

APX ATARI® PROGRAM EXCHANGE



Chris Crawford, Larry Summers, Valerie Atkinson

EXCALIBUR

Use your wits, your intuition, and your magic sword to unify
and rule a kingdom

Requires: One ATARI Joystick Controller
Diskette (1): ATARI 810 or 1050 Disk Drive
48K RAM

(APX-20235)

Edition A

User-Written Software for ATARI Home Computers

Chris Crawford, Larry Summers, Valerie Atkinson

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by
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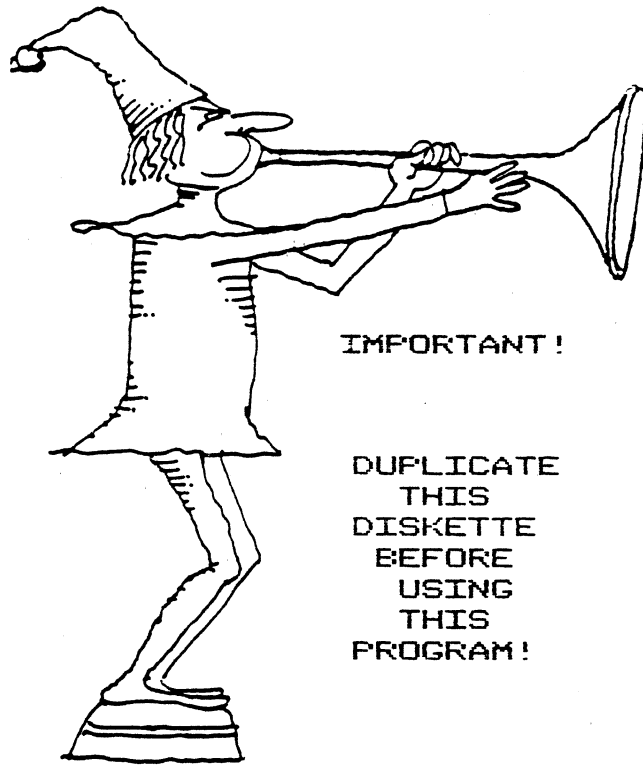
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Table of contents

Introduction...1

Overview...1

Required accessories...1

Getting started...2

Loading EXCALIBUR into computer memory...2

EXCALIBUR: a short tour for beginners...3

EXCALIBUR: the mechanics...7

Designer's Notes...12

Map of Britain showing the kings and kingdoms of EXCALIBUR...14

Some commonly-asked questions...15

EXCALIBUR Quick Reference...18

Sample screens for EXCALIBUR...22

The book of EXCALIBUR follows page 25 of this manual.

Introduction

OVERVIEW

In Camelot, young Arthur has begun his reign as king. After more than 20 years of petty, bloody wars fought by upstarts and pretenders, the united Britain his father once ruled has been splintered into shards. Now Arthur, the rightful monarch has come to restore peace, order, and good government. Armed only with his magic sword Excalibur, guided only by his intuition and the spells of Merlin, he must weld these tiny warring kingdoms into a great nation.

How does a monarch learn to govern? Could you learn to rule a nation? EXCALIBUR offers you the chance. To govern wisely, you must use economics, diplomacy, magic, military strategy, even the loyalties of friends and enemies, to reach your goals.

To heighten your sense of being in a real world, you make decisions based on judgment instead of set formulas of play. How you choose to rule shapes the structure of the game.

To help you understand the rich and complex world of Arthur, this manual contains both a brief outline of the basics and a full-length novel written especially for EXCALIBUR. The designers recommend reading the novel before you begin in order to understand the problems Arthur must face and overcome.

You use your Joystick Controller to move from the Round Table Room, where loyalties ebb and flow, to the Throne Room, then to the Treasury, where taxes are set and armies are raised, then to Merlin's lair. With his help, you can see into the locked treasuries and minds of allies and foes. Or you can leave the castle and travel across the map of Britain to do battle with your enemies.

