



THE SWORD IN THE STONE

The bitter winter wind swirled around Ector and his sons as their horses trudged through the thick snow. The three were making the long journey from their home in the south of Wales to Caerleon for the king-making. The old king was dead, and now the bravest warriors of all the clans in the land were meeting to battle for the right to be Pendragon, High King of Britain.

“Father, I am frozen nearly to death!” moaned Cei, Ector’s elder son. “Can we not stop and rest?”

“No!” said Ector. “We are nearly at the battlefield. Look! There are crowds of warriors in front of us!”

“I am too cold and tired to fight!” whined Cei. “I am not meant to be king, so why carry on?”

“I’ll not have my son talk in that manner!” bellowed Ector. “Prepare yourself, boy. Take up your sword!”

Cei swung round to reach for his sword. Suddenly he gasped. "Father! My sword is gone!" he said.

"What?" shouted his father. "You cannot become Pendragon without a sword! How could you have been so careless?"

Ector's younger son, Arthur, a boy of only seventeen, spoke up.

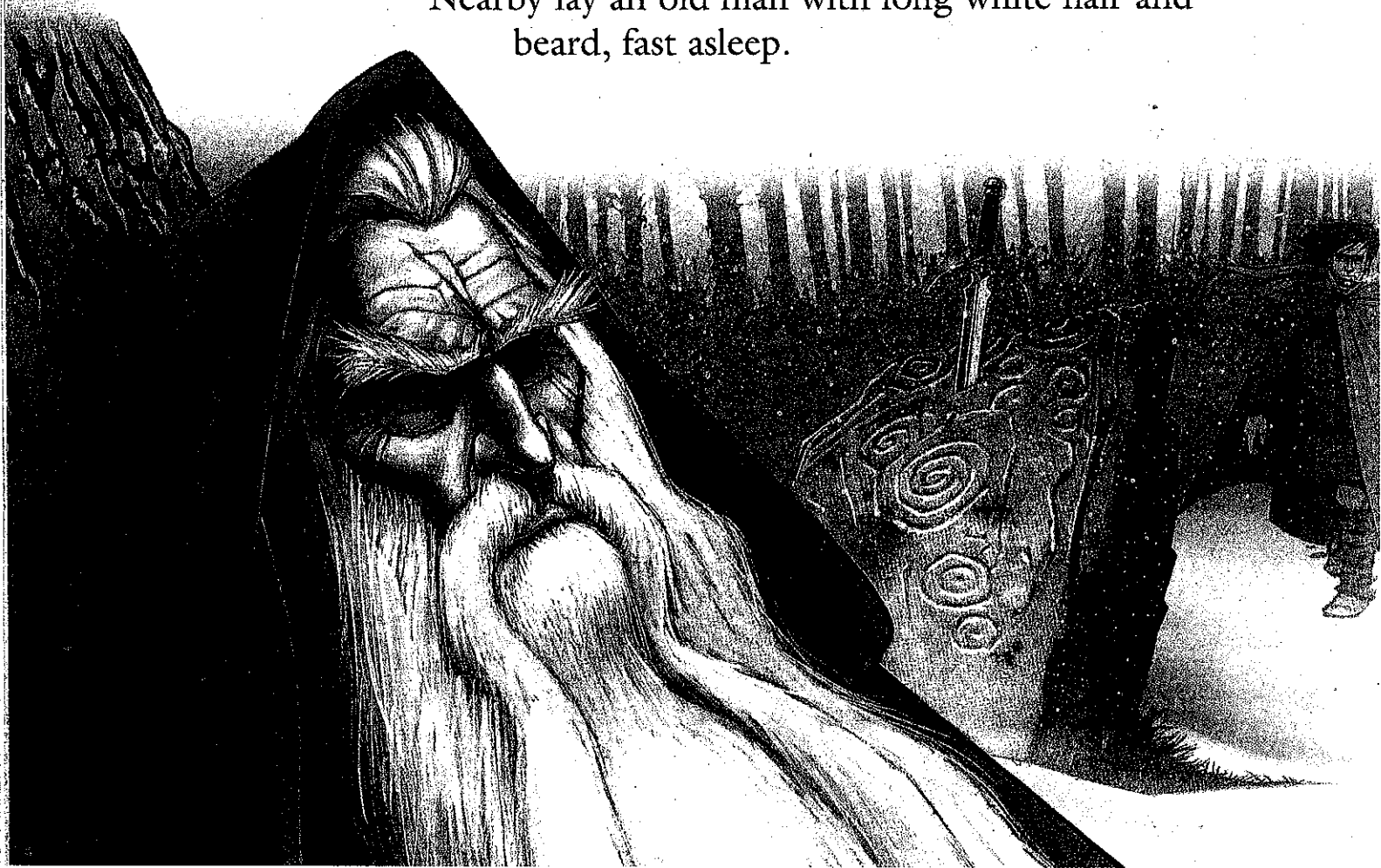
"I saw a smithy a few miles back," he said. "I could hurry and fetch Cei a new sword."

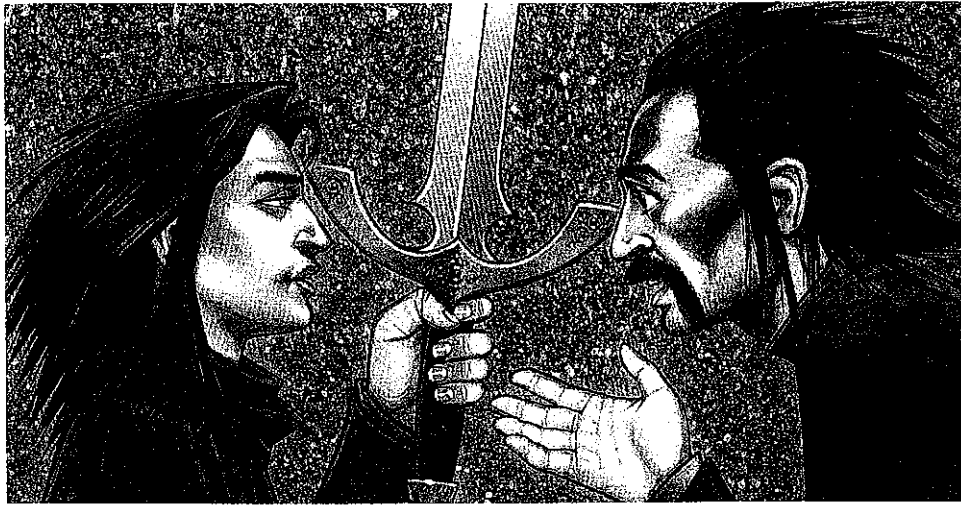
Ector broke into a smile. "You see, Cei! Your younger brother has been watchful! Perhaps he would make a better Pendragon! Here is some gold," he said, turning to Arthur. "Go and buy Cei a fine new sword."

Arthur turned his horse and sped off through the snow. But to his dismay, the smithy was shut, and all the doors were barred.

Glancing around, Arthur noticed a path a few yards away. Curious, he followed it into a small grove. In the middle of the grove was a large, moss-covered stone with a sword plunged deep inside it.

Nearby lay an old man with long white hair and beard, fast asleep.





“This must be his sword,” Arthur thought. “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if I just borrowed it for a while. I’ll return it as soon as the battle is over.”

Arthur grabbed the weapon and slid it easily from the stone. As he turned to go, he saw his brother riding towards him.

“What’s taking you so long, Arthur?” Cei shouted. “The battle is about to start!”

“Sorry, Cei,” Arthur stammered. “But look at the magnificent sword I have for you!”

“This is a fine weapon,” said Cei, admiring the gleaming blade and the jewel-encrusted handle.

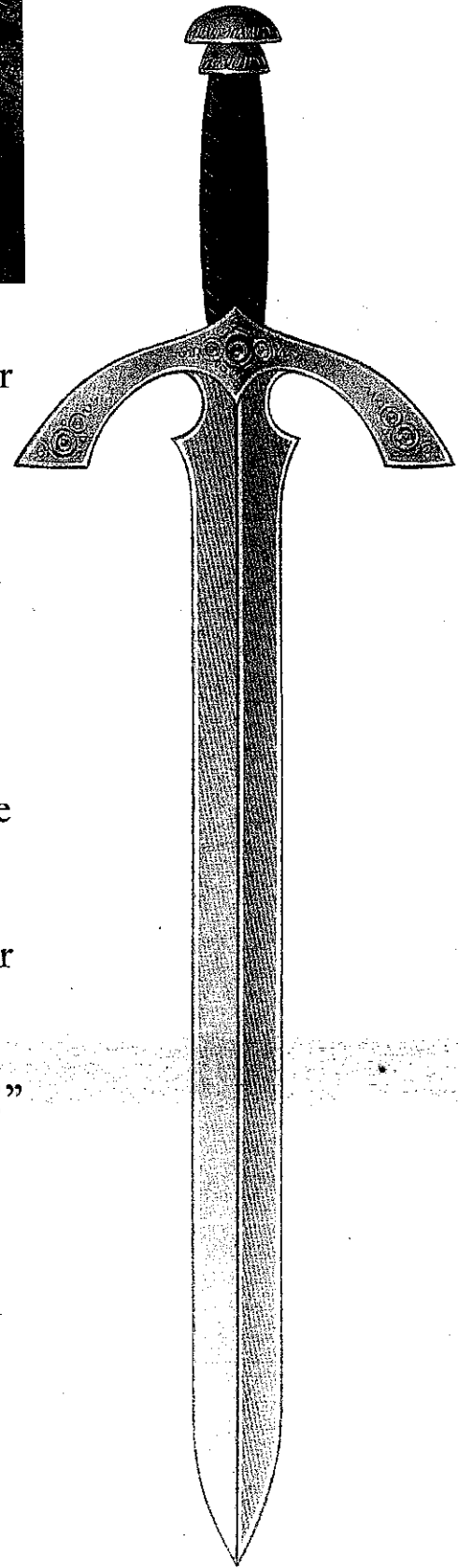
“Thank you, Arthur!”

The two rode to the battlefield together. Ector was waiting uneasily, but his impatience turned to amazement when Cei showed him his new sword.

“This is Caliburn, the sword of the Pendragons!” whispered Ector. “This is the prize for the victor in today’s battle! Arthur, how did you get it?”

“It was stuck in a stone,” Arthur began, “and...” Before he could finish, Cei interrupted.

“...and I pulled it out, Father,” said Cei. “Arthur didn’t get it, I did. That must make me the Pendragon!”





Hearing Cei's shouts, some of the warriors rode over from the battlefield to see what the commotion was about.

"Show me where you found this, son," said Ector.

The crowd followed Ector and his sons to the grove near the smithy. The old man was awake now, smiling wryly at the group coming toward him.

"Where did you find the sword, Cei?" asked Ector.

Cei looked at the old man, and knew that he couldn't lie any more. "I didn't, Father," he said quietly, hanging his head. "Arthur did."

Stifling his anger, Ector turned to his other son. "Arthur," he said, "show me where you found it."

The crowd held its breath as Arthur put the sword back into the stone.

“What trickery is this?” shouted a man in the crowd. “The sword is meant to be lying on the stone, as a prize for the winner of the battle.” More angry shouts joined his.

Holding up his hands for silence, the old man stepped forward.

“This sword is too great a prize for the winner of a mere battle,” he said.

“You have come to choose the High King today. A different test is needed. I am Merlin the Druid, and I have put a spell on this sword. Only the one who can draw it from this stone is the true-born King of Britain!”

A great cry arose, and men began pushing forward to get to the sword. But not even the mightiest warrior could budge it. None of these men was the true Pendragon.



At last only Arthur remained.
 “The boy will try now,”
 Ector declared.

“The boy?” someone
 shouted scornfully. “He’s not old
 enough to shave, much less be
 Pendragon!” A ripple of laughter
 ran through the crowd.

“He will try!” said Ector,
 leading Arthur up to the stone.

Arthur wrapped his hands
 around the jewel-encrusted
 handle and pulled. The sword slid
 from the stone like a fish cutting
 through the calm waters of a lake.

Instantly, the crowd fell silent.

“How can I be king?”
 Arthur whispered.



