

As a result, the entire village surrounding Marsh Castle was very invested in the young soldier's survival. Sir Ector was never as beloved by his people as he was later that evening when he emerged to announce that he thought the young man would pull through.

This diagnosis proved premature, as the morrow saw a fierce fever take root in the one-armed man. Ector rarely left his bedside, seeming to find the idea that the boy would die despite his efforts personally insulting. His nursing proved worthwhile, however, as the fever broke after five days, and on the sixth, Wart (who had rarely left the hallway outside the man's sickroom) and Kay (who had taken to ruling with remarkable maturity in his father's stead, though it should be noted that the village does a fine job running itself, so this feat may not be truly impressive) were finally allowed to speak with the newly awakened man.

"Now repeat what I've just told you," Sir Ector said before the boys were allowed entrance.

"Don't touch him."

"Don't make him upset."

"Don't be too loud."

"Don't ask too many questions."

"Don't look inside his arm-hole."

"Ew. Kay, that's gross."

"Kay, you'll not be allowed in with an attitude like that."

“It was a joke! Just a joke! C’mon, I want to meet him!”

“Hrmph. Then you’ll keep a civil tongue. He’s a guest.”

Ector opened the door.

Besides dressing his wounds, it seemed Ector had dressed the man as a whole, as he was sitting upright in his bed wearing perfectly clean cotton clothes. With the layers of blood and dirt scrubbed off his face, the soldier seemed more boy than man, fifteen or sixteen years at best, curtains of silvery-blond hair hanging around his face. If Wart paid more attention to such things, he might have noticed that the young man was remarkably handsome, though the styles of the time would have dismissed his smooth cheeks as unmanly.

He looked to still be in considerable pain, but he smiled through his grimace when he saw Kay and Wart.

“Good afternoon. My name is Bedivere.” Bedivere politely inclined his head. “I hear that you saved my life.”

Kay looked pleased at this assessment, but Wart said, “I just found you. It was Sir Ector who saved your life.”

“And I’ve thanked him well for it, young lords.”

Wart started at that. Nobody had ever mistaken him for nobility before.

Kay looked briefly furious at Bedivere’s mistake, casting curiously concerned eyes on Wart before remembering Sir Ector’s warning and mastering his emotions.

Bedivere noticed the reaction to his words, “What is it?”

“It’s nothing,” Kay rushed, “It doesn’t matter.”

“You shouldn’t lie, Kay,” Wart said to the floor.

“It doesn’t matter,” Kay repeated forcefully. “Not here, not ever.”

“It matters to me,” Wart took a deep breath, “I’m not a lord. I’m not Sir Ector’s son. Kay isn’t my brother. I was left here when I was a baby. Sir Ector takes care of me, but I don’t know who my parents are.”

Bedivere very clearly didn’t know how to react to that, changing the subject, “But all the same, Sir Ector would never have found me without you. And he tells me you

both helped him heal me. I owe my life to all three of you, and I pledge to repay whatever little worth that is.”

Despite himself, Wart felt his eyes drawn to the bandages around Bedivere’s shoulder. His mind flashed through all his idle dreams and half-serious plans for his life, and how many of them would be impossible if he were in Bedivere’s state. He wouldn’t be able to hold a shield, or a bow, or a lance. Such were Wart’s hopes, to prove by noble deed what he couldn’t through noble lineage. But Bedivere could never hope to do such things, to go on adventures. He’d be hard pressed to prove useful in a field or even in crafty creations.

Wart was still trying to find some way to encourage the unbalanced young man before him when Kay broke the awkward silence.

“I accept.”

Wart didn’t understand.

Neither, apparently, did Bedivere, “I’m sorry? What are you accepting?”

“You. You said you owe me your life, so I’m claiming it. I’ll share with Sir Ector and Wart, we can work out a schedule or something later.”

“Kay!” Wart said reproachfully, “You can’t just own somebody like that!”

“Sure I can. He offered, I accepted. It’s a wonderful gift, I’d be mad to reject it.” Considering the matter closed, he turned back to Bedivere, “So tell me about my new present. I’ll need to know all about you if I’m going to get the best use from you.”

Wart was furious at Kay’s opportunistic attitude. Wart never thought Kay was capable of taking advantage of a turn of phrase, of a social nicety from someone distraught by their loss, to get a free servant. A slave, really. If Wart hadn’t promised Sir Ector he wouldn’t be too loud, he’d slug Kay then and there.

Bedivere didn’t seem bothered by Kay’s claim, “Everything worth knowing is right in front of you. I’m a cripple. You might have saved my life, but you won’t get much use out of it.”

“I’ll decide that.” Kay said. “Where are you from? What do you do? How did you get here? What are your dreams? What do you need for a healthy life debt relationship?”

“Life debt, huh?” Bedivere shook his head, but answered anyways, “My story isn’t a happy one. You’ll get no joy from hearing it.”

When neither Wart nor Kay looked discouraged at his warning, Bedivere gave in, leaned back, and spoke to the ceiling.

“I grew up far from here, in the fortress of Joyous Gard. My father was a clerk of no significance. He didn’t know a thing about fighting, but when King Vortigern called his banners, Lord Brandin put a spear in his hand and marched away. Haven’t seen him since. My mother was a seamstress. After Lord Brandin left, another army laid siege to our home, and she started giving me her portions. Wasn’t long before she took sick, and she wasn’t strong enough to fight it off.”

Bedivere was dispassionate as he unfolded his story, as if it were something that happened to someone else.

“Once I was old enough, Lord Brandin decided I should be in his army too. I’d always dreamed of being a knight, with a horse, and armor, and a sword. Lord Brandin didn’t think the son of a clerk would be of much use in combat. He made me a scout. Sent me to spy on his enemies, most of whom were supposed to be his allies.

“Turns out he was right about me being useless in a fight. Wasn’t much of a sneak either. I got caught in an ambush. They took me alive bound me, meant to interrogate me. They were leading me back to their platoon when they were caught in a trap of their own. Bandits. I didn’t have anything valuable, but they figured they could sell me to Lord Brandin’s enemies for the information I had. Turns out, King Lot was interested in my information, but he doesn’t much like bandits, so he killed them, questioned me, then put me in his army. Frightening man, King Lot.” They taught me how to use a spear and shield. I enjoyed the learning. Almost felt strong for a while.

“When King Lot marched on Lord Brandin in earnest, they sent me across the country, so I couldn’t turn traitor. We, my squad and I, were to join King Uther’s force that was fighting in Cornwall. We never made it that far. Met a griffin on our way through Forest Sauvage. Our group scattered, and I got lost in the woods. Ran afoul of some wolves. Survived war and bandits and a monster without a scar, but petty vermin...” Bedivere’s flexed the shoulder without an arm. “Well, you know the rest of

the story. Beasts ran off with my limb, and I remember nothing more until you found me.”

Wart was horrified into silence. He too dreamed of knighthood, though he knew he'd likely end up as Kay's squire. Knights and soldiers and squires were all supposed to do the same thing though: quest for honor and riches and fame. Some stories said that meant hunting great beasts, or slaying evil wizards, or rescuing innocent people in danger, or turning the tides of whole battles. Bedivere's story wasn't at all like the stories he'd heard, and for the first time Wart worried that his and Kay's story might not end up as glorious as he'd always imagined.

“Hmmm...” Kay hummed when he thought. Not many people knew this, as he didn't think often. “Back in the beginning, you said your father was a clerk. Did he teach you?”

“He often spoke to mother and me of Brandin's doings, of his schemes and tricks, but that was many years ago, that's old intelligence. I don't even know if Lord Brandin yet lives.”

Kay waved that away, “But that thing that clerks do, with the ink and the parchment and the pointy feathers, did he teach you about that?”

“You mean...writing?” Bedivere asked.

“Yeah that. All those funny little symbols. You know what they mean?”

“If you mean letters, then yes; each corresponds to particular phoneme, a sound in speech. Together they build words, and words can build sentences.”

“Excellent!” Kay cried. “And I've heard there are other symbols, ones that let you count things even after you've run out of fingers and toes.”

“...Are you speaking in jest? It is a cruel jape to mock a man for his family.”

“I am perfectly serious.” Kay said with a kind of glee that offered no real reassurance.

“Then yes, I know numbers in addition to letters. I even know some punctuation, if that is to be your next question.”

“Splendid!” Kay rushed from the room, leaving Bedivere in a foul mood and Wart utterly confused at his antics. He returned a moment later with Sir Ector.

Bedivere offered the portly knight a meager bow from his bed.

“Look father,” Kay spoke quickly in his excitement, “Bedivere says he owes us a life debt, and he knows letters and numbers and punctuality. He can teach Wart! Isn’t that great!”

“Hrmph. I don’t know about this life debt business,” Sir Ector said, “But I suppose it is time the boys--both of you--had a proper tutor.”

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A comfortable rhythm played about Marsh Castle, altered by addition of a new instrument, but all the more pleasant for the change. In the mornings, Ector would train Wart and Kay in the combative arts. On Monday they would study the sword, on Tuesday the shield, on Wednesday the lance, Thursday the bow, Friday the spear, Saturday the appropriate use of armor, and Sunday was dedicated to horseback riding. After six hours of exhausting training, the trio would enjoy a meal of Bedivere’s making. Wart and Kay would then spend three hours with Bedivere’s schooling (Sir Ector generally spent this time in the village, presiding over disputes, handing out petty punishments to petty crimes, or just helping work the farms) before embarking upon their most essential responsibility: being children. Whether climbing trees, chasing squirrels, wrestling, eating strange berries, or studying odd bugs, the two took their recreation very seriously.

Bedivere, alas, was not a proper tutor. His knowledge of foreign languages was nonexistent, and while he spoke with excellent grammar and could identify deviations from that norm, he was ignorant of the jargon to effectively dissect the appropriate usage of gerunds. He had never studied Homer, Virgil, any of the great philosophers, nor even the Bible. And while he understood the principles of counting, addition, subtraction and very rudimentary multiplication, he had never read Euclid, and was never fated to be an architect. And if we are to find any method of respecting Bedivere now or in the future, it is best that we don’t speak of his understanding of the natural sciences. Neither had he ever been taught or truly considered the methodology behind



teaching itself, the importance of proper planning and lesson structures, of the subtle psychological manipulations to not only instill knowledge, but also passion, interest, or curiosity, without which memory will take no record of any detail.

This is not to say Bedivere was a charlatan or a fool. By week's end, Wart could consistently identify eight out of ten digits (the lower similarities betwixt three and five led to much confusion for the poor lad) and Kay could hold a pen properly for writing. By Wart's next birthday, both boys knew the names and heraldry of nearly every noble family in Britain and could calculate any product of single digit whole numbers.

Even so, Bedivere could feel the failings in his own education, and once he recovered strength enough to explore his new home, he discovered a very dusty library left by Sir Ector's predecessor. So while he spent a portion of every afternoon upon Kay and Wart's education, the remainder of the day's effort was spent upon improving his own knowledge. Once he'd become more comfortable with his own changed physicality, he even joined in Kay and Wart's training from time to time, sharing what he knew of the spear, advising Ector in the ways battlefield tactics had changed since his days fighting the Gauls under Constantine.

King Pellinore left two days after Bedivere's arrival, only to return three weeks later, depart once more a month after that, returning again in the middle of the night without ceremony some time after that. The Forest Sauvage was not so named for being easy to navigate. In time, he came to be something of an unwanted fixture at Marsh Castle, though he never seemed all too troubled by his absence from the lands where he was ostensibly king.

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What with one thing and another, three years passed. Wart grew taller, Kay stayed taller than Wart, Bedivere began to shave, Ector began to bald, and Pellinore began to think he ought to have a wife. The trees of the Forest Sauvage grew ever more thickly over the road leading to Marsh Castle, and a childish old man entered the story.

Wart and Kay squared off on the dusty training pitch, within the walls but outside the castle itself, where they spent most of their mornings. Kay was unarmed, but well-armored, near every inch of him covered in some degree of suffocating metal: heavy plates, sloped to deflect even the fiercest blows away from his vitals, heavy interlocking rings of chain mail offering lesser protection to his joints. Wart was clad in the inverse, possessing no greater protection than the sweat-soaked shirt clinging to his still narrow shoulders, but holding three narrow branches bound tightly together in a loose approximation of a sword, a very real shield held at the ready.

The purpose of the exercise was two-fold. While Kay learned to trust his armor, to let it protect him, maneuvering to take blows in the places where the armor protected him best, Wart was practicing to fight without armor, dancing around his opponent, staying out of range, exhausting the larger boy by staying enticingly within reach, but slipping away from harm. An hour earlier, their roles had been reversed.

Ector and Bedivere agreed, a rival was the best teacher and motivator within their reach. Neither had been extensively trained, all they could truly extend to their students were solid fundamentals. Beyond that, the boys taught each other. Even if Wart would never be accepted as a knight outside Forest Sauvage, there would be no squire more competent in the knightly arts in all the isle of Britain.

The system worked well. Kay was always a mite stronger, taller, faster, and hardier, but Wart was more creative. Every day, the younger found some new way to surprise his foster-brother, which Kay would then turn on his sparring partner in their next match, forcing Wart to continually adapt.

Wart raised his shield as Kay made an exploratory jab. The grinding of gauntlet against wood echoed dully around the training field. Wart feinted a thrust towards Kay's shoulder, letting him push the tip away. Wart had hoped Kay would try to dodge the thrust; dodging while his arm was still extended had a good chance of putting Kay just a bit off balance. They were both tired, and a small edge like that might have led to victory.

Kay took a step forward, giving his next punch leverage. Wart's block was sloppy, the blow crunching into the edge of his shield. Kay took advantage by grabbing the

shield's edge, yanking hard onto the shield's edge to toss Wart off balance. On a whim that felt brilliant at the time, Wart let go of his shield, gambling that since Kay must be pulling hard enough to throw around a Wart's worth of weight, getting only the shield would toss him on his armored back.

The unexpected maneuver worked; Kay stumbled back, shield in hand, unsure for a moment where Wart had gotten to, frantically searching his helm-limited field of vision for any sign of his brother. He felt the younger boy before he saw him.

Wart compiled deception upon confusion, tossing his stick sword to the ground to Kay's left while darting behind his back. With both his advantages spent, Wart seized the opportunity they had earned, ramming a shoulder into Kay's armored back, sending both boys to the ground.

Kay reacted too quickly. Surprised as he had been to feel the sudden pressure throwing him off his feet, he still learned where his attacker could be found, whirling about as he fell, landing on his back and grasping Wart in an inescapable hug. Victory in hand, he simply rolled over.

Wart gasped as the combined weight of the boy and the armor drove the breath from his lungs. Defeated, but unable to speak the words of surrender, he reached a hand around Kay's body to slap a quick rhythm on the smooth metal plate. Tap. Ta-tap. Ta-tap. Tap.

Kay was either bone-tired or vindictive enough that he didn't immediately rise, forcing Wart to repeat the signal before he let the smaller boy breath again.

Ector was upon the pair at once. "Hrmph. Help Kay out of his armor."

Scarcely able to breath, but otherwise unhurt, Wart hurried to comply. Tired though he was, he knew from experience that fighting in armor was much more exhausting.

"Drink," Ector said once the task was complete. "Both of you. And get up. Walk to the well, fill up your drink, come back here, and drink again. Then we'll talk."

Wart stumbled across the courtyard in a half daze toward the castle's main gate, Kay staggering behind him. There were wells within Marsh Castle's outer walls, of

course, but none of them were nearer the practice grounds nor so pleasant as a dip in the moat.

“Wart, wait.” Kay grabbed his arm. “Something’s not right.”

Wart cocked an eyebrow, then peered around the gate’s archway. “Everything looks fine. It’s just Tomkin, Rishley, and Halsey, fishing in the moat. They always do that.”

“My fairy instincts say there’s something dangerous out there.” Kay whispered.

“Fairy instincts?” Wart asked, “Since when do you have fairy instincts? First you were fairy tough, then you were fairy strong, now this? I’m starting to think fairies aren’t real.”

“Fairies are too real,” Kay cried. “They’re the ones that took mom.”

“Kay, your mom isn’t with the fairies,” Wart said, “She died.”

“She’s your mom too!” Kay tackled Wart and did his best to pin him to the ground.

Wart struggled to push Kay off, to wriggle out and run away, all for naught. Even without his armor, Kay was heavier than Wart could handle.

But years of experience reinforcing this knowledge wasn’t enough to keep Wart from trying. “Get off me, ya big troll!”

“Apologize!” Kay bellowed right into Wart’s face.

“For what?”

“For saying mom’s dead!”

“But she is!”

“No, she went to the fae!”

“Those are just in stories!”

“Oh no, the fae are very real, and they’d love to get a hold of you, Wart. But all the same, your mother is very dead, little Kay.”

A boy was standing just inside the castle’s gate, looking down on the two wrestlers from beneath a wild tangle of dark hair. He wasn’t from the village. Wart didn’t often see new people. His clothes might have been white once, but were so caked

with dirt and stained by grass that it was impossible to say for sure. And there was something weird about his eyes. They were too old.

“Who’re you?” Wart asked, pushing a distracted Kay off himself.

“Already you annoy me. Life will be so much more pleasant once everyone knows that I know everything I need to know, so we can skip these tedious introductions.”

“Okay...” Wart said. “But that doesn’t really tell me who you are.”

“So slow to learn! Do you think I don’t know the extent of your ignorance. Of course you don’t know my name yet. That’s obvious. So saying it aloud is a waste of breath. And thought. And time! My time! And just because I have more of it than anyone doesn’t make it less valuable. It’s worth more!”

“What’s all this?” Sir Ector had come to greet the new guest, Bedivere in tow.

“I was trying to do introductions,” Wart said, “but he doesn’t like them, so we don’t know his name yet.”

“Soon, everyone will know my name. And because of me, they’ll know yours too.” The boy struck a dramatic pose. “I am Merlin the enchanter, and your education begins today.”

A moment of awkward silence greeted this proclamation, and Merlin’s held dramatic pose morphed very quickly from impressive to ridiculous, a notion not lost on the self-proclaimed enchanter.

“By Hecate and Freyja, Nimue heed me!” the boy cried out, his small voice cracking, “I said I am Merlin the enchanter, and your education begins today!”

A geyser of water burst from the ground behind Merlin, sparkling, refracting, and producing a beautiful array of rainbows in the bright sunlight. Wart, Kay, Ector and Bedivere were quickly doused by the falling water, but Merlin remained quite dry.

As quickly as it had burst forth, the geyser ceased its spouting. Wart watched as the last of the water fell to the earth, and only then recognized that the water had painted intricate patterns in the dry dust. Perfect shapes, tangentially touching or incredibly inscribed, radiated out from around Merlin.

Wart had never met an enchanter before. But in the stories, magic users always seemed to come in three kinds: helpers, pranksters, and really, really bad guys. Wart hoped he'd be the first one.

Wart took a step towards Merlin, curiosity outweighing fear. "Beg pardon, but my education actually started three years ago."

"Then you've wasted three years. A medieval education. Bah! Worse yet, an education of the Dark Ages."

"Bedivere taught us--Kay and I--during the day, so it wasn't very dark at all."

"I'm sure you think yourself very bright." Merlin's voice dripped with sarcasm, skepticism, and derision. "Well go on then, what sorts of things has Young Sir Bedivere the witch-weigher taught you?"

Wart didn't know why Merlin was being so mean. But he'd learned his manners well and saw no reason not to answer. "Bedi's taught me letters and numbers. He's taught me which wood makes the best bows. He's taught us the battle tactics he used in the war and the war-banners he's seen and the history of our town."

"The history of the least important spit of land in all western civilization! And battle tactics good enough to lose an arm!" Merlin clapped his hands to his face in feigned amazement. "That will be so useful in your life."

"I lost my arm to a pack of wolves, not on a battlefield." Bedivere said with strained dignity. "For what it's worth, I think we should try learning from Merlin. It does us no harm to listen, and he's right that I'm not a very good tutor. I've read almost every book in Sir Ector's collection, but that's as far as I can hope to lead you."

Merlin threw his hands in the air, "Praise my stars and lucky loincloth, I have permission from Sir-frikkin-Bedivere."

"I have not been knighted."

"Right. Right. Let me make something abundantly clear." All the caustic snark had vanished from his voice, leaving something darker behind. "I could kill every person in this castle," an identical copy of Merlin snapped into existence behind Wart, Bedivere, Kay, and Sir Ector, each holding a knife to the throats of the castle's residents. "I could kill everyone in this paltry village," additional duplicates threatened Tomkin,

Rishley, and Halsey on the drawbridge. “I could end every one of the meaningless, transient lives in this bigoted, backwards country in an instant.”

Wart’s life had never been threatened before. For all the thousands of hours he’d spent fighting with Kay, he’d never felt the edge of hard steel held against his skin. Today was a day he had long anticipated and dreaded; the day he’d learn if all his pain and all Sir Ector’s efforts were to bear fruit; the day he’d learn if he was, at his core, a coward, a berserker, or a knight. Faced with danger, a coward will freeze up, run away, or betray their allies to preserve their own life. The berserker is no less consumed by fear, striking out without concern for the safety of self or ally. Both are doomed to fail in their purpose, soon or late. It is the knight who can defy fear and think. Sometimes a knight’s purpose requires making that hard choice, whether to cast off honor and take the coward’s path so that a greater goal might be achieved, or deem the threat cannot be ignored, the ground must be held, steel and violence is the only answer. But more often, a knight must find a third option, the words to prevent violence, the presence of mind to halt aggressions before protection becomes slaughter.

Adrenaline pulsed through Wart’s veins, urging him to move. Kay had trained for this situation with him. He could escape Merlin’s weak hold, get control of the knife, turn the tables. But then what? If Wart dealt with his dupli-Merlin, how would the others react? He had confidence in his family in combat, but what about Tomkin, Rishley, and Halsey? And the rest of the village? How would the rest of the Merlins react if one of their numbers was incapacitated or killed? Would killing one kill them all? Was Wart capable of taking a life?

No. No, these were the wrong questions. Marsh Castle was never well defended; if Merlin had wanted them all dead, this was about the silliest way to go about killing them. Merlin had put himself in a murderous position, but lacked murderous intent, so far anyways. So why was Merlin making this threat? That was the question worth asking.

Conveniently, the young warlock’s mouth had never stopped working. But there was no coordination between the copies, the words of each garbled the speech of all the others so only passionate fragments could be understood:

“I know everything worth knowing.”

“Not once in nine hundred years--”

“--nothing from Machiavelli!”

“Stupid plumbing!”

“What the ‘authorities’ always get wrong is...”

Not very useful. But he'd said he meant to be Wart's tutor, then became murderous when Bedi--Wart's current tutor--corrected him. This wasn't random or pre-meditated, nor madness. It was reactionary. It was insecurity. This child, this boy wizard, despite his incredible powers and bluster, was worried that Wart--Wart--would reject him as a tutor.

Wart had found the knightly path, a course of action both honorable and benevolent, one which was surprisingly easy, yet he hesitated, inwardly reeling that Merlin was truly serious, that anyone would care what Wart thought. He was not important, or strong, or knowledgeable, or wealthy, or influential. He was...Wart! Just a boy without a surname, leeching off the generosity and prosperity of better people. Any respect or interest he'd ever received was born of pity, obligation, and universal love for humanity, not because of any worth in Wart.

Wart waited too long. The opportunity to seize initiative passed to Kay.

Ector's son grabbed his Merlin's knife-wrist, yanking it forward and away from his throat. The height difference pulled that Merlin to the tips of his toes. In one smooth motion, Kay bent his knees before rushing upward in a jump. At the same moment, he tugged Merlin's wrist downward.

Wart winced in sympathy, the sound of snapping bone masked by Merlin's cry of pain.

The magician's white-hilted knife clattered to the ground.

Kay was not finished. With a side step and a twist of a broken arm, he tossed the smaller boy to the dirt. Kay scrambled on top of him, kneeling on his uninjured right shoulder and pulling his own knife from its sheath. “Take your punishment and learn the lesson. This is not a place for force.”



Half a dozen new Merlins tackled Kay off their whimpering comrade, the injured Merlin snapping out of existence quite as suddenly as he had materialized.

“You are saturated in being wrong. Force reigns in every place. Your inability to understand that is exactly why you will never rule, seneschal.” The Merlin threatening Wart spoke alone, as all the others disappeared, one by one. “But yes, learn the lesson. Men are animals. To survive, they hunt and fight and kill. Compassion, allies, language, society? All make-believe. Constructs. Lies men tell themselves to hide from the simple truth: strength is everything. Being clever or moral or charismatic or right doesn’t matter at all once you’ve got a sword carving through your neck. If a man wants to rule, he must first be strong, stronger than all the rest of the world put together. Conscience is delusion. Friendship, a distraction. Oaths, a noose about your neck. These are not the rules of man, mage, or god, but of nature itself.

“And now, a practical demonstration.” A new Merlin surprised Wart, shoving him off the thin drawbridge.

For an instant, Wart hung from nothing, suspended in time and air, staring at the water’s rapid approach. He broke the surface not with a splash, but with purest agony. His every bone shattered, splintering into scores of needling fragments, some fusing into new shapes only to fracture again, some crumbling into dust and on into nothing. His skin boiled, welting, scabbing, hair dissolving away. His muscles spasmed, warping without their long-held anchors, wrapping and twisting together with new purpose. Wart was scarcely cognizant of his own suffering as his skull snapped backwards, his spine rearranging to extend directly backwards, behind his eyes.

Pain is gone. Wart is fish.

Breath is easy. No mouth, just gill.

Swim is hard. No arm! No leg! Just fin.

Wiggle wiggle.

Sink.

Wiggle wiggle.

Still sink.

Not good. Mouth in dirt. Eyes no see. Just dirt.

Wiggle wiggle.

Struggle struggle.

No good. Big puzzle.

Think is hard. Why hard? Not always hard.

Not always fish.

“By my stars and fresh scales, what kind of fish can’t even swim? Nimue must be mad if she thinks you’re ready for me.”

Other voice. Not Wart head-voice. New voice keep going.

“If you want to swim like a fish, act like it. None of these dithering, shilly-shally, tentative movements. Be strong, decisive. Full stroke, snapping from the neck all the way down to your tail. Fins are for pointing you in the right direction, the tail is what gets you there.”

Stop wiggle. Stop struggle.

Sink.

Snap.

Move!

Dirt.

Snap.

Dirt.

Move fins. Snap.

No dirt!

Big fish. Pointy nose. Scary.

“Well congratulations, you’re a single step up from completely hopeless. Now follow me, and don’t dally. My time is infinite and priceless.”

Big fish leave. Wart follow.

Snap.

Swim is strange. Like fly. Shiny up. Dirt down. Wart between.

Water like fog. Not see far. What see?

Big pointy-nose fish.

Strange wavy plants.

Dirt. Yuck.

Rocks on rocks. A wall. A castle. Where people live.

Where Wart live.

Why Wart in water? Why fish?

Merlin.

Lesson.

“Oh, do keep up, guppy. I don’t want to spend all day underwater.”

Fish is Merlin. Fish talk?

Wart try talk.

Not work.

Snap.

Still lesson?

Snap.

Merlin fish fast.

Snap.

Sea weed. Make see hard.

Snap.

“You’ve caught up, good. We’re coming up on the lair of the King of the Moat.  
He’ll give you your first lesson on leadership.”

Weed.

Weed.

Where Merlin?

Weed.

Big fish.

Nose wrong. Too many teeth. Not Merlin.

King.

Wart hide. King scary.

Too slow. King see Wart.

Snap.

Wart fin wrong. Dirt.

Snap.  
Weeds. Hide.  
Wait.  
King. Open mouth. So many teeth.  
Snap snap snap.  
Clear water. No weed. No hide.  
King. Fast.  
Shiny.  
Shiny?  
Shiny pointy.  
Tomkin Rishley Hawley.  
Snap. Wart swim up.  
King follow. Faster. Mouth wide.  
Wart dodge hooks.  
King follow.  
Two fish, swim into sky.

As Wart broke the surface, his transformation reversed, with all the same wrenching, needling, bone-deep pain, and a moment later he found himself sitting in the knee-deep water beneath the drawbridge, breathing hard, a decent-sized pike dangling from a line in front of his face.

“Rishky, Tommy, wouldja take a look at this beauty? Why, I reckon this here is that same old pike I toldja ‘bout summer afore last, I do. The wife’ll be happy about this, she will. Wait...is that Wart under there? Wart, watchoo doing under there?”

Wart did a quick inventory on his limbs, his fingers and toes, stretched his neck and spread his legs as wide as he could. He ran through the alphabet, his multiplication tables, and the names of the living kings. He did his best to steady his breath, heartbeat pounding in his ears.

“Just...enjoying being a kid, Mr. Hawley.”

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Wart pressed himself deeper into the darkness. After thirteen winters-worth of exploring Marsh Castle, he had determined that this was objectively the best hiding spot.

In his younger years as Warden of the Woods, Sir Ector (who had never lived in a castle before and was secretly afraid of the dark) had stockpiled huge amounts of pitch to ensure that no room in his house would lack light. He's soon adapted to just living outside and in the outer rooms of his keep, storing all that pitch away in one of the deepest, most out-of-the-way, sun-starved basement rooms, where torch lights were forbidden, and where several barrels of the foul ooze had burst, ensuring that anyone who entered the grimy storeroom would leave with a thick coating of grime that was unlikely to come clean without considerable scrubbing. In the furthest corner of this room abandoned by light and life, , at the far end of a blind labyrinth of barrels and grease, Wart crouched, uncomfortable, but safe from everything in the world.

And yet...

Footsteps.

A voice. Kay's. "Wart, stop hiding. Merlin wants to give you another lesson."

He's just guessing. He doesn't know.

"I know you're in there. I was blessed by the fae, and my fae blessing says you're hiding in here."

Just sit where he can't see until he goes away.

"Wart, if I go in there and get all dirty only to find you hiding in the corner like a coward, I'll twist your ears so hard they'll turn up-side down, and you'll hear everything backwards until dad sets you right. I'll pull your hair until it's as long as Bedivere's, and all the girls in town will want to braid it."

He's lying. Getting dirty doesn't bother Kay. And if he wanted to wrestle Wart, Wart would wrestle him right back. He'd lose, of course. The older boy was blooming with adolescence, growing an inch each of the past few months. But loss wasn't all that bad, not really.

“I don’t know why you always come here, it’s a terrible hiding spot.”

“Is not!” Wart called back, storming to his feet. “This is the best hiding spot in the castle.”

“The first time, yeah, but it’s the only one you use. Any time you go missing, I know exactly where to look.”

“Well any time you go missing, nobody has to look anywhere. They can just follow your horrible smell.”

“I only smell so bad because I have to share a bedroom with a stinking imp like you.”

“No, you stink because you won’t take a bath because you’re afraid Diane the fisher’s daughter will see you naked.”

This was not at all true, as far as Wart knew. Kay had stopped taking his baths with Wart, yes, but he didn’t think he had a crush on either of the Dianes. Of course, Wart himself thought Diane the trapper’s daughter had the most splendid smile he’d ever seen. (Both girls were born during the same winter, and it had long been a subject of debate within the village which of the girls had been christened by the old friar first. The friar was unable to clarify, as he had not survived the winter, and the village had been without a proper religious leader for as long as Wart could remember.)

Kay was unaware of this semi-relevant vulnerability in Wart, and so retorted instead by defying his own hygiene and lunging into the muck-ridden room.

The tussle that followed was neither very dramatic, nor aesthetically pleasant. Coating both combatants in slick oil makes for a thrilling wrestling match, with a multitude of unexpected escapes from even the most captivating holds. Covering two pre-teens in tar turns a fight into a very unpleasant, elongated hug.

“You need to get stronger.” Kay said, sitting on Wart’s back. “You always try to fight with your brain, and you’re brilliant at it, but your brain will have more options if you have thicker arms.”

Wart did not respond, preoccupied as he was with proving Kay’s point by failing to do a push up with Kay’s weight holding him down.

“So why’d you come hiding down here anyways?” Kay asked. “You’ve always loved Bedivere’s lessons, even when he’s trying to teach boring stuff from way long ago. Merlin’s got magic! That’s got to be way better.”

Wart grunted.

“I wish Merlin’d teach me. But he’ll barely look at me, or Bedi, or even father. What makes you so special?”

“I’m not!” Wart gave up trying to throw Kay off, letting himself sag into the floor. He tasted the floor’s grime when he said, “I’m not special.”

“Don’t be lazy. Even I can come up with ways you’re different from the rest of us. You’re shorter. You’re skinnier. You’re less decisive. You have to work twice as hard to understand anything Ector or Bedivere try to teach you.”

Wart threw his arms backwards to where he thought Kay’s head must be, holding the awkward pose just long enough to grab hold of anything he could get his hands on before throwing the larger boy forward. He scrambled to his feet.

“Good thing I work three times as hard as you then.”

“Ow. Did you have to go for my hair? That hurt.” Despite the claimed pain, Kay didn’t seem terribly annoyed. “But if you’re going to be my squire, you’ll need to figure out what makes people special, for good or ill. Praising me and my allies is an important part of a squire’s duties, as is finding creative ways to insult my enemies.”

“Which only matters if I become your squire,” Wart muttered.

“...what did you just say.” Kay demanded softly.

“I said I’m afraid that Merlin wants to stop me from being your squire. And that’s a lie, that’s not what I said, but it’s what I should have said, it’s what I need to say! Merlin wants me to be something I’m not. When he isn’t turning me into an animal, he’s trying to convince me of the most bestial things, telling me the most horrible ideas like they’re plain truths. He’s trying to make me grow up, but it’s all wrong, it’s not how I wanted it to be.”

“Did you think growing up would be fun?” Kay mocked. “All hugs, smiles, and rainbows for Wart. You’re smarter than that. You know what’s waiting for us when I’m knighted. You hear Bedivere’s histories, you know they aren’t like our bedtime stories.

Everyone's selfish and mean. Did you think we can be any different if we want to survive?"

"Well why not?" Wart shot back. "All we want is to earn your name and glory, and then the favor of the king so that he'll let Ector keep ruling this place. What part of that needs us to become backstabbers, robbers, and murderers? We can do what needs to be done without betraying what your father has taught us."

"How do you think Ector got where he is? He was a good soldier, not a good person. And that's what we'll be, long enough to get what I want, and then, if we don't die along the way, we can spend the rest of our lives pretending we're better people than we were, that the world's a nicer place than it is. And it will be a lie. The whole world is rotten, and so are the people in it. Merlin isn't special that way. Neither is father. We won't be special either. I've just figured that out faster than you."

Wart turned away from Kay, "You've given up looking for alternatives faster."

In the darkness, Wart didn't see it coming, but he felt the punch when it arrived. It landed harder than most of Kay's blows, since Wart couldn't brace for it.

"Do you think I like it?" Kay screamed. "Don't you think I want to be the hero who only kills monsters, the knights whose armor always gleams, whose sword never rusts? Who never breaks an oath, who always serves damsels and realm alike without fault or thought of reward? I do want that. Desperately. And I hate that I'll never get it." Kay took a deep shuddering breath. "But my hate doesn't change the fact that if I don't do what Uther asks--whatever he asks--he can take this place from Ector as easily as he gave it, and the new lord might not be as kind as Ector. They might--"

As Kay listed all the terrible ways someone in Ector's position might abuse those in his care, Wart took comfort that Kay still recognized that despite whatever Ector may or may not have done to earn the position, Kay's father was a good man to his people.

"--so I've got to succeed. I've got to. And the only...the only way I'll have the strength to do it at all is if I can trust that you'll be beside me, watching my back. Can I trust that, brother?"

"Stop..." Wart shook his head, "Stop calling me that. I'm not your brother. Brother's are near equals, they split inheritances, they profit from each other's deaths.



Cain and Abel were brothers. Jacob and Esau. Odin and Loki. Nero and Britannicus. I am not your brother. I am your squire. Just your squire. And will always be your squire.”

Kay seemed to finally accept this, “Then as my squire, I require that you learn more of the world, so you can think of clever ways to get us out of doing horrible things. I hear there’s an unpleasant tutor upstairs. Go learn from him.”

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“So what did you learn?”

That turning into a wolf is slightly less painful than turning into a fish. “I learned that loyalty and teamwork can make a wolfpack stronger than a bear.” The venison that they’d defended had been worth the fight. “And I learned that ambush tactics are only as good as the quietest wolf in the pack.”

What with one thing and another, four years had passed since Merlin’s first appearance at Marsh Castle. Wart had grown more critical, Kaye had grown more caustic. Bedivere had begun courting Birch, a girl from the village. Pellinore had married a woman named Peggy, and rarely came to visit anymore. Ector remained stolid and predictable in his schedules. Merlin disappeared for months at a time, each time returning with news of the war’s progress and the inescapable desire to transform Wart into some new creature. The lad had taken his turn being a fish, a fox, a rabbit, a hound, a boar, a frog, an ant, a beaver, a badger, a deer, a squirrel, and most recently, a wolf.

“Pathetic,” Merlin said. “Four months on four legs and you have nothing to say on the pack’s leadership? About alphas, betas, or omegas? About the incredible power of pheromones?”

“I don’t know what most of those words mean,” Arthur paused, processing. “Did...did you just say four months?”

They were standing where Merlin had reverted Wart to his original, human form, not far from where he had discovered Bedivere nearly...no, more than seven years ago.

He'd missed his birthday while his mind was wolfish. The ugly scratch he'd taken across the muzzle was missing when Wart touched his face.

"Did you forget how to count as a wolf? Or were you unable to tell day from night with your wolf eyes? I'll remind you, day is the part when that really shiny ball is way up high."

"It's hard to think with an animal brain. And focusing on anything is almost impossible unless it's right under my nose. Keeping track of time was the least of my priorities."

"Time should never be your least priority," Merlin said, his veneer of disdain and cruelty breaking for a moment to show the teacher underneath. He cleared his throat. "A situation arose in London that I had to see to."

That was likely as good of an apology as Wart could expect from Merlin. He'd figured out recently that Merlin never acted on his threats, never meant his cruelty; it was all part of his strange teaching method, his way of making sure Wart knew how to deal with hostility.

"Let's ensure your human brain is operating at its usual meager capacity," Merlin said. "Expound upon the principles of leadership, as you have come to know them."

This was new. Merlin tolerated questions, but had never before invited Wart to speak his mind on any subject.

"Are you sure Kay shouldn't be here? He's the one that will be leading..."

"He said he needed to train some more with that big horse-riding stick of his," Merlin said.

Wart found it rather odd that Kay always bemoaned being left out of Merlin's lessons, yet Merlin repeatedly reported that Kay rejected his invitations.

"No more worming away from the question. Tell me what makes an effective leader."

Wart inhaled, "When you first arrived, I had no interest in leadership. It's not my duty, so it isn't my concern. If I thought about it at all, it was as a role model, how many people were inspired by Hercules, or Samson, or Cu Chulainn. I dreamed of a thousand different ways I'd get arms, amor, and steed of my own, and then I'd find a bridge to

protect in some corner of the realm, and not let anyone cross unless they...I dunno...admitted my lady love was the most beautiful in all the land, or something. It was a half-developed dream past a dream, because I never thought it could ever happen, but it says a lot about what I wanted most. I wanted to be the King of the Moat, to be the strongest, even if I didn't have any plan for what to do with that strength once I had it.

"That was stupid of me." Wart paused a second, but Merlin didn't take the obvious opportunity to make a mocking addition to that claim. "Strength without purpose is as pointless as being the biggest fish in a shallow moat.

"I started wondering what made humanity different from fish. I decided the most important difference is cooperation. We can build things together that we can barely dream of individually. Castles like Sir Ector's, crops planted across huge fields, thousands of yarrow flowers picked in a single day...that's the kind of thing that makes humanity great. I stopped dreaming about harassing people who want to cross a bridge, and started thinking about how many bridges I could build. I mean, not bridges specifically, and not just me building them. Kay still wants to be a knight, and I'm still obligated to be his squire, but if I could help Kay be influential enough to be able to build a castle of his own, that might be a life well-spent.

"But then I spent that time as an ant. And their society was incredible, all those tunnels, all that food, such great wars all waged by hundreds of thousands of such tiny, weak, fragile creatures. Everyone had their duty. Everyone knew their place in making the hive great. And it was miserable. No, not even miserable, miserable would have been better. Just...empty. No joy. No sorrow. No desire. No dreams. No pleasure. No pain. Just the work in front of you and the compulsion to see it done.

"Clearly something was missing. It isn't enough to be a part of something bigger if you don't get any satisfaction out of what your group accomplishes. That was around the time Pellinore left to get married, and Bedivere started spending all his free time with his girlfriend. That got me thinking; maybe that's enough. Maybe the highest thing we can hope to dream of is also the simplest. Family. Friends. A hot meal and a refreshing drink. Love."

Incredibly, Merlin still didn't interrupt. That sappy sort of emotional stuff was usually the quickest way to earn a lecture about the superiority of logic and intellect from the falsely young enchanter, but today Wart's tutor seemed wholly determined to let Wart finish presenting his thoughts without interruption.

"But--in the past ten minutes really--I'm starting to rethink that position. Again, your transformations were perfect, they let me question the things I'm most sure I know. The love and loyalty of the pack...it was beautiful. Sublime. I think that had way more to do with me losing track of time than being stuck in an animal brain. It wasn't that I couldn't keep track of time, I just...didn't care to. Why would I, when I could spend my time not thinking at all, just reveling in the ecstasy of the hunt, the kill, the feast, the companionship, the acceptance, the respect. If you hadn't transformed me back without my asking, I might have spent my whole life on four legs without ever realizing that I was missing my life as me, my responsibilities to Kay and Ector, my friendship with Bedivere, my passion for knightly things. If I spend my entire life consumed by consumption," Wart felt a tiny surge of pleasure at his own wordplay, something he hadn't really been capable of for the past few months, "then I might be my most true self, but I'm wouldn't spend enough time in self-examination to even appreciate that truth."