REQUIRED ACCESSORIES

48K RAM
ATARI 810 or 1050 Disk Drive
One ATARI Joystick Controller

Getting started

LOADING EXCALIBUR INTO YOUR COMPUTER MEMORY

1. Remove any program cartridge from the cartridge slot of your computer.
2. Plug your Joystick Controller into the first controller jack of your computer console.
3. Make sure your computer is turned OFF.
4. Turn on your disk drive.
5. When the BUSY light goes out, open the disk drive door and insert the EXCALIBUR diskette with the label in the lower right-hand corner nearest to you. Close the door.
6. Turn on your computer and your TV set. The program will load into computer memory and start automatically.

Note: In order to be able to save a game you are playing, you must copy EXCALIBUR to a notched (unprotected) diskette before you begin. See the instructions at the front of the manual.

EXCALIBUR: a short tour for beginners

by Chris Crawford

The best way to get to know EXCALIBUR is by first reading the novel that forms the major part of the manual you are holding. However, if you're like most people, you'll probably want to explore first and ask questions later. There's no harm in that. Like King Arthur, you'll find that experience is a great teacher, but it only takes you so far.

To help you with your first explorations, we've decided to play Merlin by providing you with some basic pointers. After you've read the book of EXCALIBUR, the hidden delights and subtleties of the game will become more apparent to you.

THE TITLE

The title appears automatically when you correctly load the diskette. It shows the magic sword Excalibur being lifted aloft from the waves by the Lady of the Lake. When the title ends, the first screen of EXCALIBUR appears and play begins.

ROUND TABLE ROOM

The very first display you see is the Round Table Room. A vertical red band stretches from the top of the screen to the bottom. At the bottom of this band is a crown that represents you, King Arthur. To the left of the band the words GIFT, HONOUR, BANISH, and SELECT are arranged vertically. These are actions you can perform in your dealings with your knights. On the right side of the band is an oval representing the Round Table. A gold crown adorns the center of the table. Around the table are clustered several shields, each with its own distinctive crest. These shields represent the knights of the Round Table.

At the bottom of the display are the words "SIR NOSNIKTA 0". Note that one of the shields is highlighted in green. That knight is Sir Nosnikta. Use your joystick to move your crown up a little bit. Do not move the crown down yet.

Now move the joystick sideways, in either direction. Notice that two things happen. First, the name of the knight that appears at the bottom of the screen changes; second, a different shield is highlighted in color. These are the knights of the Round Table.

Don't press the joystick button. If you do, you activate one of the four selections on the left side of the screen. Each selection applies to one knight at a time (the knight whose name appears at the bottom of the screen), and the significance of each is quite complex. These options allow you to carry on your relationships with your knights. The simplest one, BANISH, makes the knight whose shield is green go away forever. Obviously, you have to be careful!

THRONE ROOM

Now use the joystick to move your crown up to the top of the screen. Keep going. You are now in the Throne Room. It is structured much like the Round Table Room, except that it has a map of Britain on the right, a different set of options on the left, and a new name on the bottom. It is the name of a king, and his kingdom is shown highlighted in color on the map of Britain. Just as with the Round Table Room, you can move the joystick sideways to select a different king, and the highlighted kingdom changes when you do. Just as in the Round Table Room, pressing the joystick button executes one of the options. This time, however, the options are different! they control your international diplomacy. Feel free to push the joystick sideways to look at different kingdoms, but don't push the joystick button yet!

To see how the options work, let's perform a very safe action: let's read the news. Move the crown so that it is on the same line with the word NEWS. Now push the joystick button. You hear a "kerplonk" audio feedback beep to tell you that the computer is obeying your command. If there is any news, it scrolls across the bottom of the screen. When you have read that message, press the joystick button again to read the next message. When you have read all of the news, or if there wasn't any news in the first place, the name of the king reappears.

TREASURY ROOM

Now let's hurry up to the next room, the Treasury Room, for by now the other kings have built up their armies and they may be marching on Camelot. You will know if this happens by your crown: if it starts to flash, that means that a king and his army are marching on Camelot and you have just a few moments before they arrive. Indeed, this may already have happened if your tour of the Round Table Room was leisurely.