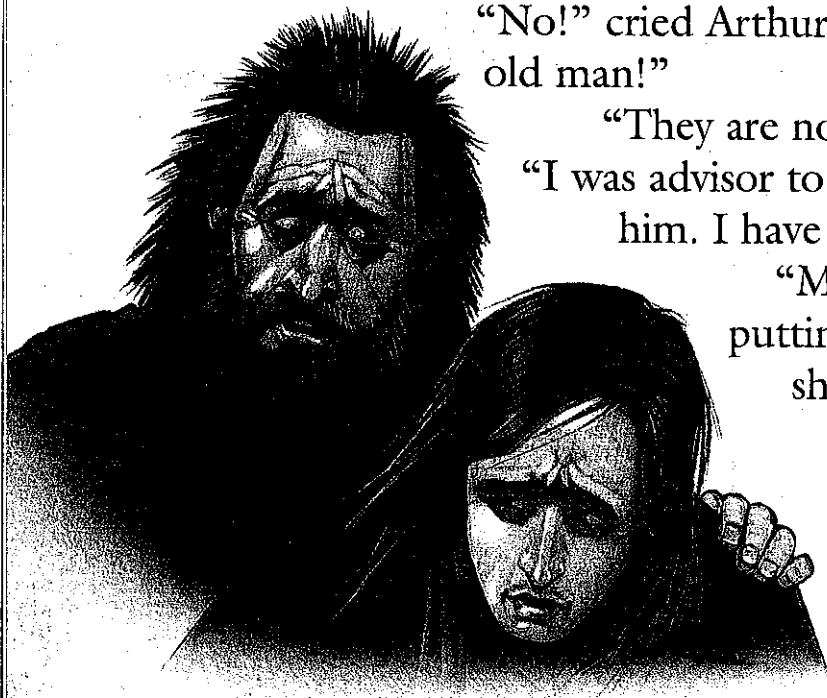
Merlin came forward. “Arthur,” he said, “you are the son of
 Uther Pendragon, clan chieftain and High King of Britain. You are the
 true Pendragon.”

“No!” cried Arthur. “Ector is my father! You are lying,
 old man!”

“They are not lies, Arthur,” said Merlin gently.

“I was advisor to your father, and to his father before
 him. I have been waiting for you.”

“Merlin is telling the truth,” said Ector,
 putting his arm around Arthur’s trembling
 shoulders. “He brought you to me
 when you were only a baby, and told
 me to raise you as my own. I did not
 know then who you were. But it is
 all clear to me now.”



“So you are not my father?” Arthur breathed. “Ceii is not my brother?”

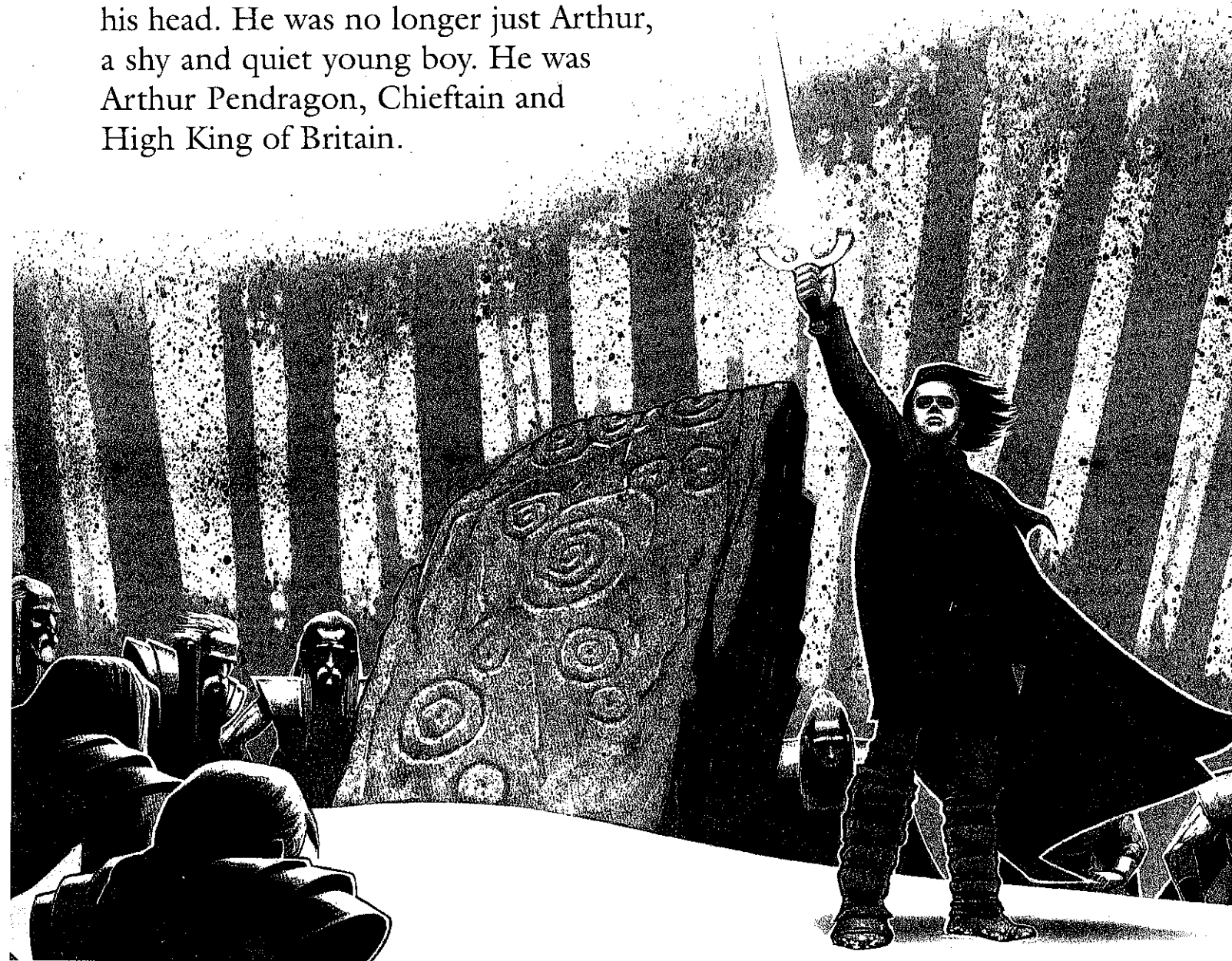
“I may not be your true father,” replied Ector, “but I love you as my own. And because of that love I know that you must take your seat as Pendragon. You are the chosen one, Arthur, whom the Druids of old spoke of in their prophecies. Now your time has come.”

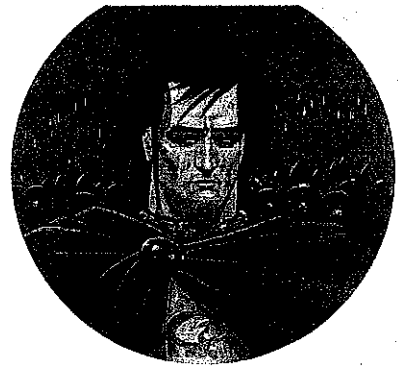
Ector kissed Arthur on both cheeks, then stepped back.

“Kneel!” he shouted to the crowd. “Kneel before the Pendragon of Britain!”

Arthur gazed at the sword in his hand. The air was cold, but the sword felt warm and alive, and a surge of energy coursed through Arthur’s body.

There, in the winter sun, with the melting snow under his feet, he raised Caliburn above his head. He was no longer just Arthur, a shy and quiet young boy. He was Arthur Pendragon, Chieftain and High King of Britain.





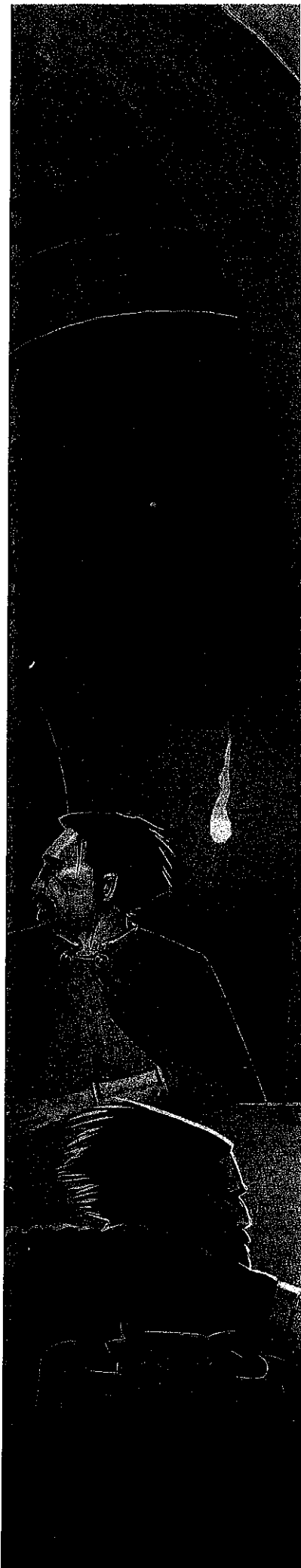
THE SAXON WARS

Britain had a leader at last. But across the sea, her enemies were preparing for war. For years, the Saxons had been waiting to invade Britain. Now that an inexperienced young boy was on the throne, the Saxon king, Aelle, saw his chance. He gathered an army and began invading settlements along Britain's southern coast.

News of the raids reached Arthur, who quickly assembled a war council at Camelot, his fortress in northern Wales. The council was made up of the wisest and bravest chieftains in the land. As they sat at the long table in Camelot's great hall, torches crackling on the walls, a chieftain named Uriens began to laugh.

"What amuses you, Uriens?" Arthur asked.

"You are so young, Arthur," the chieftain replied, "and you know nothing of war. When your father was king, war was a way of life. I was worried



at first that it would end under your rule, but now there is the promise of fighting, so my mind is at ease. War stirs the soul, Arthur, and I delight in it!”

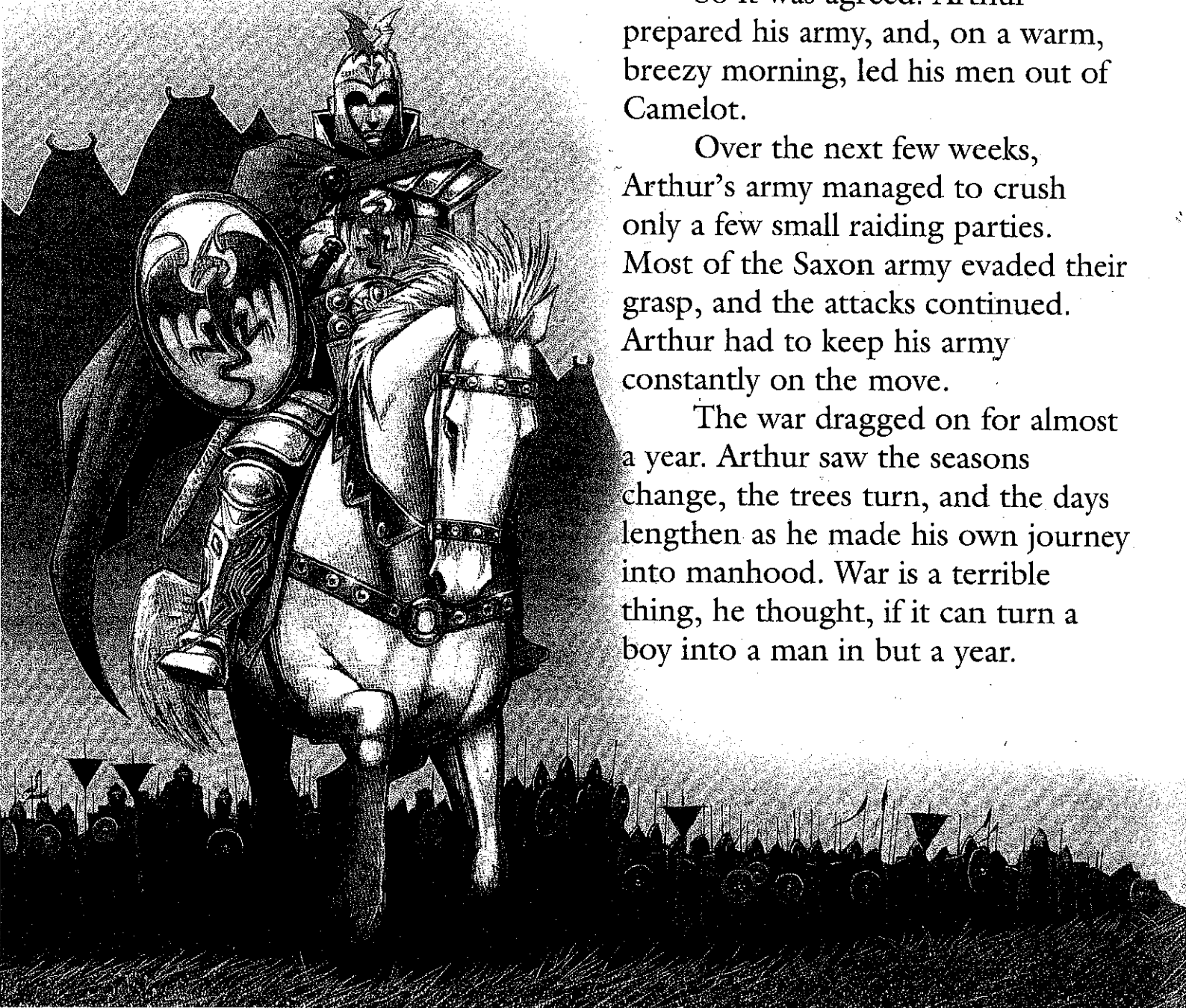
For a moment, a biting silence hung in the air. Then Arthur shattered it by slamming his fist down on the table.