Wart wasn't sure that last bit made sense, but soldiered on all the same, "So I think the most human thing we can do is exactly this: reflection, learning, and growth. And that's something anyone can do, as long as they can find the time, the opportunity, and the desire to do so."

Wart fell silent, waiting for Merlin's inevitable avalanche of criticism.

"Is that it? That is to be your answer?"

"Yes."

"That is your answer to my question about leadership?"

"I already said 'yes.'"

Merlin turned away from Wart, staring up into the foliage.

"Your answer did not once make mention of the word leadership. Or leader. Or king, duke, baron, count, general, admiral, cardinal, priest, headmaster, or any other

position of power that you might hope to hold. So,” Merlin turned on Wart, “So what in the world did any of that have to do with leadership in any way?”

“Oh, I thought that was obvious,” Wart said. “Leadership, being a leader, is all about leading, taking people from one place and bringing them someplace else. So if you’re going to be a good leader, you’ve got to figure out what that place you’re going to is. If you can get thousands of people to traipse after you, but you lead them into a swamp, or get lost in a desert, or fall off a cliff, you’re a way worse leader than someone who can convince a dozen people to follow them to paradise, right?”

“Is that so?” Merlin sneered. Here came the storm. “And while you’re leading your twelve apostles to *paradise*, what do you plan on doing when the bad leader’s multitude attacks, killing your men, kidnapping their wives, and stealing the food of your children? Still think you’ll make it to paradise, oh great leader? No, you will die and be forgotten, remembered only to be cursed by those now being led by a stronger leader.

“How you lead matters leagues more than where you lead. Once you have power, you can leverage that power to see further ahead in the direction you’re moving, and thus divert disaster, but you must have that power. Power to protect, or to destroy, to take or to give. Power to protect your power, and power to seize more power.

“The King of the Moat was not a pathetic figure, but one that is transcendental. He has absolute power, there is none who can threaten him. He can do anything he likes, but he doesn’t need to do anything. He is an ideal, a god, the goal all leaders strive for as they amass power. You humans don’t have it so easy. You’re too fragile, too weak. The frailest of your enemies could destroy you with the smallest of blades if they catch you asleep. So human leaders must find strength of a different kind, mere muscles, sharp weapons, and impenetrable armor simply isn’t enough.

“The Ant Queen shows us the solution: absolute monarchy. As a leader, dissension is weakness, every question to your authority is a seed waiting to bloom into mutiny. The Ant Queen wields the strength of her subjects without fear of that same strength being turned against her. Thus, she is the nation, and the nation is her, every worker, every soldier naught but an extant muscle, bone, or ligament of her great,

distended body, to be used for whatever grand purpose she may choose to undertake. Again, humanity can only strive to imitate her elegance. Human subjects are full of ego, self-importance, laziness, and self-preservation which can never truly be worked out, no matter the extent of their training. So human leaders live in constant fear of the incompetence and impertinence of those who follow behind.

“And so we must learn from the wolves. The Alpha leads, the pack follows, and the prey is helpless. The alpha must be strong himself, he must be able to strike down any rebellion among his greatest warriors, but in return, they can enforce his will, fight his battles, tame and exploit the wilderness at his pleasure. The pack is the alpha’s greatest strength, and his most glaring weakness. This is what you must--must!--understand. It is absolutely essential!”

“Essential for what?” Wart asked. Merlin hated being interrupted, but this point had been pressing upon Wart’s soul for far too long. “You talk like this is important for me, personally, that one day I’ll look up to authority and see only God, that I’ll have the opportunity to make choices that will decide the fate of towns, but that’s not who I am, it’s not *what* I am. I’ve been adopted by a kind noble, but that doesn’t make me noble, not by law or norm. And even if it were, Ector does not own vast lands or command large armies. That is not my place. It cannot be my place. It’s fun to think about, but it does not matter, it is not essential!”

Merlin’s form shimmered in Wart’s eyes. He blinked hard, tried to master the pace of his breathing.

“We’re done for today.” Merlin was angry. He didn’t even sound annoyed. “You’ll find some books in your room, make sure that you’ve read them by the next time I come. Keep up with your history and languages, and leave off the math; you’ve learned enough of that for your lifetime.”

And with that, Merlin vanished, leaving Wart alone on the edge of the forest.

Wart didn’t hurry as he made his way home. He missed his adoptive family, certainly, and odds were good that they were worried about him, but five minutes made little difference after four months, and Wart wanted time to think about what Merlin said.

Wart was convinced that Merlin didn't believe everything he said. He almost thought that Merlin didn't believe anything he said, he just disagreed with everything anyone said as part of his teaching process, force his students--mostly Wart--to question everything they assume, make them justify every part of everything they think.

And Wart had been making a huge assumption. Should it be a leader's duty to care for their people?

Certainly not every leader thought so. Bedivere's histories spoke of many kings and emperors who acted just as Merlin had said: use power to hold power, use power to gain power, use power to gain wealth, use wealth for self-indulgence, to indulge friends for their pleasure, to indulge allies for more power. Did that make them bad leaders?

If it did, had there ever been any good leaders?

Religion answered that question with a resounding yes. Mythology and the stories often agreed. But even then, those who were good and decent, who used their power to protect their people never seemed to accomplish as much or rule for as long as those unbound by scruples. Was Hector more powerful than Zeus? Did Jesus rule a domain more vast than Alexander the Great? Would Sir Ector have as great an influence on the world as Emperor Nero?

These were the wrong questions. It's not about what is, but what should be. Focus on the ideal. Climb towards it, always.

And there's another assumption.

This one, at least, Wart found easy to justify. For the Marsh Castle and the Forest Savage around it, people didn't have to choose between the real and the ideal leader.

They had Sir Ector.

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"Where were you last night, Kay?"

Wart often woke before the two other young men who shared his room, and was half-done dressing as Kay first showed signs of life.

"You missed most of Ralph's singing; it was a great bit of fun, it was."

The night prior had been Marsh Castle's harvest feast, one of the few times each year that everyone in the town squeezed into the great hall for the sake of pure revelry. There was always plenty of food, too much drink, music and dancing and laughing and games. Praise for everyone's hard work all year flowed as freely as the ale, and the evening always wrapped up with old man Ralph, who fancied himself the town's historian, chanting more than six-hundred verses of "*The Years of our Town.*" Highlights always included the twenty-third verse, when a dragon flew sort of nearby, the x verse when Joseph of Arimathea ate lunch at our inn, the y verse when the first castle was built for the new citylord, the y+1 verse when the castle collapsed during a summer storm, the y+20 when that citylord's son died fighting for Boudica, and the town went without a citylord for fifteen years, the y+35 verse when the new citylord built another castle, the y+37 verse when that castle also collapsed, this time in a blizzard, the z verse, when a lost giant stopped by for directions, and the p-36 verse, when old king Constantine paused his unifying war to spend a week nearly dying of dysentery in the town's inn, and the entrance to the modern age in p-35, when Constantine thanked the town by appointing Ector as Citylord and building him a new castle, which so far hadn't collapsed. Wart was particularly fond of p-11, where he was mentioned as having climbed the tallest tree within sight of the town, and p-4, a hilarious memory of the time Ector fell off of a cart and landed astride an exceptionally ornery pig, which Ector proceeded to ride backwards through town like a very silly steed. In all, Ralph's performance usually lasted half the night, all the while everyone waited to hear who and what would be included in the new years' verse.

"Shove off, Wart, I'm not awake yet," Kay grumbled.

"I'm not letting this drop, Kay, and neither will Sir Ector," Wart pressed. "This isn't the first time you've snuck out in the night. Where are you going?"

"I told you to shove off."

"Put the details together, Wart," Bedivere said from his bed. "Kay, like you, is on the cusp of manhood, with all the curiosity and desire that entails. Yesterday, he knew everyone would be paying attention to Ralph, and chose that moment to find not just a



moment of privacy, but several hours, all during the night, when he couldn't enjoy any of his typical passions. And now he is asking for discretion."

"Yeah, I thought he must be with a girl too, at first," Wart said. "But I checked around the hall, and not a single girl was missing from our town."

"Really?" Bedivere said. He sat up slowly. "In the army, I sometimes heard speak of men who prefer the companionship of other men to that of women, in...this kind of situation."

"Shove off, the both of you," Kay said, tossing off his blankets and grabbing his breeches. "There's more people in the world than what you'll find in our one tiny village."

"Wait," Wart said, "Are you saying you were meeting with someone that doesn't live in our village?" Wart knew that such people exist, but in all his years, only a small handful of people had ever wandered into their village from the outside world.

And Kay's words, 'tiny village.' Kay was feeling cramped here. A very real future wrote itself to life in Wart's mind, one where, as Kay's squire, Wart would be forced to travel far away from Sir Ector and Bedivere, from Marsh Castle, the Savage Forest, and all the people he'd grown up knowing.

And what if Kay died? Being a knight was dangerous business, no matter how skilled you became, or how strong your armor. Could Wart possibly thrive in the great wide world out there without Kay at his side?

"I wasn't here last night, now I'm back. End of story." Kay yawned. "Let's get some breakfast. Should still be some good leftovers."

Wart looked to Bedivere for support as Kay stomped from their room, but the young man was suddenly very focused on tying his breeches, and nothing else.

Wart sighed, accepting he'd get no resolution to this mystery today. "What's so great about kissing anyways?"

That got Bedivere's attention.

"You kiss Birch every time you think no one is watching. Why? Does she taste good? I've tried smooshing my lips against my arm before, but it doesn't feel good like in the stories, I just end up feeling silly. And—"

“Stop, stop.” Bedivere interrupted, his face unusually pink. He took a deep breath. “Who told you Birch let me kiss her?”

Wart rolled his eyes, “The whole town knows. Birch’s father was over a few weeks ago to talk to Sir Ector about dowries. Also the weather; he’s worried this drought won’t—“

“Dowry?” Bedivere said in a very undignified squeak. “But she...we...we just...but never...!”

“Now I’m even more confused,” said Wart. “I thought you liked Birch.”

“I did. I do!” Bedivere said, recovering some part of his ability to speak. “But if we get married...what do you know about birds and bees.”

“Not much,” Wart said, now grumpy to go along with confused, “Merlin won’t turn me into anything that can fly. He says I’m too stupid to figure out arrow death names, so I’m sure to crash and waste his education. But I figured out how to swim with fins and run with extra legs, I just know I could fly if I had the chance! But what does any of that have to do with kissing?”

Bedivere blew out a long, slow breath. “Nothing. Nothing at all. Let’s see...” He sat back down on his bed, and Wart sat on the ground in front of him. “I like kissing not because of how my lips feel, or even how I feel, but because of how *we* feel. Does that make sense?”

Wart shook his head.

“I don’t know if I’m explaining it right, or if I’m even doing it right. It’s certainly nothing like how some of the soldiers talked about how they spend time with women. Maybe it isn’t something that can really be explained at all, and you’ll just have to figure it out for yourself. But for me...” a wistful sort of look crept across Bedivere’s face, the one Wart had only ever seen before when Bedivere talked about his parents. “What makes kissing Birch so great isn’t the kissing. Not that she’s a bad kisser; she might be, I’ve never kissed anyone else, but I like it a whole lot regardless. But that’s not the point. What makes her kisses great is that she lets me kiss her. And I let her kiss me. I wouldn’t let just anyone kiss me, but I let her, because she’s kind, because she’s such a hard worker, because she’s generous, because when she sees something she likes, she

has this smile that's so genuine, it twists my guts and makes my heart hurt in a way I that I want to never end, and when she smiles at me like that, I know it's because she sees something in me that...that I'm not, but that I could be, a me without all my faults, and that's how I see her. In my head, I know she's human, she's flawed, she makes mistakes, but in my heart she is perfect, in my eyes she is flawless. And since we see each other like that, we don't need to pretend to be strong or tough, we can be honest, vulnerable, exposed. We can reveal old wounds we've gotten very good at hiding, harms that could destroy us if they were aggravated, and we can help to soothe them, and begin to heal. To be better. To be the shining knight she thinks me to be."

Bedivere stopped abruptly, seemingly just remembering that Wart was hanging on his every word. A fiery flush flooded his face, and he turned to look out the window.

Wart didn't think he had ever heard Bedivere say so many words at once before, even when he was reading old histories for their education. It made Wart realize, with a small ache behind his heart, that Bedivere really had been hiding parts of himself ever since he'd come to the castle.

Wart tried to break the rather awkward silence. "So...you like to kiss her, because it's a sign she thinks you're strong and clever, and that means you can be weak and dumb, and that makes you stronger and cleverer?"

"More clever, Wart, not cleverer. A squire with poor grammar reflects poorly on his knight's intelligence." Something of Bedivere's usual scholarly reticence had returned, the too-brief glimpse of honest emotion retreating behind grammatical forms. "But fundamentally yes. I do believe that's what makes romantic love different from friendship or familial love: the combination of enough trust to reveal the fractures in our soul, the desire to fill those cracks with compassion and wisdom, and the dedication to do so again and again until those involved are much more together than they are apart."

Wart rolled that over in his mind. He pulled his ears and then shook his head. "I don't think that makes any sense. I've always thought you were strong and clever, and we've never kissed. Although," Wart added as he got to his feet, "maybe it is something

I'll have to figure out for myself. But if you ever feel like showing me your weak spots, I promise I'll do my best to make them strong."

Bedivere looked rather shocked at that statement, but his face quickly melted into a small smile. "Thank you, Arthur. That's very kind of you."

"Ah, geez, don't call me that. I'm Wart! Arthur is such a noble-person name."

"I know. Perhaps that's why it seemed terribly appropriate at that moment. My apologies."

Wart turned away very quickly, which had nothing at all to do with the heat igniting his face at the implied compliment. "Come on, we better get downstairs before Kay eats all the leftovers."

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"Still, Wart?"

"Yes, Sir Ector. I'm certain there's something important here."

"Hrmph. Then maybe I can help you find it."

The knight settled his bulk onto the frosty ground beside where Wart was kneeling. Both watched the door of the tiny, rarely-used chapel that occupied a corner of Marsh Castle's grounds. Within, Kay's vigil was drawing to a close. When he emerged, he would be wearing his father's old armor, newly refitted, and he would swear the oaths that would make him a knight.

Wart could tell the old knight was working himself up to say something. One last lesson, perhaps? A warning to his son's future squire, to protect Kay with his life? A long-hidden secret about Wart's lineage?

Wart refocused on his aching knees. The dull ache was an appropriate solution for the idle thoughts. Ector would speak when he was ready. Preparing responses to imagined scenarios would only rob his reply of authenticity. In the meantime, his own thoughts were enough to keep him occupied.

If the king is unworthy, what is a squire to do?

A squire's foremost duty is to his knight, to make them ready to wage battle, pursue glory, and evade shameful death. It's everything as dull as keeping his armor polished and as dangerous as accompanying him into battle. To evade shameful death is the crux. Is it better to march along the safe path muddied by shame or to risk an honorable execution? An early execution prevents a lifetime of penitential good works. But without knights behaving dishonorably, does anyone need defending?

In the stories, bandits, pirates and monsters are supposed to threaten villages so knights can defend the populace, but Wart had never seen Ector do anything like that around his home. The only time Ector acted like their chunk of the Forest Sauvage was under threat, it was because they were being visited by someone who wore armor atop a horse.

Ector breathed into his hands, "Bedivere spoke to me last night. Said a lot of rubbish about gratitude, but that he was leaving the forest. He means to become a monk, or a priest, find some church to take him in, bury his nose in books. Sounds an awful fate to me, but it's his life to throw away."

Ector hadn't asked a question, so Wart said nothing. Bedivere had told him of his plan months ago, though Wart hadn't had time to think of it lately, what with all the preparations for Kay's knighting.

Wart was unsure how to feel about Bedivere's departure. He was already leaving everyone else behind, following Kay on his quest for glory and riches, so it made little difference whether he wouldn't be seeing Bedivere because he stayed here or if he didn't see Bedivere because he was deep in an abbey somewhere far away. The simple truth in either case was that he would miss Bedivere dearly. Though he did still mourn Bedivere's courtship of Birch. They'd seemed happy together, and Bedivere had hardly smiled since he'd told Birch of his plans.

Wart gave up that thought. As Ector said, Bedivere's life was Bedivere's.

Do other villages have the same kinds of troubles? It was difficult, sometimes, to tell which parts of the stories were made up, and how far they ran from the truth. Wart was very sure other places had many more coins than they did, and many more of the things that coins can buy: food, arms, colorful clothes, feather beds and so on. Wart

had never had a coin, but was certain he would love it if he ever had one, given what the heroes in the stories did to protect or recover them.

Focus. Sir Ector would demand Wart's attention soon, and Wart ought not deny him. This thought must be resolved.

Is it simply a matter of honor? Or rather, is honor the same as glory? Is honor the opposite of shame? Is honor simply goodness by another name, or must that be disentangled and thought of separately as well?

No, that is not necessary. Good and evil, honorable and shameful, these can be identified easily enough in most cases. But when society or oaths demand that a person do something they know to be wrong, should they do it, if the harm done is less than the punishment for not doing the thing? How much villainy is acceptable if it is to save a life? Does it matter if the life saved is the villain's?

Ector cleared his throat. "Though I suppose he doesn't see it that way. Bedivere, I mean, and throwing his life away." It was unlike him to make smalltalk like this, usually he only opened his mouth to eat or to speak his mind as directly as possible. "He seems to actually enjoy that reading business. Madness.

"But I don't worry about him, I'll tell you that. And I'll tell you why: that boy has thought it all through. He knows the risks, the sacrifice, and he chose it for himself."

There it was. "You don't think that I'm worthy to be Kay's squire."

"Don't be ridiculous, of course you're worthy. I raised you. It's not about worth, but want."

"A squire puts the needs and wants of his knight before his own," Wart intoned from memory.

"Yes, but you're not a squire yet, are you? You can't swear your oaths to Kay until Kay says his oaths to the realm. So you have a few hours yet to consider what it is that you want."

"Being Kay's squire is my role. We've all said so for years."

"And you've more than earned it." Ector clapped Wart on the back. "But I've known many men to spend their whole lives living out a dream of a month that left them miserable for decades."

Wart couldn't think about that. Decades were far too far away. And if he wasn't Kay's squire, what was he? He couldn't be a knight without a surname, he wouldn't be a bandit, and he didn't have the skills to be anything else. He wouldn't be nothing. But he couldn't contradict Ector either.

So Wart deflected.

"Is that why you left the king?"

Ector never talked about

Ector discusses his wife and how she was instrumental to his abandoning his post with Uther.

The scene ends with Merlin announcing the Sword in the Stone and passing along Uther's invitation to a Gwyn hunting expedition.

### ***The Tale of Morgan le Faye:***

"Travelers on the road!"

Morganna grimaced into her arm. The world hadn't seemed so cold when she was asleep.

"Travelers on the road!"

Morganna squeezed her eyes tighter, a futile effort to shut out the squawking voice circling above.

"Travelers on the road!"

Morganna's annoyance found an outlet in the noisome crow she'd enchanted. Without rising from her resting place of dirt and leaves, she thrust an open hand into

the air, retrieving the magic she had infused into the bird the prior evening. She was still tired, her craft sloppy. The crow burst mid-flight, feather and bone and viscera raining around and upon her prone form.

Disgusted, mostly with her carelessness, but also with the blood and bile now speckled across her skin, Morganna gingerly stood, careful not to disrupt the message her unfortunate pet had painted around the glade.

Morganna focused on her old lessons as she gazed around herself. Magic always leaves a trace, and she knew nobody's magic so well as her own.

“Granted, I’ve never exploded a bird before, but let’s not let details get in the way of new knowledge.”

Morganna paced to and fro across the clearing, from north to west, east to south, and around the edges, always stepping on the late afternoon shadows where she could, muttering to herself, always muttering.

“Pinions all in groups of five...

“An inverted double cross, or am I standing in the wrong...

“Is that celestial? What month is it...

“A mirror could account for that, but what would that mean? Who exists as a reflection...

“Eye, pierced by claw...

“Beak wide open...

“Where is the other leg? Gone...

“But then--Oh!”

Morganna’s eyes had been drawn to a point just above her left breast, where two tiny trails of blood led to the bird’s beakless skull, embedded in her skin. The wound was not deep, but even so, she marvelled at her own narrowmindedness, that she could fail to notice such a thing.

A moment later, her adrenaline blazed into needless life at the thought of how nearly the bone had been to piercing her heart.

A moment after that, her adrenaline found an outlet as her brain put together what that sign meant.



Intellectual love.

“It can’t be...It can’t possibly be! Oh, but what if it is!” Morganna danced about on the shadows, looking for a contradiction in her interpretation of the crow’s entrails. Five travelers on the road, two faking their faith, one a philosopher (maybe), one lacking a limb, one self-blinded (probably metaphorically), and one would infect Morganna’s mind with something to love.

Who could resist that?

Morganna halted herself, refusing to be swept away by delightful distraction without considering the cost. She’d camped around this stretch of road for the better part of a month now, awaiting the passing of the mad magic. Her fae-mother had told her it might be found here, had instructed her to learn what she might from the one who wielded it.

If she left now, she may never find it, may never be allowed to return to that place, may be trapped among filthy, disgusting, fascinating humans for the rest of her life.

If she stayed, she may grow filthier yet, continuing to consume uninteresting creatures while a vague prophecy proved inaccurate. Prescience on the scale which had sent Morganna this far could never be trusted in full, the future an erratic eel, ever squirming out of grip and sight even when grasped tight. And all that assuming the maddened magic truly existed, and was not an invention of the storytellers.

Morganna made her decision with a wide grin.

She bent, plucking the undamaged crow eye from where it lay on a mound of down. She pressed a fingernail into it, catching the translucent gel within on a fingertip. She smeared the ooze across one eyelid.

Fae magic could be disgusting, but so was the rest of life. Meals were made from the mutilated carcasses of filthy animals, from crops grown large from their own diet of feces and rot. Even sex, that sometimes-sacred foundation to life and human civilization, produced a variety of unpleasant fluids which are exchanged, shared, and smeared all over the participants. Or so she’d been told.

“More importantly,” Morganna thought as she opened her fresh eye, “fae magic is effective.” With a crow imbued eye, Morganna might have admired colors most people would never imagine, or read fine script from leagues away, but for now she looked only for her next meal. Options were plentiful, seen more easily by crow than woman: the forest teemed with life, and all had one use or another, the most potent aid often stripped from the lowliest creatures. Morganna could harvest rabbits for their sensitive ears and nose, rats for digestion or surviving disease or poison, ants for their chitinous armor, even worms could let her heal and regrow from injuries that would end an unenhanced human’s mortal journey.

Morganna’s dark crow eye found her target, perched precariously upon a brittle branch, not twenty paces away. Morganna selected a small rock, watching for a moment of distraction before testing her entirely mundane throwing arm. A tiny head swiveled the wrong way, and Morgan loosed her makeshift weapon.

“Ha! Yes!”

Her aim was true, and a young red squirrel fell twenty feet to the forest floor, where it lay quite still.

Barely believing it had worked, Morganna allowed the crow essence infecting her eye to bleed out into the Other. Best never to rely on a dead beast overlong.

Morganna had tugged on the threadbare garment which had served as her blanket and was almost upon the felled verming when she remembered her manners.

She turned back to the grisly glade, kneeling with fluid dignity, “Thank you, crow, for the aid I have taken and the life you gave. I didn’t really mean to kill you, that was an accident, sorry about that. If I ever see you on the other side, I’ll give you a fine feast of berries and mice. Bye!”

Morgan picked up the dazed squirrel from where it lay and broke the rodent’s neck with a quick, brutal wrench of the wrist. No need to extend its suffering. She set the squirrel on the ground, rushing a bow, hurried gratitude spilling from her lips before producing a knife from her belt and setting to work.

She ought not be excited. It was disrespectful. Sacreligious. Just because she knew the next part was going to be a whole lot of fun was a poor reason to disregard the usual gratitude she extended towards her benefactor.

That didn't mean she could really help it though.

The ignorant masses, especially these Christians coming to the isle from the South, often spoke about the fae in either of two ways. Either they were trickster sprits, malevolent and deceptive, but too small and too impulsive to be truly dangerous, or they are incomprehensible, impossible, omnipotent beings made of magic and lightning and the wrath of felled trees, always eager to punish anyone who wandered too deep into wood or bog. Both were almost entirely wrong.

Gruesome work completed, Morgan bowed to the squirrel's desecrated corpse. Then, with unhuman but not unnatural speed and grace, she leapt up the trunk of a nearby ash tree. Up and higher she climbed, infused eyes finding strong branches, altered fingers and toes finding secure anchors for her weight, squirrely nerves maintaining balance and emboldening her daring steps. But even as she began to launch herself from one tree to the next, the muscles were all her own, earned over years living between worlds.

The wind's whistling delighted Morgan as she threw herself from branch to branch with reckless abandon. Hair dancing in a rush behind her, she made her way to the road, searching for the travelers her crow had reported pre-mortem. Moving at ground level might have been faster, especially as she followed the path south, her way clear of thorn, bramble, and pitfall, but stealth was safer. She was curious about these travelers, yes, particularly the one with the love-dovey gore prophecy, but she did not trust them. A woman traveling alone made for tempting prey to roving bandits, homesick merchants, and self-righteous knights alike, especially a woman as delectably gorgeous as Morgan knew herself to be, what with her nubile figure, shimmering raven tresses, entrancing green eyes, and flawless skin.

Morgan put her vanity back on its leash. Though she was capable of making herself--without magic--every bit as beautiful as she envisioned herself, current reality was that she'd lost both weight and muscle tone since leaving the fae, she'd gone days

without tending to her hair before sleeping on the forest floor all day, one eye was now disquietingly squirrely, while her skin was liberally flecked with crow and squirrel viscera.

She quieted her vanity's horrified screams by promising herself she'd bathe before introducing herself to her intellectual love.

Intellectual love. She was sure she'd read the signs correctly, but even so, the term was starting to sound unreal in her own mind. What was that even supposed to mean? Was it the complement of lust, all aspects of romantic love outside physical desire? Was she going to fall in love based only on someone's mentality? Was she going to see some brains and think they were really hot?

"Oh thank goodness, there they are. That train of thought was getting really weird. Now let's see what we're dealing with."

As predicted, there were five, all men. The group rode down the narrow road in an odd formation. Two were mounted upon horses, one following the other. Another two walked besides the horses, while the fifth straggled behind.

A man with more red hair beneath his bulbous nose than upon his sweat-shining scalp rode upon one of two horses, a handsome brown behemoth.

Morgan had never sampled of horse before, but the prospect intrigued her. So much strength...

The big armored fellow walking next to the horse might be the rider's son or nephew, judging by their identical coloring. It had been years since Morgan had seen a man in armor. The metal clanked more in her memories than her ears; perhaps dirt muffled the clatter better than her father's flagstones. The younger man seemed determined to make up for his armor's failure to alert the entire valley of their passing through overloud conversation.

"I just don't understand why anyone should care about some stone sword. Steel is stronger, more kingly"

"Kay, if you open your mouth every time you're confused, some great bird is bound to start building a nest there. Before long, the lower half of your skull will be full of garbage, and while it would be nice for both halves of your head to match, I don't

know that I could stand a version of you that smells even worse.” The speaker was more child than man, riding both the second horse and the edge of adolescence.

“Perhaps your time would be better spent answering instead of abusing.” This request came from the straggler. He wore a gray cape draped over one shoulder so that only one arm could function, precisely the kind of ‘style over practicality’ Morgan’s father had so loudly denounced in woman’s fashion during her childhood. All the same, the look complimented the man’s clean-shaven face and tied-back hair. He was quite beautiful, even with those tired eyes. “Your insults are often more lengthy than your tutelage, Merlin.”

Morgan almost fell off of her perch.

“Your insults are often more lengthy than your tutelage,” the boy, Merlin apparently, had twisted his voice to sound deliberately whiny and petulant. Compounded upon his already bratty demeanor, it was a small wonder that nobody made any effort to stifle his deplorable manners. “The insults are part of my tutelage, Bed-wet-ivere. I don’t call Kay an idiot for my own pleasure, but so that he’ll know that he and his questions are idiotic so in times of mortality or dignity, he will know not to interfere with the plans of his commanders.”

The big armored fellow, Kay, looked near murderous at this assessment, but said nothing in his own defense.

Smirking in self-satisfaction, Merlin went on, “As for why his question is astoundingly moronic, there is no stone sword. There is a sword in an anvil, the both of them set upon a large stone, all of which appeared overnight in the church courtyard in Londinium, placed there by God almighty himself. Upon the stone is a divine inscription, which states, ‘Whoso pulleth out the sword from this stone and anvil is rightwise king born of all Britain.’ Not since King Constantine’s foul murder has the Isle had a true High King. The land bleeds as brother fights against brother, and all Britain’s enemies come to feast upon her weakness. The people cry out in one voice for a true king, one who will bring peace and prosperity to our kingdom, and conquer all her foes. That is why the sword in the stone is so essential; it alone is capable of judging

every man's true caliber, bringing clarity to these murky times, and will unite the kingdom.

"And you will note, Bedifear, that the instruction was far lengthier than the insult." Merlin added in afterthought.

"I agree with Sir Kay. This entire 'Sword in the Stone' business is riddled with confusions." This voice flowed out from under a deep hood, over the thick tome carried by the hunched figure walking besides Merlin, who appeared to be reading as they walked.

"Oh?" Merlin's disdain faltered, but didn't truly vanish. "Your mind is not so easily flustered as Kay. What new insight do you have to share, Wart?"

Wart shrugged, face still hidden, staring at his book. "No insights, just questions. Did somebody see God put the sword there? Did the almighty stop and introduce himself so people would know whose sword it is? If not, why do people think it was put there by the Christian God and not Arawn, Odin, or Zeus, or by you, or Mim, or Baba Yaga, or by a prankster smith with a couple strong friends? After all, why would a god of peace select their chosen leader with a sword? This may be a time of war, but why not a weapon with a use outside battle. An axe is the tool of the lumberjack, carpenters could use a hammer, a cook can never have too many knives, bows and spears are reliable tools for the hunter, but swords are only ever forged to slay those with souls. And as for--"

"You're supposed to be reading, Wart-face," Merlin said. "The Sword in the Stone is what it is, and when we get to Londinium, you and all Uther's allies will test their worth in the courtyard of the old church."

"I can multitask," the hooded man, Wart, said, book hovering beneath his nose. "But why would Uther let anyone touch the sword? Isn't he fighting to claim the crown for himself? If he can't pull it out himself, wouldn't he make sure to kill anyone who could, and anyone who tried would be guilty of treason, from his point of view?"

"Multitasking is a myth," Merlin said. "And Uther has a crown. What Uther wants is chaos. Vortigern's armies are stronger and his strategies are craftier. A third claimant from among Uther's allies can only hurt Vortigern's position."

“People multitask all the time. I’m walking and talking and reading. You’re riding and scoffing. But the bit about chaos makes some sense. Do you imagine Uther will try to adopt the sword-puller, or marry them into the royal family, or something in that vein? Gain allies through association with divine right?”

“The human mind is ever and only capable of focusing on one thing at a time. You may be able to switch back and forth quickly, as you seem to be doing where your reading and this conversation are concerned, or allow your body to perform a rehearsed task automatically, accounting for your continued walking, breathing, and the beating of your heart. But the mind’s focus is nevertheless singular, and attempting to split it only results in reduced performance. If you think you can possibly keep up with my conversational skills and your reading, you only display your own ignorance of your limitations all the more plainly while insulting me at the same time. So in that small way, yes, you are multitasking. And what’s more, I don’t ‘imagine’ anything about Uther, or the future. I know things. And Uther’s plans, like the man himself, are mostly irrelevant.”

“Irrelevant?” Sir Kay’s fury was evident in the single word, but he went on all the same, “Uther Pendragon is the most noble man in the realm, the one who holds my vows of knighthood, king of all Britain.”

“There’s more to being king than wearing a crown and sitting on a throne. In nearly fifteen years as ‘king,’ Uther has never quelled the rebellion among his own people, nor protected his borders from invaders. Yes, he has followers, bootlickers, looking to line their own pockets with borrowed wealth and glory, but not for much longer. Uther’s death is at hand.”

“Enough.” The other mounted man had spoken at last, grunting his disapproval. “There are some that would call that kind of talk treasonous, and string us all up just for travelling with you. So you’ll mind your tongue, magician. There’s no telling who might be listening, especially once we reach Londinium.”

Merlin opened his mouth to protest, but the balding man spoke over him. “Enough talk. Let Wart read in peace.”

Wart's head sank another few inches, nose nearly touching the ink of his book. Then he sighed, standing up straight.

He was taller than Morgan expected.

"I'm sorry, Sir Ector, but I can't read any further this evening. It's gotten too dark."

"Hrmph. Then we make camp. Top of that hill." Sir Ector clicked his tongue and led his horse a ways off the trail, his retainers following after.

Morgan slipped out of her tree, feeling the squirrel's strengths waning in her system. Her mind was faintly afire as she wound her way to the river.

'That obnoxious little brat is Merlin?' Morgan thought, 'How? Why?' The "how" was easily solved: magic. But why? People in her father's court had told tales of Merlin the Magician more than a decade ago. Why would anyone choose to look the part of a child for more than fifteen years?

Questions for later. For now, she had found the magic without trace, and she knew where they were camping for the night. She'd get washed up and have a chat with them. Then she'd decide whether or not to kill Merlin.

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Morgan hid outside the ring of fire light, prone beneath a tangle of thornbush. Getting into that position without making a sound had nearly ruined her efforts to clean herself, but the safety was worth the indignity. One didn't grow old while living dangerously by being incautious. She didn't much like the idea of aging, but the prospect of death was ever so much worse. So final. So boring.

She'd been watching Sir Ector's band drifting to sleep for the better part of an hour. The stout patriarch had set Wart to be vigilant through the first watch, and was now snoring peacefully. His son, Sir Kay, somehow looking even larger now that he was out of his armor, might have been dead for how still he lay in sleep. Merlin and the



pretty one had taken longer to embrace sleep, but Wart's soft singing had lulled the both out of consciousness in due time.

The hooded man still sang to himself as he busied himself about their small camp, stoking the sputtering fire, caring for the horses and their equipment:

*Now this shall be a tale about Cu Chulainn  
A warrior you know for his youth and fame  
A man who would go on to give Medb shame  
Who bested all the beasts of Morrigan  
But this is not that tale*

*And yet this is a tale about Cu Chulainn,  
Though not for his strength for he'd not yet claimed  
His terrible spear, nor had it been named.  
Before his filicide could be blamed,  
For this is not that tale.*

Wart paused in his work, suddenly tense. He wasn't looking at Morgan's hiding spot, but at a place some ten feet to the left. For what felt like the dozenth time that evening, Morgan regretted her crow's death; it would have made a marvelous distraction to any errant noise she couldn't hide.

Wart slipped a knife free from one of the horses saddles and crept towards his companions. He knew someone was out there. He'd wake them up. They'd search for her. They would find her. And then...

Morgan couldn't let that happen. Doing nothing wasn't an option. She had to act. To run. She might be caught. To fight. She might lose. Or...

Confuse what can't be conquered.

*Chulainn was a boy when he sought Scáthach  
A woman, a warrior, a witch of the dark.*

*He needed her training, her wisdom, a spark  
Of her greatness, for she was by far  
The strongest in all of the tales.*

Morgan stood as she sang, keeping just within the shadows, keeping her voice down even as she announced herself. She had Wart's attention, and didn't much care for his companions to wake just yet. Escaping one man was one thing; escaping a half dozen was something else entirely.

Wart squinted at her. Or at least, Morgan thought he did. With the fire behind him, and his hood still up, his face was as masked by the darkness as she herself. But he wasn't moving to wake his companions, so that was something.

*Chulainn was a young knight of Ulster  
Spear, sword, and saddle were all that he knew  
These woods, this woman, so wild and wondrous  
So he summoned his courage and wit  
And just hoped he wouldn't mess it up.*

Morgan giggled. Actually giggled, she hadn't giggled like that since....she couldn't remember when. She wouldn't remember when, this wasn't her, she didn't giggle, she was dark and mysterious and powerful and dangerous and sexy and she was not cute. She refused to be cute again.

Halting her...giggling...with an undignified but mercifully quiet snort, Morgan composed herself. "That was quite terrible. Your rhyme scheme was completely erratic."

"My tutor was never very interested in poetry," Wart admitted. "The fire is warm, if you'd like to come closer."

"Darkness is safer."

"And more threatening."

"Are you scared of me?"

“Should I?”

Morgan smiled. “Yes.”

Wart paused to consider her, “I don’t see why I should be.”

“No? Am I too beautiful to be sinister, to be a bandit or an assassin? Too eloquent to be mad? Have you never heard of the witches of the wood? Druids and dryads and nature spirits, fae and all the other shape-changing beasties that stalk the night?”

“Oh, I don’t mean to suggest that you aren’t dangerous. Anyone can be dangerous if they want to be, and if you’re surviving this deep in the Forest Sauvage, you’re either very, very lucky, or you can be terribly skillful when you need to be. But I’ve met madmen, I’ve met bandits, and I’ve dealt with more magic than I’d care to, and I’ve come to a very comforting conclusion.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“I’ve found people don’t really like hurting people. They make mistakes, and their emotions might get the better of them, but given a chance to think things through, people will choose to do the right thing.”

Morgan’s smile dropped. Suddenly this mysterious boy just wasn’t very interesting. She considered, for just a moment, whether it was worth her time to find words that could properly express how profoundly idiotic the fool’s optimism truly was.

Instead, she left without a word.

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“You absolute imbecile. You moron. Simpleton. Has your brain been scrambled? Were you dropped on your head? From the top of a cliff? Or are you somehow both blind and deaf, and only converse through gibbering mouth noises and sheer luck? What bard’s tale do you think you live in? Three of your companions carry swords; why do you think that is?”

Merlin never took a shift keeping watch last night. This day had played out rather similarly to the last. After waking in an unfamiliar part of the forest, she’d

requisitioned the olfaction off of a rat, tracked down the travellers, and ambushed Wart while his friends lay asleep around him.

“People love hurting other people. They’re ashamed of it, but they lust for the opportunity all the same. They adore stories where violence can be meted out without recourse, they fantasize about opportunities to take vicious revenge for the slightest wrong. They spend their lives striving to get power or wealth, or fame, so they can abuse those beneath them with impunity. And those who stay beneath are no better: they have children who they’ll abuse ‘for their own good.’ And every time our most noble, chivalrous king declares a new war, he can’t fight it on his own, but the people rise to fight for him, no matter how stupid the reasons for this year’s war. Because they want to fight. It’s humanity.”

Wart let her finish her rant without interruption. The next words out of his mouth were quick to spark another. “You came closer to the fire tonight. I was hoping I’d get to see you.”

“Ugh, what are you?” Morgan half wanted to scream her frustration, but still didn’t want to wake the others. She hadn’t heard Wart talk about her to any of the others, and she’d just as soon keep it that way. “I insult you, I spit on the way you think, and you just sit there and take it? Are you a coward, do you have no pride? Tell me I’m wrong! Fight back!”

“Your worldview does seem to demand that from me, doesn’t it? But I don’t see any purpose in fighting like that. You might have very good reasons for thinking that I’m wrong, and if I yell ‘you’re wrong’ as loud as I can, I won’t get to hear those reasons, which I do want to hear. But there is one thing I noticed in what you said. You said ‘people’ like hurting people, that ‘they’ want this, that ‘they’ do that. But ‘they’ is outside. It’s what you’ve seen. Not what you are. You’re convinced everyone else wants to hurt people, but I’m convinced that you don’t.”

“You think I don’t want to hurt people? You’re wrong. You’re very, very wrong. There are people that I would hurt not to kill, not to keep them from hurting anyone else, but just for the satisfaction of watching them whimper in agony.”

“I believe you.” Wart muttered, “For their sake, I hope you never get the chance, because I don’t get the idea there’s much in this world that could get in your way for long. But, once again, your syntax has betrayed you. ‘There are people that I would hurt,’ you said. Not every person, not random people, hopefully not people who contradict you around the firelight on dark nights. Specific people, people who have earned your wrath, one way or another.”

“Wrath earned by being exactly what you claim doesn’t exist. Look around you! Do you think everyone—everyone—does all these selfish, hurtful destructive things because of, what, miscommunication? The greater good? On accident? Or am I the fool, and just imagined everything monstrous I’ve known people to do out of greed, impulse, or just convenience?”

Wart was slow to answer, and slow in his speech once he did, eyes on his own feet. “If I said yes, would you disappear into the darkness again? Because I like talking to you, and I’m afraid the next time I disappoint you, you won’t come back.”

Morgan snorted her disdain at his blundering attempt to instill guilt in her, and began to turn away, “If you wish me to stay, make yourself interesting, not pathetic.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Morgan saw a shift in Arthur’s posture to give her pause. “I don’t know about interesting, but let me try honest. Yes, I think most of the harm in the world is in fact caused by people who aren’t trying to hurt anyone, or who think it’s the right thing to do for one reason or another. I think most people spend most of their lives having their good natures twisted and torn by everyone around them until they forget what their nature is, and start molding the next generation to be just as pragmatic and pitiless as they are. And I’d guess that you’re thinking that I’m quibbling over semantics, that it doesn’t matter if people are born good if they’re all doomed to grow into corruption; that’s the same as everyone being rotten from the beginning, just with a tragic layer of lost innocence laid on top. I haven’t lived your life, I don’t know what anyone’s done to you, nor what you’ve done to anyone else. There’s a million things I don’t know, I can’t have yet learned, but I do know this:”

Wart’s arm whipped out, pointing at the fat knight snoring nearby. “That is Sir Ector. He isn’t famous, or rich, or powerful among the nobility of Britain. His castle is

drafty, his farmlands are always full of weeds, and unless you count wood, there isn't a valuable resource to be mined within his domain. If you walk in any direction from his home, you'll quickly be lost in the densest, darkest parts of the Savage Forest. It's a pain for anyone to find us, and nobody really wants to find us. You might not have met anyone who hasn't been corrupted by society, but I've never met someone who can't be purified of their worst tendencies when given peace, prosperity, and a loving person to talk to. If the old stories Bedivere tells are true, I know Marsh Castle represents something rare, possibly unique. Pellinore says he always visits because in all his travels he's never found a place quite like it. But it does exist."