THE TRAP ROOM (A DETOUR)

If you are attacked, you will suddenly find yourself in a room that has a red background and the message "KING SO-AND-SO HAS INVADDED KING ARTHUR; WILL YOU FIGHT?" This is the Trap Room, and if you find yourself in it, the best thing to do right now is to just hit the SYSTEM RESET key and start the game over. Later on, you'll be able to handle this situation, but for now, let's keep things simple.

IN THE TREASURY: INCREASING TAXES

So here you are in the third room, the Treasury, where you see an accountant's version of graphics, with two columns of numbers. Move your crown to the row labelled TAX. It has a 9 on the left side of the bar and another 9 on the right side of the bar. Now push the joystick to the right. The 9 on the left increases to a 10, then an 11, and so forth. Increase the number to 25. Then push the joystick button to record the change. You have just set taxes to 25 pieces of gold per week. The value on the right tells you how much money you are actually receiving. It will catch up to 25 in a moment.

BUILDING AN ARMY

Now let's build an army with the money you have raised. Move your crown down a row to the row labelled ARMY. Use the joystick to increase the number on the left from 6 to 25. Again, push the joystick button to make it happen. The number on the right represents the number of men you actually have in your army. It will slowly grow until you have 25 men in your army.

SELECTING KNIGHTS

Now let's go fight a battle. Go back down to the Throne Room. Put your crown on the row labelled ATTACK. Push the joystick sideways until you raise King Hoel. (You may not be able to do this if somebody else is already attacking him. If so, wait a minute or two for the first attacker to finish, then try again.) Now press the button. His kingdom will turn from green to pink. Now go straight down to the Round Table Room. Stop at the row labelled SELECT. Press the joystick button: the knight now highlighted in green is suddenly highlighted in orange. That means that he is to accompany you on the campaign. Don't select any other knights; we'll fight Hoel with just one knight.

BRITAIN

Now, move your crown down to the bottom of the Round Table Room and out the bottom. The disk drive engages now and you have to wait for a moment. Then you find yourself on a map, just below a white castle. The castle is Camelot, your own castle. If you bump into it with your crown, you can go back inside. Don't do that. Instead, move the joystick down and to the left. The entire map will scroll underneath your crown. You are marching across Britain, toward the kingdom of King Hoel. You'll see the border between his kingdom and yours; it's white. After you cross the border, pick out a nice cluster of green farmland to pillage. To pillage, touch the farmland squares with the center of your crown.

BATTLE

Hoel's army (it looks like a sword) emerges from his castle to defend the kingdom. If nothing happens, make sure that you are in Hoel's kingdom in the

southwest corner of Britain. Use the map on page 14 to find it. If you are successful, the disk drive engages again, and in a moment the battle begins. Your army appears at the bottom of the screen, and Hoel's at the top. Press the START key on the keyboard to start the battle. Use the joystick to move the square pink cursor over one of your men at the bottom of the screen. Press the button. You are shown how many men that knight has under his command, and his strength. A glowing "X" also appears. While still holding the button down, push the joystick straight up. The "X" moves upwards, towards Hoel's men. When it reaches them, stop and let go of the button. You have just ordered that knight to go to the place where the "X" is. He will attack anybody he encounters along the way.

In the same way, give orders to your royal guard, represented by the crown. Be careful not to order the two of them into each other's path. If you do, they butt heads and get nowhere. When the fighting commences, you see flashes and hear clangs. Men die. Since this is your first battle, you will probably die. If you do, the game ends, and you are now ready to play a game "for real". If you survive your first battle, you can continue playing or press SYSTEM RESET to start a new game.

Read the instructions carefully, then the novel, the only source that tells you how to win the game. Use your imagination and your intuition. Good luck, young king.



EXCALIBUR: the mechanics

The game of EXCALIBUR is exceedingly complex. This section explains the mechanical aspects of the game, but does not explain the whys and wherefores, which can be found in the book of EXCALIBUR.