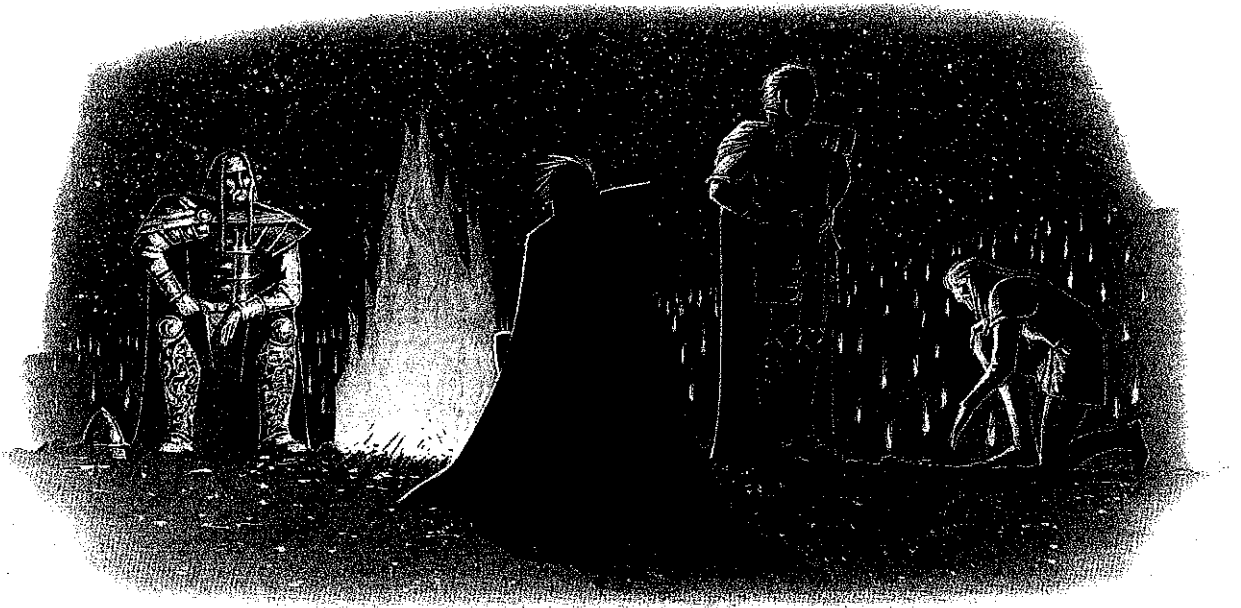
“No!” he bellowed. “No councillor of mine shall take delight in the death of others. War is a hateful thing!” He stopped, then spoke again in softer tones. “Nevertheless, if my country requires it, we must fight. We must protect our people and drive the Saxons out.”

So it was agreed. Arthur prepared his army, and, on a warm, breezy morning, led his men out of Camelot.

Over the next few weeks, Arthur’s army managed to crush only a few small raiding parties. Most of the Saxon army evaded their grasp, and the attacks continued. Arthur had to keep his army constantly on the move.

The war dragged on for almost a year. Arthur saw the seasons change, the trees turn, and the days lengthen as he made his own journey into manhood. War is a terrible thing, he thought, if it can turn a boy into a man in but a year.





One night, just after dark, Arthur and his most trusted aides, Cei and Bedwyr, sat around a fire in a grassy field. They talked about military tactics, and about the future and the past. Merlin played his harp and told tales of the bravery of Celtic warriors in days gone by.

Just as they were beginning to grow drowsy, a young messenger galloped up on a tired horse.

“My lord,” the boy panted, “the Saxons are taking up positions near Mount Badon. Their entire army has gathered there!”

“Mount Badon?” snapped Bedwyr. “That’s just half a day’s march from here!”

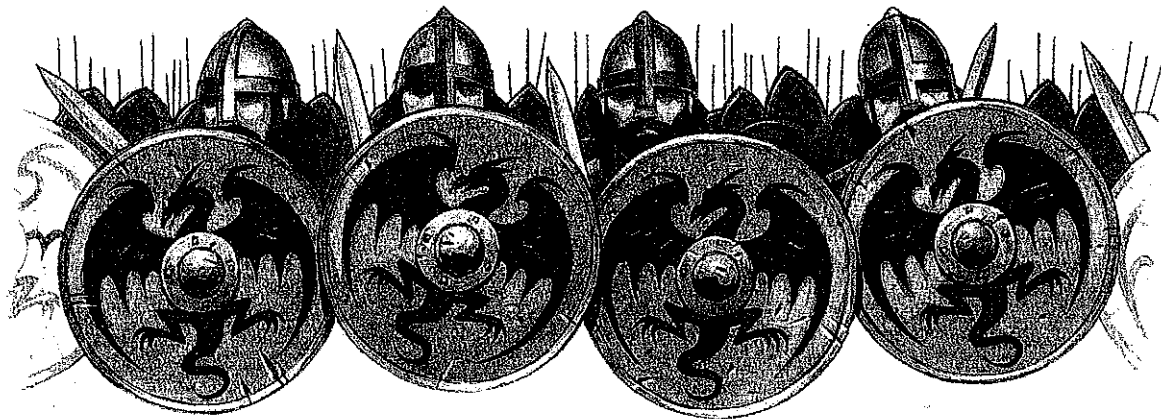
Mount Badon was a small hill outside Bath, an important city in Roman times. If the Saxons captured the hill, they would be able to take over the city, a perfect place to bring in more men and supplies. But if Arthur and his men defeated the Saxons here, they could drive them out of Britain once and for all. It was the decisive battle they had all been waiting for.

Arthur jumped up and stamped out the fire. “Prepare the men,” he told Cei and Bedwyr. “We will march at dawn.”

They arrived at Mount Badon just before midday. The Saxons had already begun moving up the hill and so had the advantage of the higher ground. If Arthur charged them now, he would surely lose. The Celts had no choice but to wait for the Saxons to attack.

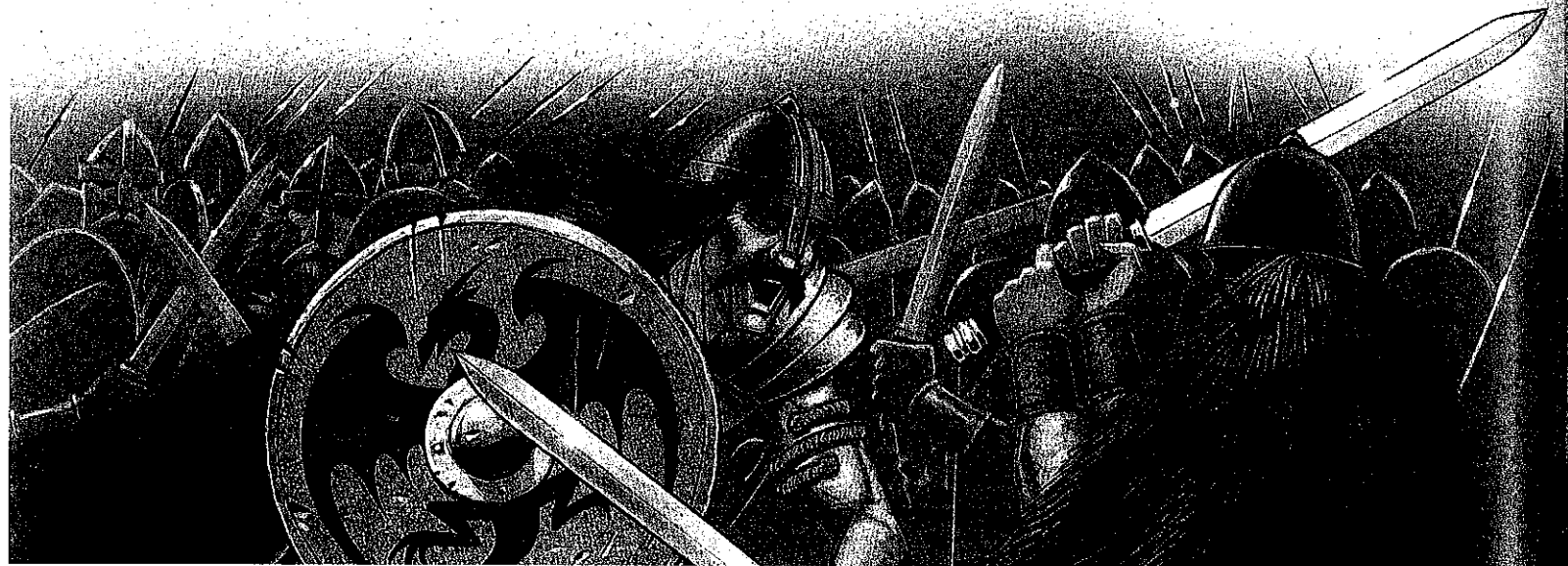
Arthur rode out in front of his troops. "Many of you will die today," he told them. "I cannot lie about that. What I can say is that in your dying, something far greater will be born—a peaceful, united Britain."

Merlin then said an ancient Druid's blessing over the men, and Arthur arranged the troops to form a shield wall against the Saxon charge. Some mumbled short prayers as they prepared for the attack.



Within seconds, the Saxons began rushing down the hill. Arthur wheeled his steed around and beckoned for a small group of mounted warriors to follow him. As the Saxons reached the shield wall, the Celts on horseback smashed into their flank. The shield wall broke, and the Celts charged the Saxons, scattering them instantly.

But the Saxons managed to recover and retaliate fiercely. The battle raged all day, the clever tactics and passion of Arthur's Celts winning out one minute, the aggression and force of the Saxons taking over the next.



By the time the sun was setting, it was the Celts who had the upper hand. A few stubborn Saxon warriors continued to fight, but most of them willingly surrendered.

The battle was over. The Saxons were defeated. Men lay dead all around, and the soft grass was stained red.

On the crest of Mount Badon, the Saxon king Aelle knelt at Arthur's feet, his hands bound behind his back, Cei's knife at his throat.

"Shall I do it?" Cei asked

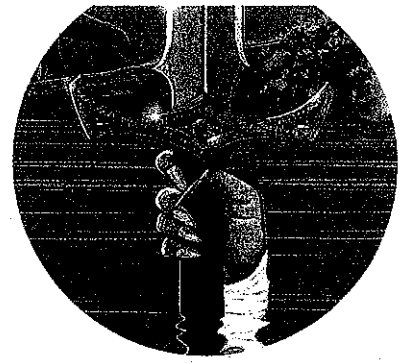
"No," Arthur said, drawing Cei's hand away. He untied Aelle and raised him up.

"You fought well. Gather what is left of your army and go home. Do not return here again."

Arthur's aides were as shocked as Aelle, who stared deeply into Arthur's eyes. "You are a worthy opponent, Arthur Pendragon," was all he said.