"Wait, Pellinore as in King Pellinore, King with the Hundred Knights, best jousting champion in all Britain, King Pellinore? He spends time in your marshy castle?"

Wart looked at Morgan shrewdly, "I suppose. Not a common name, as far as I know. Why, do you know him?"

"Forget it. That doesn't matter." Morgan retreated a bit further from the fire. "Let's focus on your dumb worldview and how stupid it is. For fun, let's pretend everything I've ever been taught by experience, peers, and mentors far more wise and ancient than you is all wrong, and people have secretly always been capable of not wrecking everything they touch, they just very consistently choose not to. What changes? Why does it matter? Am I supposed to move to your idyllic little swamp, forget everything else in my life, be nice, and not exploit all the happy idiots? Or is it the reverse, and now that I've converted to your little religion of delusion, I'm supposed to go and convince the rest of the world to give up the selfishness that has always enriched them?"

"Anything will sound silly if you make your voice sound funny."

"It sounds silly because it's ridiculous!" Morgan hissed. "You expect me to believe that there's a secret perfect town in the dark, scary forest where people are always nice and nobody is ever sick, or hungry, or mean."

"I never said it was perfect, just better. We have our share of sickness and hunger—"

“That I believe. Tell me, by the time Sir Ector has eaten enough to give him that belt size, is there any left for the rest of your little village, or do you have to eat the same crap that’s been spewing out of your mouth?”

Morgan regretted the words before they’d reached Wart’s ears. This boy was clearly naive, not stupid. He’d learn the ways of the world soon enough. Sir Ector had done him a disservice raising him so ignorant, but that was no cause to abuse the boy for something outside his control.

But Wart wasn’t acting abused, “Spewing the crap I’ve been eating? Oh, that is disgusting. Evocative, creative, but oh, so foul. Bravo.”

“Are you mocking me?” Morgan asked, contrition vanishing. “Are my words of so little worth to you that you can disregard my spite with such ease?”

“No, I’m deflecting, albeit momentarily,” Wart said without shame. “You just claimed a man I know to be humble and generous makes a habit of fasting while those under him starve, which is infuriating. I don’t like who I become when I’m full of wrath, so I’m distracting myself so that when I begin to respond to that claim, I can remember that you don’t know him, and your insult therefore has no weight, that I don’t know what life you’ve lived to make you think those words were worthy of utterance, and that my responsibility to Ector’s honor is not to harm those who would malign him, but to build him up with honesty to those who would listen. Which is not to say my compliment regarding your analogy was insincere.”

What is this guy? He can’t be human. Were there fae involved already? Or was this monstrous patience an addition by Merlin?

“Your companion, Merlin. What is he to you?”

“And here I thought I was the one deflecting,” Wart taunted.

“What do you want from me? You expect me to just forget my whole life and flip everything I know about my life after one conversation with a boy as ridiculous as you?”

“I expect nothing from you. I’ve given you nothing, save an apparently uninteresting conversation, so you owe me nothing. I want to sate some of my curiosity about you, yes, but more than that I want you to consider that we’re about the same age,

I think, and I might have just as many and maybe even as good of reasons as you for thinking the way I do.”

Morgan didn't say anything for a long moment.

She didn't apologize. She hadn't apologized for years, wasn't about to start now over some hurt feelings. But she could reward good behavior.

“One question.”

“...Well go on then, you haven't been shy about asking anything so far. What is it?” Wart said.

“You misunderstand me. I asked you to be interesting and you've done that. So I'm rewarding you. You say you're curious about me, so go on, ask your question. If it's a good one, I may allow you to ask another.”

“So I'm a pet now, to be given treats when I behave well?”

“I'll be gracious and won't regard that as your one question. If you don't want to play my games, then don't. As you say, you don't owe me anything. Go on, expose your back to me, if that's what you want.”

Wart's scowl became a frown as annoyance was replaced with consideration.

Morgan wondered which piece of her provocative, painful past he'd pry into with this foolish, fanciful fling of fortune.

Morgan had just finished her alliteration and decided to lie when Wart made his decision.

“Why are you interested in Merlin?”

Well that's a pleasant surprise. No uncomfortable memories. Still requires a pack of lies though. She stepped back within the fire's light and threw back her hood.

“Merlin's reputation has spread far and wide of late. Even more so as he's been spreading word of his Sword of Selection. People say he's the greatest wielder of magic's mysteries since Medea. People who know nothing of such things often say such things of any charlatan. Regardless, I want to see if he can teach me anything I don't already know. But before I speak with him, I want to know what manner of man I'm dealing with, if he's a man at all. So...?”



It was Wart's turn to hide his face in the fire's shadows. "You should go. Bedivere will be waking for his watch soon. Will I see you again tomorrow?"

Morgan was cautious. "Perhaps."

Wart nodded, "Then I'll spend the time between deciding what, if anything, I can tell you without betraying Merlin's trust."

"Don't speak of me to him. To anyone. Swear it." Oaths still had power, no matter how dishonorable most men may act. If nothing else, a broken oath is an entryway to the soul for a well-place curse.

"You have my word." Wart whispered.

Morgan melted back into the shadows.

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Morgan barely waited for others' heads to hit their pillows\* before approaching the fire a third time.

She motioned for him to follow her back into the embrace of darkness. "Come away from the fire. I'm tired of whispering." When Wart delayed she added, "I've set a ward in place; if anything larger than a chipmunk approaches your friends, I'll know."

She left unasked the question of trust.

And he answered that question just the way she thought he would: like a man who would spend his life walking into traps until he'd find the one that would kill him.

They walked in silence towards a clearing Morgan had picked nearby while the men had made their camp. She checked the sky to make sure the crow she'd tasked to keep watch still circled overhead.

Morgan dropped to the earth, stretching out limbs sore from a day of stalking knights. The sky was clear, the stars innumerable.

Wart came near and loomed over her. "I guess we haven't gotten to the part where you betray my trust and sacrifice me to...who would get my soul when you kill me?"

Morgan rolled her eyes, “You sure you want that to be your first question tonight?”

“First question?”

“I suppose I should explain the game if you’re to follow the rules.” Morgan lazily patted the ground in invitation.

Wart sat, back still rigidly vertical.

“Now that we’ve established that you’re hopelessly naive and haven’t the faintest idea how the world really works, I’ve decided that beyond my initial purpose of evaluating Merlin’s use to me, I’m also going to take it upon myself to remedy your ignorance. Not,” she was careful to add, “because I’m interested in your well-being, but because I think the look on your face when your entire worldview collapses will be profoundly entertaining.

“To that end, we are going to play a game. It’s very simple. I will ask you a question, and you will answer it with perfect honesty. Then you will ask a question of me, which I will answer, maybe even honestly, and then we repeat. The game ends when you break or I grow bored.”

Morgan spared Wart a glance, and found he was studying her face very closely. She made a mask of her expression, determinedly not thinking about how close he was or how little her clothes did to obfuscate her figure. She looked to the stars for help.

“Two problems,” Wart said. “First, I told you yesterday that I would consider discussing Merlin with you. I haven’t yet told you whether I’m willing to speak of him.”

Morgan had prepared for him to be difficult, and diverted him before he could deny her, “Then if I ask the wrong question, you can honestly tell me to jump in a lake. I’m not twisting your arm.”

Wart seemed to accept that, “Second, the game seems fundamentally unfair.”

Morgan rolled her eyes, “Fine, I’ll honestly tell you when I’m earnestly lying.”

“Not that,” Wart said. “I’ve played this game before, half the fun is figuring out which parts are true.”

“Then how is it unfair?”

“Because we get the same number of turns.”

Morgan turned her head, looking for a jest in the impossible man's face. He had mimicked her, back flat to the world, eyes traveling between the stars. "How in the world is two people getting equal shares uneven?"

"Because the people are uneven."

Morgan fired up, "So just because you live in some fancy castle, that makes you better than me, does it?"

"On the contrary," Wart said in his unflappable calm, "I was raised in a castle, but I don't belong there; that's just Sir Ector's kindness at work. I belong in a ditch somewhere, begging for scraps like the unwanted orphans in the stories. But you," Wart looked directly into Morgan's eyes, "You tried to brush over it, but you know Pellinore, not just by name or title, but for his strength; I'd wager you've seen him in action, probably at a tournament."

He returned his attention to the stars, "On top of that, you talk with the diction and wordplay of someone with an education. An extensive education. Put those together, and you get someone so far beyond my station, it's an almost unbearable honor to speak with you, no matter what it is that's making you act like something you so clearly are not."

Two breaths later, Morgan was staring down at Wart's face, legs astride his torso, and her knife had found its way into her hand, blade pressed to Wart's throat.

"You know, I swore that I was done being told what I am and what I'm not. I am me. What that means is for me to figure out, no one else. And as for you being worth less...when I put this same knife to Uther Pendragon's neck, do you think his skin will resist being cut because his ass has warmed a throne? Do you reckon his blood will be warmer than yours when it splashes across my skin? Of course not. Nobility, like so much of society, is a farce, encouraged by those with power so they can hold that power away from people who deserve it.

"Luckily for you, I do think you aren't equal to the filth that rules." Morgan pulled her knife away, sheathing it at her waist. "In fact, I think you're pretty great to talk to, even if some of your ideas are out of touch with reality."

She was suddenly aware that she was still on top of Wart, kneeling awkwardly over his waist. Her embarrassment turned to confusion when she found his legs had pinned her ankles in place.

Her confusion became terror when she felt the tip of *his* knife poking at her side.

“Wart, what—“

“You said ‘when.’ Not ‘if,’ ‘when.’ You intend to kill the high king.”

Morgan panicked. She could hear his voice brooked no doubt, but she tried to lie anyway, “Are you going to kill me over a slip of the tongue? How could I, a lone woman, hope to harm a man guarded by such high walls and ten-thousand loyal soldiers?”

Morgan gritted her teeth against the iron pain, but he hadn’t stabbed her yet.

“A lone woman’ with a knife in the dark is as deadly as any assassin. And we both know you have tools deadlier than any knife.”

“What, magic?” Morgan cried. “There’s no such thing! The ‘wood witch’ bit is a sham to ward off horny knights!”

“Another lie.” Wart’s eyes looked so different when the kindness was gone. “You’re a bottomless well of deliberate falsehoods, and yet the truth keeps spilling out.”

“You want the truth?” Morgan’s oaken blade was again at Wart’s jugular. “Uther deserves to die. You wouldn’t dare contradict me if you knew what he did to me, what he’s done to my family.”

“Irrelevant.”

Morgan’s knife hand tensed.

“Uther has no heir, if he dies; the power struggle will ravage Britain, brother killing brother until the Saxons sweep in and enslave us all. A land ruled by force must always know violence. A land without rule can know nothing else.”

“Such pretty words to say a brother’s death is tragic, but a sister must die without justice?”

“Revenge is not justice.”

“Justice is revenge!”

The two stared hard and long at each other. Morgan saw the same war waging behind his eyes that she felt blazing through her mind. If she slit his throat while

grabbing his hand, she'd only need to hold him off until his strength ebbed out with his blood. She knew some healing, she might survive even if she wasn't quick or strong enough.

Yet she did nothing.

He was threatening her life, she shouldn't care, shouldn't think, shouldn't hesitate. She shouldn't concern herself with regret, with desire, with sentiment. She should survive. She had to survive.

But so should he.

Morgan slammed her knife into the soft ground. "I'm not planning to kill the king. I hope he dies a slow, painful death, but watching that isn't worth being near him again. So please...don't kill me."

Morgan hated her own voice in that moment. So weak. So desperate. So pathetic. So vulnerable.

Arthur looked disgusted as well, but he sheathed his knife before pushing Morgan to the side, extricating himself from beneath her.

"All that talk about innate goodness and everyone being having a chance at redemption," he muttered to his knees, "and here I am, threatening deadly violence the first time I meet someone who really needs someone to listen. I'm such a hypocrite."

Morgan saved her annoyance for another time, "You were doing what you thought was right."

Wart snorted, "And King Herod was thinking of the future of the realm."

"Alright," Morgan said, changing course, "then maybe you're just looking at it wrong. After all, a hypocrite is sometimes just a person who's still learning. Today you learned not even you can live up to your own expectations. And I might remind you that I'm as much a hypocrite as you; if I were as self-serving as I claim everyone is, I'd have killed you the instant you threatened me."

Why comfort him now? Morgan could use this guilt, turn it into debt, force his honor to answer her questions.

But that wasn't what she wanted anymore, if her hypocrisy could be trusted.

“You’re being kind, and I appreciate it, but I should already be better,” Wart said. “What was the point of all of Merlin’s lessons if I can’t call upon them when I need them?”

“You’re studying under Merlin?” Morgan asked. “I mean, sorry about your petty problems, sucks to not be perfect, but do you mind focusing on the magical part?”

“I can’t tell you much about the things you want to know,” Wart said. “Merlin never taught me about using magic. Magic things happened to me whenever Merlin was nearby, but that was never what I was supposed to be learning.”

“But you had to have picked up something,” Morgan said. “What kinds of magic can he do? Does he know things he can’t have learned? Make things that defy nature? Do things what make no sense? And how does he power what he does? Does he speak strange words, or combine mystical reagents, or wield arcane artifacts? And is—”

“Now wait a moment,” Wart interrupted, “I think you’ll find it’s my turn.”

“Your...what?”

“And that’s the eighth question you’ve asked in a row. I thought we were supposed to take turns. That’s just an egregious break of the rules, that is.”

“Take...have you been playing this whole time? Was threatening my life just part of the game?” A horrific, fantastic explanation emerged from her disbelief, “You really aren’t human at all, are you? Was this all a test? Did Vivien send you? Or did Merlin earn Titania’s attention? Medb’s? Or is it that you’re actually Merlin, playing me for a fool? Answer me!”

Wart groaned, “Why am I so bad at talking to you? Conversations are usually so much easier. I’m not even sure which question I should be answering, you’ve asked so many. I am human. I’m not even sure what alternatives you’re thinking of, but whatever they are, they aren’t me. I’m a very boring mortal with a strange teacher, that’s all. And I wasn’t paying any attention to the question game when we were considering killing each other, but you seemed to want to pretend like that never happened, and I was just trying to play along, to play your game, to be interesting, to try to satisfy you. That’s all I’ve been trying to do since I met you, or at least since I decided you didn’t need any

help. Yet I persist in agitating and confounding you, again and again. I should go. And you should stay away. I'm not doing any good for you."

Morgan flopped back and stared once more at the stars, "Let's not pretend that this is all your fault. You're naive and optimistic out of measure, foolishly kind, and horrendously humble, but I am demonstrably paranoid, and vengeful, and power-obsessed, and that isn't even touching on the arrogance and selfishness I've cultivated since long before making enemies of many of the most powerful beings in Britain. Neither of us understand the other. Maybe we never will. But maybe...maybe we don't need to.

"An hour ago you trusted me enough to follow me away from the light. And I desired your company enough to preemptively cede control of half the conversation just to make our time more desirable to you. Has tonight really gone so badly that we can't just...try tonight again?"

"Time only flows one way," Wart lamented. "I can no more erase what I've learned from my conception of you than you can forget my deep-seated blood-thirst."

Morgan avoided rolling her eyes, "I'd hardly call confronting a potential assassin with appropriate force a demonstration of your inner bestial nature. But even if it were, I could pretend."

"You mean 'lie.'"

Morgan shrugged.

"I've always been a rubbish liar," Wart said. "But if that's what you think best, then I can try."

Morgan's temper flared, "Stop that! Stop acting like you need to cater to my every whim, stop acting like my satisfaction is so much more important than yours, stop treating me the way society would demand. You're not just a peasant, I'm not just a...anything! You're a person, I'm a person, and I demand you stop curbing your words to give me what you think I want to hear!"

"You... demand that I stop treating you like someone who can demand anything from me?"

“Yes, that, precisely! Point out my hypocrisy, I’m full of the stuff and it gets me in trouble all the time. I’ve got a quick mind, but a faster tongue, and it’s infuriating that you’re capable of pushing me to be better and are opting to grovel.”

Wart’s eyes flashed, “Then I’ll be bold enough to point out that you haven’t thought this through. You demand I treat myself with respect while showing me none. Hypocrisy. If I do as you demand, then that will just be a new form of groveling. Hypocrisy. If--”

“If you decide that the best choice is to walk away, to never speak with me again, then there will be nothing I can do about it. Despite that being the last thing I want right now,” Morgan admitted. “Hypocrisy. As I said, I have my share. But I don’t want to wonder if every word from your mouth is honesty or pretense, or if it’s a pretense that you honestly think is the best thing to say. I just want...you.”

Morgan caught herself too late. Heat flooded her face, but she didn’t contradict herself.

“And I want...to think. About a lot of things,” Wart said. “Ector says we should reach Sir Geraint’s keep by tomorrow, and we’ll reach Londinium the night after. I’ll try to find a way to somewhere private, if you still don’t wish to be found by anyone else.”

Morgan nodded her assent, and Wart returned to his fire.

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“So he only ever taught you about leadership? Not conjuring, sorcery, prophecy, enchantment, illusions, or any kind of magic, just mundane lessons on managing followers.”

Wart had snuck a heaping platter of warm food out of Sir Geraint’s kitchens, which Morgan was feasting upon under the full moon outside the castle walls.

“I’d hardly call his lessons mundane,” Wart said, shuddering. “But no, he hasn’t taught me anything mystical beyond what I observe. That’s two questions in a row, by the way.”

“But why?”



“That’s a third question.”

Morgan ignored that. “You aren’t in line to rule anywhere. Why would he spend his time on you? And those weren’t extra questions, they were addendums on the first. You give these terse replies that don’t answer the question I’m not asking, and that’s always the important one.”

“Merlin sometimes talks about how he advises kings, and I think he’s grooming me as his successor in that duty. He gets very annoyed any time I talk about growing old as Kay’s squire. I really don’t know if he’ll ever pass on the magic part of his knowledge. What I don’t know is who I’m supposed to advise. Kay will inherit Marsh Castle, and I wouldn’t mind helping him, but that’s incongruous with Merlin’s ambition. I’m sure Uther has advisors aplenty, but he has no heir. And Vortigern—“

“Uther has heirs.”

Wart’s mouth was full, but his question was clear.

“Oh no, you’re the stickler for rules. You want a question answered, you can go ahead and ask it.”

Wart swallowed. Then he took another bite.

Morgan smiled in annoyance. The boy was much more fun when felt like being a prat.

Wart chewed. Slowly.

“That’s the closest you’ve come to inviting questions on your history,” he said at last. “Forgive my presumption, but I won’t pry during the game. There’s a level of obligation and challenge in any game, and can make a soul do things in haste that they know they’ll regret.”

“That seems like it should be my choice,” Morgan said. “And you ought to know I am wholly willing to lie or run if you ask something truly foolish.”

“I suspect no lie in that. But until I’ve had time to think that over... are you truly able to perform magic?”

“All my questions on Merlin, and you think it’s all, what, a deception to keep superstitious knights from touching the pretty woods woman?”

“That’s a question, not an answer. And while that thought had occurred to me, by this point I’ve abandoned that secondary option in favor of you being an aspirant, tracking down the most credible tales of magic you can find.”

“Secondary option?”

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?” Wart teased.

Morgan stuck out her tongue, grinning like a loon. How had this boy corrupted her so?

“But yes, that’s my backup theory. My preferred explanation is, of course, that you’re telling the truth. It’s the most reasonable, as I haven’t yet caught you in a demonstrable lie. But enough of my answers. My question was simple. Do you perform magic, yea or nay?”

“Magic is no performance, I don’t do tricks for crowds,” Morgan said. “But that isn’t what you meant. I’ll answer the unasked question, though it is not as simple as you seem to think.

“‘Magic’ is a rather useless word. Is it magic to prophesy? Then it is a kind of magic when a tactician predicts an enemy army’s movements. Is it magic to brew potions? Then a magician can be found in Uther’s kitchens, heating soup. Is it enchanting items to do terrible, marvelous things? Then magic is in the blacksmith, who turns over-hard rocks into instruments of death. Perhaps it’s discrete spells you’re thinking of, to grant a man great strength, to create fire from nothing, to make solid objects dissolve into dust. Then there is magic in giants, in dragons, in the rush of the river.”

“I might call magic something not natural, something beyond what humans can normally do.”

“And you would be wrong. There is nothing more natural, and no one who can say what is normal with any authority.”

Morgan sighed, “I’m doing this poorly. We both know what you mean when you say magic, and, yes, I can do things that would make most men call me a witch. But honesty about something like this isn’t easy. My... mentors used to say that everything is magic, and so is nothing. Life is magic, as is death. It resides in all things that are, that

ever have been or ever will be, but most especially it lives in all the things that are not but might be. That we are not the only ones who can do what we do, nor are our ways the only way things are done.”

“So...that’s a yes?”

“Kind of? I’m sure the first person to figure out how to kindle fire was regarded as a potent conjurer, but fire isn’t a gift from Prometheus, it’s part of how the world works. They just didn’t know that back then. It’s the same as what I’m doing: anybody could do it if they knew how, but the people who do know like their secrets.

“If there is an essence of magic, the way I was taught it, it’s life. And the essence of magic, life. Life, upon death, is pulled inexorably to the Otherworld, unless one learned in the fae arts might intervene, harnessing some aspect of that life--its strength, skill, ability, or cunning--and graft that severed life upon a new host. Even so, the terrible note of Gwyn’s dread horn is not easily ignored, nor will his hounds lose their prey: those called to the Otherworld will not linger here. Among even the most skilled and powerful of the fae, a life cannot be held long. The sooner after death the fae harnessed magic, the longer it could be held.

“I don’t know if I believe all that about the Otherworld and the Wild Hunt or not, but the practical reality is clear. I can borrow only what the beasts I harvest possessed in life. And it’s not enhancement, nor proportionate growth, but direct displacement and replacement of life itself. No matter what magicks I might trace over which parts, my body is still her own, and the strength of a crow or a squirrel wouldn’t be enough to lift one of my clumsy, oversized human arms,” she waved a graceful, willowy hand for effect, “nevermind let me move as they move.”

On the road to London, the five travelers (Ector, Kay, Arthur, Bedivere, and Merlin) slept on roadsides, Ector eager to break Arthur and Kay's spirits in the hopes that he'd have an excuse to send them home. During each night while he was on watch, Arthur was approached by Morgan le Faye (who was hoping to learn sorcery from Merlin and is unaware of her familial ties to Arthur), who introduced herself as Morgause. Each is fascinated by the other, Arthur by Morgan's magic and freedom, Morgan by Arthur's idealism. On their third night together, Morgan proved herself an effective seductress, accepting Arthur's virginity and conceiving the child who would one day be Mordred.

For the first time in months—years, perhaps—the witch began to emerge from slumber with a full feeling in her belly. She had never missed the meats of her father's table, but the breads, the cakes, the spices...they'd been a comfort she had missed. She really ought to find some way to reward Wart for yesterday's feast.

Though given how that evening had progressed, the witch doubted Wart felt at all unappreciated.

But no, that didn't balance the scales. She'd received quite as well as she'd given. He'd been inexperienced, but diligent. In fact, seeing how she'd pushed him into it, the entire affair only put her more in debt to him.

Well, if they'd been equals last night, she didn't mind being more generous this morning.

The witch's eyes opened to a noonday sun and an empty glade.

A page ripped from Wart's book filled the space where he lay, a message in cramped script added into the margins:

*I'm sorry to leave you like this, but I couldn't awaken you, and I have duties to fulfill. I know you said you won't follow me into the city, so I will not see you tonight, but I wish that I could. I don't know if we will return this way, nor when, nor if we shall return at*

*all if Uther means for us to go to war as Merlin suspects. I hope we will meet again some day. I still have questions.*

*Sincerely,*

*Wart*

That's it? She checked the page's reverse side, checked between the lines of the original text. Nothing. She'd bared her flesh, her soul to this boy, flayed his ideals to ribbons and he thought a few rushed ink platters would sunder what bound them?

Unacceptable.

She would enter Londinium. She would defy their blades, his words. She would find what was owed her, demand it, and if it was not offered, she would take. Even if all she wanted was a chance to repay her debts.

And besides, there was still the matter of Merlin. Whether she was his pupil or his assassin, she wouldn't be doing her job if she let him get away.

Her preparations to enter the city were as subtle as they were mundane as they were fruitless. She could have requisitioned the talents of a squirrel, leaping from building to building in a way no guard could pursue, but arrows were still swifter, and a squirrel's judgments on the strength of a tree branch does little to warn of unsound carpentry. She considered the virtues of the fish's gills as well, to slip in from the Thames in the dark of night. This idea she rejected as well. The river was the center of life for sailors, fishers, merchants, and shipwrights alike. At no hour of night could she be assured no eyes would follow her, and once ashore she'd have no means of finding her quarry within the city.

No, she'd been certain it was far better to hide where daylight couldn't dispel her shrouds. She'd spent time enough in that nunnery to play the part of a guileless initiate eager on a pilgrimage to Mont St. Michel. The church would gladly welcome her, offer room and board, but would have little for her to do while they either contacted an invented mother abbess in far-off Ireland or arranged passage for her across the channel. She, meanwhile, would be free to search the city with all the authority and anonymity the mantle of religion offered.

Acquiring that mantle was the tricky bit. Acquiring a spider's talents was one of the most precise and unpleasant pieces of magic she'd ever attempted, but she was successful all the same, and with her knowledge of weaving she managed to produce something a passing merchant was more than happy to buy. That money bought coarse fabric, thin rope, and an hour with an old weaver woman's tools. Before the day was through, her costume was complete and she was walking straight-backed past the guards at the city's gate.

Then Merlin was behind her, damn him, iron shackles ready to bind her flesh and future.

But she would not let him. For all his power and craft, he was neither quick nor strong. She felt only the barest scrape of metal upon skin, felt only the first echo of that wretched pain. She wrenched free, leapt away, began to run.

"Guards, after her, in the name of King Uther and in my own name, the Magnificent Merlin!"

The streets were a labyrinth, one the soldiers knew well. Every hand she evaded brought her closer to another patrol, every alley she hoped held escape rang with cries of "Guards, guards!"

Her outfit, constructed so single-mindedly, held none of the pockets of bound animals to be killed in her time of need. The streets teemed with life, but what could she use? A lamb? A rat? A dog? She couldn't take time from running to get a paltry power without a plan for how to use it. She had no plan. No time to plan. No time at all.

A soldier took her unawares, seized her around the middle, lifted her bodily into the air before driving her into the ground. His hand was at her sternum in an instant, pressing, crushing her downwards. Her ribs creaked under the strain.

His foul breath filled her senses, his face close enough that spittle splattered her cheeks when he said, "You ran. You aren't supposed to run. That means we get to make an example of ya."

He had power. Power that could be hers, if only for a few moments.

Instinct put her knife in her hand before she'd thought to use it.

Training caught her wrist in his grasp before she could.

His sadistic mirth vanished, replaced by something colder, more dangerous. He twisted her arm until her strength broke, knife clattering to the ground. When he released her, it was only to ball that hand into a fist.

Reality flickered as pain erupted from her temple. She wasn't looking at him anymore. That should mean something, but she couldn't quite figure out what. Thinking was suddenly a chore.

Someone was talking, but the sounds weren't becoming words the way they should. It occurred to her that she should turn her head, to look at what was happening.

The soldier wasn't holding her down anymore, not the way he was. He was just lying on top of her. A strange, smooth bit of wood was growing from his back, right around the part of his uniform that was decorated in shiny red.

She blinked, reality became clearer, the wood became a knife handle.

"Should have listened to me. I told him to stop you, not harm you." Merlin knelt directly on her hand, shackled her wrist with an iron cuff.

Most pain contains the residue of a pleasure pushed past its bounds. The sensuous touch becomes the crushing blow, the cozy blanket becomes the scorching inferno, the delicious meal becomes the tormenting poison, the stream's cool caress becomes the frost's bite, the satisfying scritch-scratch becomes the cutting strike. The witch's pain was none of those. The feeling emanating from the place where iron touched skin was like nothing else, because it was only pain. So despite her agony, she held onto her mind, and her pride.

"Get this off me, Merlin. We have nothing more to discuss."

"Agreed. Your silence would please me greatly. You never were much of a conversationalist, so today you're more of a bargaining chip for me."

Her eyes widened in horror. "You can't—"

Merlin produced a wad of filthy cloth from an inner pocket and shoved it in her mouth. "The list of things I cannot do is very short. Bring her."

Another guard sprang forward to obey. She was hauled

Merlin brings Morgan to Uther.

Uther reveals her name.

Morgan kicks Merlin in the balls.

Merlin takes Morgan on as his apprentice, once he's satisfied that she is the mostly irrelevant Morgan and not the Mordred-producing Morgause.

### **The Tale of the Sword in the Stone**

Morgan, despite ostensibly having been tasked to study and assassinate (if necessary) Merlin, finds it easy to find excuses to focus upon the young knights instead. She tails the group to Londinium, and witnesses their touristy visit to the Sword in the Stone. Bedivere declined to take a pull, while Ector and Kay failed to budge the blade, and when Arthur's turn came, he found he could move it, but left it where it was, having no desire to be king.

Morgan is discovered by some of Uther's men, who recognize the errant princess, and is consequently bathed and brought before the king. Uther has no warmth for his long-absent step-daughter, only fury at her broken marriage, as it has estranged King Urien from an alliance with Uther.

Uther is distracted by the arrival of the bard Taliesen and his apprentice Tristan, who has managed to forge an alliance between Uther and Mark of Cornwall, the two having been at odds since the Gorlois incident, as Gorlois had ties to Mark as a Cornishman.

Court is further disrupted by the flamboyant arrival of Merlin, who informs everyone that Uther's son and heir has arrived in the city. One of his duplicates strikes up a conversation with Morgan, who encourages the idea of the two spending more time together. Merlin vanishes, as is his wont.

Morgan is unceremoniously thrust back into her role as pretty princess. Despite possessing the power to escape at any time, she decides Uther could use some extra humiliation, and decides to delay her freedom until her presence is made public at the tournament.

All the same, Morgan sneaks out at night, hoping to spend time with Arthur. She doesn't make it far before scolding herself for her attachment to the boy, then scolds her scolding, because Morgan does what Morgan wants. Londinium, however, is a big place, and after a few hours fruitlessly wandering around, she returns to the palace.



The tourney was composed of three events; joust, melee, and archery. All very organized and civil; it's a bit of politics, intended to emphasize the distinction between the "sophisticated" Uther, the "Christian" king who traced his lineage back to Roman Emperor's, and Vortigern, who willingly consorted with pagans and barbarians. Ector held Arthur out of the melee for his youth, but Kay represented himself well, taking second behind Sir Gawain and earning a hefty purse for himself. Morgan is privy to Gawain's victory acceptance conversation with Uther, in which Gawain, hero of the Roman Legion, claimed his long lost father was King Lot, who is in attendance. The Orkney family is reunited, Agravaine loses his birthright, heartwarming moment for everyone.

The archery was a source of much drama, as three competitors proved far superior to all other contestants: the bard, Taliesen, the mystery knight of the wood (Robin), and third prize going to Taliesen's ward, Tristan, who voluntarily revealed his bow's enchantment and was disqualified, albeit with the third prize purse. Taliesen and Robin forced the judges to continually move back the targets, until it was called a draw. Robin refused the purse, instead presenting the king with a list of nobles and knights and their crimes against the citizens they were ostensibly protecting. Uther ordered Robin arrested, but the archer escaped into the crowd.

The finale was the joust, and here Arthur began to make a name for himself, unhorsing three seasoned knights: Pellinore, Geraint, and King Lot of Orkney himself (this put Arthur into the semi-finals facing mystery-knight-Guinevere, with Lamorak and Tristan on the opposite side of the bracket). After this last, Uther (having been informed of such by Merlin) acknowledges Arthur as his son, implying that Lot took a dive to make this moment more dramatic. As this speech was tailing off, Sir Robin's arrow found its mark, killing Uther. Guinevere recognizes the opportunity, and blows a great note on her horn, a signal passed along to her army nearby. Wart rides against Guinevere with a tournament lance, while the remainder of Uther's allies panic in preparation for an Anglo/Saxon invasion of the city. Both riders were unhorsed, forcing them to engage on foot. During the scuffle, Arthur successfully removed Guinevere's helmet. As the fight went on, Arthur rapidly (and sexlessly) courted the warrior queen, telling her of the Sword in the Stone and his potential position as high king of all Britain, and offering to make her his queen.

Arthur and Guinevere rushed through Londinium, straight through the fighting armies, directly to the sword in the stone, and Arthur claimed his position as High King of all Britons, the brilliant light of Caliburn, the Sword in the Stone, grabbed the attention of every person in the city, ending the battle outright. Uther died of his wounds, and Guinevere sent her Angle allies to raid the Saxon fleet and return to the Germanic states. They acquiesced, as she knew they would: very little is quite so profitable as stealing from pirates. Guinevere herself, however, remained with Arthur, and the two were publicly

engaged (despite very loud protests from Merlin and Morgan) at the same ceremony where Arthur was crowned, taking up his father's spear.

### **The Tale of the War of Twelve Kings**

Arthur's new royal status brought with it a wide host of responsibilities, which he took to with fervor. Before leaving Londinium, he, Guinevere, and Merlin met with King Lot, King Leodegrance, and Taliesin to outline Arthur's five year plan to secure the kingdom. The outlook is bleak, as Uther's love for war had fostered enemies on every side, all eager to strike with the kingdom in the chaos of transition. Four primary forces threatened Arthur's Britain: Rome to the South, the Anglo-Saxons to the East, Ireland in the West, and Vortigern in the North. Gawain's efforts were able to delay any aggression from Rome, and the Anglo-Saxons had been fairly effectively stymied by Guinevere's efforts. Arthur requested that Taliesin and Tristan rendezvous with King Mark, and employ his legendary politicking to treat with the Fianna of Ireland.

This left Vortigern as his chief threat upon the British Isle. Nine men in Britain called themselves 'king': Vortigern, Urien, Galehaut, Mark, Lot, Pellinore, Leodegrance, Pellam. Three further kings of northern France were relevant, they being Ban, Bors, and Claudas. Uther's bid to be High King had been supported by Ban, Bors, Leodegrance, Lot, and Mark, of which only Leodegrance and Lot supported Arthur (Leodegrance because his kingdom is surrounded by Vortigern's supporters and he has old, personal beef with Vortigern himself, and Lot because of familial obligation and the knowledge that Vortigern would execute his entire family to snuff out Uther's line, given half a chance). Vortigern was supported by Urien, Galehaut, Pellinore, and Mark. Mark played both sides, while Pellam has fairly successfully stayed out of it, because, as Taliesin explains:

### **The Tale of Sir Balin**

Sir Balin isn't the best knight. He's great in a fight, but useless in a battle. Not great at following orders, see. Why should he listen to someone who he could kill?

Trouble was, most people didn't much like him. They liked other people. Ganged up. Made armies. Started arresting people they don't like. All well and good as long as you could run away. And he'd run away a long time, played the part of a bandit knight, or a knight errant with his brother Balan, villains or heroes, however they felt that day. But then he'd killed some traveler who turned out to be a cousin of the king, got a bounty. Blasted brother cooked up a scheme to claim the bounty, then break him out of jail. Needed a patsy, since the brothers looked too much alike. Picked up that Breuce kid. And they abandoned him like a fool. So now he was rotting in jail.

Some Lady of Avalon (a handmaiden of Vivan's, little though it will matter) visited the king's court, girded with a cursed scabbard under her mantle, which could not be removed except by a knight strong enough to kill her brother, who she hated for killing her lover. The sword was offered as a prize to whoever freed her from its awkward curse. Uther and a wide variety of his knights fail until Balin is pulled from the dungeons to test his might. He pulls out the sword with ease, decides he likes it, but isn't much interested in her quest or the dungeons, so he kills her, inventing a story about how she had killed his mother. Uther puts up a stink low-key focused on how this will reflect badly on him (Taliesen's depiction of Uther is distinctly neutral, ignoring his bloodlust, and charitably painting his self-interest in looking noble as a desire to be noble). Sensing that he does not have the court's goodwill, Balin escapes. He kills Sir Lanceor, a knight of Uther's sent to hunt him down, and watches as Lanceor's fiance commits suicide right in front of him. He steals Lanceor's arms and armor, becoming "the knight with two swords" (cameo appearances from Thomas as Lanceor's squire and a passing King Mark who orders Thomas to bury Lanceor and his fiance, before pulling him into his service more permanently).

Balan, meanwhile, is free as a bird, eager to reunite with his brother and take some revenge. Along the way, he sees a knight coming his way along the road, richly garbed, and begins stalking him, meaning to rob him once night falls. This plan fails when Balin's target is nabbed by an invisible knight, Garlon (invisibility granted by Carnwennan). Balin tracks the invisible knight (who rides a very visible horse) to Corbenic, the castle of King Pellam, Garlon's brother. Balin is initially refused entrance, but sneaks in during a ball, all but kidnapping a local peasant as his plus one. During the ball, things go down Mallory-style: Balin spends too much time staring at Garlon trying to figure out how to get him to spill the secret of invisibility, draws Garlon's annoyance, kills Garlon, is hunted down by King Pellam, runs through the castle, finds the grail chamber (which at that time houses not only the Grail, but also the Lance of Longinus and Carnwennan (it is a standing question where Carnwennan came from, or how it got its magical powers, but given the nature of its magic, confusion and stealth is to be expected)), seizes the Holy Spear and delivers the Dolorous Stroke. Corbenic is temporarily leveled (the location is something of a crossover point betwixt the natural world and the Otherworld), Pellam is wounded pretty permanently, his realm is rendered as impotent as its king, rapidly becoming a wide wasteland, Merlin pops in to say hi to Balin (and steal Carnwennan), and Balin wanders off with the Holy Spear.

A little while later, Balin encounters Uther's war band, off to storm King Urien's castle (cocky upstart was making a cape made of kingly hair/beards). Said castle has but a single drawbridge, guarded by a sole knight on foot. Uther picks Balan to slay the knight, insisting that Balan fight on foot as well, tearing his spear from his grip. This results in a

mutual kill, and Balin discovers too late that the knight he's killed is in fact his own brother, Balin. Mixed emotions, followed swiftly by death.

### ***The Tale of the War of Twelve Kings, part 2***

Arthur doesn't find Balin's tale to be very relevant, but Taliesen insists every time is a good time for a story. Arthur decided to send his vassals home, instructing them to secure their own lands as effectively as possible, emphasizing his own priority in protecting his people rather than conquering more land. He then asks Morgan to track down Robin the Hoodlum, whose aid he acquires for the next stage in his plans to consolidate the support of the people and undermine (and potentially assassinate) Vortigern, specifically by identifying and deposing the most corrupt of his supporters and gaining the support of the peasantry. Merlin accompanies Morgan, to teach her some magic, learn her magic, and to attempt to seduce her (he fails hard on this front). Lot set his son Gawain to accompany Arthur while Lot and Agravaine return to Orkney lands.

Returning to the Marsh Castle only long enough to drop off Ector, Arthur sets out with his new adventuring party to secure his kingdom and right the wrongs done to its people et cetera et cetera. Kay makes good on his promise of armor, and thus Arthur and his companions are soon the best equipped band of warriors in the realm, literally wearing shining armor, as long as they keep it clean.

Arthur's first order of business was establishing a base of communications, a capital for his new country. Despite the convenience of Londinium, Arthur considered it of paramount importance to establish a discontinuity between his father's reign and his own. Enter Caerleon, location of an old, sturdy abandoned fort built by the Romans in the first century A.D., brought to Arthur's attention by King Leodegrance, who abandoned the place twenty years ago. Abandoned because of the dragon. Leodegrance had since been able to track down the dragon's history--even in those times, dragons were exceedingly rare.

### ***The Tale of King Vortigern***

Vortigern was never meant to be an architect. A wordsmith, yes, a learner of languages, certainly, a forger of alliances, without peer. But for some reasons he was stuck building this useless castle for a fourth time. The castle itself was mostly symbolic; he had no use for grand halls or lavish surroundings except how they let him manipulate emissaries from foreign and vassal lands far from the paranoid ears of his father and brothers. And they really should be paranoid. Vortigern meant to kill them all.

Some nobles liked to pretend that they had their people's best interest at heart, that they served the realm or the greater good. Overtures in that direction could be useful, love was a strong shield against rebellion, but Vortigern knew it came at too strong a cost. Love binds the strong to do the loyal thing, rather than the smart thing, and thus it got strong men killed. Manipulating fear, greed, and personal interest was far easier and far more effective. Let history remember him as a terrible man who lived a very long life.

Vortigern's family was not without its uses, of course, but they could not be trusted to know their place nor acknowledge his. Ambrosius, of course, had to die for his place in the line of succession, which was rather a shame; Vortigern's elder brother had a talent with words and societal graces that was useful in shaming uppity vassal lords. Constantine's days also stretched too long, each day he clung to life was another chance for the incompetent buffoon to put a target on Vortigern's back.

The tale kicks off at the execution of Vortigern's most recent architect, a man of the cloth who desperately tries to save his life by 1): pointing out the astronomical odds against an earthquake striking Britain, and 2): recommending a replacement, none other than Merlin himself. Vortigern killed the priest anyways, but put out a call for this "Merlin."

