

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.

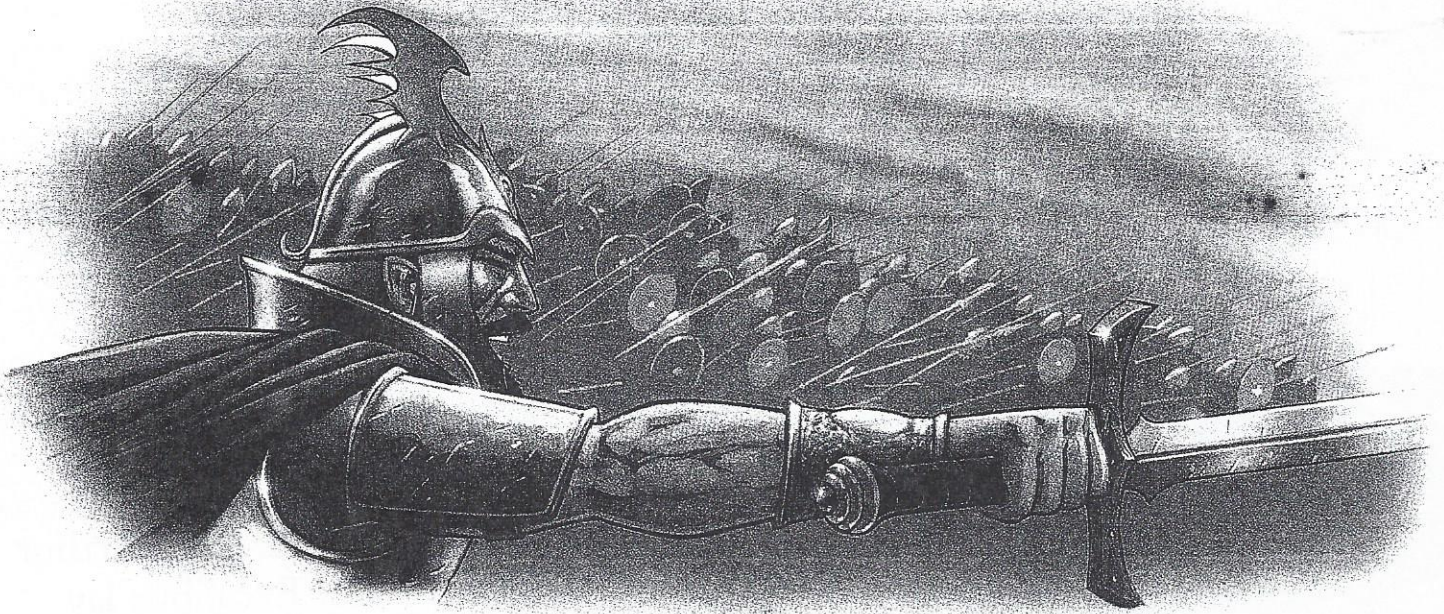
"My lord," said Bedwyr, interrupting his thoughts, "your only choice is to meet Mordred in battle."

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.

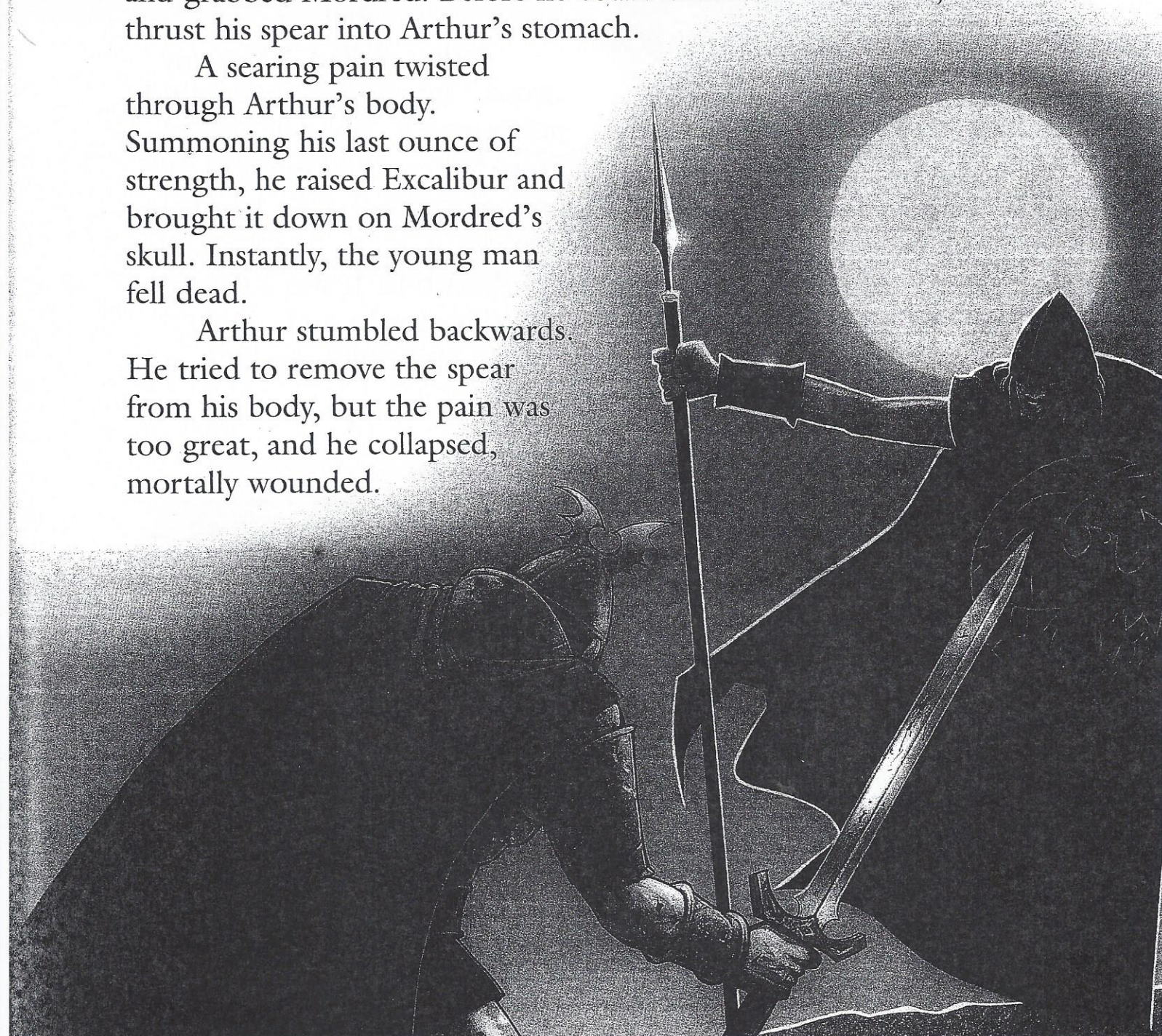
Earlier, Arthur had seen Cerdic fleeing the field, but there had been no sign of Mordred. Now, on the horizon, Arthur saw his nephew's silhouetted figure, mounted on a horse.