Arthur Pendragon reassembled his army, raised his banner once more, and began the march back to Camelot. His knights returned to Camelot as the liberators of a nation, and leading them was not a boy, but a man—a man who was a king.





EXCALIBUR

Although Arthur had defeated the Saxon invaders at Mount Badon, a few renegade warriors remained, and in the days following the battle Arthur and his army had several skirmishes with these small Saxon bands.

In one such fight Arthur found himself surrounded by warriors. He whirled his sword around his head like a windmill, and hacked and slashed his way through them. Just as he was stumbling out of the circle they had formed around him, one Saxon brought his sword crashing down on the blade of Arthur's weapon. The metal shattered into several pieces, leaving a useless stump in Arthur's hand.

Arthur rolled to his left to avoid another blow of the weapon, and quickly snatched a sword from a wounded soldier who lay on the ground. He continued fighting with this, and he and his men managed to defeat the Saxons.

After the battle, Arthur returned to the fields where his army had camped, and sought out Merlin.

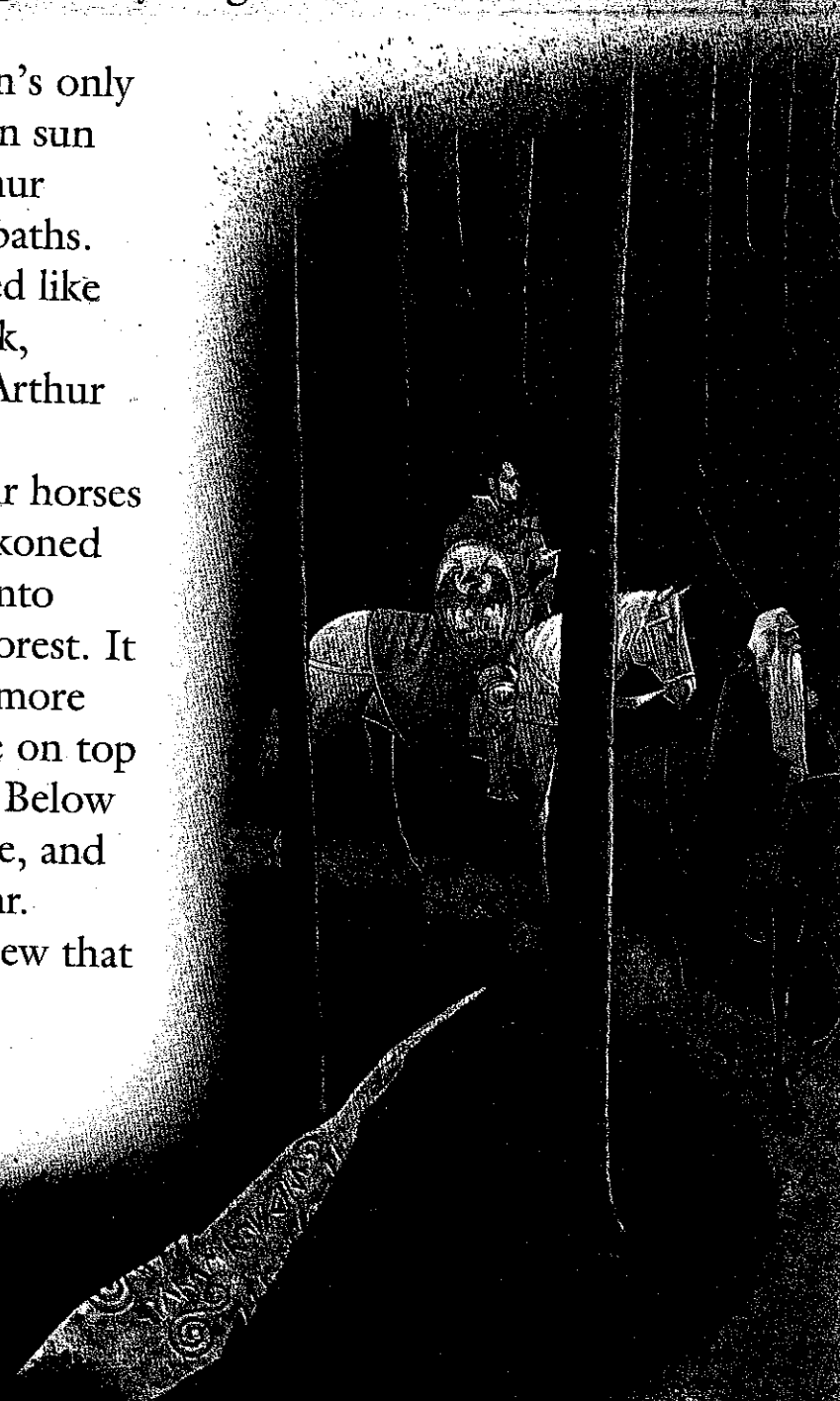
"Merlin," Arthur said miserably, "look at what the Saxons have done to the sword of the Pendragons."

Merlin said nothing, but took the stump of Arthur's sword from him, and moved silently forward. He motioned for Arthur to mount his horse, and Merlin himself did likewise.

"Where are we going?" the young king asked.

"Follow," was Merlin's only reply. As the late afternoon sun began to sink, he led Arthur down narrow, unfamiliar paths. They rode for what seemed like hours. At last, toward dusk, Merlin alighted and told Arthur to do the same.

Merlin tied both their horses to a pointed rock and beckoned for Arthur to follow him into what looked like a dense forest. It turned out to be nothing more than a thick, circular copse on top of a sloping embankment. Below the embankment was a lake, and on its bank was a stone altar. When he saw it, Arthur knew that he was on sacred ground.



“Look towards the middle of the lake,” said Merlin calmly.

Arthur looked out, mesmerized by the magical tranquillity of the surroundings. Suddenly the glassy surface of the lake began to ripple. Arthur bristled with anticipation, then gasped as an arm, clothed all in white, burst through the water. It was holding a sword, which caught the last rays of the sun and reflected them back in a spectacular, fiery display.

The sword was dazzling. Its blade shone with the radiance of the brightest star, and its jewel-encrusted handle and hilt were engraved with intricate carvings.

“Take it!” whispered Merlin. “Take the sword! It’s yours.”

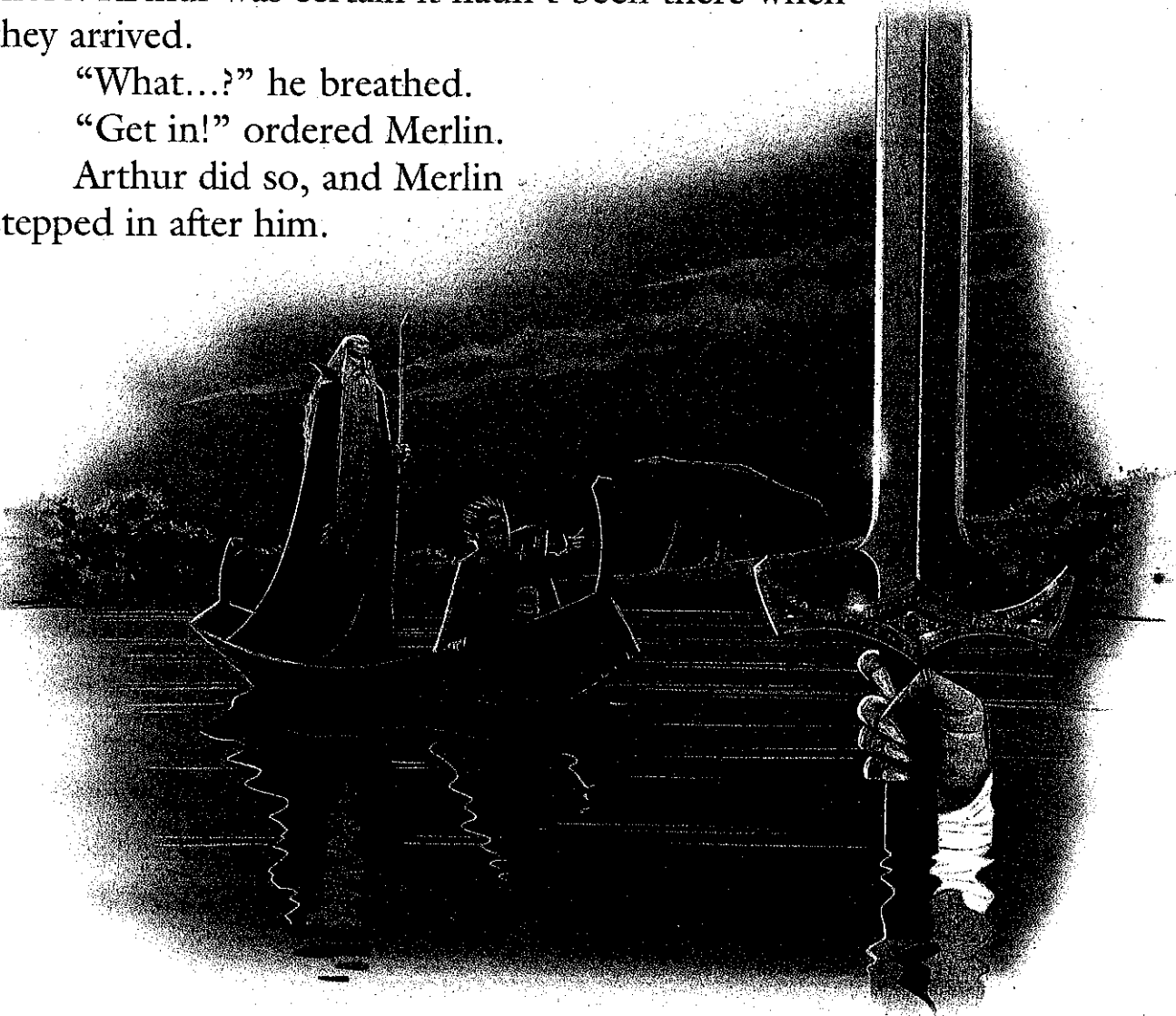
“But how shall I get it?” whispered Arthur.

Merlin jabbed a finger towards the water’s edge, where Arthur saw a small boat bobbing gently near the shore. Arthur was certain it hadn’t been there when they arrived.

“What...?” he breathed.

“Get in!” ordered Merlin.

Arthur did so, and Merlin stepped in after him.



Merlin pointed his staff, and the boat began to slice its way through the water towards the arm. When they reached it, Arthur stretched out a hand and took the sword. He held it up and admired its immense beauty.

“It is your sword, Arthur,” said Merlin. “It is Excalibur, forged in Avalon, the Otherworld, by the Lady of the Lake herself.”