Eventually, Vortigern manages to track down Merlin's master/adoptive father, a hermit by the name of Blaise. Blaise tells us the old incubus→ anti-christ→ baptism→ omniscience story. Vortigern is skeptical, but impatient with mundane methods which have repeatedly failed, so he's willing to make a stretch for something more mystical, even if there are several holes in Blaise's story. Both Blaise and Merlin's apparent mother are pushing the edges of old age, while Merlin presents as a ten year old, and apparently has for many years; Blaise is able to produce a sketch of Merlin from fifty years prior where he looks perhaps a year younger, raising the question of whether or not he actually is his mother's son.

Merlin eventually shows up in person and insults Vortigern even more brutally than is his norm. All the same, he is able to identify the cause of Vortigern's earthquakes, a pair of dragons, red and white, living and fighting in a cavern deep beneath his compound. Merlin recommends keeping one around, as a dragon is inherently magical and intelligent, and could be harnessed if trapped and dealt with. Consequently, Merlin helps Vortigern and a handful of his troops find a vent deep under his mountain. In the darkness, they find Merlin's dragons, and they strike a dark deal. One will be granted release, a tunnel to the surface carved open by Merlin, free to reign terror wheresoever it may choose (it's a dragon after all, what could stop it?), while the second will remain, the escape route collapsed by Merlin, and the dragon will exchange scales, blood, and assorted other bio-mystical reagents in exchange for consistent human sacrifices. Vortigern agrees

to these terms, Merlin releases the red dragon, which goes on to roost at Camelot. Merlin vanishes, and Vortigern ends the tale on an ominous note, with Vortigern summoning another mystical entity, the fae-taught Orwen, eldest of the Witches Orr, who can make terrifying use of dragon biology.

### ***The Tale of the War of Twelve Kings, part three***

They arrive in Caerleon, and Bedivere managed to get the beast talking using cues from Leodegrance's story, but when it was clear that it had no intention of coexisting with humanity or leaving Britain, Arthur fought it and won, earning his surname, Pendragon.

Arthur strengthens his ties with the ageing Leodegrance by setting Camelot (a renamed Caerleon) as the capital of his new nation, and the seat of his power, a favor returned by Leodegrance formally adopting Guinevere, to whom he had taken a shine, and who had no official ties to Britain to justify her betrothal to the king.

Morgan arrives, strengthened by her training under Merlin, just too late to effectively harness much strength at all from the downed dragon. Robin arrives with her, and he brings news of their next adventure: opposing Bagdemagus, nephew to Morgan's abandoned husband Urien, whose son Meleagant has been positively terrorizing the local peasantry. What's more, while Urien's alliance with Uther was shattered by Morgan's disinterest in marriage, Urien had nevertheless refused all offers of alliance with Vortigern, making Vortigern invested in seeing Bagdemagus--with whom he was friendly--ascend to the throne of Hen Ogledd (Southern Scotland).

Bedivere, Kay, Leodegrance and most of his men are low-key abandoned by the plot here, instructed to encourage repopulation of what Arthur, sweet dreamer that he is, envisions will be the shining center of his ideal kingdom (Ector had previously asked Arthur to make Kay his seneschal, and while Bedivere has always been a fairly skilled fighter, he simply isn't up to task for what they anticipate will be coming their way going forward). Morgan supplies Bedivere with a ring enchanted to allow the wearer to assume Guinevere's shape, allowing the warrior queen to accompany them while also leaving royalty in Camelot. Bedivere is thoroughly weirded out by the restoration of his arm (never mind the gender bending, cross-dressing, and inherent invasion of privacy), but Guinevere is thrilled to not be stuck in the castle, and the party moves on.

The group (Arthur, Gwyn, Gawain, Morgan) travels light, on horseback, without an army. Robin insists upon traveling separately. They encounter only one adventure on their way to Bagdemagus's lands: while traveling through Sherwood, they find Lancelot being transported in a cart (alongside several legitimately condemned individuals). Several cry out to Arthur for mercy, and Arthur slows their pace to match the cart's, much

to his companion's annoyance. The other criminals seem to be guilty, but Arthur is intrigued at Lancelot's silence, asking after him of the cart driver, and then engaging with Lancelot personally. Lancelot is a bit awkward, but passionate about justice, and explains that he hasn't committed any crime, hitching a ride on the cart just because it was heading in the direction his 'mother' said he would find the king. Their conversation is interrupted at a crossroads, where they see Sir Breuce the Pitiless knocking Feirefiz from his mount and then chasing down a girl of ten years, the grail-heroine-to-be, Dindrane. Breuce is driven off and pursued by Lancelot (who kicked Morgan right off her horse to facilitate the chase), but the villain escapes. Meanwhile, Arthur sees the group splitting up, half (Arthur, Morgan) to escort Dindrane to her family's castle, half (Gawain, Gwyn) to retrieve Feirefiz (Dindrane's half-brother and protector) from where Breuce had knocked him from his steed. Gawain stays with Feirefiz, while Gwyn attempts to hunt down Breuce, who is already being pursued by Lancelot. Bruce escapes, while Lance and Gwyn end up coming to blows, Lance proving a decisive but merciful victor, following Gwyn back to her group at Pellinore's castle. They get a rather wonderful meal from Pellinore's family (Pellinore himself is out with his Hundred Knights, but they meet Aglovale, and a five-year-old Percival, as well as Peggy, Pellinore's wife). Lancelot reveals he has been sent to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake, who has raised him specifically to be his greatest knight. Arthur, for his part, immediately falls in love with Lancelot's ardor for justice. He joins their group on good terms.

They encounter Sir Maleagant the next day. Arthur attempts diplomacy, Maleagant runs away, gets allies, tries to fight. He fails, taken down in single combat with Lancelot (after trouncing Gawain quite thoroughly). Arthur and company take Maleagant hostage, and use him to turn Badgemagus to their cause. As an immediate consequence, they resolve to visit King Urien's place, which forces Morgan's identity as Arthur's step-sister into the open. With their immediate goal achieved, some conversation is made regarding what their next step ought to be. Vortigern's greatest remaining British ally is undoubtedly Galehaut, but Robin's intel suggests that he's a relatively fair and just king, and not especially deserving of upheaval, save for his alliance with Vortigern. Vortigern's fortress remains untouchable so long as Galehaut protects him, and word has been coming in that King Lot has been increasingly harried in the far North. At the same time, Arthur has lost the support of Ban and Bors due to attacks on their homes by King Claudas. Robin's priority is Sir Nascien, ostensibly an ally of Arthur's, and a loyal vassal of Uther, who has been committing multiple war crimes during his unordered march through Vortigern's lands.

This is one of the few times in the story where focus is split between multiple storylines, alternating between King Arthur's group heading South to France and Morgan's group going North to Orkney.

Arthur's half is a tale of continual success, first watching Lancelot best an overproud Bors at the joust before feasting with him and meeting his sons Bors Jr. and Lionel, as well as Ban's son Hector de Maris. From there, they proceed to march on King Claudas' holdings, where, after Claudas absolutely refuses to recognize Arthur as king even enough to come to the negotiation table. Battle. Arthur and Guinevere's tactics combined with Hector de Maris's intel make for a devastating combination, utterly routing the French forces, forcing Claudas to accept some rather generous terms, freeing Ban and Bors' forces to join Arthur's northern campaign.

Meanwhile, Gawain and Morgan are having a less optimal time. Though Gawain and his parents are thrilled to be reunited, Agravaine is significantly less enthusiastic, and Anna very obviously thinks Morgan is scum for abandoning her royal and familial duty to Urien, an opinion not aided by Morgan's imminent childbirth. At least tiny Gaheris is pretty dang adorable, and loves Gawain's stories about Lancelot's exploits.

As it turns out, Orkney is not actually high on Vortigern's priorities in the wake of Urien's betrayal, so besides one last small skirmish, not a lot of action in the far north right now. But this plot cul-de-sac does set up a few major plot points: baby Mordred being raised by Anna, Gawain's adoration of his father, Agravaine's bitterness towards Gawain, and introduces Accolon, a knight of Orkney to whom Agravaine is squiring, and who quickly jumps into a relationship with Morgan with ambitious intent.

The group had planned to regroup in Sherwood, a valuable piece of intel which Accolon leaks to Galehaut. Accolon, power-hungry in addition to greedy, convinces Morgan to steal and replace Caliburn with the inferiorly enchanted Clarent. Galehaut has some contacts among the outlaws of the forest, and when he confirms the arrival of Arthur, he moves to intercept in force, ambushing the group with a full army, arresting Arthur, Accolon, Gawain, and Guinevere, while Robin and Morgan successfully escape through stealth and guile, and Lancelot does his first proper berserker frenzy, forcing his way out through hundred-to-one odds.

Galehaut brings his prisoners to his keep at Sorelois, defying Rowena (identified by Galehaut as Vortigern's wife, and by Gwyn as Hengist's daughter (Hengist is a very high-ranking Saxon)) who called for their immediate execution. He further denies Accolon any reward for his treachery, as he does not value traitors. Galehaut is perturbed by Gwyn's accusations of Rowena's identity, as he didn't know Vortigern was allying himself with mainlanders. Not wanting to bring invaders to his home, Galehaut tells Arthur he plans to sever his alliance with Vortigern and, recognizing Arthur's talent for diplomacy in gathering so many allies so quickly, tries to make an alliance, beginning his own play for the position of "High King." The two verbally spar, Galehaut's pragmatism feeling ultimately disappointed in Arthur's idealism and his claim that right made might, pointing to Accolon's betrayal and Arthur's lack of a protective army as obvious failings in



his capacity as king. Arthur, for his part, is not averse to the idea of giving up the crown in concept, but flatly refuses to swear allegiance to a man whose goal is so narrow. Arthur's final verbal stroke is to claim that Galehaut was already on the side of idealism, otherwise he would reward Accolon, rather than punish him, to encourage others to turn traitor. Galehaut resolves the contradiction by directly testing Arthur's "right makes might" mentality, organizing a gladiatorial match between Arthur and Accolon.

Meanwhile, Morgan finds Robin out in the woods. Robin is tending to the dead civilians caught in Galehaut's attack (mostly criminals), and Morgan is caught somewhere between guilt and despair. The two are each on the verge of abandoning Arthur and the quest, but each inadvertently encourages the other, and together they begin a supernatural siege of terrible efficacy, all Robin's guile combined with all Morgan's craft.

The next morning, the day of Arthur's fight with Accolon, Gwyn and Gawain, whose cells are adjacent, discuss Arthur and Britain, bonding over their shared status as foreigners. Their unexpected friendliness is interrupted by Galehaut around noon, who thinks it only just that Arthur should have some friendly faces in the crowd, since popular support is so integral to Arthur's ideology. They get balcony seats to the fundamentally unfair fight. Besides Accolon having stolen Caliburn, Galehaut has also provided him with appropriate armor, while Arthur was given naught but his prison garb and a flimsy practice sword. Arthur attempts to talk Accolon into a fairer fight, into some kind of chivalry or honor. Accolon declines. They fight, Arthur quickly shedding his clothes to serve as a makeshift net/shield.

Morgan, whose crows have been keeping an eye on things, chooses this time to begin her assault in earnest, unleashing Lancelot upon the castle. With his indestructible sword, he physically attacks the walls themselves, carving a path inside and subsequently through Galehaut's forces, all the while quite as naked as he was in his sleep the preceding evening.

Gwyn and Gawaine conspire to toss Galehaut from the balcony to the ongoing arena match below, wresting arms from some nearby soldiers before following the proud prince's fall and rejoining their king. Arthur's duel was on the point of tragedy, his sword having shattered, when aid came from several directions simultaneously: Nimue appeared among the crowd of onlookers and cast a spell causing Caliburn to fall from Accolon's fingers, and Arthur recovers the fumble. Guinevere stabs Accolon in the back, an action which earns her the lasting ire of Morgan. Without armor, no matter how well the royal trio fights, it's a losing war of attrition. Even with Robin picking off their archers, Morgan doing Morgan things, and Lancelot going berserk on everyone, the cuts continue to pile up, Galehaut's troops seem endless, and defeat seems inevitable.

Then Galehaut called off his forces. So enamored was he with Lancelot's exquisite skill (which had not yet allowed an opponent's weapon to touch his exposed skin) that

Galehaut begged Arthur to accept his loyalty in exchange for a chance to befriend Lance. Arthur, obviously, accepts.

In the battle's wake, Morgan reattaches a few of Gawain's recently removed fingers, Gwyn helps Lancelot cool down, and Robin discusses with Arthur whether or not Galehaut ought to be allowed to live. Ally he is now, and a competent leader, but he has done some terrible crimes which, performed by a man without power or wealth, would easily earn a death sentence. The two discuss justice, Robin concerned with preventative punishment, Arthur with redemption. Robin leaves the group in disgust. The next morning, Morgan is found to be missing, and before Arthur can forbid him telling the tale, Galehaut tells the rest of the crew what Accolon told him about Morgan's part in his betrayal. Arthur doesn't go into detail, but it's clear that he and Morgan spoke the previous evening, and that her departure is not a surprise. Lancelot finds Galehaut's attentions confusing and not particularly welcome, but the half-giant makes for a great sparring partner while Arthur and Gwyn plan the final assault on Vortigern.

This entire interaction rapidly escalates the Arthur/Vortigern conflict, and Lamorak comes to Arthur with the message that Vortigern has called his banners in earnest, as well as hiring mercenary armies from Saxony, marching on Pellinore's castle at Badon (technically not Pellinore's, but one of his sons was wooing the woman who was in charge, so Pellinore and his hundred knights were already involved). Vortigern himself will take to the field, wielding an enormous hammer and the strength of a dragon. Arthur and company arrive a week prior to the battle, and have time to get the lay of the land, become attached to the citizenry, and draw up battle plans for Vortigern's approaching force. Merlin has done his work, alerting allies to arrive on time. Sir Ector makes an appearance, complete with new sets of armor for the party, as do King Ban and King Bors, old allies of his father's, who Pellinore had told there was a fight, which they thought they'd enjoy. Robin also returns with a less noble group of followers, thieves and assassins ill-suited to open battle, but who Robin has convinced to fight nonetheless. Merlin says this battle was foretold, and has no interest in fighting it. If Arthur wins, he will be king and the prophecy will continue; if not, then there never was a prophecy at all.

Despite his bloodthirsty allies, Arthur attempts to sue for peace three times, riding out before Vortigern's forces with a white flag tied to the tip of Rhongomyniad, Uther's legendary spear. Twice he is rebuffed with arrows, and the third time one strikes his horse a deadly wound, pinning him the ground.

Battle of Badon. Lancelot rushes all the alliance's forces forth from the castle's safety to protect his king, and while they successfully protect their over-noble leader, it is at strategic cost, Vortigern's forces constantly advancing. Battle battle battle. King Lot's forces arrive mid battle, taking the Saxon's from behind, and the once well-defined battle lines dissolve. Battle battle battle. Ultimately, Vortigern is the lynchpin keeping the

opposing alliance afloat (a charismatic force much like Arthur), so when Arthur is given a path to him (courtesy of brilliant charge by Lancelot, Gawain, Lamorak, and Guinevere) their climactic showdown seals the battle, and while Vortigern's hammer shattered the Sword from the Stone, (Sir Tor protected Arthur during his moment of vulnerability, dying in the process) Rhongomyniad, retrieved from where Arthur's dead horse still lay, pierced Vortigern's stolen plate. With Vortigern's death, the Saxons routed, and in the battle was won.

### **The Tale of Merlin**

King Mark, despite living relatively nearby, fails to send a solitary soldier to either side. In the aftermath, Arthur claimed the whole of the isle of Britain as his domain as High King, further assigning specific roles for his most trusted knights. Arthur himself would act as a one-man legislature, writing laws for the new country. Lancelot became Commander-in-Chief, enforcing those laws, Guinevere was to organize a system of courts. Kay became the seneschal of Camelot, Bedivere became Arthur's cupbearer and personal aid, Gawain, envoy within England (which basically comes out as professional knight-errant, keeping tabs on the territories, keeping an ear to the ground, etc.). An age of peace is declared.

Merlin was decidedly discontent with this proclamation; beyond feeling snubbed for not receiving an official title or role in Arthur's government (little though he wanted such), he was eager to see the kingdom become an empire. To that end, he entreated Kay/Nimue to kill and replace Arthur himself, revealing that he had poisoned the true infant Kay to allow for these years of deception in the first place. Merlin also lets slip Arthur's fate, to be overshadowed by those who swear fealty to him, to be betrayed by his best friend, to be slain by his son, the child of Morgan le Fay. Nimue, in response, shows Merlin how to forge magemetal, conning him (by impersonating a "future" Merlin, who tells current Merlin that it works) into forging and enchanting Arthur's arms, Excalibur and its sheath, reforged from the shards of Caliburn, as well as potent enchantments for his knife, Carnwennan, and Prydwen, his shield, artifacts so potent their creation saps Merlin of his magic for centuries to come. She then imprisons Merlin in Avalon, a prison tower in the Otherworld, which she built custom to contain him and his time-traveling/world-hopping sorcery. He will have no further impact upon Arthur's trials as king.

### *The Tale of Nimue*

Nimue tips off Lancelot that she stole Arthur's arms, and thus he encounters the Lady of the Lake, who, upon testing Arthur's will, humility, and morality, most notably passing along portions of Merlin's last prophecy, that his fall will come at the hands of one conceived in the month whence he pulled Clarent from the stone, implying the May Day massacre, the loss of the Holy Grail, and Lancelot and Guinevere's affair. For each correct answer, Nimue gifts Arthur with one of Merlin's creations, Prydwen, Carnwennan, and finally Excalibur (with sheath).

Overwhelmed at the fae's generosity, and oblivious to the loss of his most powerful ally, Arthur chooses the still abandoned Roman fort of Camelot to make his seat, and invites all his knights and allies to attend his coronation and subsequent wedding.

Taliesin and Tristan return from Ireland with hopeful overtures towards peace with the nearby nation (Tristan is much more concerned with his infatuation with Isolde, though this doesn't keep him from hooking up with a woman (a daughter of King Ban or Bors, which would make her a French princess?) at Arthur's upcoming coronation).

The coronation itself was performed by Nimue in Merlin's guise, and she used it as an excuse to explain away Merlin's absence hereafter. King Arthur makes a speech, everyone is happy to see him as High King.

At the coronation feast, Sir Nascien makes an appearance representing Tintagel, apologizing for Igraine's absence, with some polite but pointed implications that she has no interest in being drawn back into court politics, nor in even meeting her son. Arthur is quite clearly perturbed, but does his best to put on a brave face.

The twins Drian and Alain and their family make an appearance, and the two are subsequently knighted and inducted into Pellinore's Hundred Knights, with the understanding that the boys were fathered by King Pellinore. Rather than any kind of shame, Pellinore makes a crack about how the women the world over simply can't resist him (with jovial rapey undertones), leading Arthur to pull the old king aside and threaten his life if he doesn't shape up. Pellinore is unimpressed, but explains that his facade is an act, that he'd never met the boys mother, but his Hundred Knights were a place for peasants, bastards, and fifteenth sons with martial inclinations to make something of themselves, and kept many from lives of banditry. Arthur still isn't fond of anyone making light of sexual assault, as he does not want that normalized. Pellinore agrees, and they return to the feast as allies. Lot and Pellinore discuss plans to marry Agravaine to Dindrane (which would never bear fruit).

In the ceremony's aftermath, Arthur and his inner circle escape the festivities for a quiet drink around a circular table. The Round Table itself has been made glorious since the dragon's defeat, varnished and exquisitely carved. At this first seating of the Round Table, Morgan le Faye makes her presence obliquely known. In the center of the table lies

Clarent, whole, reforged, and carefully enchanted. And at the table's head stands the Siege Perilous, with engravings explaining its enchantment. Arthur deliberately does not test that throne, instead establishing the ideals of the Round Table: not perfection, but betterment, strength without pride, charity without reward. End volume one.

At the end of this first leg of the story, the Round Table is filled thusly: Arthur, Kay, Bedivere, Guinevere, Gawain, Robin, Lot, Galehaut, Tristan, and Lancelot. Two seats are yet unclaimed.

*End of Book One*

*Begin Book Two*

### **The Tale of the Wedding of King Arthur and Lady Guinevere**

The wedding feast begins well before the wedding itself, and with confusing overlap with the coronation feast. This is deliberate on Arthur's part, as he wants Guinevere to be perceived as his equal partner, rather than a foreigner arbitrarily elevated by his interest in her (Guinevere makes note that the reverse is more accurate, that she had power and an army of her own while Arthur was still Wart).

The feast sees two significant political hiccups, one quiet, one loud.

### **The Tale of Prince Galehaut**

Prince Galehaut is a remarkable man. The son of a king and a giantess, he holds most of their strengths and few of their exploitable weaknesses. He was a proud prince in a time of warring kings, and never bent the knee. He is cunning and strategic, strong and brave in battle. He is not just "the one gay knight in Logres."

So why has he been able to think of nothing but Lancelot since the siege of Serleus?

Enough is enough, so Galehaut begins scheming for means to spend time with Lancelot and confront his desires directly. And, hoping for the best, he knows that he has to conspire to tear Lancelot out of Camelot, rather than join him there: his kingdom depends on him far too much for any endgame to involve Galehaut leaving his home.

The tale begins with Galehaut making a formal plea in King Arthur's throne room (which is noticeably less crowded than Galehaut remembered from the wedding) to host a

grand tournament, such as has not been seen since before the War of Twelve Kings Robin points out the opportunity for exposing corruption by enabling it; a gathering of so many disparate factions would allow for the most untoward members of the nobility to communicate freely without suspicion. Arthur himself is preoccupied with codifying his law, but heavily approves of the concept as a means to redirect the violent habits and desires bred by war. As such, he not only approves of the tournament, but instructs nearly his entire court to attend, up to and including his wife, sending out messengers to every corner of his land, seeking out his questing knights. Further inquiry on that subject reveals that shortly after the wedding, Lancelot insisted upon personally attending to one claimant's plea for aid. Gawain decided this was marvelously manly, and set out to do likewise, making questing the newest fad to seize the Round Table.

Cut to the opening feast, the evening before the tournament begins. Some time is spent in Galehaut's head as he looks over his crowded hall, identifying the most promising talents in each of the gathered factions. From Orkney, King Lot was perhaps the most seasoned competitor present, tougher and meaner than most, if not the most skilled or strong. Agravaine is also present. From the French contingent, many names are high contenders, most especially the two sons of King Bors, Bors and Lionel, though King Ban and his son, Hector de Maris, ought not to be underestimated either. The same respect does not extend to the knights of Cornwall; King Mark has long favored a court of intrigue to one of strength, though some stories were starting to circulate about young Sir Tristan. Widely, the most respected faction is Pellinore's Hundred Knights. Among them, Pellinore is as seasoned as Lot, as talented (particularly in the saddle) as Lot is crafty. His knights in general are better trained and more talented than most, but two rise above the rest: Palomides, an up-and-coming foreigner with tremendous potential, and Lamorak, who is widely regarded as the finest knight living. But Galehaut's interest lies primarily with the final faction: Camelot itself (mostly seated alongside Galehaut at the hall's high table). New Arthur's Round Table may be to the national scene, but it had quickly become home to the land's brightest stars; Robin and Bedivere weren't flashy, but hadn't yet seen injury, Kay's limits were never consistent, Sir Gawain was brilliant and at times astoundingly strong, Sir Gwyn was an often terrifying mystery, and, of course, Sir Lancelot was...Lancelot. Galehaut himself had been in many battles, had watched good men die and great men conquer. He'd known infatuation, lust, and a lover's touch. But never had he seen a man fight like Lancelot. This would not be a tournament. It would be a showcase, and a dire warning to anyone who might think of defying Arthur.

Contemplation completed, Galehaut feels pathetic when he attempts to re-enter conversation, as he continually feels spikes of jealousy at Lancelot's entirely appropriate attempts to keep Queen Guinevere a part of their conversation. He begins to suspect romantic desires exist between the two.

When the feast is mostly complete, Galehaut gets everyone's attention and explains the structure of the tournament: several separate competitions will be held simultaneously, with the most prestigious being the Field of Honor. From 9-3 each day, the field outside Sorlois castle will be a free-for-all, each day's prize and purse being rewarded by the head judge to the knight who held the field the longest without being unhorsed, with some preference granted to the champion at end of day. Meanwhile, at other locations in and around the castle, several other challenges have been set up, where knights are encouraged to compete for lesser prizes: there's an archery range, a horseback obstacle course, places for 1 v 1 combat or tilts, and more. Gale assigns Gwyn as head judge, a spiteful move in two parts: for one, it keeps her off the battlefield, for another, it keeps her away from Lancelot.

The next morning, the tournament begins in earnest. As the host, Galehaut is the first to take the field. Several knights simultaneously charge at the first bell with more sense than skill, the first to force Galehaut to properly try being Gawain. Galehaut is surprised at how much weaker Gawain is than the last time they fought during the war, but Gawain skill is still enough to make their battle interesting. However, their honorable battle is interrupted by a coordinated charge from a large portion of the Hundred Knights, Lamorak and Palomides personally knocking down Galehaut and Gawain. All signs of unity dissolve, however, when a furious Pellinore enters the field to chastise his sons, knocking Lamorak from his horse and knocking out Palomides altogether. The field dissolves into chaos, and it is remarkably Lamorak who comes out of the field on top, having managed to regain his steed.

Galehaut, half furious at the breach of sportsmanship, half eager that Lancelot will get such a marvelous spotlight, searches out the man of the hour, only to find him chatting with Guinevere, unarmored and just enjoying the exhibition Lamorak is putting on. When urged to participate, Guinevere explains that she, too, has urged Lancelot to enter the fray, but he feels it would be no honor to freshly fight someone who has been straining on the field for hours. Guinevere eventually decrees that Lamorak has won the day.

That evening, a bit of a stir is made when a woman loudly begs Palomides to fight on her behalf against a knight who has been making unwanted advances towards her. This leads Guinevere to speak to Galehaut about her "harem" (in the original meaning of the word) idea, a place in Camelot where women from any background can come to study, train a trade, or simply exist without fear of male interference or entanglements. Galehaut has concerns and criticisms, but Lancelot encourages her.

The next morning, Galehaut sees through his bedroom window that Lancelot is already astride his horse, waiting to challenge Lamorak before the rest of the castle (or the fields of pitched tents) have managed to pull themselves from liquor-enhanced sleep. In

anticipation of Lancelot's action, Galehaut situates himself not at ground level, in armor, but in silk finery in the judges box, as it affords the best view of the field. Unfortunately, this results in him sitting beside Guinevere, his rival for Lancelot's affections. After some initial hostility and resultant awkwardness, the two end up bonding over, rather predictably, Lancelot, admiring his incredible prowess as he strikes down Lamorak as well as the continual, mutual struggle to convince the young, insecure knight their affections are genuine. Guinevere hints heavily that she knows and does not disapprove of Galehaut's romantic inclinations, suggesting that Lancelot would benefit from a romantic relationship.

As the day wears on, Galehaut comes to realize that he's genuinely enjoying Guinevere's company, a first in a long, gay, misogynistic life. She demonstrates many of the virtues he values most, and is more knowledgeable of combat styles, arms, armament, and the history of war than most of his contemporaries. The revelation sparks something of an identity crisis in the half-giant, leading to Lancelot asking after his host's health over supper. Galehaut deflects by latching onto a quip from King Lot that he was being upset by love. The conversation goes on to allow Lancelot to vocalize his pro-virginity stance, ascribing the status supernatural power and God's favor. Much of the table is surprised to discover that Lancelot seems to be entirely sincere in this belief. Lancelot, for his part, seems to come to the conclusion that Galehaut has become besotted with Guinevere. Palomides fights on behalf of another woman.

The third day advances in much the same manner as the second, Lancelot near-effortlessly trouncing any and all comers, driving the steadily more-and-more humiliated knights of the kingdom to resort to less chivalrous tactics to unseat the untouchable champion. At length, Lancelot is eventually put on the rocks by the simultaneous assault of Gawain, Lamorak, Palomides, and King Bors. When Galehaut attempts to engage Guinevere in discussion of Lancelot's chances, he quickly discovers that Guinevere has left an impersonator under her veil (veils, like a knight's armor, are impenetrable disguises under most circumstances)--notably, the False-Guinevere Ring was not employed in this instance, as Morgan is currently in possession of the thing--while the Queen geared up to save Lancelot. While Lancelot and Guinevere kick butt below, Galehaut is gently lectured by the false Guinevere (whose identity is not explicitly revealed, as Galehaut is uninterested in women on principle, but who is implied to be Eglante), who like Lancelot believes that Galehaut is falling in love with Guinevere. Fortuitously, her words of warding, warning against selfish indulgence in the flesh's pleasures when the target of your affections will be actively harmed by your love apply rather nicely to Galehaut's actual situation. While Lancelot sportingly unseats "Mystery Knight" Guinevere and Tristan speaks with Lancelot (who seems to be apologizing for not interceding on Lancelot's behalf earlier), Galehaut gives up on his desires for Lancelot,



and instead misguidedly decides the correct thing to do is the most selfless, intending to see Lancelot hook up with Guinevere.

That evening, while Galehaut is scheming how to pierce Lancelot's armor-against-happiness, the man in question is confronted before the entire hall by Sir Lamorak, who apologizes for his dishonorable actions. Lancelot extends his forgiveness, and his following speech on the value of chivalry as a tool to not subjugate, but conquer, to leave the defeated party in a position to be a useful ally, is received with much less scorn than his claims the night prior.

In line with his claims that holding your honor is separate from clinging to pride, Lancelot arranges for his own defeat the next morning at the hands of a young competitor, the barely-knighted Sir Bors, leaving the "field of honor" to compete in some of the side events. Galehaut follows him, triggering a general migration of interest away from the "main event," leaving Guinevere and the Cornish party (offscreen, Mark blindsides Bors, and is subsequently nearly killed by Tristan, who holds the field against a tenacious but outmatched Palomides for the remainder of the day) to watch over a largely uncontested field. Meanwhile, in between a horseback obstacle course, archery shots, and other small trials, Galehaut pesters Lancelot continually over the nature of his relationship with Guinevere. Lancelot consistently answers some variation of his virginity argument, but eventually concedes that he is capable of feeling desire. This narrows Galehaut's interrogation to sussing out precisely which characteristics he finds desirable, despite Lancelot's growing and visible discomfort with the topic. Lancelot starts with vague statements, but quickly finds himself rather explicitly describing Guinevere. When Galehaut (made tactless by his own emotional distress over the implicit rejection) points this out, Lancelot furiously--but discreetly--explodes, pointing out that yes, he is highly attracted to Guinevere, and yes, she is likely receptive to that attraction on some level, but she is the queen, his best friend's wife; even assuming that he would be willing to abandon his virginity position--a highly inaccurate assumption--he still wouldn't touch Guinevere with lascivious hands for the sake of her husband and the realm. It was for the sake of avoiding that precise temptation that Lancelot had left Camelot in the first place. This last admission is enough to drive Lancelot past the threshold of acceptable embarrassment, so he takes his leave of the proud prince for the remainder of the day.

At the evening meal, Lancelot avoids the high table in favor of the French Contingent, with whom he has no formal ties, but whom he knows and generally respects from during the war, and who are more than eager to welcome him after the stunt with Bors that morning. (By contrast, King Mark is receiving dirty looks from every corner for his dishonorable takedown of Sir Bors, leading to his abandoning the tournament a day early.) Galehaut takes offense at this, and despite Guinevere's words to the contrary,

confronts Lancelot in his quarters afterwards, all but demanding that Lancelot spend the evening with either Guinevere or himself. Lancelot throws him bodily out of his room.

On the fifth (and last) day of the tournament, as on the second, Lancelot takes up a position at the Field of Honor at dawn, which Galehaut interprets as an effort to avoid conversing with him, personally. Dejected but unwilling to acknowledge his own guilty feelings, Galehaut returns to the top box, where Guinevere is still stuck. Guinevere notices Galehaut's less than haughty attitude and asks after that, leading to Galehaut admitting to his actions the night prior and Guinevere giving her perspective. As a foreigner, British attitudes toward sex don't always make sense to her, particularly when notions of loyalty and ownership get intermingled. But she does understand consent, and knows that for as much as she wishes it were not true, Lancelot has not given it. So she waits, and she hopes, but she does not push, and she does not take. Galehaut finds a great deal of wisdom in her words, and consequently rushes to arm himself so he can apologize to Lancelot for all the ways he's messed up in the past few days. Turns out, having a heartfelt conversation while someone is swinging a sword at your head tends to result in injuries, in this case of the "severe concussion and unconsciousness" variety.

When Galehaut awakes, he finds himself almost alone in his castle. Guinevere awarded all prizes for him, establishing the first iteration of the tier list while she was at it, and left record that she was returning to Camelot, thanking him for his hospitality and leaving a standing invitation for him to visit. The absence of tents and other signs of life from the fields around his castle suggested the other contingents had departed as well. All that remained in Sorlois was Galehaut himself, the castle's staff, and Lancelot. Words were said, apologies made and accepted, and Lancelot makes to continue his directionless questing. When Galehaut requests it, Lancelot happily accepts the slightly less Haut Prince as a comrade in arms.

### **The Tale of Sir Tristan:**

King Arthur receives word that King Mark of Cornwall is talking big game, that he refuses to bend the knee to any man, nor pay tribute, particularly given that Arthur had done nothing to aid Mark's troubles with the Irish pirating and plundering along the Cornish coast. Thinking that Taliesen and he made peace with Ireland the previous year, Tristan volunteers to treat with Mark, not least because he is his uncle.

Tristan prefers negotiating on his terms, displaying the power of his bow by writing messages and tying them to arrows, which he then deposits at high speed within inches of King Mark's person. Mark, who has never been gifted in combat, takes offense to this, and declares in a fit of clever pettiness that he will swear fealty to Arthur on the condition that he supplies peace with Ireland, made concrete by acquiring for him an Irish bride, particularly Isolde, who Tristan has mentioned as a great beauty, forcing Tristan to choose between his duty and his love.

Tristan reluctantly visits the halls of the Fianna, reuniting with the woman of his affections. She is thrilled at the initial notion that she is to marry Tristan, but refuses to pledge herself to Mark save at her grandfather, Fionn Mac Cumhail's, own request. Fionn decides to test Tristan on Mark's behalf, pointing out that without an heir through Iseult, Tristan is Mark's rightful heir, further testing his martial might without the aid of Failnaught, his enchanted bow.

This is achieved via martial proving, setting Tristan against another of Iseult's suitors, Palomides. This is not the first time Tristan and Palomides have crossed paths (Tristan first met Iseult while Palomides was serving as her escort, jousting him and kidnapping her, only returning her to her family at Taliesen's insistence years earlier). Talented knight though he is, Palomides is outmatched by Tristan. Tristan extracts a promise from Palomides to lay down his arms for a full year and to never again pursue Iseult, and to convert to Christianity, and in exchange spares Palomides life.

At Tristan's success, Fionn gives his blessing, and Iseult consents to the engagement. Their journey is fraught with bickering, both horribly unhappy with the situation, but Tristan is wholly determined to uphold the code of honor, dignity, and chivalry which Arthur so recently espoused. By day at least. By night, there aren't any witnesses to where fingers may stray or whose clothes may or may not have been discarded.

Upon returning to Cornwall, Mark reveals he has a love potion for Isolde (prepared by Morgan le Fay, with implications that she orchestrated the conflict), which he orders Tristan to deliver to his bride. Tristan agrees, but secretly smashes the flask, considering such a plan unchivalrous (Morgan's potion actually would have granted invisibility and enhanced strength for 24 hours). Even so, Iseult does her duty as princess and goes through with the marriage. The first night after the marriage, Tristan, at Iseult's behest, saves her from the wedding bed by getting Mark outrageously drunk. The second night, he invites Mark upon a hunt (Mark slays a deer, which are sacred to the Fianna). The third night, Tristan elopes with Iseult, fleeing to his own castle of Tintagel to escape Mark's wrath. Mark pursues them with a small host, which he parks outside Tintagel's walls.

Arthur is forced to go in person (accompanied by most of the Round Table) to rescue one of his strongest knights, and acts as mediator to their case. Arthur hears their case, ultimately judging that where two men pursue one woman, it is the woman's decision which matters most, and as she has already said "I do," she must return to Mark's side. Iseult gainsays her vow, which Lancelot begs Arthur to heed. Mark accuses Tristan of using the love potion himself, which gives Arthur pause. He reverses his prior decision, claiming that Iseult could never be happy with Lot if she has been enchanted to love Tristan. Agravain protests this decision, claiming the marriages of royalty need not be loving, existing for the stability of the realm, the production of heirs, and the foundation of alliances (the implications regarding Guinevere are clear). To this, Arthur, all but throwing up his hands, decrees that as nature changes in cycles, so too must this relationship, with Iseult to be with Mark for a portion of the year, and Tristan for another, with one to spend time with her while the trees have green leaves, and the other while they do not. Mark is given the choice of which he wants, as he is the elder, is a king, and is already married with her. Mark, a clever man, argues that the existence of evergreen trees gives him year-long access to Iseult. Arthur, pretty thoroughly convinced of Mark's jerkishness at this point, but also wanting to maintain the law, vows to uphold and safeguard this marriage, specifically by permanently installing one of his finest knights, Tristan, to see that no man enters Iseult's quarters save by her express permission.

Beyond firmly establishing the illegality of marital rape, Arthur espouses more directly on the idea of law and honor itself, his dream for a world which is ruled not by threats of what people can do, but by discussion of what they should do, and his promise to, in the coming months, craft a clear set of laws which his knights shall enforce throughout the realm, and finally his fear that this plan is flawed, as it will only inspire men like Mark to scour his laws for loopholes.

### **The Tale of Lady Elaine:**

Whilst out and about adventuring in early mid-winter, Lancelot (who naturally travels with Galehaut) came across the town that stretches between the two nearby castles of Borbenic and Dolorous Gard. A girl, Elaine, is being boiled alive in the town square.

Her father, Pelles, explains the situation: he was once king of Corbenic, but after receiving the Dolorous Stroke, his power was usurped by the king of Dolorous Gard, one Lord Brandin, a dangerous and cruel man who has history with Vivian, the Fae that initially trained Morgan and who Nimue masquerades as. At first snow, the people asked Brandin for wood to burn from the castle's storerooms. Brandin responded by trapping Elaine in the ever-boiling cauldron. Lancelot performs a small miracle in freeing Elaine, at which point he and Galehaut turn their attentions on Dolorous Gard itself. The castle is enchanted to require any invader to endure a brutal gauntlet, fighting off twenty enchantment-knights. Galehaut immediately sets out to do the thing. When he fails to return in a timely manner, Lancelot begins building himself into a berserker frenzy, but is restrained by Elaine, who insists they find mystical backup of their own.

Lancelot consequently sets out for his mum's lake, but finds her absent (Kay having no idea of the situation, being in Camelot at the time). However, an actual Fae, Vivian, attended by Lynette, finds and takes pity upon them, calling upon "the Circle" to grant them aid. The Circle consists of Vivian, the mother and daughter Or (Orddu and Orwen), and the witch Morgan. A fifth position (Taliesen's) is left open, from which Lancelot and Elaine occasionally hear music which the Circle understands as words. Despite Morgan's vehement protests, the Circle enchants Lancelot's sword and shield, in a twisted fashion; the sword itself is made indestructible, while the shield grants its bearer immense strength. Morgan, in an attempt to forestall Lancelot and Guinevere's affair, encourages Elaine to pursue Lancelot romantically, telling the girl of Lancelot's great love for Guinevere. She encourages Elaine to emphasize her strengths over the queen, illustrating her point via the ring she once made for Bedivere. Elaine ignores the advice, but steals the ring.

With these new boons, Lancelot has little trouble overthrowing Dolorous Gard, ousting Lord Brandin, and rescuing the many defeated knights who had tried their luck before (most notably Galehaut and half the Orkney clan). Lancelot is gifted the castle in turn by Elaine and Pelles, who, due to his wound, is not fit to rule much of anything, though he reclaims Corbenic castle as his own. Lancelot changes the name to Joyous Gard, and sets up shop in his new home, eagerly inviting Galehaut, Elaine, and Pelles to live with him.

That night, Elaine puts on her enchanted ring, and appears as Guinevere. As Guinevere, she tries to trick Lancelot into bed. Lancelot has little trouble sussing out the deception, and explains his reasons for maintaining his virginity. Galehaut, overcompensating for his jealousy, encourages Elaine's affections, telling her to expect a late-night visitor in her bedroom. He then does his utmost to get Lancelot as drunk as possible and gets him talking about Guinevere, love, and what he really wants from life. Lancelot wakes the next morning in Elaine's room. Horrified at the loss of his divine

patronage, he goes berserk, seizes his sword, and leaps from the window, naked. Elaine, now pregnant with Galahad, waits in Joyous Gard with Galehaut, and both channel their loss and misery into raising Lancelot's son.

When Lancelot arrives at Camelot, emaciated, naked, alone, trekking through the last slush of winter, he finds Guinevere at the training grounds who, not recognizing him, promptly beats him into submission until she recognizes his sword. She brings him into the castle, and sets about seeing him healed.

### **The Tale of Sir Gawain**

This tale begins right on the heels of the last, with Gawain and Agravaine (recently released from Brandin's cellar) speaking with Arthur about the woes currently plaguing his kingdom, not least being the rapid losses of his most powerful assets: Morgan abandoned them, Merlin is missing, Tristan trapped with Mark, Lancelot grievously sick, Guinevere debilitated by guilt, and Kay becoming more and more surly, moody, and drunk. Arthur finds himself relying more and more upon Gawain in particular.

Agravaine responds poorly to this, and (outside Arthur's earshot) seriously lays into his elder brother, who knows nothing of Lothian, or Orkney, of their old gods or ways,

Week's later, at a New Year's feast (held in March), attended by much of King Arthur's court in Camelot (Tristan is at Mark's, Guinevere is maintaining her vigil over Lancelot's sickly body), is interrupted by the appearance of the Green Knight. The knight explains his classic game: whack me with my awesome axe, and in return in one year's time, I'll whack you right back. And as an extra prize, whoever does so gets my awesome axe.