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.

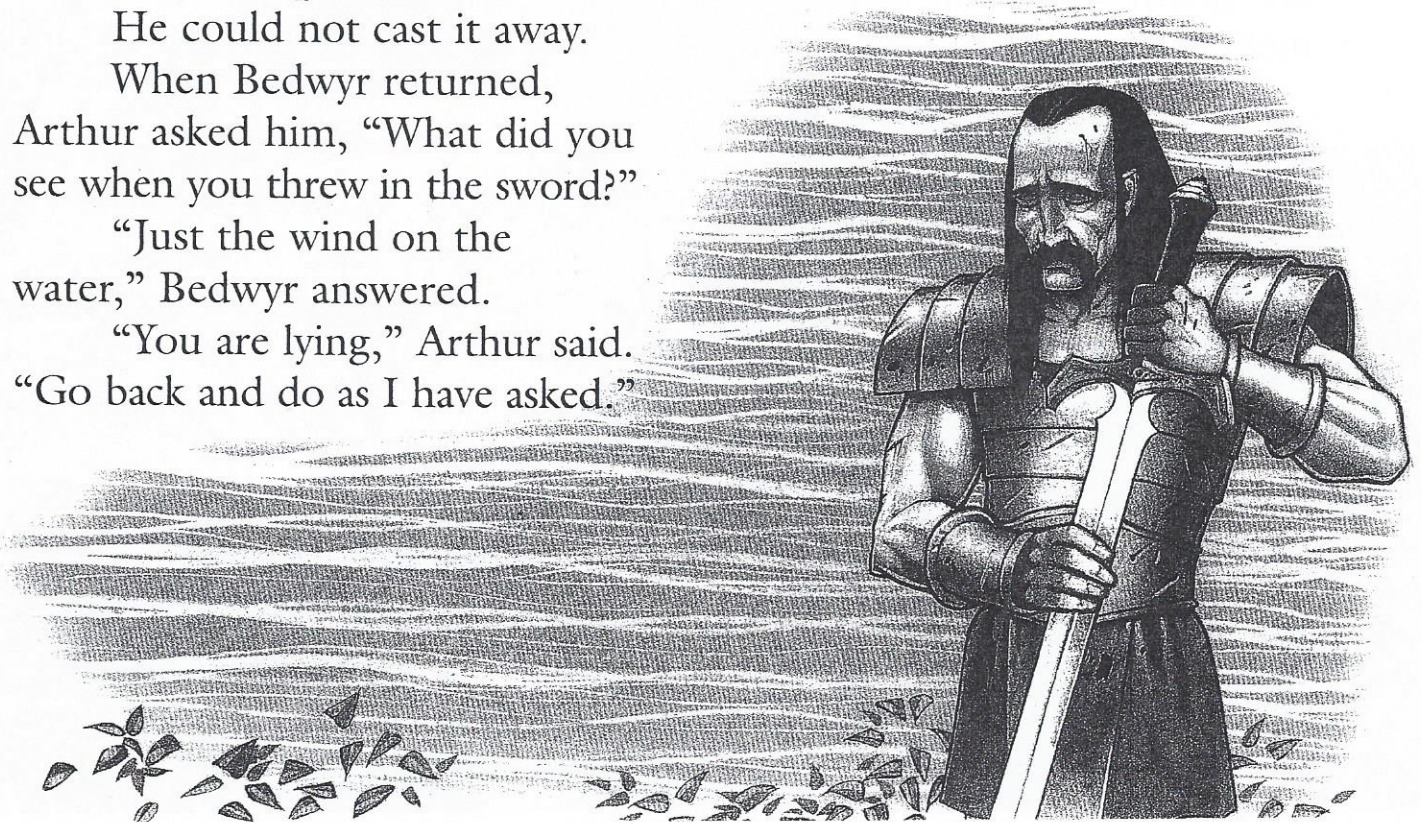
He could not cast it away.

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.