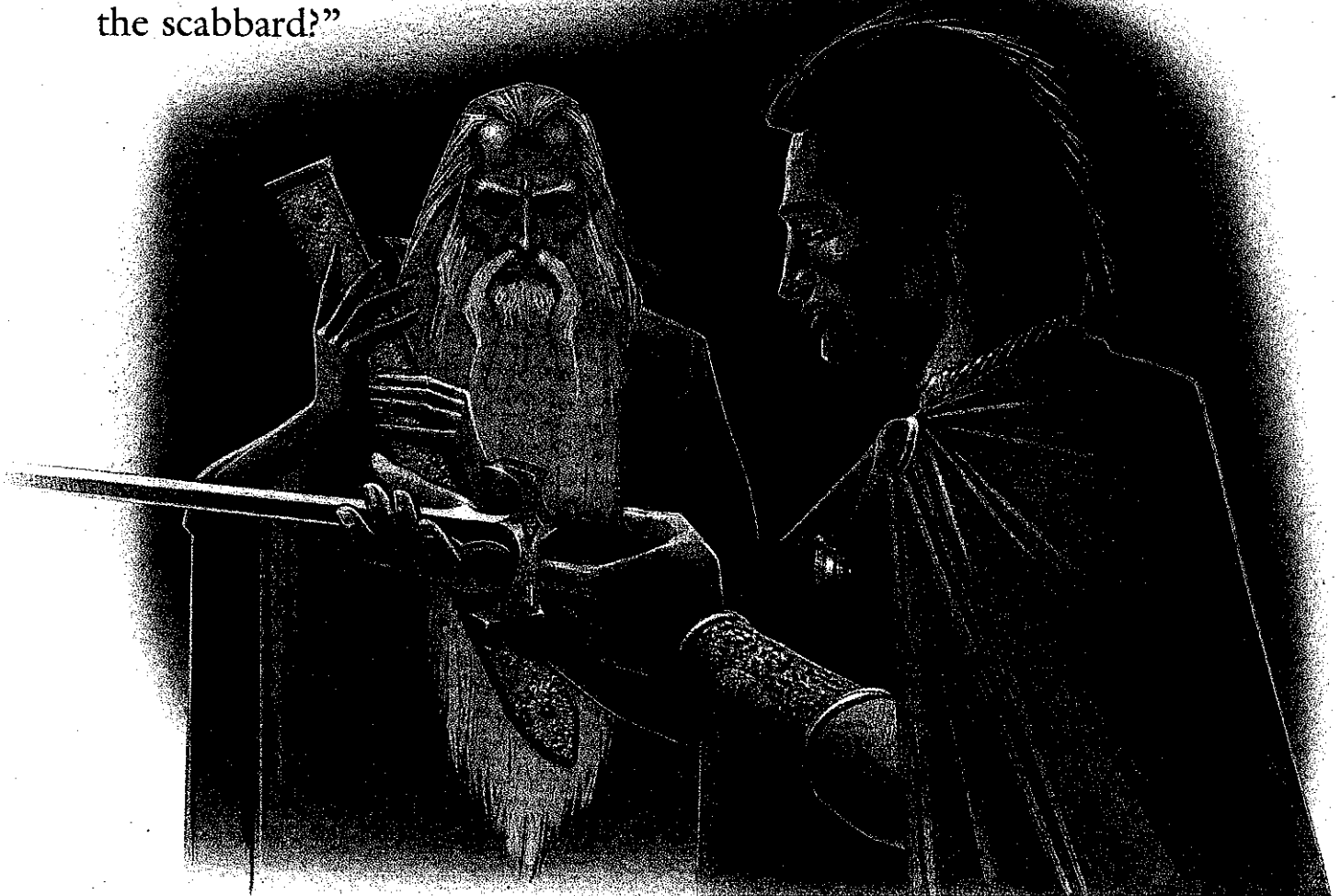
Arthur was awestruck. The Lady of the Lake—the powerful spirit who guarded the entrance to the Otherworld—had blessed him with this sword! All the way back to shore, he gazed at it, too overcome to speak, or even to read the words he saw engraved on the blade.

When they were back on land, Merlin drew a golden scabbard from within the folds of his robe and held it out to Arthur.

“This is the scabbard for your sword,” he explained.

Arthur was disappointed. Next to the splendid sword, the scabbard looked plain and unimportant.

“Which do you like more,” Merlin asked, “the sword or the scabbard?”



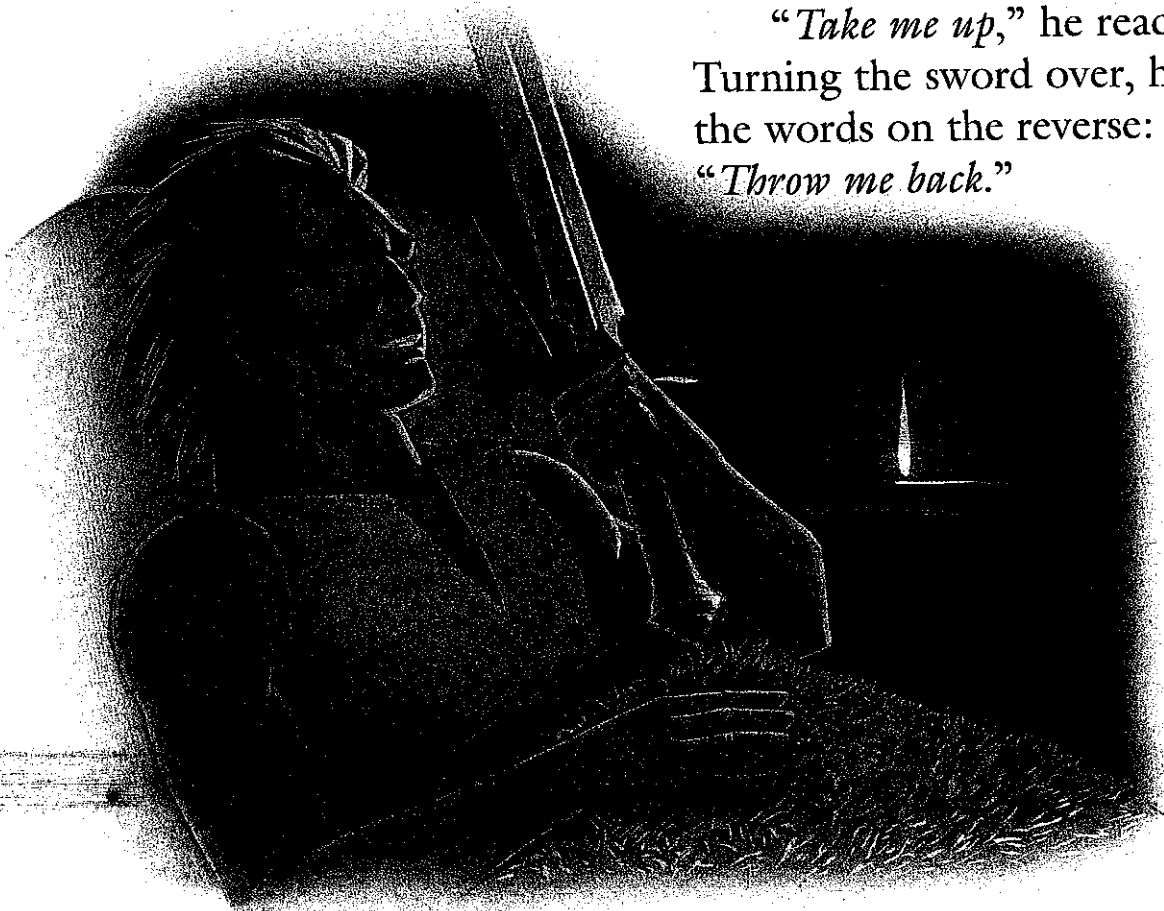
Arthur could not lie. "The sword," he replied. "I can win wars and defend my land and people with this magnificent sword. But what use is the scabbard to me, especially one so ordinary? I could easily do without it."

"Looks can be deceiving," Merlin said. "The sword will serve you well, but with this scabbard at your side, no sword, spear, nor any weapon carried by any son of earth shall harm you. Take good care of the sword, Arthur, but make certain you never lose the scabbard."

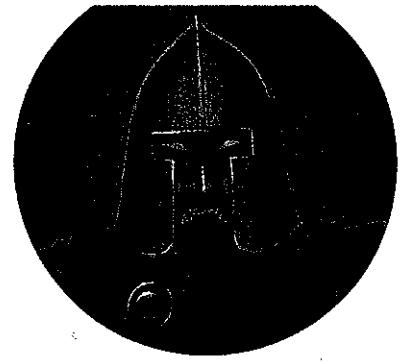
That night, before he lay down to rest, Arthur took a final look at his new sword. This time, he looked closely at the words etched on the blade.

"Take me up," he read aloud. Turning the sword over, he read the words on the reverse:

"Throw me back."



The words were as mysterious to Arthur as everything else that had happened that day. With a yawn, he replaced the sword in the scabbard and, clutching it to him to keep it safe, he was soon fast asleep. When he awoke the next morning, he once again gazed in wonder at the beauty of this mighty sword ... his sword: Excalibur.



GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

It was midwinter, and bitter cold. In the great hall of Camelot the knights of the Round Table sat wrapped in their cloaks, eagerly awaiting the meal that would soon come steaming from the great hearth in the next room.

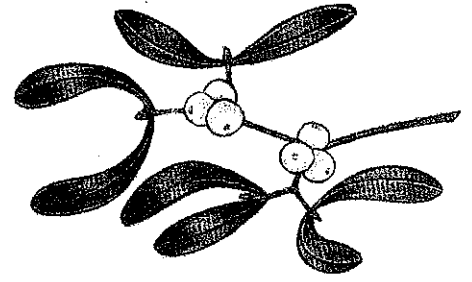
To pass the time before the food arrived, King Arthur proposed that a tale should be told, one of bravery and great deeds. Arthur turned to Merlin, but before the old man had a chance to rise, there was a thunderous clattering at the gates, and a rider burst through the doors.

The men were taken aback. No one entered the hall of Camelot on horseback, let alone unannounced and without permission. When they took a closer look at their guest, they had an even bigger surprise.

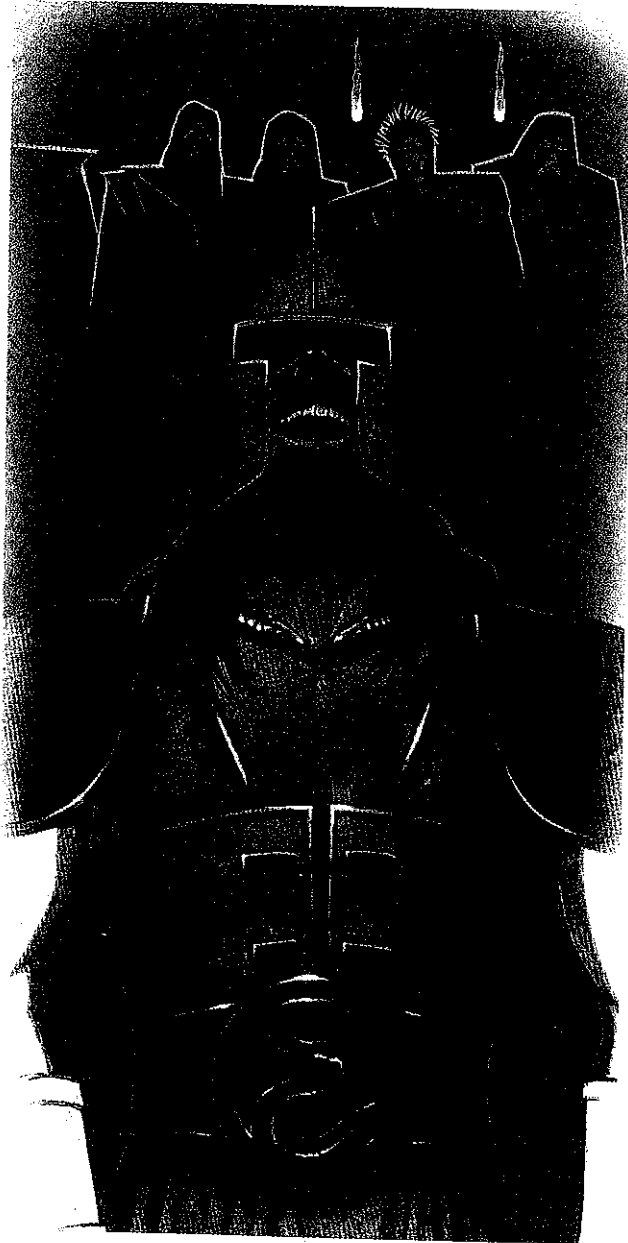
Everything about the man—his skin, his clothes, his horse, his hair—was green. Only the whites of his eyes and his gleaming white teeth



shone through the mask of green. In one hand he carried a large axe. In the other he held a sprig of mistletoe, a holy plant to the Celts, to show that he did not come in anger.



“Men of Camelot, I come in friendship,” said the Green Knight, getting down from his horse and laying his axe on the floor. “To entertain you on this coldest of all nights, I present you with a challenge: I ask that one man here come forward, and, with one blow, strike off my head with this weapon.”



There was a small murmur from the men, but it was quickly hushed as the Green Knight spoke again. “There is just one condition,” he added. “I am to do the same to him in a year and a day.”

The hall was silent. Not a single warrior wished to take up the terrifying Green Knight’s challenge.

The Green Knight began to laugh—so loudly that the walls shook. “I had heard,” he roared, “that the men of the Round Table were the bravest in all the land. Now I see the truth, and I am quite disappointed.”

This was too much for Arthur. He could not have his loyal, courageous warriors spoken of this way. He stood up.