Arthur's court, clearly smelling a very obvious trap, refuses his bait (though the axe is awesome). The knight begins to ridicule their cowardice, and the emptiness of their ideals, which triggers Arthur enough that he rises to the bait. Gawain, one of many heirs to Orkney, one of many knights to Arthur, neither the strongest, bravest, or most clever, stops his king on the grounds that he is much more expendable. Agravain having told him it is a trap, Gawain is cautious handling the axe, and, finding it awesome, comes to the conclusion that this is a test of their chivalry, and the game might violate sacred hospitality, so Gawain's first swing misses the Green Knight altogether. After a hearty laugh, the Green Knight reassures Gawain that there is no trick, and the challenge is to their courage, not to their custom. By the second blow, Gawain has come to respect the Green Knight's fearlessness, and he doesn't want to see him harmed, and consequently strikes him with naught but the slightest scratch, logicking that the knight's own honor would ensure he would not be harmed more severely in a year's time. The Green Knight

becomes annoyed at this, accusing Gawain of himself fearing death. At Arthur's order, Gawain swings the axe a third time, cleanly decapitating the giant of a man.

The Green Knight proceeds to then pick up his own head, retrieve his great axe from Gawain, mount his elephantine horse, tell Gawain to be at the Green Chapel in one year's time, and ride out of Camelot.

Arthur thanks Gawain for his aid, and further assures him that he would not be thought a greater coward than any were he to miss the Green Knight's appointment, which Gawain regards as something of an insult, and a challenge in its own right.

Shortly thereafter (as he has no idea where the Green Chapel is and doesn't want to be late, and after he has set his affairs in order, Gawain sets out for his own execution, with little notion of where to go, going full knight errant in his effort to find anyone who knows where to find the Green Chapel, slaying beasts, animals, and monsters, sleeping in his armor on the roadside, and generally acting like someone who has little to live for and thus has little fear of death.

Early on his quest, Gawain encounters Nimue, who seems to consider Gawain to be successor to Arthur's throne in the event of the king's death, and consequently offers him Galatine, Excalibur's sister-sword, which will grant the knight up to triple strength during daylight hours. This act of semi-divine providence confuses Gawain, as he rather thought he was fated to die in the coming months.

In a short episode, he encounters Sir Alisandre standing guard over a burned-down castle. With no reason to fight, he continues his journey, thoroughly confused at the knight's odd behavior.

At one point, Gawain comes across the keep of the Lady Ettard, where he finds the young knight Sir Pelleas being beset by five knights of the keep. Gawain offers to intervene, but Sir Pelleas refuses the aid. Riding on, he encounters a knight and a dwarf fighting over a woman, and they ask that he settle their dispute. He puts the matter in the woman's hands, and she (with her little paramour) invites Gawain back to her home in Lady Ettard's keep. On entering the keep, he speaks with Lady Ettard who gives her point of view, primarily that she's promised and owes Pelleas nothing, and simply isn't interested in him. Given his history with Dame Ragnelle (a tale from his time in the Roman Legion, which he relates to Ettard), Gawain respects her autonomy. Ettard finds his surprising feminism attractive, and they end up sharing the night together. On waking, they find Pelleas's sword between them, leading Gawain to reflect upon the optics of his actions, even if said actions were justifiable. Ettard attempts to coax Gawain into staying and forgetting his quest, but he insists upon leaving her.

At last, Gawain comes across the keep of Lord Bertilak, who tells him with only three days until the New Year that the Green Chapel is naught but two miles down the road. Bertilak is in high spirits, on his way out for the first hunt of the spring, and invites

Gawain to join them, claiming tales of Gawain's courage have already reached them. Gawain, exhausted and devastated that he will have to face his death, declines, which inspires Bertilak to make a game: Gawain will get whatever Bertilak acquires on his hunt, while Bertilak will keep anything Gawain gains while staying under his roof. Gawain, perplexed, sees no reason not to agree, and is given the opportunity to bath. In the bath, Bertilak's "wife" (a self-illusioned Morgan le Fay) helps Gawain clean. Gawain rejects her implied advances semi-successfully, receiving one kiss from the beauty. This kiss is passed along to Bertilak, who shares "Gawain's" deer over a feast that evening.

The next day sees a repetition of the first, with Bertilak going hunting, and Gawain finding Morgan in his bed when he awakes. Gawain receives and re-gifts two kisses this time, exchanged for a feast of boar.

The third day sees Morgan really turning up the charm, claiming to have heard of his quest and begging him to let her give him one last happy memory, and when he still refuses, offers up her girdle, which she claims is enchanted to forestall death by one grievous wound. Gawain, looking forward to getting his head lopped off tomorrow, accepts this last one, as he's truly afraid of death, and fails to pass it along to Bertilak that evening.

The next day, Gawain meets the Green Knight, who compliments Gawain for showing up before getting down to business. He misses his first swing, as Gawain panicked and dodged. He stops his second swing short, just to test if Gawain was going to flinch this time. On the third swing, he gives Gawain the tiniest cut along his neck, for a tiny insult he paid to Morgan in the prior book. Morgan reveals herself to her old adventuring companion, and assures Gawain she meant him no personal harm. She was still pissed at Arthur, however, for kicking her out, but shared her suspicions about Lancelot and Guinevere. Mordred's existence as Arthur's son is established for the first time in consequence of Gawain's squick at his aunt's jesting flirtations. Morgan was glad for his self-preservation, as she feared Arthur's espoused honor would get them all killed. Gawain was quick to defend his liege's ideals, claiming that though he had failed by flinching and taking the girdle, his liege's honor would have weathered that storm of temptation without failure. Morgan insists that he return with the girdle, a gift from Lady Bertilak, in addition to the axe.

He does so, and his return to Camelot is met with great enthusiasm. Their joy only intensifies Gawain's shame, and forces him to ask whether the Round Table is as honorable as it claims if they would celebrate what they must believe is a dishonorable act on his part, for how else might he have survived?



### *The Tale of Sir Dinadan*

Sir Dinadan isn't big on chivalry. It's a fun idea, and it'd be nice if things always worked out that the strong guys were the good guys, but Dinadan knew better. His big brother taught him that at a very young age.

Still, there's no point pretending the world is anything but itself. And no, the world isn't honorable. But lots of knights like to say the world is honorable, and making those guys look like idiots is both easy, fun, and a convenient way to cover up the existential dread that comes with your brother being the vilest knight in all Britain and being too weak to do anything about it. The trick, of course, is that you don't get a chance to mock them unless you spend time in their circles.

To that end, our story begins with Dinadan arriving at Castle Dore for King Mark's tournament. Mark's tourney lacks much organization at all, an exercise in chaos and opportunistic backbiting; there are no teams, no lines, no rules, just an open field and an extremely biased judge: Mark himself. Narratively, the tourney itself is mostly a showcase of Tristan's might and how far above the average knight he is. Despite Mark's attempts to make it the event of the decade, he failed to attract many knights from outside Cornwall. Hector de Maris alone of Arthur's knights made an appearance, and he embarrassed everyone he met on the field--Dinadan included--until he met Tristan.

Dinadan's focus, however, was on a much less valiant knight. Unknown to most, Dinadan recognizes his brother, Sir Breuce sans Pitie, and after the first day of the tournament, calls him out on being...himself. Sir Breuce mocks every aspect of chivalry and valor, recalling the many times he's easily weaseled out of the grips of "good" knights, and encourages Dinadan to enjoy life as he does himself. Dinadan refuses, and almost brings himself to slay his brother in cold blood. Breuce mocks him for this failure, but seems to have a tiny soft spot for family, making no effort to cause Dinadan any physical injury. He leaves the tourney early, stealing a great deal of wealth from Mark as he does so.

Hector was a good loser, and made an effort to headhunt Tristan and Dinadan (who for all his dismissal of chivalry did himself act in a knightly fashion and was scrappy in a fight). Dinadan quickly accepted, but reversed his decision on hearing Tristan's response: Tristan would remain in Cornwall to ensure the safety of not only Isolde, but Mark as well. Despite Mark being a terrible ruler, despite Mark having it out for Tristan in particular, in spite of being Mark's lawful heir, Isolde's lover, and consequently having every kind of earthly reward for Mark's demise, Tristan was nevertheless propping up the idea that he would genuinely put his life on the line in defense of his king as nobly as Sir Bedivere might protect King Arthur. Dinadan, savant of snark that he is, can't help but love the opportunity to mock everything about that, so he decides to spend some time in Castle Dore tailing Tristan.

Entertaining premise though it is, the execution involves a lot of waiting around for old Dinadan, but he earns his stay by entertaining Mark with his wit. This, sadly, means Dinadan is forced to actually interact with Mark, and somehow not mock the king to his face when, a few weeks after the tournament, he starts talking about old family drama...

### *The Tale of Sir Alisandre the Orphan*

This tale is fundamentally themed around revenge and justice; Anglides' obsession with revenge gets herself and her son killed, while Alisandre's failure to search for justice leaves Mark in a position to repeat his atrocities. Secondly, it is about gender. The Damsel of Le Beale Regard is the single female wearer of arms and wielder of a sword in all of Mallory. Contrasting her, we see two aspects of traditional feminine roles in their least muddled roles: Morgan le Fay and Alice le Beale Pilgrim. Alisandre's title, "le Orphelin" is also noteworthy, as it suggests the mother's influence is insubstantial, when she was singularly responsible for his initial fixation on Mark.

Backstory: Sir Boudwin, brother of King Mark, earned the king of Cornwall's ire and was killed via dagger by his royal brother. Mark, fearing revenge, gave orders to kill Boudwin's young son, Alisandre. Alisandre successfully escaped Cornwall with help from his widowed mother, Anglides, running for Arthur's protection in Camelot. She tells Arthur that Mark killed Boudwin for jealousy, as Boudwin had recently won a great victory over 40,000 invading foreigners (he lit three of Mark's ships on fire, then sent them among the enemy's fleet, his own forces slaughtering anyone who managed to make it to shore). Arthur calls Mark to justice, who explains (dubiously) that the "invading army" were merchants who Mark had invited to Cornwall after considerable time negotiating trade deals, making Boudwin guilty of arson and mass slaughter of innocents. Arthur rules that Boudwin's execution was justified, but that Alisandre and Anglides were innocent, consequently shielding them from Mark.

Anglides raises Alisandre to be an instrument of her revenge, and the boy is eventually knighted. On that day, the day this tale begins, Anglides gifted her son the still-bloody shirt Boudwin had worn when Mark stabbed him in the back, sending her son on a quest to avenge her long-dead husband.

Anglides had been raised much like Lancelot, with an inordinate focus upon the use of mount, arms, and armor, and knew very little about geography, history, or current politics. He is simultaneously well-meaning and concerned, but frequently flouts decorum, decency, and well-bred manners without meaning to. Due in no small part to this ignorance, Alisandre quickly finds himself lost, without the slightest notion where home or Mark might be.

He stumbles across the path of Sir Gawain, who is returning to Orkney for a tournament his father is putting on. Gawain promises to lead him south towards Mark, on the condition that Alisandre first speak with Arthur before attempting his revenge; goodness knows plenty of people have wanted to oust Mark, but Arthur keeps him around for some reason. They arrive for the tourney together.

Rather than the familiar brackets, Lot has put together something a bit more practical, organizing all the competing knights into two mock factions, invaders and defenders, and having them perform a sort of battle, ending when an invader enters the ever-open doors of Castle Orkney, with the glory and the victor's purse being awarded by popular acclaim among the spectators (mostly ladies, but also several aged lords and retired knights). The premise that the battle is without stakes, however, is undermined by the fairly clear division between the knights of Orkney and its vassals all being on the defending squad, while every one of Pellinore's Hundred Knights in attendance is placed in the invading team. For his friendship with Gawain, Alisandre takes a place among the defenders. Alisandre is thoroughly trounced as the tourney begins, as he knows little of teamwork, less of strategy, and nothing at all of formations or signals. Once the battlefield devolves to a melee, however, Alisandre's strength shines through, so much so that a few of Pellinore's biggest names--Lamorak and Palomides among them--repeatedly set out to unseat him. Alisandre is saved by Gawain who, despite quite clearly being on the losing side, shines like the flaming angel of Eden under the noon side sun, and with mounts forgotten, the two knights hold the bridge against all comers for the day's remainder (Lamorak and Palomides refrain from breaking their impressive stand out of courtesy).

The first day's purse is awarded to Gawain, to noticeable grumbling that the King's favored son should receive his own money (Agravaine is one of the loudest whiners). During the first evening's feast, Alisandre notices a knight, Sir Malgrin, speaking of women with (a very drunk) Sir Agravaine. Agravaine makes his very incel claim about being willing to commit sexual assault, to which Sir Malgrin one-ups him by boasting explicitly of all the sexual assault he has personally committed, and of all the knights he's killed to gain access to their ladies, and of the knights he's killed just because he felt like it. This predictably and understandably peeves Alisandre, who attacks him outright in the middle of King Lot's great hall. He's held back by a dozen different men, and Agravaine says he ought to be executed for his breach of courtesy, a claim Gawain pointedly does not contradict. Once Alisandre picks up on exactly why they're so annoyed at his outburst, he makes some quick inquiries about what would be an appropriate way to murder someone that needs killing. Lamorak suggests a duel, which Malgrin flatly refuses, having nothing to gain.

During the second day of the tourney, the sides are switched and both Malgrin and Alisandre find themselves trying to force their way into the castle. Malgrin strikes a very low blow, putting his spear straight through Alisandre's leg and into the belly of his horse, and this in full view of not only the audience, but half the competing knights (this distraction allows Agravaine to sneak into the castle unchecked, which is likely the greatest triumph of his unspectacular life). In the resulting outrage, Malgrin accepts Alisandre's challenge to a duel, and goes on to name the time and place, that very evening. Against all practicality, Alisandre accepts the challenge.

The fight goes poorly, but impressively. Malgrin is a dirty fox, stooping to every depth and delivering multiple opportunistic injuries as he lures Alisandre further and further from Orkney castle. Even so, Alisandre manages to eventually get ahold of Malgrin and breaks the old rogue.

Bleeding out, Alisandre is approached by Morgan le Fay (who later explains she attended the Orkney tournament in disguise). She bundles him off to her latest castle, La Beale Regard, where she makes him a proposition: if she heals his wounds, which no other healer in Britain could accomplish, he must stay with her for the space of one, single year. He agrees, and she heals him in naught but a few moments. She insults him with many of the same words she used to turn against Arthur, implying she's still trying to fill the whole he left. Her efforts at seduction, however, are stymied by his utter disgust with her perceived deception and "villainy" (the deal was admittedly made under heavy duress). Even so, he honors his words and remains within her walls.

He is soon visited by a wild Rhea. While Morgan technically lives alone in the Geale Regard, she is not the first to do so, as she commandeered the castle from Rhea and her father, who had moved in with permission from King Urien, who properly owns it, but who initially gifted it to Morgan during the three days she'd been married to him before she escaped. Rhea's sneaking is tolerated by Morgan, but Morgan's presence in her childhood home is seen as abominable by Rhea, who decides the proper course of action is to burn the place to the ground (after making sure there'd be no innocent casualties). Alisandre finds her initiative attractive, but explains he's bound by his honor to not leave the castle for a full year, which makes the burning business awkward. Rhea conspires to sequester Alisandre, his horse, and arms in the castle's courtyard, which contained both a sizable pond and a very deep well. Then she burns the castle down around them.

For the remainder of the year, Rhea makes daily deliveries to Alisandre as he keeps vigil over the ashes (she lives nearby with the Earl of Pase, her uncle). This behavior, as we learn through some picnic conversations between the two (another picnic conversation sees them bonding over their shared revenge-based compulsions), has become the subject of rather a lot of gossip, and Alisandre is soon something of a local landmark, "Come see the knight who will not leave the ashes!" Gareth and Mordred,

growing up nearby, occasionally come to visit and adore/pester the weird knight. A few knights take his presence as an opportunity to test their own mettle, and his victories only add to his legend. Eventually, he snags the attention of Alice, le beale Pilgrim. Alice is effortlessly everything Rhea is not, traditionally beautiful, compassionate, thoughtful, and feminine. Alisandre is so lost in her gorgeousness, that he literally faints into a delightful dream while still upon his horse. Mordred attempts to play a cruel prank, leading his horse away from the castle's ash and making Alisandre break his vow. Part to protect his vow, part to break Alice's inadvertent spell, Rhea takes up Alisandre's armor and calls out to him, accusing him of oathbreaking. This somehow works, and even more surprisingly, the three somehow come out of the ordeal the best of friends and lovers.

### *The Tale of Sir Dinadan (part 2)*

Mark concludes his story by informing Dinadan that Alisandre settled into a new home with both Alice and Rhea, and that a marriage had been performed, though he wasn't certain who the wife was. But, Mark says it doesn't really matter, since once he heard the child was alive and that Anglides was plotting against him, he had sent assassins to make sure both were dead. That was a few months ago now, word had just come in corroborating the assassins' success. Mark tells him this because he recognizes and respects another actor, but he feels it necessary to put the mocking knight in his place. No matter what a good actor and jester Dinadan is, Mark senses and resents his moral judgment, so he takes the time (in a rather G.R.R.M-esque dialogue) to lay out precisely how and why he does the terrible things that he does, why he puts up with Tristan and Isolde's affair, and why Arthur and Camelot will never do a thing to stop him. Dinadan is saved from the daunting task of responding when a valet approaches with the news that Sir Lamorak of the Hundred Knights and Camelot has arrived, demanding a boon of King Mark.

Mark recognizes a public opportunity for chaos when he sees it, so he grants the boon out of hand without hearing it, knowing that it'll be good PR if it's reasonable, and an opportunity to drive a wedge between Arthur and Pellinore if it is not. Turns out, the boon is Isolde. Dinadan watches as Mark grants the boon, over the protestations of half the court, chief among them being Tristan and Isolde herself. Lamorak makes assurance that he has no unvirtuous intentions towards the woman, and even requests that Bragwaine accompany them to bear witness to his chivalry, albeit doing so in a very villainous tone, to keep up the farce. Mark threatens to send the whole of his own might

against Lamorak. Lamorak leaves. Mark makes grand statements about preparing his every garrison for the pursuit. Tristan, easily manipulated, and predictably, says that that will take too long and rushes off on his own, Dinadan on his heels.

When they catch up with Lamorak, they find him exultant that his plan with Hector had worked, and they had now safely extricated Tristan, Isolde, and Bragwaine out from under Mark's nose. He again offered them a place at Camelot or new, quieter lives under new names as a part of the Hundred Knights. He attempts to sweeten the deal by pointing out that away from Mark, they could organically work out their feelings for each other, properly explore whether it was the other that they loved, or if it was the idea of the other which they had constructed in their minds which they loved, or possibly even the excitement of transgression. Queen Isolde is indignant at Lamorak's presumption, and unleashes a tirade of queenly pride and privilege which she flat refuses to abandon. Dinadan supports her position by reporting what Mark told him, that she was one of the very few who truly had nothing to fear from Mark, but also advises Tristan to get the heck out of Cornwall. Tristan refuses. The couple returns to Mark, Dinadan and Bragwain not far behind.

Adventure number two isn't far behind, as Mark invites Dinadan and Tristin on a celebratory hunt on their return, knowing Tristin's custom to never hunt on a tired horse. Once far enough out on their hunt, Mark puts his cheerful facade behind, and divulges to Dinadan that his soldiers were in the process of arresting Tristan and Isolde at that very moment, Mark having used Lamorak's scheme as an opportunity to spring one of his own, planting unassailable evidence in their rooms while the lovers were missing, and now yet another of his nephews would catch the lovers in flagrante delicto. Tristan could easily fight off thirty of his men in a fair fight, but how many could he defy without arms or armor while trying to defend his lady?

Dinadan rushed back to Castle Dore, and found that Tristan had indeed surpassed Mark's expectations yet again. He catches up to his friend and performs some genuine heroics of his own, and the two claim sanctuary in the fortresses' chapel, which is overseen by a nun who is subtly implied to be Igraine. Tristan is not doing well at all mentally, having abandoned Isolde on Isolde's orders as queen. When Mark himself ignores the protections of the sanctuary, Tristan leaps out a window to escape, falling a hundred feet into the English Channel. Mark is convinced that Tristan is dead, and calls off his knights to leave Dinadan unharmed. After all, he hadn't spent so much time telling Dinadan how he operates so his secrets would die with him. He wants everyone, everywhere to know that it doesn't matter if you're the second best knight in the world with the favor of the queen: nobody crosses Mark in Cornwall.

### *The Tale of Sir Bedivere*

As in every year since his reign began, Arthur encourages the unity and hardiness of his realm by throwing a great tournament, with grand glory and networking as the prize (and a champion's purse, naturally). This year in particular is important to Arthur, as it celebrates Gawain's return from certain death and Lancelot's return to the tourney scene. The tournament is the traditional affair, bracketed one-vs-one jousts with caveats allowing for fighting on foot as well.

Bedivere, as Arthur's chamberlain and generally in charge of running Camelot castle (as Kay has taken to sloth and drink), is running ragged to ensure everything proceeds smoothly. He interacts in ways small or large with every knight, lord, and petty king in attendance. He has to organize sleeping arrangements for all the visiting competitors and their retinues, see to food and drink, coax a distraught Lady Elaine to not embarrass Lancelot before the whole court, organize tournament brackets for the tilts (making efforts to ensure that higher ranked nobility never face each other directly, and that more talented knights do not engage before the latter rounds, etc.), inspect practice weapons for the melee, head off arguments before they get out of hand, organize all the servants and staff to perform tasks well outside their usual duties, stand witness as King Lot hands off his sister-in-law's bastard child to serve as King Pellinore's squire (the two kings decide to engage in a playful tilt after the tournament is concluded for the day), and somehow make sure Lancelot and Guinevere hold off their passions (which have been brewing since his return, a fact obvious to everyone but Lance and Gwyn), and all this while sitting beside the throne, addressing all formal complaints and pleas to the crown in absentia, as Arthur and Guinevere are both at the tournament grounds.

Into this haze of chaos marches King Bors the elder, one of the few kings to maintain his power and influence from Uther's reign to Arthur's (largely because for all his royal pomp and arrogance, he does rule his corner of the kingdom well, helped by the area's natural fertility), who has recently driven out an invading Claudas (with the aid of a Camelot army led by Lancelot), who was recently acknowledged by Arthur for his contribution at Badon Hill, who has recently made Lancelot retroactively noble via adoption into his family through his adipose brother, Ban, and who is determined to throw around his rank, reputation, martial prowess, and thuggish attitude to see that the tournament is conducted properly, constantly at the expense of poor, disabled, peasantry Bedivere. He wants final say on the bracket construction, complains at the quality of the

meat, and demands a second melee when he fails to find victory in the first. After taking a loss in the joust which he found to be unfair, Bors goes on to accuse his opponent of cheating, insisting they be disqualified from the tournament, exiled from Camelot, and executed on the spot. Seeing how his opponent was Guinevere as a mystery knight, Bedivere could not allow such accusations to continue. Bors took offense to Bedivere's "cheek," and made to batter him, pulling him from his seat beside the throne and tossing him to the ground. Immediately, several nearby knights (ableist Agravain chief among them) scrambled to Bedivere's defense, making implications that his missing arm left him incapable of defending himself. Bedivere waved them off, and attempted to extend an olive branch to Bors.

Multiple pieces of tragic news come to the throne room all at once. Guinevere rushes in, ignoring an incensed Bors, and has a furious row with Elaine, where it comes out that Guinevere has just exiled Lancelot from Camelot. Then King Mark appears, gleefully announcing that Pellinore killed Lot in the tilts. Agravaine rushes off, and so does Bors, storming past the throne to enter the Round Table's chamber, insisting he would not leave until he had spoken with Arthur himself. Despite Bedivere's warnings, he sits the Siege Perilous and is instantly slain.

At that moment, with Arthur's realm on the verge of collapse, the Holy Grail materializes high above Camelot, glowing with Excalibur's perfect golden light, filling all their hearts and minds with peace, joy, and contentment. Those who can see it are transfixed in place, while those who cannot are drawn in a daze to a place where they might. The grail remains in place for the better part of an hour before streaking away out of sight. On cue, King Arthur calls upon his knights to be worthy of this divine gift, to be not only good but holy, that others might look to Camelot and its knights the way that they just looked at the grail.

Bedivere holds himself responsible for the tournament's utter failure, but Arthur reassures him, pointing out that he held himself with utter dignity and grace, and that one simply cannot be held responsible for someone else's actions. Bedivere is left wondering if Arthur's courtesy can survive, as long as there are those who might take advantage of it, or if Lot or Pellinore in some way breached their courtesy such that their fates were deserved. But even so, he is determined to hold to it himself, for better or for worse.

### ***The Tale of Sir Palomides***

Palomides always seems to be lost. A phenomenal knight in prowess of arms, he nevertheless can never seem to succeed when he truly cares about a task. Born far to the



South, in a land whose name he doesn't remember, Palomides was brought to Britain by his knight father, who was one of Pellinore's Hundred Knights, along with his brothers, Safir and Segwarides. Their father died while they were still young, leaving the three to be more or less raised by Pellinore and rose to prominence among his Hundred Knights, despite being the darkest skinned person in all of Britain.

This tale is unique, as it unfolds in parallel in two time frames: a flashback to after Palomides first returned from Ireland and the Hundred knights went to liberate Ban and Bors' land from Claudas, who conquered their lands while they were away helping Arthur unite Britain, and in the present after Pellinore's death, which sees Palomides, his brothers, Lamorak, and his brothers dealing with Pellinore's legacy, his will, the fate of the Hundred knights, and potential revenge against Orkney.

Starting in the past, we find a thoroughly upset Palomides explaining to Pellinore that he made an oath to Tristan to not bear arms nor armor for the space of a whole year (and also permanently give up his love for La Belle Isolde). Palomides is doing his best to retire from the Hundred Knights with some dignity without offending Pellinore, the only father he's ever known, but Pellinore instead promotes him, training and giving him responsibility over many of the knight's non-martial duties, even going so far as to include him in his battle planning with King Arthur for the upcoming war against King Claudas, who did not honor the terms of surrender set to him by Arthur a year earlier.

Claudas, as it turns out, has some very strong allies among the remnants of the western Roman Empire, and is one of many looking to reunite the empire under Emperor Lucius. Lucius and Claudas give off some very fierce "good old days" vibes in the worst possible way, heavily playing up bloodline strength, the strength of their legacy, and the idea that the Christian God is on their side/they're the champions of said God.

Arthur holds an out of court court, seating his allies around a makeshift round table. To Pellinore and his army of bastards and orphans, Lucius' ideology is particularly vile, but he heeds Arthur's insistence that they aren't here to conquer, they're only here to aid their allies. Ban insists that he'd feel more secure if there wasn't a fledgling empire on his doorstep, calling Arthur's strength into question while he's at it.

Arthur responds by dealing with the giant at Mont St. Michel (literally cutting him down to size so that he can get at his vital organs. Beyond rescuing a terrorized populace, the wide variety of corpses of failed knights and slaughtered noble-ladies proves to be a massive stockpile of arms, armor, gold, and precious jewels. He restores the Giant's lair to its previous owners, a man named Howell whose wife sacrificed herself while he and their two children escaped. In gratitude, Howell makes a gift of all the giants' wealth to Arthur, enough to enrich Camelot for decades to come, and to more immediately supply his armies with some higher quality equipment for the upcoming battle.

And battle does come, Lucius' forces joining with Claudas in central France and marching on Ban's holdings in Brittany. Despite being heavily outnumbered, Arthur has the advantage of picking the battlefield and fighting on the defensive. Kay and Bedivere have their finest (martial) hour here. Lancelot also performs admirably, but most of the other big names remained in Britain. Despite the overwhelming odds, Arthur finds victory, personally casting down Lucius, who attempts to save face by claiming that Camelot is the inheritor of western civilization, tracking the course of destiny back through Rome, Troy, Jerusalem, and Uruk. Arthur defies that legacy, and says he's building something new.

But Palomides sees none of this, banned as he is from bearing arms or armor. Instead, he's spent his time just off-stage, getting his information from Pellinore and Lamorak, working to coordinate the 100 knights. A particular bit of drama arises from Aglovale, a blood son of Pellinore, who resents Palomides getting such an honored position, particularly given Palomides current inability to fight, and Aglovale's transparent racism. Palomides accepts a date for a duel immediately after he is released from his year of pacifism. Pellinore is furious when he learns of this, and he takes Pellinore aside to explain why: Pellinore established the hundred knights to give second sons, bastard sons, warriors without war who would inevitably turn to banditry a place to fight and die for something meaningful. Infighting could lead the the hundred knights' collapse, and that many lawless knights being unleashed upon the countryside could spell doom for Camelot. But, Palomides does not back down; he already has seven duels scheduled for the day he's free to fight them, but promises not to make any more challenges. Pellinore then gets extra serious with Palomides, and gives him the Questing Beast talk, talking about how, for all his bluster, he's always wanted to hunt that beast, and only met Palomides father in the first place because he'd been hunting the beast at the time, but that he fears he's grown too old, and is now looking for someone else to take up the hunt.

When the day comes, Palomides has eight opponents, first among them being Pellinore himself, fighting in protest of any fighting among his children. They tilt, Palomides refusing to lower his lance, as he won't fight his da. Pellinore doesn't extend this courtesy, and puts Palomides on his butt. Then he turns and does the same to each of Palomides' opponents (he's fantastic in the saddle). Pellinore then makes it very clear that they were all his sons, regardless of who their mothers might be, or whether or not they might have another father.

Back in the present, Pellinore is dead, but nobody yet knows. The hundred knights are parked a short way outside of Camelot, as everyone else from their number had left early from Arthur's tournament, Pellinore remaining behind into the evening for the sake of his recreational joust with King Lot. A rider, a yet unknighthed and in-text unnamed Mordred (who had just been assigned to be Pellinore's squire earlier that day), reports

that Gawain ambushed Pellinore, and killed him. The Hundred rush to the place, and find Pellinore's body. Some suspicion is cast upon Mordred, the unknown element, but they know how skilled Pellinore was.

After the burial, Lamorak and Palomides rush to Camelot to demand justice. Guinevere's court is given its first high-profile test. According to Lamorak, it fails. Gawain's defense, paradoxically, rests on the ability of one knight to take another knight to justice, which he claimed to be doing to Pellinore for the "murder" of King Lot, and that Pellinore's refusal to face justice (witnessed only by Gawain) justified Gawain's use of force to bring him in. Lamorak attempts to counter this claim with Mordred's testimony, but Mordred has run away, trying to get back to Orkney. Without any witness, Gawain is judged innocent, and Pellinore's legacy is tarnished.

Lamorak and Palomides return to the hundred, where they have to ask some very hard questions. Lamorak is unwilling to be the new Da, and nobody else is as universally beloved to pull it off. Palomides, recognizing that the faction is on the verge of disintegration and devolving into the very thing Pellinore had spent his life trying to avoid, and also knowing that the only other king they could have sworn fealty to (Arthur) had just cast away that chance by his ruling against Pellinore, desperately tries to avoid that outcome by inspiring them to be Pellinore's legacy, to hunt his beast, to be good errant knights.

It's a good speech, but he's quickly upstaged by a passing Sir Tristan, who uses the opportunity of Mark being out of Cornwall to storm his castle and make off with Isolde once and for all. Some of the Hundred go with him, but not a plurality, the remainder wandering off and away on their own lives and adventures.

Within a fortnight, Palomides is alone, despairing the loss of his family. But then he hears the Questing Beast's cry, and the hunt is on.

### **The Tale of Isolde**

Isolde is a queen. She was born to it, she had trained for it. She knew how to handle kings and courtiers, how to inflict her will upon her lands even if she had never picked up a sword. If she had married Tristan, she would have had him conquer Cornwall and then turn around and make war upon her homeland until she could properly call herself Queen of Ireland. Instead she had Mark. Clever, scheming, treacherous, out-of-his-era-and-league Mark. Fifty years earlier or later, Isolde couldn't have asked for a better partner than Mark, but in a world where he was so thoroughly trapped under Arthur's astronomical power and popularity, there simply wasn't room for upwards growth. So the game changed. Instead of the king being one more asset in her effort to

rule everyone, the king became part of the everyone. Mark knew she was moving against him, and she knew he knew, and he knew that, and both knew neither could openly move against the other without bringing Arthur's justice upon their game.

And then Mark killed Tristan.

She'd lost the game, and she knew it, and there was little way to start the game anew. She was a foreign princess, and nearly everyone with power in Cornwall was either related to Mark or had been given their lands and position by Mark. Her only real ally and friend was Bragwain, her handservant, and Mark had made it clear that he would have her killed if she tried to play the game again.

And then Tristan returned, and the story began anew.

The noble war of reclamation that Tristan had outlined to the Hundred knights didn't pan out. Mark was an unpleasant schemer and a jerkface, but he was the lawful ruler of Cornwall, and it didn't take long to realize that if Tristan, for all his accolades, didn't think he could get Arthur on his side, that probably meant Arthur wouldn't just let Tristan hold those lands assuming they managed to seize them. Killing Mark was easy, surviving Arthur was impossible. As such, Tristan's assault team consisted of only Tristan himself, Dinadan, Kehdius, and Lamorak, plus a few of Lamorak's more loyal hangers-on. While Dinadan distracts Mark with chess and Lamorak and his men wait in the forest in case things go South,, Tristan and Dinadan enter the castle by a stealthy route, appearing before Isolde as this Tale begins.

Isolde is once again offered an escape from Mark, one she has had received twice before, first from Arthur and second from Lamorak. This time she accepts, as Mark has been making her feel more like a prisoner than a queen, and she feels she deserves better. Things go off the rails however, when Sir Kehdius declares his undying love for the queen, offering to wed her in Mark's place. This leads to the explanation that Kehdius is the brother of Iseult le Blanchemains, the young woman who found and nursed Trystan back to health after the church-defenestration-drowning incident, and who also married Trystan. Isolde is furious, Kehdius accuses Trystan of lying to himself and Iseult about everything, things escalate, Kehdius falls out Isolde's window and onto King Mark's chess game. Mark kills Sir Kehdius when his explanation proves lackluster. They retreat, regrouping with Lamorak's assault force. The group is only just into the forest and out of sight of Mark's castle when Lamorak turns on them. Ever honorable, he informs Tristan quite formally that he will be the one courting Isolde henceforth, and that he means to fight Tristan to the death if necessary to prove his right to such. Internally, Isolde is furious at the objectification, but refuses to voice her objections, as Tristan has earned her fury even more thoroughly of late by virtue of his disappearance and marriage, which he's explained to her during their escape.

Lamorak falls, and Tristan spares his life while Dinadan deals with Lamorak's allies. Though Isolde was told the plan was to appeal to Arthur and get Mark deposed, they deviate at this point, Dinadan going to test the waters in Camelot while Tristan and Isolde carve out a living deep in the forest, far from civilization and its comforts.

Queen Isolde is not pleased.

We get to see Isolde at just about her lowest at this point; she is highly accustomed to being treated as a queen and does not adjust well to a life of peasantry. Trystan is an accomplished hunter, carpenter, and forester (because of course he is), and their cabin is undoubtedly cozy, but it's also a cabin, unsuited for a queen. They have an argument, and Isolde finally realizes the truth of Lamorak's statement years ago: she really doesn't know Tristan, not on a personal level. Her intense love has never been for him, but for the idea of him, for the defiance of Mark, for her own power. This realization triggers a small existential crisis in Isolde, who has long crafted her self-image around being the second-best lover in Britain, and by extension, the world. She wrestles for a moment whether this means she should find a new, worthier lover (Lancelot or Arthur, perhaps), abandon that title and return to Mark as a dutiful and loyal wife, or actually put in the effort to earn the title with Tristan.

One of those options is clearly the most romantic. The most appropriate for a queen like Isolde.

As time goes by, Isolde is half-surprised to discover herself genuinely enjoying this life. She misses the scheming and the plotting and the plays for power, certainly, but as it slowly becomes clear that Tristan has protected their place well, the absence of any kind of stress in her life makes for a fascinating counterpoint to everything else she's ever experienced. Tristan is additional pleasant addition to her life; a fascinating conundrum of expertise and simplicity, brilliant and nearly perfect at nearly everything, a musician, well-read, and a writer of prose, poetry, and in the process of codifying hunting practices, but even so prefers to treat the world as if it were a simple place, where simple morals of good conquering evil are inviolate. But as time goes on, her instinct to plan pushes her to figure out some way to regain their place in society.

Dinadan tracks them down nearly a year later. He reports that Mark is keeping Isolde's absence officially under wraps, but has alerted his spy system to watch for Trystan. Rumors are spreading across the country of Tristan and Isolde's romantic elopement. Isolde decides the time is right to make their grand return, and plans to return to Camelot in time for the yearly tournament, traveling and competing completely in disguise, Tristan with a covered shield, Isolde living under a heavy veil.

The Camelot tournament follows the same format as has become the norm: tilts first, foot-fighting after. Isolde makes her way into the stands, maneuvering her way among the ladies in waiting until she is within hearing range of the royal box, where she

realizes Mark is trying to talk his way into the Round Table as a knight. He is conversing with Arthur and Lancelot, and it's explained why Lancelot is not competing, and left ambiguous why Guinevere is not present. Mark's request is quite soundly rejected, primarily on the basis of him being distinctly averse to action, having no credible feats of arms on his record, and even failing to participate in the relative safety of the tournament. Isolde uses her anonymity to speak favorably of Tristan, drawing attention to him defeating, at various points, Agravaine, Palomides, and Aglovale. She manages to pull one over on Mark by hinting a bit too heavily that he should also support that mystery knight, which he refuses to do on principle of not liking to be manipulated. As such, when the tournament reaches its end and Arthur orders Tristan (who took the prize with scarcely any contest) unmasked, she immediately reveals herself as well, painting Mark as a horrible judge of character who can't recognize his nephew or his own wife, going on to provide her (semi-honest) account of Tristan's initial banishment and Isolde's subsequent flight from Cornwall.

Mark is not left flat-footed. While he did not recognize Isolde, claiming otherwise is not difficult, and he spins her stealth as deception and suspicion. The two banter back and forth a bit, each dragging the other deeper into the mud until Arthur intervenes. Arthur asks clearly what each is looking to gain from this unauthorized audience. Tristan forestalls both of their answers by calling in the reasonable boon which is his reward for winning the tournament. He asks for Arthur to declare the feud between Mark, Isolde, and himself null and void, to--without impacting his standing at the Round Table--allow Tristan to return to Cornwall with Mark to serve him as his loyal knight.

Lancelot asks for a word from Arthur before the king can grant or deny Tristan's desire, giving Isolde ample opportunity to have a brief panic attack over whether this might be Tristan's way of honorably abandoning their affair, returning to his young, beautiful wife with the white hands. When Arthur returns, Lancelot looks annoyed, but far from mutinous. Arthur makes a short speech on the dangers of escalation, cycles of violence, and the virtues of de-escalation, finishing by granting Tristan's boon by making a formal plea to King Mark to accept Tristan and Isolde back within his court, accompanied not by threats if things go wrong, but by encouraging all three of them to truly stop and consider what it is they want from life and from each other, and whether its reasonable to expect those things. To that end, Arthur orders his box emptied save for those three.

Awkwardness. Tristan starts on the old line about how he'd always been loyal to Mark and that he'd never touched Isolde and that Mark's treatment of him was horrendously unfair, but he's immediately called out on it; neither Mark nor Isolde care much for continuing the charade without spectators. Isolde voices her simultaneous admiration for Mark as a politician and disgust with him as a romantic partner, meaning

she has no desire to either end the affair, nor to see Mark overthrown. Mark expresses his disdain for the muscles of the world, all those who enforce their will by steel and strength, made manifest in Tristan, and his consequent desire to crush the system which he feels devalues his mind drives him to utterly destroy and humiliate Tristan. Tristan, in a rare show of his own unmasked vindictiveness expresses similar desires in the opposite direction.

The end result is that they paradoxically agree; they all have to remain near each other because it's the only way to properly annihilate each other personally. The three go down as a united front to Arthur and his assorted awaiting courtiers. Isolde led her two men on to Cornwall.

Her domain.

### **The Tale of Sir Robin:**

Sir Robin has a seat at the Round Table, which he hates. Hatred is his constant companion, a source of familiarity, of comfort, really; hatred for the nobles who ruined his childhood, for monsters of four legs or two which prey on the weak, for the weak who won't work to become strong, for the Fae who constantly meddle in the mundane world, for the God who refuses to help his people, for the armor that deflects his arrows, for the knights finding profit by pretending to Arthur's ideals, for Arthur for failing to give him cause to hate him.

He spends precious little time in Camelot itself, generally opting to spend his time in the wild, or if in town, in dark alleys or dim taverns, listening for tales of corruption, cruelty, and abuse, which are never far off.

Sir Robin's tale begins in earnest with him being approached and summoned to Arthur's presence by Sir Gwyn, who Robin, spending as little time in court as he does, fails to recognize as the queen. They bond over their low opinion of knights in general, Gwyn bouncing back and forth between enjoying her anonymity and being treated as a knight and being annoyed at Robin's dismissive attitude toward her own tales of victimhood.

Upon returning to court, Arthur dismisses the day's petitioners to go have a big meal or something (Kay is annoyed) so that he can speak with Robin in relative privacy. He shares word of a copycat Robin terrorizing the roads around Orkney, using many of the same subtle, "dishonorable" methods Robin was known for prior to his induction as one of Arthur's knights. Arthur is not suspicious that these acts are being performed by Robin himself (as Robin has proven himself exceptionally diligent in his quest to bring low the unworthy, and wouldn't have time for banditry on the side), but Arthur thinks that no one else in his court is better equipped to deal with such a foe.

