

IV

The Death of Arthur

One bright morning, Lancelot looked from the parapets, and there was Gawain, in full armor.

“Defend yourself, Lancelot du Lac!” Gawain cried into the stiff breeze, “or die dishonored!”

But when Lancelot wearily mounted his horse and rode out to meet him, Gawain was talking to someone else — a messenger from Camelot.

“My Lord,” said Gawain to Arthur, “you must read this, Mordred’s proclamation.”

“Mordred?” Arthur unrolled the parchment:

“By the Grace of God, I, Mordred, natural son of Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, heir to the kingdom of Logres, hereby declare that King Arthur is dead. Long live the King!”

It was signed *Mordred*, King of Logres, and all Arthur’s other titles.

“The man had to sneak out of Camelot with this, my lord,” said Gawain. “Mordred is raising an army.”

But Arthur wasn't listening. Suddenly he was miles away, thinking of the first night he had Excalibur, and his dream of Guinevere. Mordred was his son by one of those witches! Of all Morgana le Fay's plans to take his kingdom, he never thought of this. How could he have been so blind to it? Would he never be rid of this troublesome witch?

“Every knight and every soldier who can march — I want them on the road for Camelot at dawn tomorrow,” Arthur roared.

Lancelot looked sadly at him. “I cannot fight with you, my lord. I have decided it is over for me. I will not wield my sword from this day on.”

The following day, only Lancelot remained and, dressed now in the long brown robes of a monk, he watched the army march away.

Arthur rode again at the head of the great line of fighting men. This time, he had to rescue Guinevere.

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Mordred smiled a crooked smile, “Everything is falling into place, Morgana. It will all be ours in a matter of days. With Merlin gone and Arthur out of the way, your enchantments will be supreme.”

“Are you quite sure that no word of our plans has escaped Camelot?”

“The city is sealed tight as a drum, Morgana. Nothing comes in or out not checked by my men. The last of our allies have arrived. In the morning we march. Then we will destroy the Pendragon, once and for all. Surprise is on our side.”

Morgana shifted in her chair. Her witch’s thumbs prickled their warning.

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“My lord, Sir Bedivere sends me.”

Arthur nodded to the messenger. The army had travelled far and fast since leaving Castle Joyous.

“Mordred’s army are not a morning’s march from here — at a place called Camlann

“Why does the name Camlann worry me so?” thought Arthur by the campfire that night. Was this the last great battle Merlin had spoken just before he disappeared? Would Merlin be there to help him? Then, as grey dawn touched the moor, he saw the dawn mist thicken into a shape. The Lady of the Lake!

“I come with a warning, Arthur,” she said.

“Fight Mordred tomorrow and any hope for the kingdom is lost. Knights will die in their thousands here. Promise Mordred what you like. Make a truce, but do not meet him in battle. Save yourself and raise a great army to fight him another day.”

Arthur tried to speak, but the mist gathered up the Lady of the Lake, and she disappeared.

When he woke, Arthur was not sure if the Lady of the Lake had really been there, or if he had dreamed what he

remembered. But when Sir Bedivere showed him Mordred's camp, he knew she had been real.

"She spoke the truth," he murmured. Below in the valley of Camlann, Mordred's soldiers were camped far as the eye could see.

"We cannot fight them here. Both our armies would be destroyed," said Arthur. "If we fight, we die. Not just you and I, Bedivere, but thousands of knights. We must settle this revolt by talking. Go now, down to Mordred. Summon him to a parley."

It was not much later. Two great bristling lines drew up: Then, the banner for the parley was raised.

"Lift our own, Sir Bedivere, and we shall go and meet them at the ford," said Arthur. "Gawain, let no man take a step forward or throw a spear — unless you see a sword raised at the parley."

Gawain nodded grimly. Arthur spurred his horse into a canter.

"Well, my father, have you come to surrender?" said Mordred.

"I have come so that ten thousand knights will live tomorrow."

"Your knights, Arthur? I care nothing for them."

"As you wish, Mordred. But your knights will die too. I was willing to share my kingdom, but if I die today in battle, I promise, you will be hunted down."

Arthur pulled the head of his horse round and set off to rejoin his knights. Mordred sat still in his saddle.

“No! Wait!” he shouted suddenly. The noise made his horse rear, and the crashing hooves disturbed a snake. Without a thought, Mordred’s blade flickered from its sheath. The snake lay in two. A sudden silence rolled down the valley. Arthur turned. He saw Mordred’s naked sword. The ground began to tremble with the charge.

Arthur’s kingdom died that day. The river Camlann ran red with the blood of his knights. As dusk fell, only a handful of knights remained on the field. Sir Bedivere was wounded but alive. And there was one other lumbering towards them.

“Mordred!” Arthur croaked. “Stand and fight!”

But Mordred did not want to fight now. Morgana le Fay had fled to some enchanted place. There was no one left to crown him, no knights to do him honor. Excalibur hummed angrily as Arthur swung it at Mordred’s head. The weapons clashed. Then Excalibur’s point seemed to catch in the ground. Arthur stumbled. Mordred saw his chance; he ran at Arthur. But Excalibur had been forged for this. The enchanted blade lifted free at the last moment, and buried itself in Mordred. Mordred met his doom, inches from Arthur’s face. Sir Bedivere found his king crushed beneath Mordred.

“Bedivere, I am dying. Carry me to those woods. There is something I must do before I die.”

Bedivere stumbled from the field to the edge of the wood, and placed Arthur carefully against a tree.

“I cannot carry you any further. I am too weak.”

“You must go in my place then,” said Arthur. “Here, take Excalibur. Go to the lake and throw it in.”

“Where is the lake?”

“Beyond those trees.”

Bedivere struggled to his feet and limped away. There was no lake near here. Throw away Excalibur? Arthur's mind must be wandering.

Then through the leaves he caught a glimpse of moonlight shining on water. How had Arthur known? Bedivere grasped Excalibur by the point to sling the sword from the shore. What if Arthur recovered? What if he needed it again? So Bedivere hid the sword, and went back to Arthur.

“Did you throw it?” Arthur's voice was fading now.

“It's gone,” said Bedivere.

“What did you see?”

“It fell with a splash, and the lake swallowed it.”

“Then you do not speak the truth, Bedivere. Go back and throw Excalibur into the lake.”

So Bedivere returned to where he had hidden the sword. Such a noble sword. If Arthur died, Excalibur would be all that remained of his reign. He shoved it back.

“What did you see, Bedivere?”

“The ducks scattered, and the water rippled across the lake.”

“Liar! Bedivere, must I do it myself?”

“No, no, no, my lord,” said Bedivere. He turned, and went back to the lake. This time he threw Excalibur as far as he could over the water. As the blade flashed in the moonlight over the lake, a woman's hand broke the surface. It caught the hilt of Excalibur and drew it down. Bedivere watched, amazed.

“Well?” said Arthur.

“A hand, my lord, reached out and caught Excalibur,” said Bedivere.

“Well done, Bedivere,” said Arthur, and let out a great sigh.

The trees parted, and Bedivere saw three ladies gliding towards him, veiled in black. They picked up Arthur as if he were no more than a child, and carried him to the barge they had arrived in.

“Where are you taking him?” asked Bedivere.

“To the Isle of Avalon,” they answered. “His wound will be healed there, and then he will sleep until he is needed again.”

Then the barge floated away into the darkness and the mist. But King Arthur was never forgotten; and he lies somewhere to this day, sleeping, but ready with Merlin for the call to save his land in its hour of greatest need. Just for now, then, the tale ends of Arthur, Once and Future King.

The End of Thomas Mallory's

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