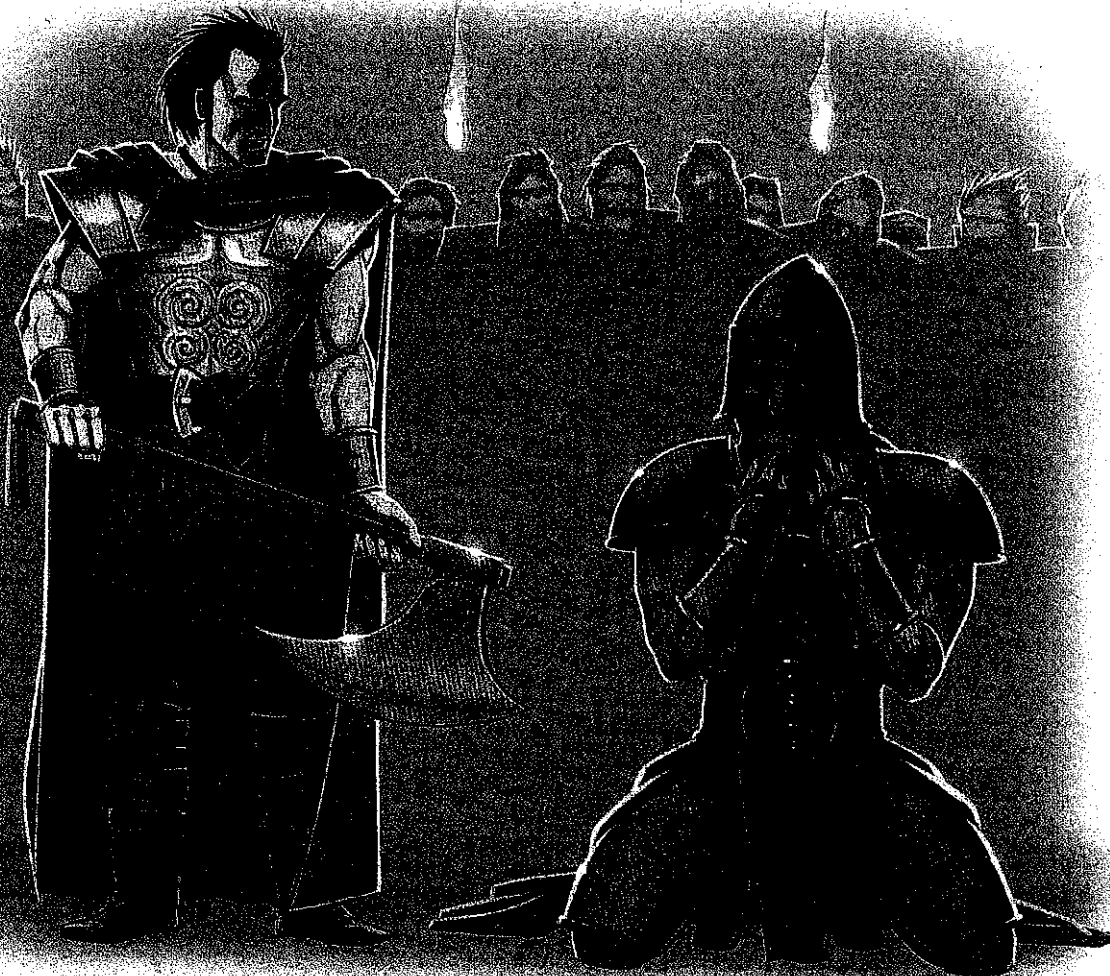
“I will do it, sir,” he announced to the Green Knight.

But before Arthur could step forward, Gawain, a young warrior from the far north, stopped him.

“No. The Pendragon must not go,” said Gawain. “I will do it.” He turned to address the Green Knight. “I am Gawain. I accept your challenge.”

“Gawain, you are a credit to yourself and this table,” said the Green Knight. “Come and take my axe.”

Gawain did so, and the Green Knight knelt and bared his neck.



“One blow, Gawain,” he reminded him.

Gawain struggled to lift the heavy axe, but at last he held it over his head and took his swing. He made a clean cut through the Green Knight's neck. Instantly his head fell from his body and rolled across the floor.





Gawain jumped back. But instead of toppling over, the Green Knight got up, walked over to his head, and picked it up by the hair.

The head cleared its throat and fixed its eyes on Gawain. Then it spoke.

“You will find me at the Green Tower,” it said, “in a year and a day.”

With his head under his arm, the Green Knight picked up his axe, hopped onto his horse, and galloped out as quickly as he had arrived, leaving the men in the hall stunned.

The year passed quickly. Everyone seemed to forget the Green Knight’s challenge—everyone but Gawain. He worried about it all year, and when the time finally came for him to leave, he was filled with dread.

“Good luck, Gawain. Return safely,” Arthur said as he watched him go. In his heart, though, Arthur did not believe he would ever see Gawain again.

Gawain rode for days through treacherous, frozen woodland paths. Bands of robbers roamed the forests, and wild beasts howled all around him. Gawain took shelter in peasants' cottages and woodcutters' huts, and wherever he went he asked the way to the Green Tower. Still, he was never sure he was going in the right direction.



Finally, just a few days before he was supposed to meet the Green Knight, Gawain was close to giving up. Icy sleet lashed down from the sky, and he felt he did not have the strength to go on. But just as he was about to turn back to Camelot, he saw a fortress on the horizon, and galloped toward it. When he arrived he banged hard on the gate, and begged the gatekeeper to let him in.

The lord of the fortress came to meet Gawain in the courtyard.

"I am Bertilak," he said. "We are privileged to welcome a knight of the Round Table."

After dinner that evening, Bertilak invited Gawain to stay for a few days. When Gawain explained that he had to be at the Green Tower in four days, Bertilak exclaimed, "The Green Tower is less than a day's ride from here! Stay for another three days."

Then Bertilak suggested that they play a game over the next few days. "Anything that I acquire while you're here I'll give to you, and you must do the same for me."

The game seemed a little strange to Gawain, but he agreed.

Early the next morning, Gawain was awakened by a knock at the door. It was Bertilak's beautiful wife, who came in and sat on the bed.



"Good morning, Gawain," she said. "I have heard many tales of your bravery in the wars. Such courage deserves a reward."

She leaned toward Gawain and kissed him.

Stunned, Gawain could only murmur, "Thank you, my lady."

The lady just smiled and left.

That afternoon, when Bertilak returned from the hunt, he presented Gawain with a small fox.

“And what do you have for me?” he asked.

In reply, Gawain reached up and kissed Bertilak, who roared with laughter.

“I won’t ask how you came by that!” he chuckled.

The next morning the lady visited Gawain again, and again she kissed him. Later, Bertilak again presented Gawain with the morning’s catch, and again received a kiss.

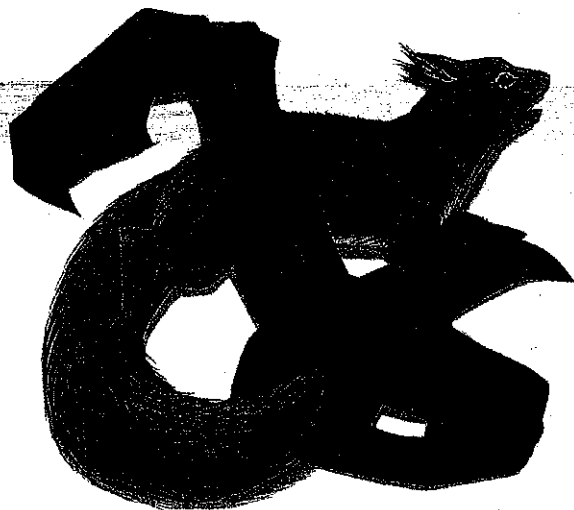
“You’re a lucky man to be getting all these kisses,” he laughed.

On the third day, the lady came to Gawain yet again.

“You go to meet the Green Knight tomorrow. Please take this,” she said, holding out a green sash. “If you wear it, nothing will harm you.”

Then, as before, she kissed him and left.

When Bertilak returned, the usual exchange took place—he gave Gawain a squirrel, and Gawain gave him a kiss. But Gawain did not give Bertilak the sash, knowing that without it he would surely die.



The next morning, Gawain wrapped the sash around his waist and followed Bertilak's directions to the Green Tower. The Green Knight was waiting for him, axe in hand.

"I am pleased to see you have kept your promise," boomed the huge man. "Now, kneel."

Gawain did so, and clenched his fists, waiting for the blow. He felt the air rush across his neck as the Green Knight's axe came down. But the blade never struck him.

"What trickery is this?" he shouted.

"I am allowed one blow," the Green Knight replied. "That was not a blow."

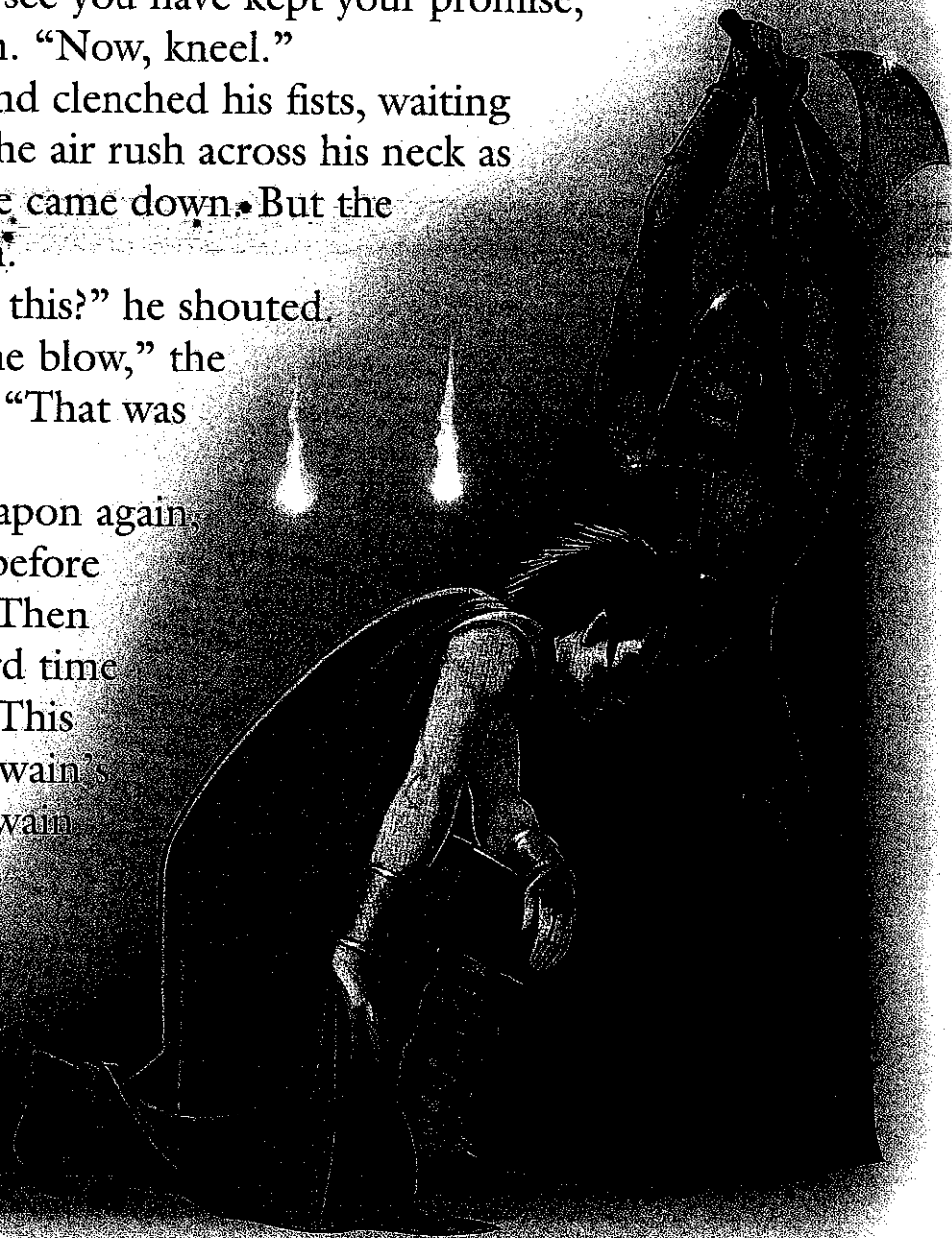
He raised the weapon again, but again he stopped before he hit Gawain's neck. Then he raised the axe a third time and brought it down. This time it just scraped Gawain's neck. Jumping up, Gawain drew his sword.