Sir Robin sets out to find the Other Robin. Along the way, he muses on his accomplishments and limits as a knight of the Round Table, how many obviously corrupt

and incompetent nobles he's maneuvered Arthur into deposing. At the same time, the king could be obstinate, refusing to act against some of Robin's other targets because "there was no evidence" or "those tax rates are reasonable" or "your gut doesn't count as evidence." Perhaps it was time to part ways with the law-abiding life.

As he's musing on these things, Sir Robin scarcely notices the first of Other Robin's many traps, and eventually ends up falling victim to a trap which specifically targets knights, resulting in him being pinned under his own broken legged mount. Hours later, Other Robin appears, demanding Robin's name and making threatening overtures. Robin criticizes his technique, saying a victim is unlikely to be honest under such circumstances, that they won't tell the truth, they'll just say whatever they think won't get them killed. Robin manages to talk his way into Other Robin's confidence. They end up talking, with Other Robin revealing his name (Mordred) and that he began his campaign after witnessing an armored knight (Gawain) ambushing and killing an unarmored old man, King Pellinore, Other Robin's old master. Sir Robin is unsurprised by this, pessimistic and suspicious as he is. But he is also older and wiser than Other Robin, seeing not only the crimes of petty kings but the fallout of war. As such, he decides to embrace Other Robin as a successor, training him to train others, that every peasant can hope to be protected by a man in a hood, that every noble must fear retribution for their corruption.

But before he can put that plan properly into practice, Robin feels compelled to prove himself more honorable than what he thinks of knights. Robin returns to Camelot with every intention of abandoning the Round Table, but wants to confront Arthur about Gawain first. Arthur is unsurprised that Robin intends to leave the Round and makes no overt move to keep him around, save to thank him for his service and to encourage him to consider the consequences of any further actions. He also agrees with Robin that his hands are tied where Gawain is concerned; as the new King of Orkney, and with Pellinore and Bors the elder dead, further upheaval would do far more harm than good, so justice cannot mean simply deposing the new king. All the same, Arthur vows to confront Gawain about it, but privately, on a personal level, and will see to it that the Orkney clan makes recompense to Pellinore's family (it's later implied that Gawain's nigh-constant presence in Camelot is part of his punishment, to keep him from directly ruling his lands). But more importantly, Arthur speaks to Robin of forgiveness, and of redemption, and of the many crimes Robin himself committed before being knighted, many justified, many not, which Arthur forgave.

Robin, disgusted at Arthur's inability to hate Robin, leaves Camelot.



## *End of Book Two*

## *Beginning of Book Three*

### **The Tale of Sir Culhwch**

Sir Culhwch is highly unusual among the knights of the Round Table. He was not raised in an era of war, as all the old guard who remember Uther and Vortigern's reign were, nor was he raised in times of peace, as all who know best Arthur's rule. Rather, by learning his values in just pre-Beowulf-era Heorot, Culhwch defines himself by battle, by glory, by boast. He's more viking than knight by aesthetic, and his values don't quite match the chivalrous mindset either.

That said, he does seem to think that he's kin to Arthur, a fact Arthur isn't particularly eager to deny, particularly as he's been looking for a more stable peace with Vortigern's old allies. The Battle of Badon had been decisive, but it had also been many years since then, and raiding parties were not well known for having long memories. Even so, the precise nature of Culhwch's relationship to the Pendragon's house seems to change every time the tale is told.

What does not change, and where our tale begins, is Culhwch's bombastic tale of personal romantic woe, the result of a curse placed upon him by his father's jealous second wife, which keeps Culhwch from finding any satisfaction from any woman save one, and that one is the least likely suitor possible: Olwen, the sole daughter of Ysbaddaden, the Chief of Giants.

The word "giant" triggered memories of Mont St. Michel in Arthur, so when Culhwch asks for the assistance of pretty much the entire Round Table as a boon, up to and including Arthur himself, Arthur acquiesces. They travel to Ysbaddaden's fortress in force. Along the way, Galehaut explains to Arthur and Culhwch something of the nature of giants, being half-giant himself. Giants are not necessarily "giant" in the traditional sense. Certainly, many are exceptionally large, but that is a consequence of their power, not the source of it. Rather, giant's are conceptual beings, their physical and mental faculties reflecting their personal self-perception. If they think themselves monstrous, they will become monstrous. If they think themselves wise, they will become wise. If, as Ysbaddaden seems to, one thinks of themselves as a chief or a king, they will acknowledge no authority besides their own, which directly leads to the driving background theme of this tale: Arthur claiming authority over his lands. Contradiction of these kinds of self-perceptions can prove exceedingly dangerous to giants; if they cannot resolve the

hypocrisy or genuinely grow and alter their self-perception--a task exceedingly difficult for a mature giant and all but impossible for an ancient one--they will simply die.

When they arrive, only Arthur, Culhwch, Kay and Bedivere actually enter. Ysbaddaden is an arrogant but generous host, refusing to see them for some time, but offering them every accommodation while they wait. He refuses to acknowledge Arthur as king, which nearly brings Kay to violence. When Culhwch makes his demand of Ysbaddaden, the giant replies that he's far from the first to desire his daughter, and that he's said yes to them all: he just insists that the ceremony is worthy of the occasion, requiring an unending feast--courtesy of the Cauldron of Rebirth (aka the Black Cauldron, currently in possession of the witches Orddu and Orwen--and the opportunity to look his best, which necessitates his comb, razor, and scissors, which are currently lodged in the skull of Twrch Trwyth, a demon boar that can only be tracked by the hound Cavall (who can only be tamed by a leash made from the giant Dillus' beard), and whose current location is known only to Mabon, the son of Modron, who escaped his own mother at just three years old, and has not been seen by human eyes since. Culhwch accepts these challenge with typical bravado, but it is Arthur and Bedivere who put together the inherent threat to Ysbaddaden himself: if Arthur and Culhwch are able to recover that which Ysbaddaden could not hold, then Arthur is a greater king than the giant's chieftain. Olwen herself fails to make an appearance.

Upon their departure, Arthur convenes with the biggest names of the Round Table to consider his options. A strong argument is made (mostly by Lancelot) for simply returning to Camelot; Culhwch clearly isn't actually related to Arthur, has never done anything for the Round Table, has no moral ground to stand on, no relationship with Olwen, and Ysbaddaden seems to be a prosperous leader for his people, his only crime being to continue quietly calling himself king while Arthur claimed the ground out from underneath him. Bedivere and Agravaine make the pragmatic argument that, good king or no, his land is still in Britain, and if Arthur turns a blind eye towards it, that sends a message to other, less benevolent would-be leaders. Kay backs up Culhwch, who insists that the best way to lead is to do awesome things--regardless of morality--so that people want to follow you. Arthur coalesces these opinions and brews upon them for a moment, deciding to withhold judgment for the moment, opting to first pursue this magnificent cauldron.

The last we saw of Ireland, it was under the wise and peaceful rule of Fionn mac Cumhaill. Things have, sadly, changed. Fionn's first, beloved wife, was transformed into a deer (these things happen), and when he was eventually remarried to the relatively young Grainne, his new wife quickly seduced and absconded with one of Fionn's finest warrior, Diarmuid. Though Fionn escaped that episode with integrity in check, his failure to save Diarmuid when he was in a position to save him from a mortal wound left a mark upon

the king which Fionn himself was unwilling to overlook. After setting his affairs in order, Fionn left his Fianna for parts unknown.

But that's all in the background. When they arrive, the Fianna are now led by a small council, and they have heard the tales of Arthur, and are happy to point him toward the witches Orwen and Orddu, but warn against reckless use of the Cauldron; it can raise a living thing's body and mind, but neither their soul nor their voice.

For such a mystical scenario, Arthur misses Merlin more genuinely than perhaps ever before. He asks after Taliesen, who is unable to offer counsel. Lancelot happens to be nearby and puts two and two together, telling Arthur his experience in the Tale of Elaine, when he encountered the Circle, which at that point contained not only Vivian and Morgan, but the witches Orr and Taliesen as well. Arthur wanders into the deep woods alone, hoping to make contact with Morgan, to no avail.

When they arrive at the dwelling place of the Orr witches, their welcome is less "cheery" and more "maimy." They encounter multiple vicious traps along the path to the witches' cave, prompting Guinevere to forbid Arthur from directly engaging the witches. However, as more and more knights, Lancelot among them, enter the cave, without any sign of their returning, Arthur decides a change of tactics is desperately needed. He seizes his dagger, Carnwennan, and sneaks inside, the dagger's properties protecting him along the path (though Robin's old lessons on stealth don't hurt either). Once inside, he finds the witches menacing some of his knights--Lancelot in particular--leading to Arthur assassinating the elder witch, Orwen, leading to Orddu escaping in a puff of magic with vengeance in her eyes. The knights successfully locate the Cauldron, but in testing decide that the zombie-men it creates are altogether too spooky to be used outside the most desperate of situations. Or as a giant's food source, as the situation may warrant.

With that accomplished, the hunt for Tyrch Twyrth commences. Step one is acquiring the services of Mabon, who alone knows where Tyrch Twyrth's lair can be found. At this point, Agravaine raises the eminently reasonable question of why they are bothering with any of this, if the end game is to kill Ysbaddaden, why bother with his games, why not just roll up to his castle, besiege it if necessary, and execute him, rather than wandering all over the countryside while affairs of state are neglected. Culhwch takes this as an assault on his honor, rather than pragmatism, and offers to solve his concerns with violence. It's a mark against Culhwch that when swords of defense and aggression are drawn, Agravaine (Agravaine!) resoundingly wins the popularity contest. Arthur peacefully resolves the confrontation with words, pointing out that Ysbaddaden's death is not the end goal, and further that honor is not without value, ends don't justify means, etc..

With that speed bump scaled, Bedivere comes up with an idea for how to track Mabon, whose whereabouts no human knows: ask an animal. He knows Arthur spent a

good chunk of his childhood on four legs, and has personally spoken to a dragon. The “speak with animals” idea is sound, but when pushed on details, he fails to come up with a particular direction to send the group. Camelot’s dragon is dead, and nobody has seen Vortigern’s in years, and nobody knows where to find another animal that speaks English. Merlin and Taliesen are unfindable, while Morgan and Orddu are presumed hostile.

Enter the true Lady of the Lake, Vivian. Where Nimue is theatrical in her otherworldly ethereal presence, Vivian is effortless, an emissary to a dying religion, holier-than-thou confidence incarnate. After scolding Arthur for not communicating with her (making the Vivian/Nimue distinction explicit, and also faintly echoing of Rome’s colonialization and painting Nimue as engaging in a kind of cultural appropriation), Vivian points him in the direction of the Stag of Redynvre, an ancient beast, lord of all Britain’s forests.

Arthur, somewhere between terrified for his knights at the prospect of diving headfirst into this spooky business and ashamed for having ignored the non-Roman elements of his kingdom for so long, orders most of his court to return to Camelot, with Guinevere ruling as queen, pursuing the remainder of this quest with only Culhwch, Bedivere, and Kay.

The meeting with the Stag is peaceful, but disquieting. The Stag oversees and maintains all life, human, animal, and plant alike. As such, he regards wars as a tiff between his children, wildfires as a scraped knee, and the machinations of Arthur and Ysbaddaden’s courts on equal terms with wars between rival ant colonies. As such, he has no qualms about divulging not only Mabon’s location, but that of Cavall and Tyrch Twyrth as well, but is surprised to find he can’t locate any of them, which ought to be impossible, as all life is within his domain. Half out of embarrassment, he points them towards the Eagle of Gwern Abwy.

The Eagle is associated with sight and air, but neither thought nor memory. Since it cannot directly see Mabon, it nearly abandons the notion of being helpful until the Salmon of Wisdom pokes its head out of the water, so the Eagle sends the questers in that direction.

The Salmon reveals that it is the very same source of wisdom that empowered Fionn decades ago, making Fionn the wisest man since Solomon. It practically dares Arthur to do deliberately what Fionn did partially by accident. When Arthur refuses, the fish exposit on the nature of the Otherworld, then directs him to the First Oak.

The First Oak is not obviously sentient in the manner of the Stag, Eagle, or Salmon, nor exceptionally large relative to the forest around it, but it is ancient beyond reckoning, and highly mystical in its own way, serving as an anchor between worlds, rooting them together.. There is some talk about how they are to use the tree to find Mabon, whether they are to climb it or cut through it, walk about it or uproot it, at which

point the tree's protector appears from among its branches, a barbarian. Kay wrestles the man into submission (growing twenty feet tall in the process), only to discover that he is, in fact, Mabon, already accompanied by Cavall. However, he has no interest in their quest, desiring only to protect the tree.

Rather unsurprisingly, tracking down Dillus proves significantly easier, what with his being a giant and all. As a bonus, Cavall is also present. The trouble crops up in that a) Cavall is Dillus' beloved pet, and b) Dillus seems entirely unworthy of hostile intent; not a particularly benevolent individual, but displaying no malice either. Bedivere solves the problem in much the same manner that he dealt with the dragon all those years ago: he talks to Dillus, and while Cavall is altogether too attached to his master to aid in the quest, he has recently had a litter of puppies who Dillus is delighted to give new homes. Bedivere shaves Dillus in the giant's particular way (which oddly involves oversized wooden clothespins and a lot of pulling).

With all the fetch-quests complete, Mabon's directions lead Arthur's troupe to Twrch Trwyth's lair. The small group is split on methods to their goal of acquiring the tools lodged atop the boar's skull: Arthur and Bedivere want to avoid killing the beast (Arthur for mercy, Bedivere for fear) while Kay and Culhwch lean towards violence (Kay as the only practical method, Culhwch for the sake of more glory). Kay, true to caustic, sassy form, opines that Culhwch doesn't get a vote, as he has done pretty much nothing of note to accomplish his own quest. This self-defeating tactic leads Arthur to switch sides, as a ploy to illustrate that Kay has done nearly nothing for himself since the coronation, and that Arthur misses his old older brother. Bedivere concurs, but points out that Arthur is hardly in a position to speak, as he has been growing steadily more distant from all his knights throughout his reign.

Their bickering rouses the beast, and Twrch Trwyth immediately proves itself incredibly dangerous by tusking a massive gash in Arthur's chest, exposing heart and lungs to the open air. Luckily, his sheath prevents blood loss, and one lung momentarily proves sufficient to stave off asphyxiation, but the combination of shock, pain, and reduced access to oxygen leaves Arthur unable to participate in the following fight.

Each of his three present retainers successfully removes an implement from Twrch Trwyth's noggin while also protecting Arthur (Kay plays shield, Culhwch sword, while Bedivere calls tactics), at which point the boar escapes by running headlong into the Otherworld sea. They bandage Arthur as well as they might, and the king is soon on his feet.

Arthur is barely able to stand, supported by his brothers when Culhwch presents the cauldron, comb, razor, and scissors to Ysbaddaden. The wedding preparations begin immediately, and Arthur sends envoys to Camelot, and the affair goes off without a hitch. At the feast, Arthur speaks first with Culhwch, who intends to take his honeymoon back

in Heorot, which he implies will become his permanent residence. Arthur then speaks with Ysbaddaden, striving to help the giant wrap his mind and self-perception into a position where the world might make sense. He fails, the giant king dying at his own feast, unwept even by his own daughter (she is implied to have defined herself as a princess in need of rescue, to Culhwch's implied future detriment). The tale ends with Arthur morosely musing on how many will mourn at his own mortification.

### **The Tale of Sir Geraint**

This tale barely qualifies as a tale, it's really just an excuse for a gag and a chance to take a shot at miscommunication tales in general.

Geraint, the son of a shepherd, is a very happily married knight who has mostly fallen out of the tournament scene because he doesn't really have any motivation to participate. He has his own keep, a wife he adores, and little ambition beyond perpetuating the happiness he already has.

Enid is married to Geraint. She's also very happy with her marriage and is generally thrilled to have him around so much. However, she is increasingly concerned that she has robbed Camelot of a strong knight, and her husband of everlasting fame and glory as a highly ranked knight.

One night, as our tale begins, Geraint wakes to find Enid is not in bed with him. Upon investigation, he finds her praying aloud, specifically coming upon her saying that she has been a terrible wife who failed to keep to her vows and always put her husband first.

He reacts with patience, waiting for her to finish her prayer before confronting her on the meaning of her words. She explains her fears, and he reassures her that he cares much less for post-death glory than he does for a happy life. Fears assuaged, the two return to bed.

### **The Tale of Sir Bors**

Sir Bors the younger is a man of self-control, and has little in common with his father besides martial prowess. He is loyal, honorable, religious, and holds King Arthur in the highest respect. He is a prodigy in the saddle, a juggernaut with a lance, a genius with a sword, and a veteran with a shield. And all his strength he attributes to his God, or more precisely, the vows he has made to his God. Vows of chastity, of poverty, of

abstinence, beneficence, and empathy, of honesty, fealty, (technical) pacifism, and austerity. (Very notably, Bors never cracks open a Bible, nor is he seen reading; his Christianity is all hearsay, based upon his own understanding of society's perceptions of God.)

His brother, Sir Lionel, has not taken these vows, and does not abide by them. They travel together anyways, and are usually best friends, even though Lionel is something of a party animal, while Bors has extremely strict rules on how he can have fun. The brothers' grief over their father's death throws these distinctions into extreme relief, Lionel diving ever deeper into bottles and orgies, while Bors scarcely leaves his meditation cell.

The two are torn from their grief and thrown into the story by King Arthur's summons to Camelot, demanding a renewal of their father's vows of fealty. The pair's voyage is largely uneventful, a backdrop to the brothers' odd friendship, but the journey from that French castle to Camelot is precisely the same as Arthur's final trip to Camlann.

King Arthur seems the epitome of all Bors strives to be: impersonal, unselfish, powerful, and benevolent. Arthur is still structuring his ideal government, and is questioning the efficacy of bloodline-based inheritance. As such, he sends Bors and Lionel on a quest, notably not the quest for the Holy Grail that is all the rage in Camelot at the time, but rather to locate and retrieve Lancelot.

Beyond the king's official order, the queen offers her personal plea, receiving an oath from Bors to never return to home or Camelot without Lancelot or news of his fate. This is the first opportunity for Bors to demonstrate his brand of misogyny: condescension, disinterest, judgement, but never violence, callousness, or cruelty. He doesn't want bad things to happen to women, and will happily engage in daring heroics for their sake, but he doesn't like who he becomes around them, as he tends to regard them as potential sexual partners first, people later.

As they leave Camelot, Lionel pokes at this character foible, alluding to the "Claire and the magic ring" incident. This rebuke coming from someone Bors regards as his moral inferior is altogether ineffective, but keeps Bors from involving himself when Lionel runs off to pursue Sir Turquine while Bors was resting his horse. Hours later, Bors has continued traveling and comes to a crossroads at the same time as two potential adventures: in one direction, he sees Sir Turquine bearing away a naked Sir Lionel, while in the other direction, a knight is bearing away an unwilling damsel. Bors pursues the damsel, but prays for his brother.

The damsel is rescued without incident, and offers Bors a room at her home. She explains her situation as the second daughter of King Amans, whose elder sister has usurped nearly all of her father's lands, leaving her nearly destitute, and defenseless against her sister's knights, as seen earlier that very day. Even so, she pulls out all the stop

to offer Bors a fine meal, of which he only eats bread and water because of oaths, and gifts him the use of her own bed (she slept on a couch) which he also rejected in favor of the floor's discomfort because of oaths.

That night, Bors dreams of the elder sister, of her successfully seducing him, reacting as if it were a nightmare. The younger sister wakes him, noting that he rejected the bed. She manages to get him talking about his oaths and why he rejected her generosity, but he shuts down when she presses on why he swore them in the first place. Even so, he decides to respect her father's will, and vows to wrest her lands back from her sister. She decries this additional oath, as she quite rightly thinks his many oaths are bound to contradict/are a shield from taking responsibility for his actions. He sets out to confront the elder sister, who lives in a tower.

Upon hearing that Bors had killed her last champion/lover, the elder daughter of Amans decides to make Bors his replacement, willing or not. As such, she (communicating from a high window of her tower), having already learned of Bors' status as a knight of Camelot and their reputation for honor, toys with him, tricking him into vowing to not attempt violence upon her or hers as long as negotiations might persist, seeks to squeeze an oath from him, threatening the lives of her subjects should he refuse her bed. Bors refuses, and someone is thrown out a window, dying at Bors' feet. Then someone else. Then a third. And Bors does nothing to stop her, bound as he is by his most recent oath. And as the bodies hit the ground, Bors still refuses to sleep with the woman.

That evening, with the elder sister and all her keep dead, Bors offers himself the scant comfort that her actions were hers, and his actions were in accordance with his oaths.

What with one thing and another, two years pass. At various times, Bors runs into Palomides bemoaning his lost love at a well near Joyous Gard, where Tristan and Isolde have taken refuge. He also meets a young Mordred at King Urien's castle, just starting to make a name for himself.

The plot kicks off again when Bors encounters with Hector de Maris, his cousin and Lancelot's adoptive brother, also searching for Lancelot, who is traveling with, of all people, Galehaut. Hector theorizes that Lancelot must be with a lover, as only a woman has previously marred his reputation as a perfect knight, so he's trying to track down Elaine. Increasingly despairing at his own failures, Bors happily joins him.

The theory proves to be correct, and the two find Lancelot raising his son alongside Elaine, living under the assumed name 'le Chevalier mal fete,' the knight who trespassed, the ill-made knight. He has convinced himself that Camelot is better off without him, that Arthur and Gwyn are better off without him, that he has a responsibility to his son and his son's mother. Bors hits him in the oaths, pointing out that he is still bound by his



oaths as a knight, while he has never made any oaths to Elaine. This proves unconvincing, as Lancelot has never been especially concerned with honor, just doing the right. Hector, who knows his adoptive brother better, and has largely accepted his place in Lancelot's shadow, makes an argument based in selfishness, accepting the premise that Camelot can survive without Lancelot, but pointing out that Galahad and Elaine will thrive without him as well (as Galehaut had long sheltered Galahad/Elaine under his giant-sized wing), positing that Lancelot should then go where he himself will be happy. To accent this argument, Galehaut challenges Lancelot to a fight, tempting him with the sweet satisfaction of martial prowess.

Lancelot leaves with Hector. Galehaut remains with Elaine. Bors leaves alone.

With his oath held complete, Bors is free for the first time in ages, and truly a bit lost. His vows keep him from accepting the accolades for completing his quest in Camelot, and he doesn't feel it appropriate to return to their home when his elder brother is MIA, so he instead sets out to find Lionel.

Smash cut to success, Lionel drinking his quest away along with Mordred and a few other no-name knights. Lionel sees Bors and goes full rage mode, which Bors refuses to defuse or defend against. In consequence, two people, a hermit Bors had followed to find Lionel and one of the knights Lionel had been drinking with (a fellow named Sir Calogrenant) are killed by Lionel for the crime of trying to keep him from killing Bors. Bors does nothing to defend them. Mordred is the one who ends up intervening, incapacitating Lionel without harming him (violent drunk does not equal death sentence). Mordred goes on to call out Bors for his cowardice/inaction/lays the guilt for the two dead people at least partially on his shoulders.

Genuinely troubled by the experience, Bors travels to Camelot for Arthur's guidance, wondering if it is possibly enough to merely hold to his oaths and do no harm if others can exploit those oaths or bind his arms with them. Arthur praises his self-control, but warns against mistaking self-denial for self-change. It's not a man's place to be an angel. If he wishes to be a holy person, first be a better person, a contemplative person, and prioritize. Not all oaths are of similar worth, nor are all sins; some are worth breaking for the sake of others. Bors makes one final oath: to remain in Camelot, pondering, until he can determine the optimal oaths which any man might take to become holy.

### *The Tale of Thomas*

This one is basically the Knight of the Cart, albeit from the POV of the Cart's driver, a little person, a fellow by the name of Thomas. He's functionally an OC.

Thomas is a pretty simple character, in that he loves the idea of knights, knighthood, chivalry, combat and all that, but due to his stature and social class, he has been denied any opportunity to fulfill his dream. Even so, he's managed to become a walking repository of knowledge on all the different kinds of contemporary arms, armor, and fighting styles available, and more realistically wants to pass that knowledge along. He's actively hindered, however, by his own bitterness, and won't see that dream ever truly come to fruition.

Thomas had some history with court politics, having previously been in service to Segwarides until King Mark cast him out of Cornwall over a pre-Igraine tiff with Tristan. He then squired to Sir Tor, one of Pellinore's bastards, until he died at the Battle of Badon. He briefly found love, as incidentally witnessed by Gawain. Sadly, this was not fated to last, and by the time of this tale, Thomas is working as a cart driver, generally responsible for garbage disposal in Camelot in a time of very foul garbage. On a day when the manual labor is more bothersome than most (rain, poor sleep, and a dead pet in the garbage), Thomas is disposing the city's runoff well outside its walls when he's nearly run down by a fleeing Sir Maleagant, who has kidnapped Queen Guinevere.

Off-screen, as we will learn later, this was only made possible by Guinevere's blackmailed consent: Maleagant is holding a great many of Arthur's knights and nobility hostage, and used that as leverage to get Gwyn to come along peacefully, and made sure Guinevere was thoroughly bound (he, unlike most, remembers that Guinevere was once Sir Gwyn) before setting her upon his horse.

Maleagant is eventually pursued by Gawain and Lancelot, who question Thomas. Thomas, who was present at Badon Hill and is deeply insulted that both knights have not only forgotten him, but Sir Tor as well, refuses to help either of them unless they abandon their horses and ride in his cart. Gawain refuses to play his games, and rushes off. Lancelot reluctantly hops in.

The ride is not a friendly one, as even though Thomas knows this is his opportunity to elevate his status, he can't help but take vindictive pleasure in needling Lancelot with his less-than-flawless reputation, and singing praises to Sir Tor. Lancelot's natural humility, coping well with a town's reaction to his debasement, and failure to react violently to a very arrogant Sir Bruce sans Pitie, softens their relationship, and they bond over their interest in knightly things. Lancelot gets the chance to speak openly of his relationship with Guinevere, which to this point has not been carnal. He's honest that he does desire her, and though his love for the queen is greater than his love for the king, even greater than his love for knighthood and God, that love is predicated on Guinevere

being loyal to her duty, and to her king. He suspects that she is in a similar situation, that though each loves and desires the other, the realization of that desire would destroy it, not to mention the disastrous side-effects it would have upon Arthur and his kingdom.

Lancelot and Thomas split ways at the Sword Bridge, which Lancelot insists is the fastest method for storming the castle. Thomas catches up with him a few days later, after going the long way around, only to find Lancelot fighting Maleagant for Guinevere's honor, in response to an accusation that Guinevere slept with one of the knights of her personal guard while under Bademagus' "care." (Bademagus has kept his son from outright assaulting the queen.) Thomas finds himself again doubting the virtue of Lance/Gwyn. All the same, Lance beats Maleagus into submission, at which point Guinevere takes Lance's sword to execute the traitor knight.

In a fit of gallantry and generosity, Lancelot insists upon riding in Thomas's cart on the return trip to Camelot, and Guinevere, unhelpfully to their reputation, accompanies him. The tale ends with the two not-paramours pulling a sleep-cute in the back of the cart.

### *The Tale of Sir Perceval:*

Perceval was raised without swords or armor, trained by his mother, Peggy, in the feminine arts, as his father, Pellinore has little influence on Perceval's upbringing. Pellinore's wife accepts but is uninterested in Pelly's hunting and mercenary work, and Pellinore, for his part, spends very little time at home, but sends vast funds back to his wife. Since Piggy is an avid reader, most of these funds are funneled into the castle's vast library. As such, Percy spends far more of his youth reading books than climbing trees, never mind any training in swordplay or horseriding. Visitors to the castle are rare (after accidentally killing Lot, Pelly did his best to take his wife off the map for fear of the Orkney factions retribution), so Percy's best friends and companions are truly his mother and sister, Dindrane.

We're treated to several scenes of happy home life, during which we find that Percy is something of a Biblical nerd and philosopher, if something of a goofball in day to day life, while his sister is much more interested in history stories and archaeology. The plot kicks off when the two uncover an old journal of Joseph of Arimathea, who is apparently an ancestor through their father's side, which documents the apparent resting place of the Holy Grail.

Knowing that Arthur's court is seeking the Grail (and generally filled with youthful rebellion and curious about the outside world, Perceval and Dindrane foolishly run from home, hoping to find Camelot. In their exploration, they quickly become lost, and spend several months wandering before chancing upon a farm. The farmer showed them a road, which brought them to Joyous Gard. Perceval sees Galahad and Galehaut training, and thinks they're the coolest thing he's ever seen, immediately deciding he wants to be a knight, too. Galehaut says he's the spitting image of Pellinore, and sends them south with that in mind.

In Pellinore's more public castle, the home base of the Hundred Knights, Perceval finds his father died nearly ten years ago, and also meets his siblings, Agloval (currently consumed by his lust for revenge for his father's murder), Lamorak (training and scheming to get between Tristan and Iseult), and Feirefiz (the only one who seems genuinely pleased in greeting a new brother), each of whom have a different mother. From them, Perceval learns where to find King Arthur, the Round Table, and Camelot.

Cut to Perceval and his siblings arriving in Camelot with a solid theory for where the grail can be found. Kay initially dismisses the skinny Perceval and the value of history, but bites his words and apologizes after Bedivere makes plain his longing for time enough to spend on scholarship. Arthur gives the brothers his blessing on their quest, but declines to go with them, for much the same reason that Bedivere and Kay remain behind: the affairs of state require their presence. Arthur does, however, recognize the political opportunity, symbolic value of the grail, and even a chance of mending the

Pellinore/Orkney feud and encourages Pellinore's sons to invite others on their quest. Lancelot, meanwhile, positively jumps at the opportunity to escape his confusing romantic inclinations.

They first visit Cornwall, but find it icy with the presence of both Mark and Tristan, each suspicious that the other will take what the other has if either leaves. They both remain behind. Lamorak finally accepts that Iseult will never be his.

Perceval, eager to extend an olive branch (and with no personal grudge, given he never knew his father) insists they visit Orkney. Lamorak, entranced by the newly widowed Anna, remains in Orkney, as does Agravain, who is suspicious of Lamorak's intentions, while Gawain, clearly regretting his murder of Pellinore, makes amends with Aglovale and joins the Grail party. Young Gaheris's pleas to join them as well are refused, despite being about as old as Percy and Dindrane.

Lancelot pointedly refuses to enter Joyous Gard. Inside, Galehaut is saddened and guilty at his friend's apparent continued distress, and feels utterly unworthy (and uninterested, as a follower of the Old Ways) in joining the quest.

Upon arriving at the Grail Chapel, Perceval finds it's more a system of caves than anything man-made (though the mouth of the cave is within the walls of King Pelles' castle), and it's only through his and Dindrane's scholarship that the knights are able to keep from becoming lost. They eventually find a door with Joseph's mark upon it. However, the moment the door opens and the assorted knights glimpse the relic, the Grail pulses with holy energy, impacting each of them differently.

Gawain's skin is burnt as from the sun, his sword glowing with heat to the precise point where he impaled Pellinore. The Grail burns with a heat he cannot approach.

Feirefiz is not Christian, and as such cannot see the Grail. Even so, he is noble, and feels the Grail's presence as a pleasant breeze, which heals his scars as it passes.

Lancelot's flaws stem primarily from living an unexamined life. With his conflicting loyalties between king and queen, difficulty separating personal glory with Camelot's reputation, unexplored trauma at the unwitting hands of Elaine, and confused spirituality stemming from being raised by a fake fae with a real faith, Lancelot's armor locks up around him, keeping him from entering the grail room, but allowing him a genuine glimpse of the grail itself.

Dindrane, who has always preferred history to spirituality, cannot focus upon the grail itself, though whether this is a natural disinterest or a supernatural compulsion is unclear. Instead, she studies the reactions of everyone else through their experience, rather than living her own life.

Perceval the religious scholar alone is able to approach the Grail, and even handle it without harm. He decides to remain with his sister and the relic in the Grail Chapel, writing a brief letter to Lamorak and to Arthur, delivered by Lancelot.

The tale follows Lancelot back to Camelot, where he Guinevere, and Arthur finally come clean to each other, establishing their unorthodox relationship: after his less than stellar time with Morgan, Arthur learned he was asexual, so he is perfectly happy to let his wife find pleasure in a man he trusts as thoroughly as Lancelot.

### *The Tale of Sir Gareth:*

We find Sir Gareth on the road south from Orkney, making his way to Camelot. He thinks often of his recent shameful actions, but is determined to make them right by being better. Camelot, he finds, is oddly empty, much of the Round Table still pursuing the Holy Grail. Even so, while Arthur does not outright reject Gareth's plea for knighthood and admirable, redemptive work, neither does he accept the newcomer, making the very valid claim that Gareth is being oblique about his history, Arthur has never heard of Gareth nor his deeds, nor has Gawain or any other native of Orkney made reference to him. Gareth offers to make a display of his combat prowess, but Arthur claims such is not the only qualifier to be a knight of the Round. In desperation (Gareth can't go home again), Gareth asks a boon of Arthur, to work in Camelot's kitchens for a year, or until Arthur might be in need of a knight, with the stipulation that he would perform all such kitchenly duties in his armor. Arthur, Guin, and particularly Kay are a bit bemused at this reaction; this isn't the first unproved knight to desire membership at Camelot, and protocols had been developed for situations like this. All the same, they grant Gareth's boon, and Kay ends up giving him the half-mocking nickname "Beaumains," or "Pretty hands," since removing his gauntlets proves necessary for his work, and thus his hands are the only part of his person that are ever exposed from under his armor (and they are very dainty, tiny hands). Outside of his duties in the kitchen, he spends most of his time on the training grounds, which, like most of the castle, are empty, save Thomas, who vocally observes the flaws in the young knight's technique, caustically coaching him, and Guinevere, who is disappointed to find Gareth is unwilling to spar with her on foot, albeit not because she is queen, but because he himself is incapable of holding a sword without igniting the worst of his trauma.

Two weeks later, Arthur and Gwyn are holding court, with Kay, Bedivere, and Gareth in attendance. A courier arrives from Sir Ector, making it clear the old man is on his deathbed; Sir Kay begs leave to visit his father, which Arthur immediately grants. Next, Lady Lynette (dressed all in yellow), who rode in on a kinda-creepy zombie-automaton horse which collapses and dies right in the audience chamber. Lynette ignores her horse and pleads for Arthur and all of his knights to rescue her sister, Lady Lyonesse, whose home, the triple-moated Castle Perilous, is under siege by four strong knights, and they're threatening to take Lady Lyonesse herself to wed against her will. With most of his usual retinue out questing, Arthur accepts Gareth's offer to take up Lynette's quest. Lynette, who noted Gareth's current occupation (he's wearing a flour-stained apron over his armor), considers this an insult from the king, responding to her plea for his entire army with one kitchen knife. When she insists a more seasoned and capable knight aid her, starting with Lancelot and working down the ranks, Guinevere explains the round table's current competitive streak, noting that the yearly Tourney is

forthcoming, and as such, while Camelot will be swarmed in the coming weeks, most knights are currently preparing for the event of the year, either by visiting home and repairing their gear or finding a last-minute adventure to justify their continued membership at the Round. Bedivere offers to scour the countryside for any local adventurers. This infuriates Lynette all the more, who lashes out at Camelot's reputation, Kay's drinking, Bedivere's arm, and the royalties' suspected cuckoldry. Arthur breaks out his king voice, and denies Lynette a place to rest in Camelot, sending her and Gareth on their way that very day, while yet ordering Bedivere to follow through on his offer to find more help, and assigns Thomas to accompany and evaluate the potential knight of the round table, as well as granting Lynette (and her Franken-horse) a place on his cart.

Lynette is still incensed at the entire situation, and takes out all her frustration and worry upon her new traveling companions. Forcing him into silence, into riding three paces behind her, into listening to her berate his parentage, hygiene, youth, etc., making several pointed comments on his masculinity/romantic prospects to boot. As they ride, Lynette works on repairing the damage her reckless riding inflicted upon her Franken-horse. Along the path, they encounter first a knight (in violet colors) who is trying to buff his bracket numbers by besting any knight that comes along. Gareth knocks him down, which only earns him (violet) a new tirade from Lynette about how inept he must be as a knight if Gareth could best him. They then encounter a wealthy man being robbed by forest bandits (green), at which Gareth, ignoring Lynette's protests, handily routs the bandits. The man turns out to be mayor of a nearby town, and, utterly misunderstanding the situation, grants the both of them a single room in which to stay the night. Gareth, in a fit of chivalry, opts to sleep outside (still in full armor) to protect the perception of Lynette's chastity (Thomas excuses himself to sleep in the cart). Lynette is satisfied with this arrangement until a storm hits that night, at which point she requests Gareth's aid inside, inadvertently learning in the morning that Gareth is an assumed identity for Gaheris, sister to Gawain and Agravaine.

They resume their journey the next day with Gareth's sex newly revealed to Lynette, and Lynette newly infuriated both by the deception and the reinforcement of Gareth's inability to effectively protect her or rescue her sister, the previous evening's violence dismissed as wholly irrelevant, given the dangers to come (the ride is made yet more awkward by Thomas' indignation at being left to sleep in the rain). Gareth makes his counterargument by knocking down the indigo knight, come to take vengeance for his cousin, violet, who Gareth had recently disgraced, and who was able to overtake them on account of the cart's plodding speed. The tsun is toned down and we get a bit of dere with Lynette expressing that she doesn't want to be responsible for his death, and she does think he will die, as the four knights holding her sister are very strong.



When they arrive at the castle the next day, however, Bedivere and backup are nowhere to be seen, but neither has the castle been taken. The castle is protected by a very unusual moat system; beyond the usual ring around the castle's walls, any approach is impeded by a waterway spiraling away from the usual moat. Gareth, not one to leave Lyonesse in the clutches of lustful men, immediately sets out to rescue her, out of his depth or not. Conveniently, the knights have taken to a gauntlet-style defense, with one knight standing at the bridge over the second and third moats, while two stand guard at the outermost ring. The first knight (orange) strikes at Gareth's mount, but leaves himself open, leaving Gareth pinned under his own dead horse. The second (red) treacherously attempts to ride down Gareth in his prone position, but Gareth manages to get his lance up and knocks the second knight to the ground, dead. As such, the third knight (blue) dismounts, and demands that Gareth fight on foot. Lynette sends Gareth her newly re-forged steed, and Gareth challenges the third knight to joust. The third knight recognizes his reluctance to clash blades and exploits Gareth's nobility, refusing to re-mount. Gareth refuses to fight on foot, as he still isn't willing to hold a sword, but neither will he fight a knight at disadvantage, and he ultimately retreats, to his immense shame. Gareth retreats to nurse his wounds, tended by a furiously concerned Lynette. Thomas offers his critique, accurately identifying that Gareth isn't capable of holding a sword without going into debilitating flashbacks, nevermind fighting. As such, he takes away Gareth's sword, replacing it with a lance, even without a mount, offering a supremely rare piece of genuine praise, comparing the young knight to Sir Tor. When the battle is rejoined, Gareth pushes the third knight into the moat at lance-point. While they try to fish him out by that same lance (Gareth is not without pity after all) Lancelot (black) arrives, having ridden ahead of Bedivere's call to arms. For all his legend, he's not in a good mental space after the encounter with the Holy Grail. Even so, Gareth begs to be knighted by his hero, and to finish his quest should he fail in this last hour, so that he might embrace death with head held high. Lancelot acquiesces, his own demons quieted by the youth's words. Gareth mounts on Lynette's forged steed.

When they find the fourth knight, he announces himself as the Black Knight of the Midnight Star, very impressive words in a quavering voice. Gareth realizes a moment too late in their first joust that something is wrong, his opponent is off balance, weak, loose in his armor. He pulls up his strike and knocks an empty helm off the Black Knight's armor. The rest of his body slides off the horse with a crash. Dismounting to investigate, Gareth and Lancelot discover a preadolescent youth swimming in the impressive armor. He explains that he was red and blue's little brother, forced into the role of arch-villain. While they're afoot, a final knight emerges from the rushes in ambush.

Lancelot recognizes Sir Breuce sans Pitie (brown). Breuce likewise recognizes Lancelot, attempting once to ride the legend down before bolting on his famously fast

horse, leaping the many moats of the spiral in a manner that Lancelot can't replicate, but Gareth can. Gareth finally catches the rogue knight and puts him down for good. As they return to Castle Perilous, Thomas tells Lancelot of Gareth's deeds and heroism. Impressed at any knight that can impress Thomas, Lancelot offers to take on Gareth as squire and protege, counter-offered by Lynette and Lyonesse at the castle's open front door, who offer to make Gareth champion of the newly re-christened Avalon. Gareth opts to remain at the castle, but promises to always come should Lancelot or Arthur call for aid.

Unusually, this tale cuts out before a proper denouement, and it's never made at all clear whether or not there's any romantic inclinations between Gareth and either of the sisters, nor any proper explanation for the mechanics behind Lynette's "magic."

### *The Tale of Queen Guinevere*

Gwen has never enjoyed society's rules. Her parents would have seen her married off, her warriors never saw her as a woman, or even human, regarding her as a goddess of war, and now she has to cope with Camelot. All of Arthur's courtiers regard her with tip-toeing suspicion if they know her history, and disdain of her womanly failings if they don't (mostly loudly of her failure to bring Arthur an heir). The Round Table was almost worse, with Gawain constantly hinting that Arthur should have kept Morgan around, Bedivere always going on about propriety and appearances, Agravain (Guinevere never understood why Arthur had granted him Robin's seat) continually speaking of "a woman's place," and Kay...Guinevere couldn't really figure out Kay. Lancelot was all right when he was about, especially with that new squire of his, and he was bestial in the best ways in bed, but he always seemed so eager to return to the North. Arthur at least is wonderful away from the court, but spends so much of his time ruling his country that he scarcely has time for her, and their time together became even more strained when she considered her own duties as Queen of Londinium.

Not that she complained. Not her style. She fought her own battles, punched enemies in the face until they stopped trying to fight back.

Her daily schedule was fairly predictable. In the morning, she "held court," a farcical notion, as Arthur was always in attendance and his word superseded hers, so any ruling she may make on the manner in which her corner of the realm may be governed inevitably would upset one party or another, at which point a cry would go up begging for Arthur's judgement. She was fine with that, she never wished to be queen, no matter how skilled a leader she may be. Afternoon was when she lived, donning her armor and smashing away at Arthur or whichever other knight had the nerve to train alongside her. As the realm came to rely upon Arthur more and more, his presence at this training became less consistent as he became less warrior and more king. In the evenings Kay

made certain the castle produced yet another meal fit for a king and his court, with fine foods, potent drink, and often some manner of entertainment or another. Given her choice, Guinevere would have traded the nightly party for a five minute meal and hours of solitude or passion, but a queen's duty is to her people, or something like that.

The action kicks off this time with the arrival at Camelot of Sir Dinadan, a Cornish knight and an old friend of Tristan. He's jovial, silly, and just plain fun, right up until he gets a chance to speak with the royal couple in confidence. He tells them that, in an effort to humiliate King Mark, Tristan has written a new song, a ballad telling the story of The Knight of the Cart, and that he has every intention of playing it at the upcoming yearly tournament. Arthur, Gwen, and Lance discuss the pros and cons of taking their relationship public, biting the bullet before it can be misfired, after a fashion. Some talk is made of the existing rumors. Lancelot, as ever, approaches every battle the same way, straightforward in the sun, and votes to forbid Tristan from playing his song and punishing anyone who would speak ill of the crown in this way. Gwen, having grown quite adept at navigating court politics and the rumor mill, is confident that while it would cause some minor scandal, any attempt to squash the rumors would only lend them credence, and riding out the storm wouldn't prove too difficult. Arthur, personally responsible for writing most of his own laws, reveals he deliberately maintained a loophole to allow for polyamory, and intends to address the matter during the tournament's opening speech (which he has previously established as a "state of the union" style event). Gwen's narration dwells on this being far from the first time that Arthur makes a show of listening to her and Lancelot's opinions only to opt for his own path.

Despite Dinadan's discretion, other travelers from Cornwall bear news to Camelot of Tristan's scandalous song, and Guinevere, Lancelot, and Arthur are soon surrounded by separate gangs of curious gossipers.

This plotline is cut short by the re-emergence of Lord Brandin, making mischief by use of the "False Guinevere" Ring once used by Elaine in his castle. With it, he manages to get Lancelot to rush off on a false rescue mission by kidnapping the false Guinevere (really a kidnapped farmhand Brandin bullied into being his accomplice).

Lancelot's sudden departure pours gas on the gossip-fires, and within the hour all of Camelot is convinced all the rumors are true. Desperate to escape the spotlight, knowing that it won't really help, Guinevere armors up and rides out for the first time in ages, this time to rescue Lancelot. She is accompanied, almost surprisingly, by Arthur himself.

Guinevere is initially resentful of Arthur's presence, suspicious at first that he doesn't trust her strength as a warrior, and then concerned about how Camelot will fare, lacking the usual support structure (king, queen, seneschal, heir). Arthur is confident in

his own success as king, that the structures he has left in place will function without his presence, at least temporarily. His claims that he has brought peace and prosperity to Britain are upheld by the course of their journey: as they pursue Lancelot from town to town, they are not harassed by bandits or rogue knights, the people are generally happy and appreciative, and Lancelot's wild ride is an odd enough event that nobody has any difficulty at all giving Arthur/Gwen detailed recollections of his passing. The two have time to speak to each other honestly and openly (Camelot's walls have ears, and Arthur has not taken off the 'king' hat in years. They properly affirm their love for each other in what the two realize is the first time; their engagement had been practical, their friendship military, their wedding political. Arthur worries that he has been a terrible husband, which Guinevere half-confirms: Arthur's drive to be the perfect king has certainly left him aloof and very busy, and his knowledge that their marriage was not born from love left him feeling like he had no right to intimacy with her, physical or emotional. They reaffirm all the things they love about each other, and it's all really very sweet.

In the middle of the conversation (somehow unnoticed by Arthur and Gwen), Lancelot rides up from ahead having already foiled Brandin's plot off-screen. Lancelot contributes his own part to the multi-directional love confession, and is embraced in turn. They spontaneously conduct a marriage ceremony for Lance/Gwen in the middle of a wide, empty road, conducted by Arthur. Lancelot then knights Arthur in an intensely emotional ceremony (Arthur was crowned before being knighted, and after a few years of war, has largely abstained from knightly duties).

The mood is soured somewhat when Arthur and Guinevere ask after Lancelot's latest adventure, and they learn of Brandin's deception. The damsel is saved, the ring is secure, and Lord Brandin himself was killed by Lancelot. This momentarily leads to a discussion of capital punishment before Lancelot points out that Arthur has pardoned Lancelot without knowing close to enough of the details to do so, leading to a discussion around the nature of law itself and the duties of the king. Arthur's position hasn't significantly changed since his night time discussions with Morgan all those years ago, which eventually transitions to a discussion on Arthur's failure to age and the nature of Excalibur and its sheath. In a moment of insecurity, Arthur wonders if Excalibur is as great a curse as the crown, as he will likely outlive his peers and their children, all the while saddled with the responsibilities of kingship. Already, particularly with Kay's departure, Arthur knows that every person in Camelot, and likely the world that knows of him, sees only the perfect king, the invincible warrior, nothing of the human he's so ardently hidden for so long. Lancelot counters his despair with envy, looking at the promising next generation which only Arthur will see fully bloom. Guinevere voices a question untouched since Merlin's disappearance: will Arthur's reign ever extend beyond Britain. No clear answer is given, as Arthur is torn on that very point: he believes it might

do some good for many people, but he knows he has no right to domination, and no desire at all for war.

Conversation lulls, and some chit-chat is made of the upcoming tournament, the standings and expectations. There are echoes of T.H. White in Arthur's ruminations on how many people are inclined towards enjoying violence, and the importance of supplying a non-destructive outlet to those urges. Guinevere plays with her ring. With it, she's as young as Arthur. Without it, she's as old as Lancelot.

After a while walking in silence, the trio recognizes that they probably won't be back in time for the opening of the tournament, and Tristan's song will likely have filled Camelot. This transitions into a bit of commentary on Tristan's character, and then into his love triangle with Isolde and Mark, directly contrasting to their own situation and whether they might be able to find a similar solution. They're all sceptical, concluding that there is far too much envy and not enough love, but that leaves an undercurrent of doubt about whether their own relationship might be able to survive. Arthur rallies, looking at all the impossible things they have achieved, concluding that no relationship is without flaw or rough patches, but they three have all proven willing to work and put in the effort to make things work.

### *The Tale of Sir Kay:*

Despite a year's nurturing by Kay, Sir Ector is on his death bed. Ector has grown old, but his mind is still sharp enough to give Kay one last lecture/expression of love. Kay struggles to tell the old man he's long since grown to love the truth, that he's never been his son, but Ector preempts him, assuring Kay that whatever secret he might want to divulge, it doesn't really matter; Ector loves him all the same, and trusts him to care for Marsh Castle and the surrounding village regardless. Ector dies.

Kay, feeling his age and youth and separate from the world as never before, visits Merlin in his tower. Merlin is wholly unapologetic for his actions and intentions, but does not beg release, or even admit defeat, determined that he can and will escape without aid. Kay asks into his true motivations, and Merlin is very straightforward, claims he always has been: to unite Britain and conquer the world, achieve order and peace. Kay can't quite put his finger on why Merlin is wrong; thinking has never been his forte, but he knows he himself wouldn't make a good king, and with that realization, comes to the conclusion that neither should he be trying to manipulate Arthur as he has all Arthur's life. With Arthur's blessing, he largely abandons the Round Table in favor of ruling over Marsh Castle, only returning to see his king on festival days and the like. This doesn't stop him from keeping a mystic eye on Camelot.

### *Several Years Pass*

### *The Tale of Sir Mordred:*

After his time training with Robin, Mordred wandered, now hero, now bandit, never hurting where possible, never apologetic otherwise, and always acutely aware of the darkest parts of Arthur's shining peace. When he happens upon Urien's castle, Mordred meets Ywain, a fairly mediocre knight-in-training who immediately takes an envy to Mordred's free-wheeling lifestyle, particularly as Ywain's father, Urien, is something of a joke across Britain for his long history of doing nothing. At dinner, a more-mature Morgan recognizes Mordred, and remembers Merlin's prophecy. She takes him in, and begs him not to visit Camelot, (not least as she's protective of her little brother, who would both be caught in the crossfire should Merlin's prophecy prove true) telling him of his heritage. He refuses to make any promise, and departs in the middle of the night, smuggling out Ywain as well. Morgan has no trouble tracking them at all, and helps from behind the scenes, even arranging for the pair to rescue a lion from a dragon (neither of

which have been seen in Britain in years), the lion then serving as a companion for Ywain (Morgan detains the dragon for use on a rainy day).

The lady (Laudine) of the local town, who had been petitioning for someone to deal with the dragon for some time, gives Ywain and Mordred a hero's welcome, and Ywain instantly becomes besotted with her. Mordred warns him off of rescue romance, as he feels it is a weak foundation to a relationship but Ywain, beholden to his emotions, pursues her anyways. She, whose husband was slain fighting the dragon, and isn't really interested in a rebound, says she wants a husband by her side, one who will not be traveling to tourneys or out adventuring, so she sets Ywain a test: go out, prove your worth, go do hero stuff, but come back by a specific date, to prove his reliability. So Ywain leaves with Mordred, hearts in his eyes.

The pair encounter Gawain, which quickly leads to drama. Ywain knows Gawain from the stories, and greets him with even more hero-worship than Mordred. Mordred remembers Pellinore's death, and remembers the many knights he ambushed searching for his moment with Gawain. But he knows Gawain is stronger, so he pushes buttons, but doesn't pick a fight. Gawain speaks obliquely to utilitarianism, that regardless of whether or not he had been lying back then, reopening old wounds would help nobody. Mordred bitterly accepts this, but cannot stomach the thought of traveling with him. Ywain joins Gawain on the older knight's quest, eager to prove his mettle to Camelot's court. Mordred makes his own path.

Mordred makes a name for himself as a hero, righting wrongs across the realm, save near Camelot. He drinks, he laughs, he's beloved by the people. It is at a visit to Joyous Gard that Mordred comes upon Lancelot and his not-blood brother Gareth, who is looking to mend the rift between Galehaut and the Round Table. The six (Galahad and Elaine joining them) travel to Camelot for the yearly tournament. Upon arrival, Mordred finds he is expected, word of his deeds having long since reached the king (Ywain is similarly well known, but his open association with Morgan is something of an albatross about his neck to the citizens of Camelot). Arthur invites Mordred behind the throne, and converses with him awhile before offering him a seat at the Round Table. When Arthur invites the rest of the table to find their seats, Mordred finds he already knows most of the faces he sees: his brothers, Sir Gawain and Sir Agravain, Sir Bors the younger, Sir Tristan, Sir Aglovale, his traveling companions, Sirs Lancelot and Galehaut, Sir Gareth, and Lady Guinevere. The only ones he doesn't recognize are those who never leave Camelot, Sir Kay and Sir Bedivere.

The tournament to follow was an odd one in many ways, the injection of new blood to the Round Table making all Arthur's foremost knights eager to put forth their best foot, and through it all, the life of the party was Mordred, laughing loudest and surrounded by laughter, bridging old rivalries without any show of effort. Though he did

not do exceptionally well in the melee or the joust (and didn't even enter the archery contest), Mordred impressed all present with his wit, his smile, and his raw charisma. Meanwhile, Galahad found his third victory that day, having bested Sirs Gawain and Lancelot in the melee, Sirs Tristan and Lancelot in the archery contest, and now Sirs Lancelot and Gareth at the tilts.

Arthur immediately calls a session of the Round Table and invites Galahad to attend as well. But as the group congregates, Mordred requests a private word with Arthur, revealing his parentage, and demanding his birthright as Arthur's son and heir. Arthur refuses, but his reasoning (something along the lines of separating the throne from familial inheritance, but this is interrupted by Galahad accidentally challenging the Siege Perilous (the rest of the Round Table was full) and surviving. Mordred though, who knows nothing of the mysticism surrounding the chair, focuses solely upon the rejection.



### *The Tale of Sir Galahad:*

In the stunned silence after the Siege Perilous was conquered, Arthur takes Galahad down to the river for a more direct test via the second sword in the stone, which also proves Galahad worthy. Both are at once thrilled and deeply troubled by his effortless success, and Arthur decides to take Galahad as his own squire, with the distinct implication that he is being groomed for the throne. At Galahad's prompting, they return to the Round Table where Arthur decrees his desire to baptize the Round Table anew, to search out the Holy Grail as one united force.

Upon reaching the Grail Chapel, they find it abandoned, with nary a sign of Sir Perceval, Lady Dindrane, nor the Grail itself. Sir Kay locates a hidden chamber, and within it Sirs Bedivere and Aglovalé suss out a puzzle left by Perceval, which points the group towards Tintagel. Here, the group finds more of Perceval's puzzles, as well as more personal information: the aging and regretful knight-hermit Nascien, who was an old friend of Uther's, and now finally meets his son in person. Arthur asks after his mother, and in the process speaks of Uther in glowing terms, inspiring Nascien to tell Arthur of his parents' relationship.

### *The Tale of King Uther:*

Uther only lived in battle. Vortigern could keep his political scheming, Ambrosious could waste his life acting the perfect prince for their father's court, but when the time came for Constantine to call his banners and make clear his might to rule, there was no doubt which of his three sons would lead the charge.

Uther nudged the steed between his legs, the great beast so well trained it seemed an extension of his own will, putting height, weight, and power behind every strike of his great war lance. Uther let the tip fall, felt the slightest resistance as his point pierced leather and flesh, then another hapless soldier fell before him. Then another, and another.

A wide grin split Uther's features as he wheeled about, searching out his next victims. The bards always sang about the glory of war, the bonds of brotherhood forged between soldiers, of grand injustices righted by noble warriors empowered by some god or another's divine will. Idiots didn't know anything of what it was really like. Of the power. Of the thrill.

Uther's gaze swept across the battlefield. The noonday sun illuminated what an hour ago had been a wide, green field, now trampled, seasoned with fresh corpses and painted liberally with red. This was the part of the battle he loved best, lines broken, chaos everywhere, men drunk on their own battlelust having no clue whether their side was winning or losing, too thirsty for the next kill to consider defense or retreat. Earlier, the orderly lines made it impossible for him to properly indulge his own hunger, and in another hour or two men's rage would be supplanted by exhaustion, or cowardice.

Not that fleeing or prone men weren't enjoyable to dispatch in their own way, but there wasn't that same satisfaction, that moment when the rage abandoned a man's eyes when he noticed ten feet of wood, metal and death protruding from their chests, with no time for unseemly fear or panic before death took them. Of course, a man standing to fight had no better chance of survival before Uther than a runner. Upon this field, it was no god, nor demon, nor fae who determined who would be the next to die. Only Uther.

His eyes landed on a pocket of six men still-standing. They made a small ring, backs together, swords and axes held on the defensive, waiting for enemies to come to them.

Uther indulged them.

The fool bards never quite gave a steed their proper due. True, horses could be stupid as any animal left to their own devices, left piles of dung wherever they might please, and lacked the power of speech so critical to the storyteller's rambling drivel. But there was no weapon on earth half as deadly as a well-trained horse. Fourteen hundred pounds of muscle and sinew added to Uther's own not inconsiderable bulk made wielding a weapon as massive, heavy, and awkward as his war lance not only possible, but indefensibly lethal, slaying his enemies before their weapons could touch him or his steed. Swords and axes were fine enough weapons with feet on the ground, but in the saddle, nothing could compare to a fine lance.

Half a dozen deaths later, Uther decided he'd have to track down whoever has crafted this particular lance. The point was holding, the shaft had not yet shattered, and it slid out of his opponents quite as easily as it slid in. Nothing quite killed the flow of a good fight like having to track down a new weapon, and Uther couldn't count the number of men he'd killed while they were trying to wrench their weapons free from one of Uther's allies. Might be impossible to find the smith; petty lords were always gifting his father weapons with ridiculous names and stories. "This sword was wielded by Julius Caesar." "This spear pierced Jesus Christ himself." "This axe was used by blessed Thor to cut his toenails, it were." Looking into it would probably prove a waste of time, but Uther had to do something between battles.

That train of thought coincided with a sudden surge of responsibility in Uther. Much as he enjoyed battle, the only reason he was allowed to fight in them so often was because he won. He cantered to a nearby rise to survey the battlefield.

Things were going predictably well. Uther had never lost a battle, and that made his opponent's skittish, defensive, stupid. He wasn't the greatest strategist in the country, nor the strongest sword, nor did he have allies among the fae. He just had his reputation, a large army, and a willingness to sacrifice either of the latter to make sure

he held the field at the end of the day. He had to take the field, else he'd lose his reputation, and without his reputation he would not win, and would not be allowed to fight.

Uther took a moment to recall who it was that he was killing today. Irish? Angles? Cornish? Probably not the Gauls, his father had made a thrice-cursed treaty with the arrogant buffoons for some daft reason.

Uther spotted a mounted opponent, and everything else on the battlefield fell away. His charger looked strong, and the man appeared to have an honor guard defending the horse's flanks. They could be trouble. The man held an axe in one hand. Uther could respect that; a more defensive option than Uther's lance, better in the event that his mount was swarmed by infantry. His other hand held a large shield, whose insignia marked the rider as one of Erbin's whelps. Their fathers had fought alongside each other once. King Constantine said Erbin was a good man, honorable.

Uther raised his lance in salute to his opponent, dropping his shield hand to his belt.

The enemy returned the gesture as well as he could with an axe in hand, maneuvering his mount away from his guards as he did. The message was clear: this was to be a fight of honor, without interference or deceit.

Honorable people were such fools.

Uther mirrored his charge. Tournament jousting was becoming popular in the "civilized" world, if the merchants from Gaul were ever honest, but two horsemen squaring off on the battlefield was anything but civilized. A direct charge could cripple both horses if they were to collide, and any sane man would attack an unarmored horse rather than attempt to trade blows with the highly skilled knight atop it.

Uther left his shield hanging from his saddle, flipping a knife with his off hand at the oncoming horse once it was in range. His aim was off, but that was fine. He didn't need to hit the horse. He didn't even need to spook the beast. He just needed to surprise the rider. A well-trained horse wouldn't veer off from a distraction like that, but a rider would try to save his mount, disrupt his own charge to dodge an attack that had already passed.

By the time his opponent had realized his mistake, Uther was upon him, lance piercing the horse's broad neck.

The beast panicked then, fell, pinning its master to the ground.

'Wasteful maneuver,' Uther thought to himself as he leaned down to dispatch his foe, 'Can never have too many good horses.'

The honor guard was almost upon him now, shouting to the heavens about deceitful conduct, a lack of chivalry, and how they would avenge their fallen lord. What hell did they think they were in? They'd never learn.

His long lance saw that they'd never get the chance.

The people who survived this battle might learn--his people, however many might be left--that there was only one kind of rule that mattered in a fight: the one you could enforce. With his unbroken lance and strong steed, Uther fought by the rules he chose, and sometimes he chose to change them. But usually they were these: kill, don't die, don't stop, and enjoy yourself. Simple rules. Effective.

It all came down to power.

With a gleeful roar ripping free from his lungs, Uther charged back into the battle.

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The battle was over, and it would probably be weeks before Uther could properly live again. The brief hunt for enemies who'd retreated or allies who'd deserted was almost bloody enough to hold his interest, but it paled so wholly to the thrill of battle that Uther abandoned the task to some subordinate or another, returning to Londinium and his father, in hopes of finding a new war to wage.

Uther slammed his goblet down harder than he intended. Wine was a poor substitute for blood, but it was the best that the royal court could stomach. Uther looked up along the table to see if anyone had taken notice.

Uther's father, High King Constantine the Third, self-proclaimed guardian of all Britain south of Hadrian's wall, sat at the center of the high table, looking down over the

great hall. Once, he'd been a great man, a warrior of such strength to protect the shores and the wall from invasions from the Picts, the Irish, the Angles, the Saxons, and the Gauls, and a politician of such cunning that he could keep the dozens of petty kings within his realm well underfoot. The people had loved him, his enemies had feared him, his vassals had paid him.

Then Constantine became comfortable, found a wife, found religion, found honor and chivalry and society. Constantine never left Londinium any more, preferring the company of his wife (sitting on his left), the archbishop (sitting on his right, in Vortigern's chair), and an entire court of leeches assuring him that he was a fabulous king while his legacy rotted outside his walls.

Crown Prince Vortigern was almost never in court, and today was no exception. Where Uther was Constantine's spear, battering his enemies away and his allies into submission, Vortigern was the King's voice, whispering in the right ears, making promises and spreading lies to keep his enemies at each other's throats and his subjects tolerant of the ever-rising taxes. That damnable man had cost Uther dozens of livable days with his bargains and treaties. And he was supposed to be high king one day.

Uther snorted at the thought, his eyes narrowing at his other brother. The youngest of the three, Ambrosious was the favourite of their mother and never left court. Where Vortigern was crafty and Uther was brutal, Ambrosious was handsome, beloved by every woman and womanly man among the nobility from Orkney to Cornwall. His golden hair danced in the firelight as twig-arm threw his head back in laughter at his own joke. Marriage proposals arrived every week for the third prince, and never yet had any of them been accepted or rejected. Half the kingdom boasted that they'd soon have the royal family for in-laws.

When their father inevitably died in the next decade, too weak to breathe within the cocoon of fat he built meal by meal, there would be quite the succession war between Vortigern and Ambrosious. Uther cared little whether Vortigern's army of gold-bought allies triumphed over Ambrosious' cult of love and loyalty, but he looked forward to that day. He didn't want the crown himself, but the war, the war! Brother

against brother, blood bent against itself, and an entire country caught in between? Uther very much looked forward to that day.

Smiling slightly into his goblet, Uther let himself drink deeply. There was no talk of battle on the immediate horizon, but it would come. No need, and no sense pretending to care about the pretend politics that came in the space between living.

A peal of forced laughter peeled the joy from Uther's lips. Setting his goblet down again, he saw the small crowd around Ambrosious at the far side of the royal table were all stealing glances at him. His brother's most recent witticism was clearly at his expense.

That was fine. Uther was despised by the court and he despised them. There was no pretense to the contrary. He'd eat their meat, drink their wine, and fight their battles, and they could go on pretending they were the ones living well.

"The humor comes from the truth. And that truth is the source of his shame."

Uther whipped about. That had been his father's voice.

"And his shame is this family's shame. It reflects poorly upon the crown. I'm done standing for it. Uther, your battlefield tactics are unacceptable."

Uther braced himself for the least pleasant kind of combat. This wasn't his preferred battlefield, and he didn't hold his favorite weapon, but he still knew how to fight here. "Which tactic troubles you? You don't accept how I've never lost? How I always slaughter your enemies? How you haven't had to leave this place in years while I fight your battles?"

"Cease this insolence! Petulant child, you know nothing of--"

Uther just wasn't in the mood, "Using big words doesn't make you any smarter! Wearing fancy clothes doesn't make you any nobler! You have no right to talk to anyone about morality or decency. I know what happened with you and the kids in the abbey back then, and so does everyone else here. You're no better than me, because you're just like me. You've just spent so much time dying slowly inside your walls that you've forgotten what it's like to actually live."

The hall had gone profoundly quiet. Uther wondered absently how long it had been since anyone told off his father. Too long, probably. He sipped on his wine.

“I was like you, once,” Constantine’s voice was no longer jovial, nor condescending, nor was there any bluster to his anger. This was the voice of the high king who had forced Britain to its knees to kneel before him. This was an opponent who could fight back. “I grew. I matured. I learned from the mistakes of my youth and found greater wisdom. Morality has no place in war, it is true, but we are not at war. The men I send you to fight are no threat to us, and could be made into our allies once again if you left any of them alive. Kill their soldiers, by all means, they mean nothing to me. But when you kill their knights, their nobility, their leaders, you leave Vortigern--and me--nobody to treat with, nobody to tax, nobody to stand upon to raise this throne higher. Am I understood?”

This wasn’t the first time they’d had this conversation. Uther had heard this argument before, had thought of a counter since then. But he’d had too much wine; he couldn’t think of his retort.

“I am, as ever, yours to command, your highness,” Uther hated losing, but he knew how it was done.

The king grunted his acknowledgement, turning back to those sitting nearest him.

Uther finished his goblet for lack of anything better to do. He hailed down the wine-carrier for a fresh drink when the night suddenly became...well, not quite lively, but still much too interesting.

A gout of flame manifested upon one of the lesser courier’s tables. Out of the flames, a small robed figure, face hidden in a deep hood, appeared as suddenly as...well, something very sudden. Uther was in no mood for metaphors when there was witchcraft about.

The idiots nearest the warlock felt compelled to grab everyone’s attention, screaming like babe’s with skinned knees, which only seemed to annoy the mage, who had now put his foot in the gravy.

Uther feared magic. Magic could ignore his weapons, could defy his prowess, his strength. It could do things he could not imagine, which was very nearly everything, and that was truly terrifying. He told no one of this, for he could not afford to be



thought a coward in any way, and if word spread of his weakness, his foes would doubtless turn to the woodswomen, to enchanters, sorcerers, warlocks, witches, wizards, bone-readers, demon-summoners, and fae to face him in battle.

So with this magic right before him, and unwilling to let anyone know of his fear, Uther did the only thing he could think to do. He scooped up the nearest steak-knife, rose to his feet, and threw it, twirling end-over-end at the apparition.

Once again, Uther's aim was off, failing to strike the man through the heart, and instead burying the knife's blade into his stomach.

The wizard, a mere child now that Uther could see him properly, took one glance down at the red stain spreading down the front of his tunic before collapsing onto his back, convulsing on the dinner table to still more screams.

But magic is not so easily bested. A moment later, two more men appeared, identical to the first from the smooth young face to the blood-dyed tunic. One of these two knelt beside his dying brethren before vanishing, the injured man and Uther's knife going along with him, while the second stared up at the high table, pulling a strangely fashioned metal rod from his broad sleeve. A wand.

Uther grabbed another steak knife from the man sitting next to him.

"Are you going to try to kill me again without so much as a 'how-do-you-do?' It's fine if you do, just costs me time and I have loads of that, but it is rather annoying. Not unlike that screaming, oh shut up!"

The mage twiddled his wand before him, and suddenly the entire room fell silent. Some guards could be heard chatting with each other outside the main hall, oblivious to the danger threatening their masters.

"That's better. See, we need not act the part of donkeys braying at the meteor storm. I believe introductions are in order. I am Merlin."

The wizard, Merlin apparently, put emphasis on the last words, as if his was a name everyone ought to know. Uther thought it strange that anyone would take pride in being named after a bird.

"I am, or will be, court wizard to King Arthur, who I'm fairly certain hasn't been born yet. So, naturally, I'm doing my utmost to find the bastard. You would not believe

how difficult it is to track down someone when they don't exist yet. So, if anyone could tell me, are any of you noble types fond of the name 'Arthur,' planning to name your kid such? Or, better yet, if anyone could point me in the direction of a King Uther, I hear he dallies about around here from time to time, that would expedite things considerably."

Uther sat stunned, mind racing. For all his brothers' snide comments on his intelligence, he was no fool. He knew the implications of a magical man addressing anyone in this room but Constantine as king. If there weren't already people thinking he was conspiring to take the crown, there were at least people plotting to frame him for such. His outburst moments prior did not help his situation. He had moments to salvage the situation, and he may well already be dead. Killing the thin mage might not work, and certainly wouldn't do anything to prove his loyalty, but there was something to be said for taking revenge upon his killer before he even died.

Better, though, to avoid dying in the first place. Uther rose from his chair and pointed dramatically at the new arrival.

A twitch from Merlin's wand and Uther felt the magic muting him lift.

"And who are you who would dare call anyone but my father 'King' in Britain?"

"I literally just got done telling you who I am. Merlin. Court wizard. And I've already met five men who call themselves 'king' since I arrived in this era, the last of which told me that this is the home of Uther Pendragon. Is he here?"

Uther could feel every eye in the hall on him. He imagined Ambrosious smirking at his discomfort, but didn't dare look away from the young warlock.

A tiny opportunity for escape occurred to him, and Uther seized upon it. "I am Uther, loyal son of King Constantine. But I've no knowledge of 'Pendragon,' whatever that title may mean. Your heretical magicks are mistaken." Uther was not a religious person, but any ally he could scrape in this room might help. "It is not my fate to be king! What is it that you want with me?"

"Of course it's you," Merlin said in an annoyed whisper that carried all through the hall, "I know a bit more about fate than you, kiddo."

Uther's blood boiled at the condescension.

“You will be king. If you aren’t next in line, well, I guess things are going to happen. I don’t much care about that. The Pendragon title may be one you’ll claim later, or just one of those things my prophecies got wrong. They often contradict each other. I don’t care about that either. Your kid’s the important part, so I need to make sure he’ll exist, and that he’s nothing like you. But I’m in no hurry. Just needed an introduction tonight. I’ll be in touch. Ciao!”

Uther hurled his knife, but the insufferable child vanished as quickly and impossibly as he appeared.

The horrified grunt as Uther’s knife struck the man behind the vanishing wizard alerted everyone that Merlin’s mystic silence had ended.

The hall exploded with gossip.

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For the first time on the road to battle, Uther longed to turn around. Not that he had lost his lust for battle, but because he knew those left behind would make sure that this battle would be his last. Constantine had wasted no time in getting Uther out of Londinium, sending his suspected son west, to deal with the faintest rumor of rebellion from the king of Cornwall. Uther doubted he’d even get a chance to fight on this excursion.

And to make matters still less pleasant, Merlin appeared beside him on a Rowan steed just outside the view from Londinium’s walls.

“Right then, I’ve just been studying the prophetic texts, and it seems you won’t actually manage to conceive Arthur without my help.” The accursed man spoke without preamble, as though this encounter had been arranged. “So, like I said last night, I need to make sure--”

Uther wrenched his side-sword free from its sheath and slashed at the hood and cloak in one fluid motion, only to find hood, cloak, man, and horse had vanished before he could touch them.

“--that you have your son at the proper time and place.” Merlin and his horse were now on Uther’s other side. “You can stop trying that, by the way, I’m not going to be killed by a sword. Tell me, where are you going?”

“Leave me be.” Uther dug his heels in the horses flank.

Merlin refused to be left behind, and rode well enough to keep up. “I assure you, I’m no more thrilled to extend our interaction than you seem to be at the prospect of differentiating your musk from that of your horse.”

Uther took another swipe at his tormentor.

This time Merlin was slow, vanishing only after Uther’s blade had pierced the fabric of his hood. When he reappeared (slightly before vanishing, Uther noticed this time) Merlin wasn’t on the path, but stumbling through the ditch just to the side of the road.

The better part of half an hour had passed before Merlin caught up to Uther, “I’ll admit that it is heartening to know you’re capable enough with the language to recognize a slight against your hygiene, but even though you cannot kill me, you have proven quite adept at annoying me. You ought to know that people who annoy me do not do so for long. I could make some very creative threat about what breed of slug I’ll transform you into, or how I might deliver a different one of your limbs to each of your enemies while keeping you alive so that you might properly feel all the varied tortures they might inflict upon you at once, but that kind of talk just makes my toes tingle in the unpleasant kind of way. Or perhaps it is these boots that do that. I do miss proper arch support.”

“Fine,” Uther snapped, “you’re here, I can’t get rid of you. You think I’m going to have a son, even though I have no wife, nor any interest in marriage. What is it that you want me to do?”

“A civil tongue! How delightful! Well, for starters, I need you to not die. I’ll do my best to help out there, but if you could avoid being impaled or disemboweled, that would be a great help. Second, there’s the matter of Arthur’s mother, Lady Igraine. My prophecies are really very imprecise where she’s concerned, but she may be married to the Lord of Tintagel at the moment, any of that ringing a bell?”

Uther pulled his steed up short. "You mean to see me wed to Igraine?"

"I mean to see you in bed with Igraine, as for marr--I should not have phrased it that way. I don't care whether you marry the girl, that part isn't important; really, the story is a bit more meaningful if Arthur is illegitimate. Why, do you know her?"

Uther jerked his steed's head about until he was pointed back towards Londinium. "Igraine is married to Gorlois, a duke, brainy man, bony, nose is always in a book, you'd probably like him. He is sworn to Mark, who is currying favor with my father, so both Gorlois and Igraine are currently in Londinium, doing politics. I courted Igraine when we were both young. The king objected to the match. She took up with Gorlois, gave him two daughters, the weakling. But I can win her back for a night, have no fear. If I bed her, you'll leave me alone?"

Merlin followed behind, "You have my word. And my aid in the wooing; magic can be helpful for that sort of thing. You, ah, you have no objection to the entire adultery business, do you? Nor the betrayal of sacred hospitality? I thought I'd have to make a great, impassioned speech on the importance of your legacy, the inevitability of fate, perhaps tell you tales of your son's glory and prowess in war or somesuch."

Uther snorted, "Morals are something we have when people who can stop you are watching. She swore the marriage vows, not me. It's on her head when I break them. And you can keep your aid, this won't be the first time I've had a woman when I wanted her."

"...I have never been so disgusted by a human before. I don't think excrement has ever repulsed me so. Do keep in mind that I need this child to be born, so don't do anything at all that could harm Igraine, or might inspire Gorlois to harm her, or to cause either of them to harm Arthur."

"You don't need to fret, old man, she'll be quite enthusiastic by the time--" Uther found he was talking to no one; the wizard had vanished once again. Uther checked over both shoulders for where he might reappear, hope mingled with relief and lingering fear.

As he re-trod the short path to Londinium, Uther began to wonder if Merlin wasn't some kind of blessing in disguise. Days of life and violence were growing more

scarce in recent months, Uther's brutality outweighing Constantine's passivity in the greedy mind's of their vassals. Perhaps this was just a new opportunity: bed Igraine, insult Gorlois, offend Mark, create a war and revel in life.

~\*~

"Your seduction went well, I take it, given the speed with which your lover and her husband fled the capital."

Merlin again. Would Uther ever be rid of him? As if he needed reminding of last night's humiliation.

"The wench thinks she is satisfied with Gorlois." Uther grunted, "So I'll just have to kill Gorlois, and then I can put the babe you're so obsessed with in her. I'll have an army ready to march on Tintagel within the week."

"Alternatively," Merlin said in a voice like he was speaking to a particularly dim child, "you might take note of the fact that you are speaking to the most powerful enchanter west of Baba Yaga, and that we might be able to establish a golden age in Britain without sparking a civil war."

Uther didn't think much of any course of action which failed to lead to war, but he didn't want Merlin to turn him into a dove either.

"Speak your mind. You have an idea, obviously."

"Glamours are quite simple. Making one thing look like another, that is." The child of ten shifted and blurred, leaving in his place a bent and bearded man, which became a warrior in full mail and battle leathers, which melted in turn, leaving the child in his cloak and hood. "I could apply one to you, make you appear to be Gorlois. I trust that you can work out the details from there. Quite a ways simpler than starting a war for a woman who doesn't return your affected affections."

Uther thought over the proposition. "I'd be dead if I'm found out. How exciting. There will be trouble if the Gorlois appears. So I'll bring an army regardless, draw him out of his castle for a fight. Then while he's out, you can do your witchcraft, and I'll have Igraine without anyone the wiser." He'd have the woman and the war. Deception

was not usually his style. No glory. No fear. But for one last battle, and a night with Igraine, he'd make an exception.

~\*~

The plan went better than expected, and Uther got his night with Igraine unaware, and killed Gorlois the very next day on the field of battle. Better yet, word arrived that Vortigern has made his move against Ambrosious and Constantine, sacking Londinium with an army of foreigners and declaring himself king. Uther took the opportunity to make his forever-war, declaring Vortigern a blood-traitor, which of course left the crown to himself.

King Uther rode to battle.

### **The Tale of Sir Galahad (part 2):**

Nascien explains that Igraine had vanished from under Uther's nose shortly after her forced second marriage, and that he had been ordered by Uther to hold Tintagel against any and all invaders thereafter, to disguise the embarrassment of a runaway wife.

The group proceeds to the Grail's final resting place, Castle Adventurous. The Journey from drawbridge to Grail is a sort of microcosm of the entire Matter of Britain; it is the most complete the round table has or ever will be, united in a common cause. As such, the POV shifts tirelessly, giving each available character their own chance to fail.

The Grail party encounters Perceval, Dindrane, and, of all people, Morgan le Faye waiting for the knights just beyond the castle's drawbridge, where they inform the party of the castle's premise: it is a test of worthiness, built as much to keep the Grail in and safe from unworthy knights as it is to keep the unworthy safe from the Grail.

Dindrane instructs the questers on what can be found with each challenge, beginning with the drawbridge itself; as the moat is seemingly of infinite depth, and hundreds of meters across, it is the only means of entering the castle. Further, it is guarded by some massive, eldritch, many-tentacled things lurking far beneath sight in the chasm below. Dindrane tells them this is a path of courage, and they must not only brave the danger, but face it without violence, whether that violence is intended to protect themselves or one of their peers. King Mark, Kay, Lionel, and Feirefiz fail this challenge and are tossed back to safety by the beasties, Mark by cowering, unwilling to face the

peril, Kay by never attempting, leaving this trial to the mortals, Lionel by striking at the beasts in aggression, Fierfiz lashing out in defense of his brother.

In the castle's great entrance hall, a grand feast stretches across many tables, and many of the chairs about those tables were already filled with the castle's pleasant inhabitants. Dindrane gives them all leave to refresh themselves, but warns against sloth and gluttony. Further, she says the next step must be taken individually; many doors surround the hall, each etched with one of the companies' names, much like their seats around the Round Table. One by one, the adventurers leave the hall, though two, Agravaine and Lamorak never left the feast, Agravaine reveling in food and drink, Lamorak at last recognized by the party-goers for his remarkable feats.

Hector de Maris is the first to leave the feast, planning to do some stealthy scouting to aid the party. More than any of the others, Hector relies upon the group, so when he encounters a true monster in his room, he retreats to alert the other knights of the situation. When he returns to the feasting chamber, he finds it no longer has any other doors to proceed, and the few knights who remain have lost interest in the grail. Without knights at his side, he is neither courageous or strong enough to face the world's wrath.

In Arthur's room, the king encounters his mother, Igraine, for the first time. She asks after his health, he accuses her of being dead, she evades the question. She hits him hard by asking if he's happy. He goes to the next room.

Gareth encounters a similar encounter with Anna. Flashback to her murder, Gareth's involvement is finally made explicit. His guilt keeps him from going to the next room.

In a similar vein, Bors confronts the instigator of the oaths, the girl he making love to while his father died way back in Bedivere's tale. He apologizes for pushing her away, and acknowledges that his misery was not her fault. He's actually grateful to her for inspiring all his oaths, as they have led him to being a much better version of himself. He proceeds.

Lancelot and Guinevere enter separate rooms, but encounter similar scenarios, each seeing the other, the other expressing themselves unworthy of the grail, primarily on account of their relationship. They each refuse to proceed onward without the other, and consequently fail to proceed.

In contrast, Gawain and Ywain seem to end up in the same room, which appears to be a twilight forest path. An apparition of Robin II, screaming about Pellinore's death, attempts to ambush Gawain, but is consequently overpowered and killed by the knight of the sun. Ywain protests that murder during the Grail Quest hardly seems appropriate, but Gawain counters that a quest is a quest, and the adventure is the important part, having a story worth the telling, and besides, bandits are fine to kill. Ywain, who idolizes Gawain (as he is Mordred's big brother) does not protest. Neither of them proceed.



Palomides gets a chance to confront his daddy issues with Pellinore, and in an emotional scene gives up on the Grail quest for the chance to spend a few more minutes with his father.

Bedivere, who has always been a follower, is given a vision of Arthur giving up on the grail quest, espousing very non-Arthur ideas about abandoning chivalry, abusing power, and reveling in his riches. He is thus led astray and away.

Tristan has been condemned repeatedly in ambiguous, often praising ways. His room, consequently, is as direct as at all possible: a vision of the almighty directly condemning him for his flaws. The option for repentance and redemption is flagrantly available, but his arrogance, selfishness, and cruelty are thrown into stark relief in a way that nobody has ever forced Tristan to confront. He fails to advance.

Mordred has his ambition thrown in his face, being confronted by the sword in the stone. In his own head, he'd always operated on a much smaller scope. He always wanted control, sure, but only over the people around him, so make sure everyone was always having a good time. Sure, he'd wanted to tell Arthur about his heritage, and he was jealous of Galahad, and he wanted Arthur's ear, and... Mordred takes so much time contemplating the meaning behind this challenge and the implications within himself that he falls behind the other successful questors.

Thomas finds himself in an armory, and meets with OG Robin, who attempts to inspire Thomas to take up arms and armor himself, despite his stature, in much the same way that Robin took up his bow despite his poor upbringing. Thomas rejects this, insisting that his role as a guide and trainer is important and essential. He might wish he was a knight, but not all wishes are or should be realized. He moves on to find someone he can advise.

Galahad encounters Joseph of Arimathea, who offers him the sword of King David (trademark). All of Galahad's confusion and frustration rises to the surface, and he (cordially as ever) demands some kind of explanation for his own Mary Sue-ness, why his every attack connects, why no weapon can touch him, why he can always keep a cool head in combat, keep his emotions in check when they might tempt him to wickedness, etc. etc.. Joseph says, rather unsatisfyingly, that he is perfect because someone must be, for if nobody was then everyone would have the excuse that nobody can be, which makes his existence a damnation for everyone else. Galahad is understandably perturbed by this, and to drive it home, he finds he is able to draw the ridiculously cool David sword (pommel is made of many separate jewels cut to fit around each other, the blade is perpetually hot to the touch, the hilt is made from a bone from behemoth on one side and a bone from leviathan on the other, while the sheath is made from snakeskin and engraved with strange letters). Dindrane appears and provides a girdle for the sword, beautifully bejeweled and made of her own hair.