"You have had your blow!" he cried. "Now prepare to fight!"

"Put away your sword, Gawain," the Green Knight said calmly. "You are in no danger from me."

"Why?" asked Gawain. "Who are you?"

"I am Bertilak," he replied, "the very man you have been staying with for the past three days."



“B-but...,” stammered Gawain, “how can that be?”

“Morgana, half-sister of Arthur Pendragon, placed me under a spell,” said Bertilak, “and turned me into the Green Knight. She sent me to test the bravery of Camelot’s warriors, and so I offered my challenge—the challenge only you were bold enough to accept.”

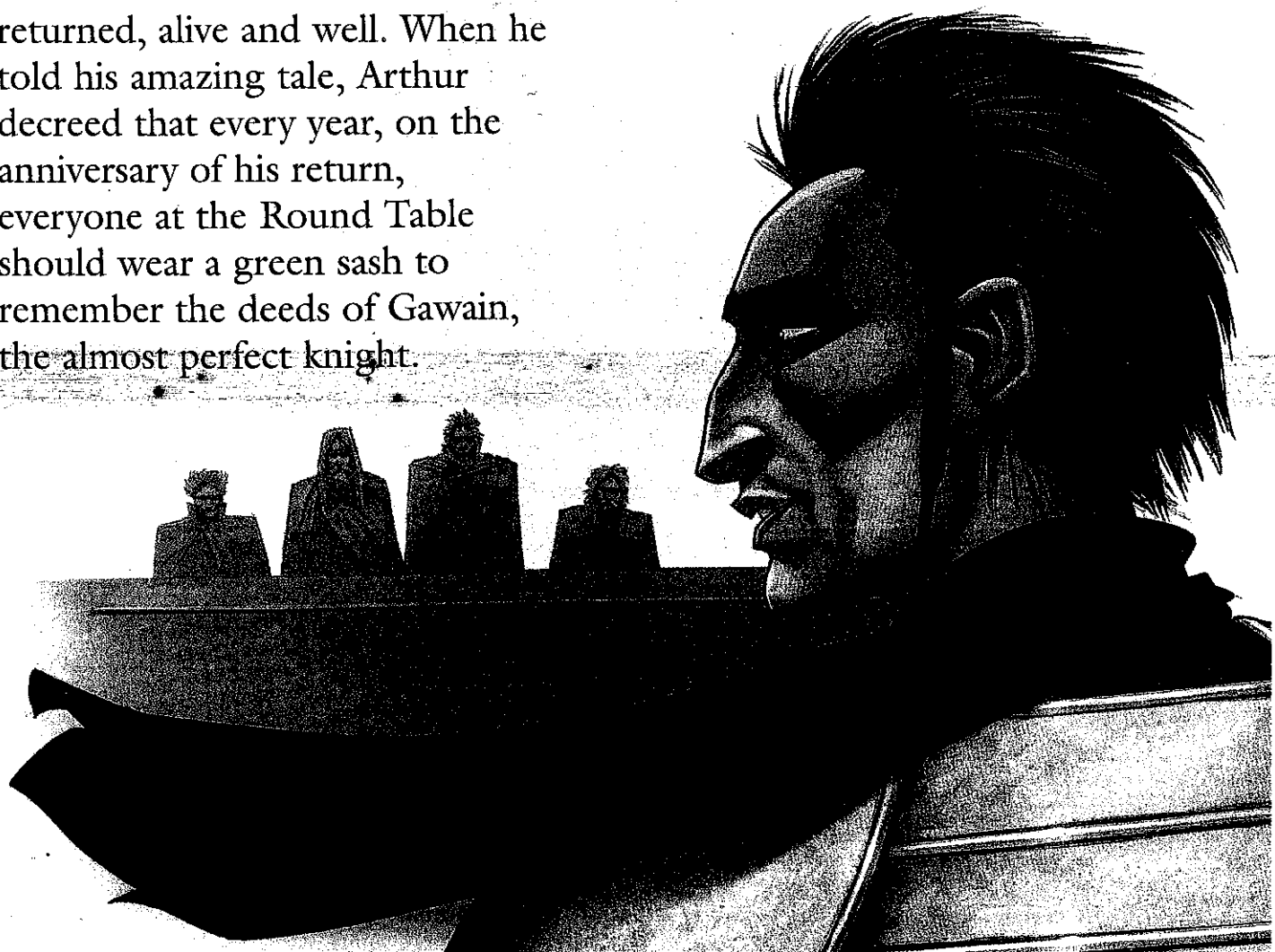
“But why did you not cut off my head?” asked Gawain.

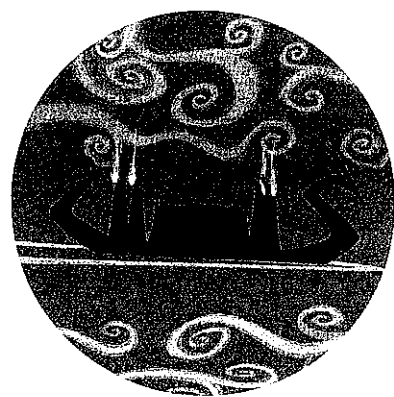
“I missed you the first two times because you kept your promise to me and gave me the kisses I had told my wife to give you. I scratched you the third time because although you gave the kiss, you kept the sash.”

Gawain looked down, ashamed. “I have been dishonest,” he admitted. “I don’t deserve my seat at the Round Table, and I didn’t deserve your hospitality.” He knelt again. “Take my head.”

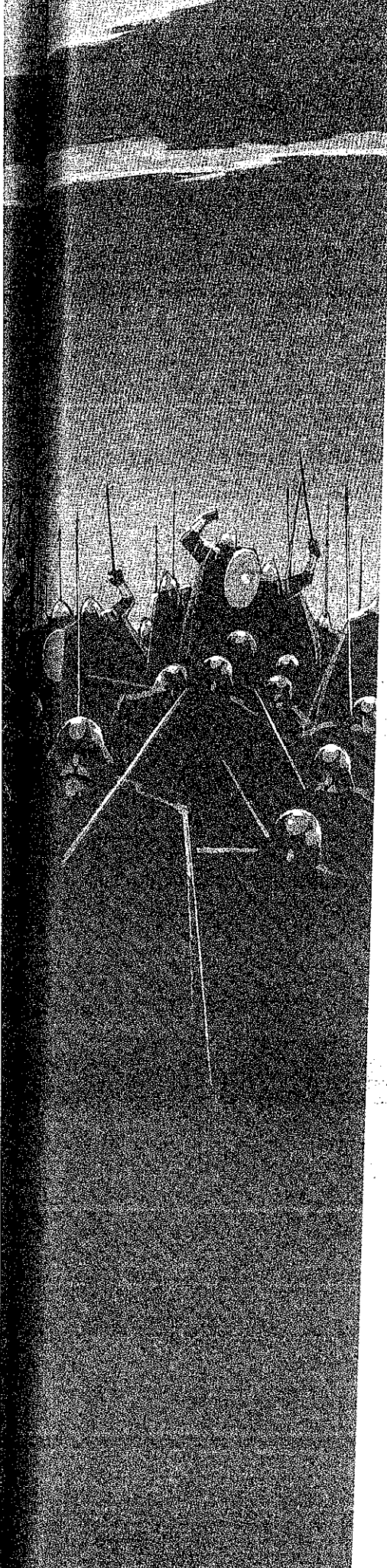
“Get up, Gawain,” said Bertilak. “Nobody is perfect, but you have come closer than most. Go back to Camelot with pride—you are an almost perfect knight.”

Everyone at Camelot was astonished when Gawain returned, alive and well. When he told his amazing tale, Arthur decreed that every year, on the anniversary of his return, everyone at the Round Table should wear a green sash to remember the deeds of Gawain, the almost perfect knight.





THE FINAL BATTLE



In his tent in a field near Camlann, King Arthur warmed himself by a small fire. Excalibur lay across his lap. It was dull, and scratched and chipped from the many battles it had seen. I have spent too much of my reign at war, he thought sadly.

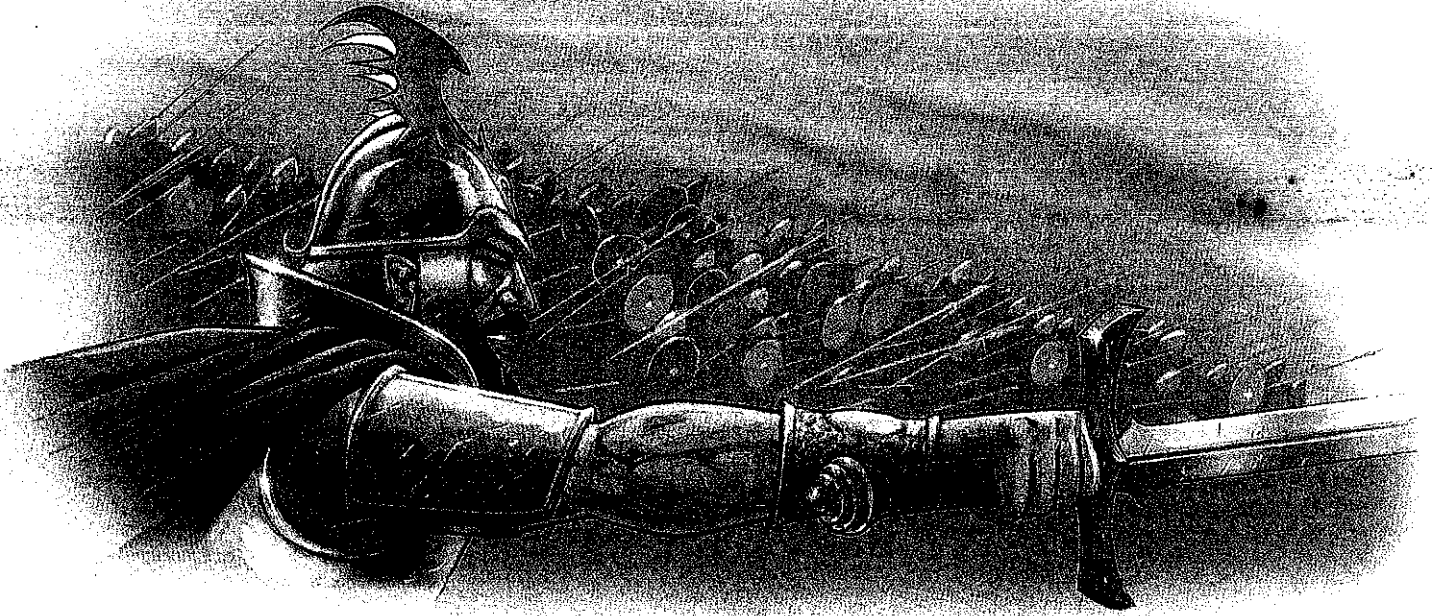
“My lord,” said Bedwyr, interrupting his thoughts, “your only choice is to meet Mordred in battle.”

Arthur sighed. “Mordred is my own flesh and blood, but I fear you are right. I must speak to the men.”

Riding out to the head of his army, Arthur knew that it was outnumbered by the hordes led by Cerdic and Mordred. But Arthur had something his enemies didn't. His men believed with all their hearts in the dream of Britain, and they were willing to die for it.

“Men of Britain,” Arthur shouted, “today, you are not fighting for me or even for my kingdom, but for your children's future and the future of your homeland. You are fighting for our dream. Do not let it die.”

For a second or two, silence hung in the air. Then a colossal cheer rose from the men. Arthur drew Excalibur and held it aloft. "Forward!" he cried.



But even the Celts' passion could not overcome the sheer numbers of Mordred and Cerdic's army. They suffered heavy losses, and Arthur was forced to retreat.

The Saxons cheered when they saw the Celts falling back. But across the field, Arthur was rallying his troops again.

"We have but one chance," Arthur told his men. "We must make them charge us, then attack their flank with our cavalry. It worked at Mount Badon. We can only pray it will save us now."

The army formed a shield wall, and just as Arthur predicted, the Saxons charged, allowing Arthur to lead his small cavalry force into the flank of Mordred's army. The cavalry's assault sent the Saxons into confusion, leaving them open to attack by the shield wall.