The questors are reunited, but now reduced to four, Arthur, Thomas, Galahad, and Bors, with Dindrane advising and Perceval waiting at the end (Mordred would catch up were they slower). Dindrane explains that the next portion of their grail trial was designed by Morgan. Hence, the dragon. Morgan herself appears as well, and challenges Arthur to stay out of the fray, and face her himself, to prove the strength of his Table by trusting in them to slay the dragon. Arthur acquiesces, and the scene splits in two, as Arthur walks his way through his understanding of each of Morgan's "misdeeds," spinning them to portray Morgan in the best possible light, because that is how he has always seen his old friend. Meanwhile, Galahad solos a dragon, as Perceval and Thomas are mostly useless in a fight. Morgan admits she didn't ever think Arthur would do as well as he has as king, but is nevertheless adamant in her cynicism, that no matter how good a king he might be personally, he will not live forever, and he has no control over his successor, and the sheer amount of power he has amassed will turn catastrophic in the hands of the wrong successor, all the more so with the power and the authority the Holy Grail, so she will oppose him, directly. So when Galahad slays the dragon, Morgan uses her earliest seen magic, seizing all the dragon's strength and power for herself.

Fight. Mordred arrives near the end and proves instrumental in defeating his mother.

When Morgan admits defeat, she reveals why she didn't use the Grail herself, nor did she make any effort to destroy it: the Grail has become a locus of magic, a lynchpin to the idea of magic itself being held within the world. She departs, and Galahad goes quiet. Dindrane praises the questors, and says the Grail is near. Thomas pulls back, determined to wait for Gareth, and is consequently left behind, as Gareth never comes.

Arthur sees that Galahad is troubled and takes a moment to speak with the lad, indicating in less than subtle language that he intends to see Galahad succeed him on England's throne. Galahad interprets this as yet another achievement he doesn't feel he has earned which Arthur actually empathizes with; he had done very little of national worth when he pulled the sword from the stone, but expresses the simple ideal that no matter what the situation, no matter the cause, all we can do is our best. Galahad's appearance has truly been a relief to Arthur, because he might get an opportunity to retire, now that an appropriate heir has been found.

At the next door, Dindrane draws attention to gold lettering around the doorway, which states that there are no more tests, and the Holy Grail rests within, but only one who enters will ever leave; all others shall be brought before God and honored in Heaven as the Grail's protectors. From the doorway, they can see the Grail's light (though not the Grail itself), as well as Perceval, reading his Bible like always, blissed out of his gourd by the Grail's holy light, sitting on the prow of the blessed ship in an underground lagoon. Arthur forbids them from entering, but one by one his greatest knights abandon him for

God, first Dindrane, then Bors, and finally Galahad. For a moment, Arthur hesitates, but then moves to step into the room himself, only to be held back by Mordred. With Mordred's reminder of everything left on earth, Arthur relents. The two watch as Perceval greets each of the Grail heroes, outlining a final journey to return the Grail to its proper resting place, and Arthur gets a momentary glimpse of the Grail itself; Mordred is literally in his shadow at the most important moment.

When the light fades, Arthur finds that Castle Adventurous has disappeared, along with the Grail, the ship, Perceval, Dindrane, and Galahad. A very confused Bors has been left behind, and the rest of the failed knights are left in an unpleasant limbo between embarrassment and emotional turmoil. The moment is saved by Mordred of all people, who is able to accurately report that Arthur made it to the Grail Chamber itself, and saw the glory of God. He buys Arthur enough time to get his head together and give an inspiring speech of his own. Lancelot refuses to accept his son's absence, and sets out on the quest anew, accompanied by Thomas. The end result is Mordred catapulting up Round Table's hierarchy, Arthur's renown growing all the more, and most of the rest of the table turning suspicious eyes upon each other, silently wondering why they were not worthy.

### *The Tale of Sir Dagonet*

Sir Dagonet is a complex man. Known primarily as King Arthur's jester, his actual merit as a clown or a knight is easily called into question, as he has few feats to his name, comedic or otherwise. In fact, his funniest moments aren't of his own doing, but the result of others marshaling his abysmal martial prowess to humiliate other, more useful knights. The complication comes in the form of Sir Helior of the Thorn, a rogue knight who killed Dagonet's wife years ago, and who Dagonet killed in revenge.

Dagonet's brand of humor relies upon his being the worst knight in King Arthur's court. He knows that, paradoxically, being the weakest puts him in a position of strength, enabling him to shame and manipulate any knight of any pride with negligible effort. Deeply ashamed of his own past, his role in his wife's death in the Helior incident, Dagonet is the loudest proponent of the old way of chivalry, of the most toxic kinds of masculinity, and of the most self-destructive mod of prideful honor. As such, he is one of the leading causes of that mode of thinking's decline. To that end, he's made an artform of painting his defeats as victories, his victories as legendary, and of skewering the pride points of his peers. He doesn't really enjoy his life, but that's okay, he doesn't really think he deserves happiness, not after Helior. His humor is his duty, his atonement. And if he can make other people happy along the way, so much the better.

Thematically, Dagonet's tale is about the decline of a comedian, one who goes from speaking truth to power to hiding behind "it's just a joke!"

Dagonet's tale begins in the only place it really could, the only place Dagonet does much of anything: the court of Camelot. Dagonet did not personally partake in the quest for the Holy Grail, and was actually left in charge alongside one of Guinevere's chief handmaids (who played the part of Guinevere using the old disguisey ring).

Arthur, while waiting for the return of the Grail Knights and Lancelot, sees in the Grail Castle's tests and failures an opportunity for each of his knights to become better people. To that end, he rearranges the Round Table, inverting it for the sake of anonymity, every person present turning their back to everyone else, so that his knights can speak openly of their failures despite the inherent shame. Dagonet, present for these meetings, and in possession of a set of ears capable of telling one knight from another, wastes little time burning this new fuel in the service of humiliating Arthur's knights.

This state of affairs persists until Sir Bors returns from the Grail Quest, alone. Bors recounts his experience in the Grail Quest, from the Sword of King David, to the healing of the Maimed King, to the 150 Grail knights they met from all across the world, to the final arrival at the Grail Hovel, a humble abode warped by the Grail's presence in the upper room of the first Last Supper. There all 150 knights share in communion, officiated

by a person who Bors believes to be either Joseph of Arimathea or Jesus Christ himself. As they were praying after the sacrament, all the other knights and the Grail itself had vanished, leaving Bors alone. This last bit formed the foundation of Dagonet's comedy routine for the following days and weeks, first mocking Bors for his apparent failure in being raptured, but progressively going on to make light of everyone and everything involved, made all the more tasteless when the news travels to Corbenic and back, saying that Elaine has died, her sad life as Lancelot's "lover" and Galahad's mother complete. The cause of death is unclear, but when Guinevere goes to investigate, she returns with a babe she calls "Nestling," which she claims (unconvincingly) she rescued from an eagle's nest, on the side of a cliff, in a storm, and the babe was unharmed beside the cold, still wearing a very decorative bit of jewelry that reminded some of Carbonek.

Guinevere calls Dagonet out on his consequent behavior, saying he lacks courtesy and chivalry, and that his japes are eroding the foundations of Arthur's perfect kingdom. Dagonet replies with his ivory-tower theories on the nature of comedy, about how his intentions are precisely the opposite, and how his efforts to position himself at the bottom result in everyone taking his words in their opposite meaning. Guinevere is unconvinced, but also unconvincing, and the status remains quo.

At long last, Lancelot returns to court, and speaks of his own experiences, of his failures, his repentance, his further failures, his reunion and side-questing with his son, his final denial to see the Grail, and his long, lonely trip home. With a little prompting from Dagonet, the Camelot gossip system explodes over the question of what Lancelot's great unforgivable sin may be, thrusting into the limelight decades old rumors about Lancelot and Guinevere. This is enough to get Arthur to take a personal interest in Dagonet's antics, pointing out the frankly obvious position that despite Dagonet's intentions, people are believing him, treating the Holy Grail as a farce, deriding the accomplishments of Lancelot, Bors, Galahad and the rest, knights preferring to join in the name calling than to aspire to greatness. Dagonet plays the fool properly, taking altogether the wrong lesson from Arthur's words, wondering how he might use this newfound power to bring down the corrupt, failing to recognize the corruption within himself.

### ***The Tale of Sir Agravaine:***

Getting a look inside Agravaine's head, it isn't a nice place to exist. He is astoundingly bitter and hateful and jealous of nearly every other knight in Camelot, most especially

Lancelot's perfection, Tristan's adoration, and Gawain's birthright. He hates them all. But he knows that he's hateful, that if he followed his instincts, he'd be another Sir Breuce sans Pitie, so he clings desperately to the letter of his chivalry and honor, because he simply doesn't understand the spirit of it. His mind is prone to departing on tangents unrelated to his current surroundings (particularly when drunk), which he remonstrates himself over, considering his mind a skittering anthill (a metaphor offered by Gaheris many, many years ago), each errant thought an ant ignoring the queen's commands. Everything has its place, and Agravaine knows his.

Years later, when our tale begins, yet another tournament is interrupted, this time by the rise of the Red King, who claims to have founded his own Round Table, with blackjack and hookers (the precise details are unimportant, as the narrative never meets the Red King in person, but there are implications that he A: set up his Round Table near King Urien, which makes Morgan a false lead, and B: has a secret identity never directly revealed to the audience; possibilities include remnants of Vortigern's faction, Beowulf or someone related thereto, someone related to Fionn and Ireland, etc.). Arthur, eager to prove the value of chivalry, courtesy, honor, and morality, leads the next generation (most notably Mordred (who has filled Galahad's place as Arthur's squire), Ywain, Bellengerus (Allisandre's son), Elyan the White (bastard son of Sir Bors {? might be too young}) and Gareth) to wipe out this False Camelot. He leaves Lancelot to oversee the tournament. This leads to some very ugly drama within the royal triad, due to the recent death of Nestling.

On the evening before the tourney, with Arthur and company absent, Agravaine, Bedivere, and Dinadan drink together (Agravaine POV), the three weakest knights of the Round Table. Dinadan was jolly, Agravaine was somber, and Bedivere was contemplative. Agravaine, in his usual combination of impotent and slighted by the world, is furious at being left behind by Arthur, and bitter at his forthcoming tourney humiliation, but approves of Arthur's decision to put realm before "womanly softness." Dinadan had been more wandering jester than knight for years, and revels in his position, even if Dagonet has the official position, and always has a good time at a tournament, but is concerned at what Dagonet will do with ammunition that could be aimed at Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere. Bedivere recognizes the significance of this tournament, to prove that Camelot can shine without Arthur at the top, and is eager to see it do so, even if he's privately worried about the health of the royal marriage, and Arthur's mental state in particular.

Lancelot and Guinevere immediately begin ignoring the tournament at large in favor of mourning Nestling in their preferred (violent) way, and without Arthur's presence to curb their baser instincts, Camelot's courtesy fails and old rivalries rise to the surface. Bedivere does his utmost to curb the debauchery, but without the threat of Arthur behind

him, nobody listens to his moralizing. Gawain outright murders Lamorak in the melee as displaced revenge for his parents' death. Tristan humiliates all his archery opponents with Failnaught, shooting many of their arrows out of the air. The joust is a farce, home to every dirty trick imaginable and several instances of outright cheating. Tristan emerges victorious, having shot the horses out from beneath several of his opponents. Lancelot mocks Tristan at the presentation of the trophy for his lack of courtesy, and Tristan responds in kind, making scarcely subtextual overtures about the nature of Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship.

The weak trio join to drink again (very) late that evening, with their roles shifted. Bedivere is now despairing his weakness and failure, Dinadan is thoughtfully regretful, that for so long he has done nothing but poke fun at the growing rot, even encouraging its growth so that he'd have more to laugh at, rather than seeing it righted, and feels some personal culpability in the day's events. And Agravaine, spurred by Tristan's remarks, has found new inspiration for the salvation of Camelot whilst also settling an old score: exposing Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery.

Tristan and Isolde are killed together in their sleep that evening by King Mark, the Cornish retinue departing before dawn, a not-especially subtle declaration of war, since Tristan has long enjoyed Camelot's protection. There are whispers that Mark has allied with Hengist's remnant.

Agravaine spies upon Lancelot and Guinevere, catching them late at night in Guinevere's chambers, ironically not in the act. He gets some more witnesses, the archbishop among them. Agravaine bursts in unannounced, making accusations of treason against Arthur, by Lancelot and Guinevere, by way of infidelity. In an utter panic, Lancelot leaps from his seat, cuts down Agravaine and the next fifteen knights behind him (Gawain alone among these survives the vicious assault), all in front of half the court, then runs from Camelot in a panic. Rattled yet raging, but unable to touch Lancelot, Gawain turns his burning sword upon Guinevere. The two fight, Guinevere without armor and using Agravaine's sword. Even so, she bests Gawain, then declares herself arrested, and bars the entry to her own quarters. Agravaine dies, loyal to Arthur, laughing in cruel mirth at Lancelot and Guinevere's just fall from grace.

### **The Tale of Sir Lancelot:**

Like Guinevere's, this is a tale of only passing adventure, focusing instead upon the inner workings of Lancelot's mind as he dances upon the edge of madness, torn, as ever, between his devotion to God, love, and loyalty, between the religion and culture he has propped up his entire life and how it conflicts with the arcane feats he knows his 'mother' and Morgan are capable of achieving.

When his panic eventually breaks, Lancelot takes shelter in what had once been King Ban's castle, now technically owned by Lancelot's adoptive brothers Hector de Maris and Lionel, both of whom are knights of Camelot now. He spends some time there, half-determined to never see another human so long as his life may last when two foreign merchants from Camelot stumble into his apparently abandoned shelter. Desperate for information, he accosts them, threatening them at swordpoint. They say that Gawain means to execute Guinevere for her infidelity.

Lancelot rushes off to Camelot, and upon Gawain's taunting, sees red, and caves in Gawain's skull (Bertilak's Belt proves its worth by saving Gawain's life, but there is a definite change in Gawain's temperament for the next few weeks). He finds a perfect moment of violent clarity in which he knows he would tear down everything Arthur has built and salt the earth where it stood if it might buy him any more time with Guinevere. He slaughters his way into and through Camelot. He acquires Guinevere's armor and weapon, breaks down her prison door and gives his queen her armaments. She utterly refuses to accompany him: Camelot is her home, and her place is by Arthur's side, just as it is Lancelot's. She recognizes and accepts the contradictions of her position, a feat Lancelot is entirely incapable of replicating. His fragile mind, shattered anew, seeks a place where life made sense, and he begins the slaughter anew, fighting out of Camelot towards the lakes of his youth.

### **The Tale of King Arthur**

Arthur, fresh from his victory over the Red Knight, is riding high. He hasn't enjoyed death in many, many years, but he is heartened at the performance of Camelot's next generation. Mordred wielded Clarent with distinction, Gareth held Rhongomyniad with honor, Bellengerus was learning quickly, Arthur's fingers still felt their old strength when they clutched Excalibur, and Ywain's death, though tragic, was performed with all the grace and dignity any knight could hope for. The Red Knight's court never truly stood a chance. Reinvigorated, Arthur is thinking of reorganizing his government; his recent brush with his father's character emphasizes all the more clearly the folly of a blood as an indicator of worth, nevermind royal worth. Though Excalibur's sheath does a marvelous job retaining Arthur's own youth, the simple fact remains that he has done almost



nothing at all to prepare England for his passing, unlikely though it is. He speaks openly with Mordred and Gareth, drawing them into confidence with himself and one another. Arthur muses upon two truly good options for government that he has seen: the anarchy practiced by Sir Ector in his youth, and the kingdom of justice he has strived for all his life. Even as good systems, he observes their weaknesses (invasion for anarchy, corruption for royalty), and consequently stresses the importance of good foreign relations, communication between communities, checks, balances, and above all transparency. To that end, given that he warmly anticipates the growing influence of these two from the next generation of knights, he asks that they go public with their big secrets (Mordred's parentage and Gareth's birth gender). Gareth is so enthusiastic in his acquiescence that he pulls off his armor as he rides, while Mordred's follow-up questions regarding heirs and succession are interrupted by a crest in the road revealing smoke rising over Camelot.

Not recognizing his old friend in his frenzy, Lancelot sees only another obstacle in Arthur's returning army crossing Camelot's drawbridge. He fights his way through Arthur's unarmed vanguard, striking down an unarmored Gareth (Mordred quite reasonably retreats in the face of Lancelot in full rage), and Arthur himself crosses blade with his commander-in-chief, only surviving by the magic of Excalibur's sheath. Lancelot escapes.

Arthur calls an emergency meeting of the knights of the round and hears a report from Gawain, which he has Guinevere corroborate. Arthur commends Guinevere for trusting his system, which he has written to explicitly allow for his situation with Guinevere and Lancelot, but which he has not illuminated, as he was not yet ready for a full confrontation with the church (Mordred makes note of the absence of transparency in Arthur's own system). Even with the knowledge that Lancelot and Guinevere were not breaking the law, Gawain demands bloody recrimination from at least Lancelot for both his brothers' death, both of whom met their unnecessary and unprovoked deaths at his hands, requesting of Arthur the questing right to bring Lancelot to justice (long tradition has established that only one group at a time were permitted to pursue the same quest), but Arthur denies him, citing Gawain's failure to apprehend him thus far, claiming the quest for himself.

Before adjourning the meeting, Arthur gives instructions pertaining to Camelot's operations in his absence, putting Mordred alone in charge of Camelot and the kingdom until Arthur's return, as Guinevere was currently awaiting trial, Gawain was consumed by revenge, and nobody else had yet impressed Arthur so thoroughly.

With scant hours having passed since his arrival, Arthur departs once again, carrying both Excalibur and Rhongomyniad, dropped from Gareth's hands, using tracking techniques taught to him by Robin long ago. These lead the king to Lancelot's childhood, the realm of the Lady of the Lake. The Lady is nowhere to be seen, and neither is

Lancelot. With no physical lead to follow, Arthur breaks down in fear and frustration, finally showing cracks of the strain of dozens of years of self-denial. He calls out to the supernatural, pleading with God, the saints, Merlin, Nimue, and, at last, Morgan, who answers his call in turn.

Arthur finds himself visited by Nimue. She is utterly at a loss to help, as her methods have always been practical application of violence, which seems unlikely to be helpful in this scenario. She apologizes for not intervening sooner; she hasn't been watching over everyone as she once did, and has no idea where Lancelot is. Arthur is kind, but she still fails to reveal Kay's identity.

Not knowing what to say, Nimue spirits the exhausted king away to Merlin's tower. The ancient child confirms the story of Uther that Arthur found in Tintagel, but also reports that the realm is in chaos once again, a lifetime of work undone in a month. The French contingent was organizing their own search party for Lancelot before Arthur was out of sight of Camelot, which a thoroughly annoyed Gawain (who knew they did not share his rage over Gareth's death) reported to Mordred. Mordred, in his first act as interim monarch, reiterated Arthur's last act as monarch, threatening to name the French Contingent traitors to the crown if they did what they were planning. Lionel, however, took this as Mordred siding with his "brother," and defied the order. When Gawain heard of this, he took it into his head to enforce the king's justice whether or not the king ordered it, raising his banners against the French. The French, in consequence, take refuge with Galehaut in Dolorous Gard, where Gawain besieged them. Mordred, meanwhile, in a ploy to get Lancelot to reveal himself, has sent Guinevere out of Camelot on a long, slow, pilgrimage to London, ostensibly to dig deep enough to witness the Boudica ash layer for herself, as some kind of unnecessary lesson about violence and revenge and whatnot. Guinevere agrees and departs from Camelot. Merlin fails to mention that Mark sees an empty Camelot and is assembling his forces, a threat Mordred will soon hear and prepare for. He does, however, mention that the Romans, the Irish, the Angles and the Saxons all smell blood in the water.

The flood of bad news gets Arthur back on his feet in a way a motivating pep talk likely would have failed to achieve. He then does something we've never seen Arthur do until now: he prays.

God's answer, if he answers, is the appearance of Morgan, unseen by anyone since the Grail, and it's all very civil. He asks how she's enjoyed life, she asks after Ywain and Mordred, and he finally cuts to the chase regarding Lancelot. She is able to track him to the territory of the Or witches, but is unable to trespass upon their territory without causing some serious trouble in the Otherworld. Even so, the sight of Rhongomyniad gives Morgan pause, and she educates Arthur about the three kinds of magic and the nature of the enchantments upon his sword, spear, and knife for the first time. After they

part ways, Arthur finds the witch's hut, and Orddu within, now with an apprentice of her own (probably unnamed, but with certain similarities to Orgoch). The king speaks with the witch about the difference, if it exists, between justice and revenge. Arthur refuses to acknowledge fault or offer reparation for Orwen's death; this is the first time that Arthur is treated as being directly in the wrong, displaying an aspect of his character that will lead directly to his downfall: after so many years of being relied upon by others to be their moral leader, of being personally determined to do the right thing (and generally proving himself worthy of both roles), Arthur finds it exceptionally difficult to admit to any personal wrongdoing, and is too easily satisfied with his well-intentioned excuses, failing to understand the ease of apology relative to its power to heal. He reinforces his own moral superiority by not killing Orddu, but fails to give her any closure over her mentor's death; the two witches leave.

Arthur finds Lancelot was enchanted, but is unharmed, and the enchantment is shattered with the witch's absence.

Arthur chews Lancelot out for his rash and violent actions, certain he could have smoothed everything over had he simply waited in Camelot. Lancelot bemoans their fruitless cause, that for all their efforts, Britain will fall to chaos and madness all the same. Arthur denounces his despair, urging Lancelot to join him in reclaiming their realm. Lancelot rejects Arthur's pleas, saying he's never been as strong as his king, and cannot endure being in the presence of Arthur and Guinevere if he is not allowed to love them, and he is not so proud as to fight for that love's existence when the realm itself is willing to tear itself asunder in its denunciation. When appealing to his logic or his emotion doesn't work, Arthur appeals to his honor, flatly ordering his knight to accompany him. Lancelot quite rightly sees this as a betrayal of the respect their long relationship has garnered, which Arthur gravely tosses aside: a good king cannot afford the luxury of personal feelings if it comes at the expense of the realm. To be a great leader, he has to be something more than a man, and something far less. Lancelot accepts this man as his king.

Their last ride together brings them to Dolorous Gard, where a skirmish is underway as Gawain attempts to storm the castle. Lancelot outpaces Arthur and deals Gawain a second heavy blow to the head in order to save an unmounted Sir Bors from the sun-soaked Orkney King. The French retreat inside alongside Lancelot, who attempts to temper their fury at Gawain and his army. Arthur does similarly with the newly rekindled temper of Gawain, who goes so far as to call Arthur's authority into question, as he has not reclaimed his renege power from Mordred. The subsequent argument is very personal and very public. It comes out that Gawain has been sitting on a lot of bitterness for a very long time, feeling that Arthur has never appreciated his prowess, his feats, his service, or his strength, has never treated him like family, has never invited him into his

confidences, has never treated him as he always treats Lancelot, even now, after Lancelot had betrayed them both so thoroughly.

The row is only ended when Bedivere arrives, barely alive (the wound he received was minor, but has torn wider by his wild ride across Britain). Bedivere reports that Mordred has seized the throne for his own. Arthur forces Excalibur into Bedivere's hands, aiding his recovery. Arthur twists Gawain's vengeance away from Lancelot by pointing out that Mordred's betrayal, should it prove true, is far greater than Lancelot's, which Gawain, desperate for something to fight, having been denied a battle of vengeance against Lancelot or Guinevere, accepts. He rallies his forces at once to march on Camelot.

Arthur rides more slowly, commandeering a portion of Gawain's medical unit to ensure Bedivere's recovery. When their expertise seems unlikely to be sufficient, Arthur makes the crucial decision to leave Excalibur's sheath, which had seen him safely through many fights, with Bedivere, his brother.

Arthur rides after Gawain with Rhongomyniad his spear at his side, a naked Excalibur in hand. When he crests the hill revealing Camelot, he finds that the armies of Orkney are already locked in an organized battle with the knights of Camelot under Mordred's command. Arthur raises Excalibur to the sky, glowing with divine light, and calls for peace. The battle lines pull back, and Arthur speaks with Mordred upon the hill of Camlann, each sinking their swords into the soft earth in sign of their truce. Mordred explains that he and his army had been waiting for King Mark, who it is said is marching on Camelot, when Gawain fell upon them. Gawain gave him no chance to explain, and Mordred cut him down despite the sun's blessing, the belt of Bertilak shorn in two, a great gash across Gawain's back. Mordred didn't adhere to the laws of chivalry in true war, just as Robin once taught. Arthur, grieving, frustrated, and tired beyond measure, reclaims the authority Mordred had been given. Mordred does not relinquish. He still admires Arthur, and would not see him harmed, but fundamentally disagrees with his tenants of leadership, calling Arthur and his expectations of conduct inhuman and impossible, even for Arthur. To his credit, Arthur is more receptive to Mordred's criticisms (coming as they are with ample evidence) than he was to Orddu's, going so far as to offer Mordred fully half of Britain to rule through his life's days, and if Mordred's half is judged to be the better at the end of his life's days, then Arthur will extend those days by giving up Excalibur's sheath.

Mordred acquiesces in the formal fashion, seizing Clarent for the sword's formal duty, inadvertently signaling for Arthur's forces to charge, forcing Mordred's to mimic them. When Mordred realizes what has happened, he kicks Arthur in the back, laying him low in the mud, where he is overrun by his own troops. Battle lines quickly disintegrate as they are all on the same side, and thus nobody is on anyone's side. The slaughter goes on, many knights having wished to see battle for nigh on twenty years,

those who wish for peace being the quickest to fall. There will be no retreat. At last, Arthur pulls himself up out from under the corpses of his men, retrieving Rhongomyniad and confronting Mordred, fury such as he has never known consuming his all. Arthur pierces his son's breast with Rhongomyniad, and Mordred slashes his father open from ear to hip with Clarent, a sword of peace, a wound that would have meant nothing to Arthur if he held Excalibur.

Bedivere, who had healed quickly and just as quickly followed, finds his liege in the battle's wake, slowly bleeding out, and attempts to return Excalibur and halt his death. Alas, it was not the sword with such a power, but the sheath, and Bedivere had lost the sheath in the thick of battle; he had emerged unharmed only by his own oft-ignored skill. Arthur asks if Bedivere would be king, which Bedivere denies, and Arthur reluctantly accepts, claiming Bedivere would have done well, but that Arthur himself had spent too much time trying to make of people what they are not. He sends Bedivere to return the blade to the Lady of the Lake, which Bedivere twice fails to do. Before Bedivere can return a third time, Morgan appears, and with her come Vivian, Lyette, Lyonesse, Taliesen, and Nimue. They carry Arthur to Marsh Castle, which summarily sinks into the swamp, until that day when Arthur shall be healed once more.

### *Epilogue*

Shortly after Arthur's apparent death, King Mark storms the now knightless Camelot, plundering its accumulated wealth, slaughtering and scattering its citizens. This final act of villainy, without Tristan to excuse and defend him, brings Lancelot and Guinevere at last to his door. Lancelot and Guinevere's fate is uncertain, but Mark himself escapes, only to be killed by his own great-nephew, Sir Bellangre le Beuse, whose father and grandfather he had previously killed.

The final POV is Bedivere's, who is tormented by what he perceives as Arthur's sacrifice, giving up his protective scabbard to save him, an action that Bedivere simply cannot justify. He ends up cloistered in a monastery, often conversing with an imagined spectre of Sir Ector. He is visited by Thomas, who, at Arthur's final request, is striving to make a record of everything that has happened. Bedivere ends up burning a significant portion of his manuscript.

# Characters of Camelot

## I. Clan Pendragon

### A. Constantine (father of Ambrosius, Vortigern, and Uther)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

### B. Ambrosius

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

### C. Vortigern

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

### D. Uther

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

a) Wielded Rhongomyniad for a time before his death

### E. Anna (elder daughter of Gorlois and Igraine, wife to Lot, mother to Gawain, Agravaine, and Gaheris)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

### F. Lot (King of Orkney, husband to Anna, father to Gawain, Agravaine, and Gaheris)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

G. Gawain (First son of Lot and Anna, brother to Agravaine and Gareth)

1. Physical attributes
  - a) Grey eyes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets
  - a) Horse: Gringolet
  - b) Shield has image of Virgin Mary on inside of shield

H. Agravaine (Second Son of Lot and Anna, brother to Gawain and Gareth)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

I. Gareth (nee Gaheris, trans son of Lot and Anna, brother to Gawain and Agravaine)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

J. Morgan (daughter of Gorlois and Igraine)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets
  - a) Trained in a form of magic which allows her to displace the attributes of the dead, a skill which she hones with time.

K. Arthur Pendragon (bastard son of Uther and Igraine)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
  - a) Conceptually, this Arthur glosses over the insatiable emperor and hot-headed warrior characterization that more or less defines medieval Arthur in favor of delivering on the promise of his epic “Once and Future King” tombstone. He is the king chosen by God and fae, the perfect king. As such, he owes much more to White than Mallory, with a good helping of Nasu along the way.
3. History
4. Assets

- a) Steed: Passelande, Llamrei
  - b) Hound: Cavall
  - c) Swords: Caliburn (Sword in the Stone), Clarent (the sword of rule, crafted by Morgan), Excalibur (Caliburn reforged by the Lady of the Lake)
  - d) Sheath: never formally named, forged in Avalon
  - e) Spear: Rhongomyniad
  - f) Shield: Prydwen
  - g) Knife: Carwennan (literally, “Little White Hilt”)
- L. Guinevere (Gwyn, wife to Arthur, unknown lineage, adopted by Leodegrance)
- 1. Physical attributes
  - 2. Mental Attributes
    - a) My treatment of Guinevere is likely the greatest departure from anything that could be considered “canon.” There is virtually no precedent for Guin as Amazon Queen, and she generally has much more in common with Medb than Penthesilea. All the same, my Guin is thematically relevant in a way that Medb simply would not, and I make no apology. I did not want a woman made villainous for her sexuality in a book largely focused on making masculinity moral. Instead, Guinevere is as Amazon allows for an examination of dealing with an otherwise feminine and feminine performing person entering and engaging with masculine arts.
  - 3. History
  - 4. Assets
- M. Mordred (bastard son of Arthur and Morgan, raised by Anna)
- 1. Physical attributes
  - 2. Mental Attributes
    - a) This one was a bit of a dance, hitting that balance of “destroyer of the perfect society” and “was a knight of Camelot for years, literal kin to King Arthur, and yet neither the perfect king, the strongest knight, nor anyone else was able to see him for who he was.” So I definitely leaned into a combination of “well-meaning, but tragic,” “doubts the ideals and doubts the man,” and “daddy issues.”
  - 3. History
  - 4. Assets



## II. Clan Pellinore

### A. King Pellinore

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

### B. Aglovale

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

### C. Lamorak

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

### D. Perceval

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
  - a) The friendly knight, a low-key Phil Vischer. Rarely seen without a smile, always near laughing, and enjoys jokes at his own expense.
  - b) Kind of an idiot. Has a lot of weird ideas that won't work.
  - c) Almost always has his nose stuck in a book (almost always the bible).
3. History
4. Assets

### E. Dindrane

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

### F. Tor

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

## III. French Contingent

- A. King Ban (brother-via-marriage to Bors, adoptive father to Lancelot)
  - 1. Physical attributes
  - 2. Mental Attributes
  - 3. History
  - 4. Assets
- B. Sir Hector de Maris (natural son of King Ban, adoptive brother to Lancelot)
  - 1. Physical Attributes
  - 2. Mental Attributes
    - a) More than any other knight, revels in the opportunity to play the sneaky sneak role. Wearing disguises, skulking around, and gathering intel are his forte. Even so, he tends to balk at the idea of assassination.
  - 3. History
  - 4. Assets
- C. Lancelot (unknown lineage, adopted by King Ban, father to Galahad)
  - 1. Physical attributes
  - 2. Mental Attributes
  - 3. History
  - 4. Assets
    - a) Sword: tends to go through them; despite his association with the fae, his swords can't usually keep up with his swordplay. At various times, he uses Secace, Seure, Gastiga Folli, and finally Arondight, which is enchanted to be indestructible.
- D. Galahad (son to Lancelot, Galehaut, and Elaine)
  - 1. Physical attributes
  - 2. Mental Attributes
  - 3. History
  - 4. Assets
    - a) Shield: Red cross on a white field, with strong association with Joseph of Arimathea. In truth, the cross itself was painted with Joseph's blood, and the shield can only be wielded by those deemed worthy by Joseph himself. When wielded, Joseph's spirit fights alongside Galahad as a sort of quasi-guardian angel.
    - b) Pulls but does not wield the Sword of Selection during the Grail quest before acquiring the Sword of King David.
- E. King Bors (brother-via-marriage to Ban, father to Bors the younger)
  - 1. Physical attributes

2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

F. Sir Bors (Son to King Bors)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
  - a) Low-key Gandhi with serial numbers filed off. Obsessed with doing the good and right thing always, he sets numerous rules (oaths) for himself far above and beyond what is necessary for knighthood. He refuses to eat meat, wear comfortable clothes, eat tasty foods, engage in sporting violence, tell a lie, disobey his liege lord (initially his father, later his brother, and then Arthur), own things, sleep in beds or relax on comfy cushions/couches.
3. History
  - a)
4. Assets

G. King Claudas

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

IV. Cornish Contingent

A. King Mark (husband to Isolde, uncle to Tristan)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets
  - a) Has been known to employ the services of noted villains, including Morgan le Faye and Breuce sans Pitie

B. Isolde of Ireland (husband to Mark, lover to Tristan)

1. Physical attributes
  - a) Freckles (Tristan claims to know them all)
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

C. Sir Tristan (Nephew to Mark, lover to Isolde of Ireland, husband to Isolde Whitehands)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets
  - a) Bow: Failnaught, a bow that doesn't miss
  - b) Horse: Bel Joeor

D. Isolde Whitehands (Wife to Tristan)

1. Physical attributes
  - a) No Freckles
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

E. Sir Palomides (Not related directly to King Mark, but all his relevance comes in connection with Tristan)

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

V. Sauvage Contingent

A. Sir Ector

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

B. Kay

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

C. Robin

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

D. Briant

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History

4. Assets
- VI. Magical Contingent
- A. Merlin
    1. Physical attributes
    2. Mental Attributes
      - a) There was a lot to digest with Merlin, from his incubus heritage, to his divine gift of prophecy, to his aging backwards, his “relationship” with Nimue, enabling of Uther, and tutoring/advising of Arthur.
      - b) This Merlin is a bit self-indulgent, a hold-over from a prior, Arthurian adjacent work of mine. Like White’s, my Merlin has seen the future, but he did not return to the past via the slow-path. As such, he lacks much of White’s wisdom and dignity. Rather, he found himself in possession of time-based powers, and determined that he could gain fame by zipping back in time and becoming someone famous, and who better than the premier pop-culture wizard. He ages remarkably slowly, and has done so since birth, so he is naturally significantly older than his natural, boyish form would suggest. Nevertheless, that is his natural state, physically and mentally (albeit a form only occasionally adopted in Mallory), and any deviation from that form is the result of magic.
    3. History
    4. Assets
  - B. Taliesen
    1. Physical attributes
    2. Mental Attributes
    3. History
    4. Assets
  - C. The Or Trio
    1. Physical attributes
    2. Mental Attributes
    3. History
    4. Assets
- VII. Others
- A. Thomas
    1. Physical attributes
    2. Mental Attributes

3. History
4. Assets

B. Balin

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes

a) Pulled primarily from Mallory, where he was mostly a terribly unlucky knight with poor impulse control, here he is much more responsible for the many terrible things that happen around him.

3. History
4. Assets

C. Galehaut

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

D. Elaine

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

E. King Urien

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

F. Sir Ywain

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

G. Sir Dinadan

1. Physical attributes
2. Mental Attributes
3. History
4. Assets

## Necessary Additions

Sir Moriens? PoC are remarkably scarce, so dodging this one seems dodgy.

Clear up the Galehaut/ Elaine/ Lancelot/ Pelles/ Galahad situation, who is living where, when.

Rework Merlin's mechanics to draw more parallels to Connecticut Yankee. Magic is the genuine article, but the origin of that magic is left ambiguous. Role and attitude is left unchanged (still a horny jerk who sees characters to be used instead of people to be respected), but add physical self-manipulation (Simeon's deal) to his time shenanigans as his primary power

Make Pellinore and his Hundred Knights flip to Vortigern's side after Uther's death?

No Morganna, only Morgan, with Anna as pseudonym. Related, make Lot's wife's name Morgause

Rework opening of King Arthur's tale so that he returns to Camelot after Lancelot's flight, while Guinevere has still locked in herself in her tower for fear of Gawain's retribution. Arthur spreads words of Gwyn's execution to lure Lancelot back, and is himself standing alongside Gareth and Guinevere on the execution platform when Lancelot arrives. This may throw kinks into Guinevere's absence through the remainder of the tale, which had been previously excused by her awaiting trial.

Revive Ector's wife, the Lady Sefin. Mallory has her survive at least until the SitS incident. Historically, she is the daughter of a St. Brychan.

Implant the "Tale of the Wedding of Arthur and Guinevere" between Nimue and Galehaut as the opening chapter of book two, setting up the current state of Camelot and setting up a bunch of the driving plot elements: Mark's absence instigates Tristan's tale, Roman ambassadors demand and are denied tribute (Arthur doesn't declare war, but it is clearly forthcoming), and Lancelot and Guinevere's mutual desire is acknowledged for the first time.

Rework Bedivere from Arthur's butler to his personal chaplain. Have him inducted into a monastery in Londinium pre-sword-from-stone, then rejoin the cast as an assistant to the Archbishop at Arthur's coronation, who then assigns Bedi to personally pastor to the Round Table. This gives Bedivere more time to read and subsequently exposit on both political, spiritual, and monstrous matters, but also gives a face to the church whose power and influence will grow steadily over Arthur's reign.

Bishop Baldwin? Research the name, could work well as Bedivere's superior

Add a scene to the tale of Wart. Beginning of Morgan was written with the assumption that Wart would finish with preparations for the Londinium trip, at least allude to that in a final scene with Wart and Ector around Christmas where the focus is on Kay's knighting/Bedivere's future in the church.

Append that Ector does not own Marsh Castle/Forest Savage, but more that he's been assigned as a temporary caretaker

Orlando and Melora?

Disassociate Morgan with Dragon Age's Morrigan; while Morgan has very radical ideas about sex/sexuality and has strong ties to nature, she's still takes pride in her own appearance, and this extends to her fashion choices.

The Forest Sauvage is periodically renamed over the story's course. Savage→Perilous→Wondrous→Beauteous.

Add a scene in Swamp Castle with Wart tending the horses. We spend a lot of time talking about jousting and traveling from point A to point B on horseback, they should be introduced early in a kind, non-utilitarian manner. (Wart's old warhorse now helps with the village's harvest? Check the timeline and nail down how big a wheat field could reasonably be carved out of the middle of a forest.)

Add a ballroom scene, possibly one attached to Guinevere "poisoning" Sir Gawain

## Unnecessary Additions

La Cote Mal Taile, aka Sir Bruenor, whose tale is altogether too similar to Sir Gareth's to be worthy of inclusion

Some kind of Epilogue for all the surviving characters (Guin, Lance, Bedi, Nimue, Morgan, Mark) is worthy of consideration. Mallory told Lancelot's story, so it ended with Lancelot's death. I'm telling Arthur's story, so everything thereafter can be ambiguous.

A woman from the Parzival, in possession of enormous scholarly intelligence, able to speak every known language, but cursed with bestial ugliness, a dog's nose, warthog tusks, etc..



## On Magic

While all the kings and knights fight over wealth and land, a second story unfolds a short ways offscreen, occasionally encountering their more mundane masculine counterparts, but quite content to wage their own war on their own terms.

Magic comes in three primary forms in Britain, with Merlin being a distinct outlier for his knowledge of mystical systems originating elsewhere in the world. British magic, however, comes in three flavors: divine (Christian, primarily associated with the Grail), demonic (also Christian, primarily associated with Satan and those demons still loyal to his cause), and fae (primarily associated with nature and the Otherworld).

Divine magic has very few active practitioners in the traditional magical sense. Monks, nuns, priests, and clerics are incapable of shooting celestial fireballs from their fingertips. Rather, its power can only be earned, not sought, by virtuous living. It is a significant contributor to Lancelot's prowess in battle and Arthur's strategic victories. Further, it is often serves as a destroyer of magics, allowing pure knights to shatter curses or cure unhealable wounds. Even so, this power is extremely fickle, investing and abandoning individuals with little warning or fanfare. The fanfare is saved for its artifacts, of which three are particularly notable: the Holy Grail, the Lance of Longinus, and the Shield of Joseph of Arimathea. Each has wholly untapped and untameable power, and do not react well to attempts to be wielded in sinful causes.

Demonic is pushed further and further to the fringe over the story's course. It is the least subtle magic, its practitioners often become monstrous in form and thought. It is the origin of dragons and giants, and is consequently actively antagonistic not only to the Round Table, but to humanity as a whole.

Fae magic sees the most focus early on, particularly in the character of Morgan, who is able to discuss some of the simpler mechanics out loud. Fundamentally, the magic system operates on transference of properties from one object to another.

## Timeline

493: Battle of Badon Hill

537: Tale of King Arthur (Battle of Camlann)