Soon the Celts had cut a swathe of destruction through the enemy troops. Saxons lay dead all around, but for every Saxon that fell, six more seemed to spring up. One man grappled at Arthur's side, tearing his scabbard from his belt. Remembering Merlin's prophecy, Arthur tried to retrieve it, but it was lost in the turmoil of battle.

Despite their gains, the Celts could not take the lead. Yet they fought on. By sunset, both sides had suffered enormous losses.

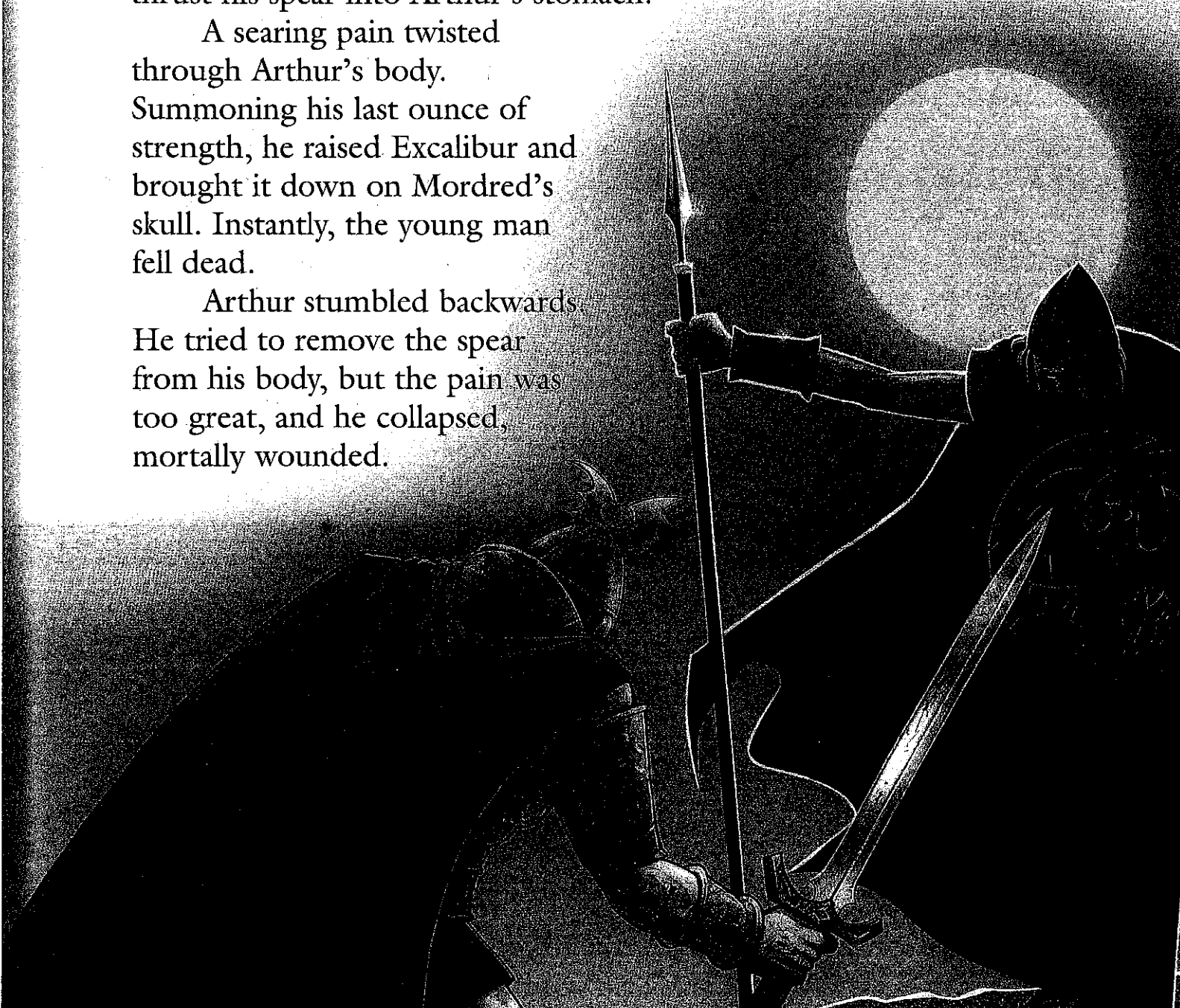
Earlier, Arthur had seen Cerdic fleeing the field, but there had been no sign of Mordred. Now, on the horizon, Arthur saw his nephew's silhouetted figure, mounted on a horse.

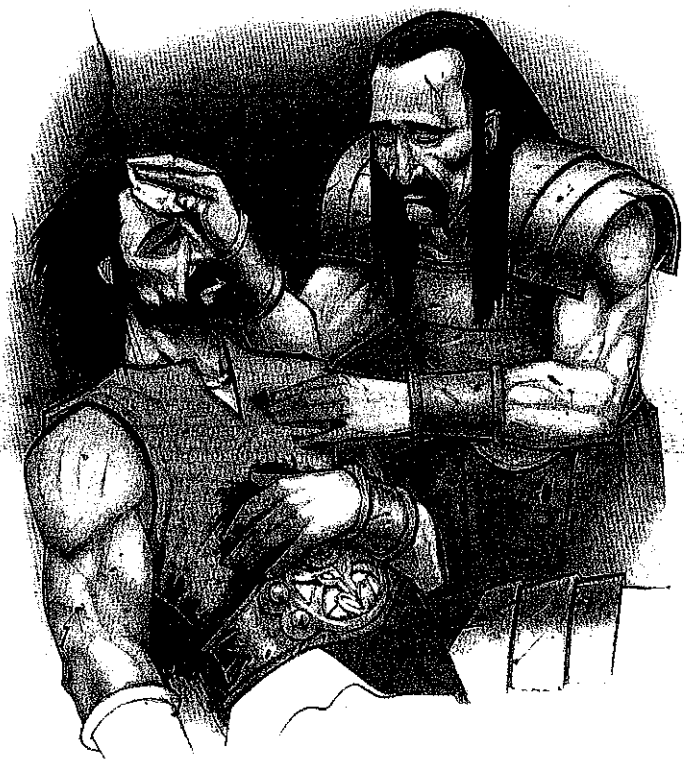
The time has come, Arthur told himself, and rode toward him.

Mordred turned and galloped to meet him. As they collided, Arthur swung Excalibur and sent Mordred flying from his saddle. But Mordred leaped up, and pierced the flank of Arthur's horse. Arthur tumbled down, but, still holding on to his sword, he got to his feet and grabbed Mordred. Before he could deliver his final blow, Mordred thrust his spear into Arthur's stomach.

A searing pain twisted through Arthur's body. Summoning his last ounce of strength, he raised Excalibur and brought it down on Mordred's skull. Instantly, the young man fell dead.

Arthur stumbled backwards. He tried to remove the spear from his body, but the pain was too great, and he collapsed, mortally wounded.





After what seemed like an age, Arthur felt a hand on his forehead. It was Bedwyr. Arthur could see that he had been crying.

“What happened?” Arthur gasped. “What of the dream?”

“The dream is dead, my lord,” replied Bedwyr.

Arthur sighed. “Take my sword,” he whispered, “and ride north with it. You will find a holy grove, where the Druids used to pray, and a pool. Cast Excalibur into it.”

Bedwyr found the place after only a short ride. It was a Celtic custom to throw objects into water as offerings to the gods, but Bedwyr thought of what Excalibur stood for, and could not let it go. Then he noticed the engraving on the blade.

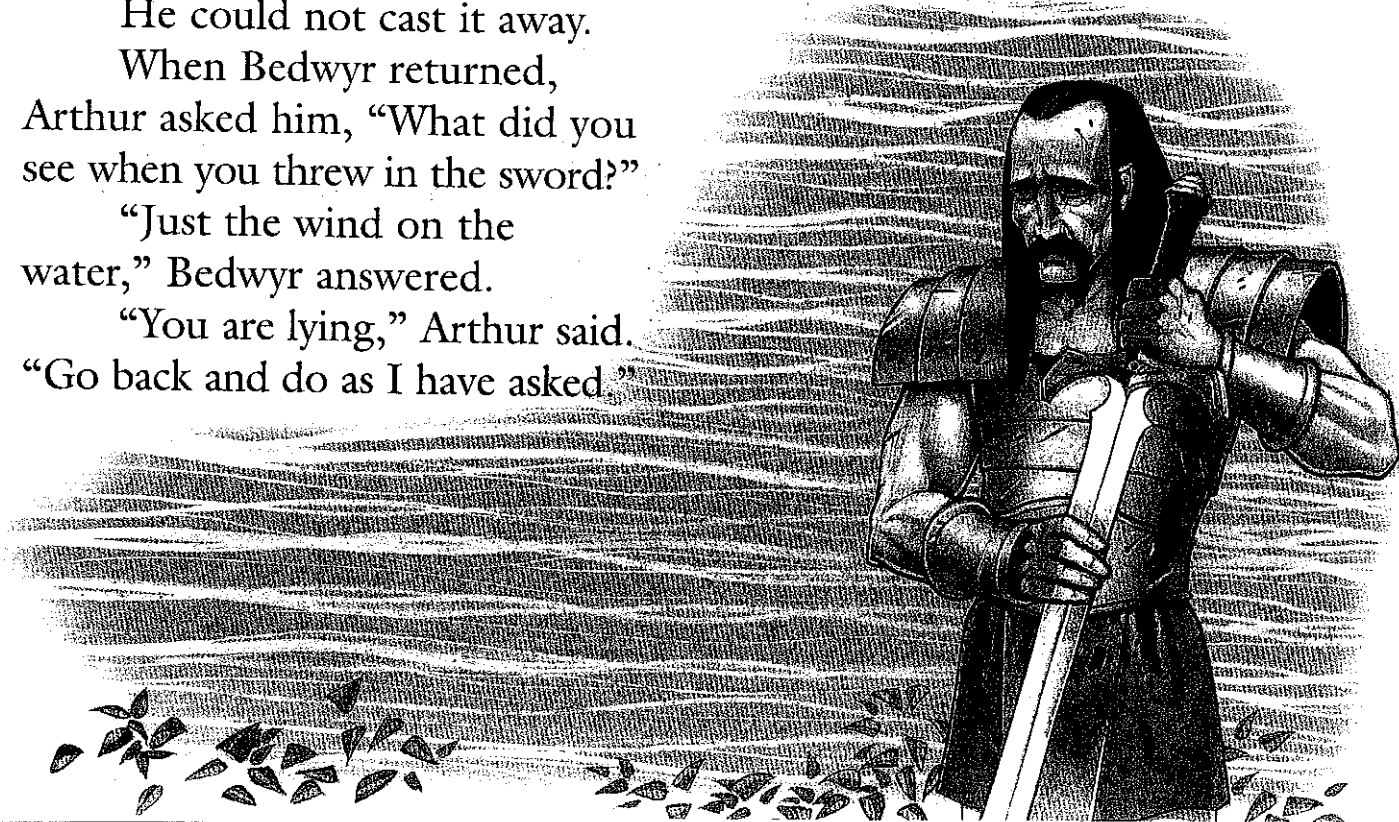
Take me up, it said.

He could not cast it away.

When Bedwyr returned, Arthur asked him, “What did you see when you threw in the sword?”

“Just the wind on the water,” Bedwyr answered.

“You are lying,” Arthur said. “Go back and do as I have asked.”



Wondering how Arthur could have known, Bedwyr went back to the pool. But he still could not let the sword go.

"I couldn't do it, my lord," he told Arthur when he returned, "not when I read the message on the blade!"

"Turn it over," Arthur told him, "and read the other side."

"*Throw me back,*" Bedwyr read aloud.

"When the time is right," Arthur said, "a king will come, and Excalibur will return. The dream will be born again. Until then, you must do as your king commands you. Just this last time, old friend."

With Arthur's words ringing in his head, Bedwyr galloped back to the pool. This time he flung Excalibur in without hesitating. A white-sleeved arm rose from the water. It caught the sword and drew it under the surface.

Bedwyr sped back to tell Arthur what he had seen, but found only some flattened reeds where the king had been lying. In the distance, he saw a black barge sailing through the mist toward the sea. He knew that it was taking Arthur Pendragon, the greatest of all kings, to his final home.