LOADING A GAME YOU PLAYED, THEN SAVED -- TITLE SCENE

If you press the OPTION key while the title scene is in progress, the computer will load a game that you have saved to continue play at a later time.

ROUND TABLE ROOM

If you move down to the bottom of this room and keep going down, you leave Camelot and go out into Britain. In this room, the positions of the knights around the Round Table indicate their social relationships: dislike increases with distance. The distance of a knight from the center of the table indicates that knight's loyalty to Arthur. If you press the joystick sideways, it changes the knight currently under selection. You then see displayed at the bottom of the screen the name of the new knight and the number of men-at-arms he commands.

If you press the joystick button, it executes the menu option indicated by the position of the crown. Thus, if the crown is next to the word GIFT and "Sir Sremmus" is displayed at the bottom of the screen, pressing the joystick button transfers your gift of five gold pieces from your treasury to Sir Sremmus.

The SELECT option allows you to choose which knights accompany you on a campaign into Britain. If you select a knight, and then change your mind, you can deselect him by pressing the button a second time. The color of the knight indicates his state: orange means selected, green means unselected.

BANISH sends the knight away forever. HONOUR accords military honors to the knight, giving him a larger share of the men-at-arms in your army. If you move the crown to the top of the Round Table Room, you go to the Throne Room.

THRONE ROOM

If you move to the bottom of the Throne Room, you go to the Round Table Room. If you move your joystick sideways, you change the king whose name appears in the window at the bottom of the screen. If you press the joystick button when the crown is next to an option, that option is executed.

The NEWS option allows you to read the international news. To see all the news, press the joystick button once after each news item is displayed. The message scrolls across the bottom of the screen; the locale of the news item is highlighted on the map of Britain.

The PRESTG line executes no action, but can be selected to see how much prestige you have. The ATTACK option allows you to declare war on the king in the bottom text window. This must be done before you can pillage an enemy's crops. If you change your mind, you can cancel a declaration of war ("Sorry. Never mind.") by pressing the joystick button a second time. You cannot attack a king already engaged in another battle. His name will not even appear in the bottom text window.

The TRIBUTE option is the most complex in the game. You begin by placing the crown on the TRIBUTE row and choosing the king to whom you wish to offer tribute. Then you press the joystick button. Next, move the joystick sideways to set the amount of tribute you will pay each week. Press the button a second time to make the offer complete. Your tribute payments continue until you reset the tribute to zero or offer tribute to another king. Tribute from a king to you is shown next to that king's name in the bottom text window.

If you go to the top of the Throne Room, you move to the Treasury Room.

TREASURY ROOM

If you move the crown down from the bottom of this room, you go to the Throne Room. Here in the Treasury, armies are raised, and taxes and tithes are set.

The TITHES option executes no action. The left value tells you the amount of tithe you have demanded of your vassals. The right value tells you the amount they are actually sending. The ARMY option controls your army size. The left value tells you the amount of money you are spending on men-at-arms. The right value tells you the number of men-at-arms in your army. You can adjust the left value by pushing the joystick right to increase it, and left to decrease it. Press the joystick button to set the new value you've chosen.

The TAX option controls your taxes. The left value shows the amount of tax you have commanded your subjects to pay. You can change this value with your joystick in the same way you change the size of your army. The value on the right shows the amount of money the people are actually paying you.

The WEALTH option executes no actions. The left number tells you how much money remains in the kingdom after taxes have been collected. (This sum is used by the people to improve their lives and the nation's economic strength.) The right number tells you the amount of money in your treasure chest.

EXPERIENCE at the bottom of the display tells you the average amount of military experience your men have. Moving to the top of the Treasury Room takes you to Merlin's Room.

MERLIN'S ROOM

If you move to the bottom of this room, you go to the Treasury Room. If Merlin is present and available to do magic, his face appears on the right side of the display. The brightness of his face indicates his strength. For all four options in this room, you may manipulate the joystick sideways to choose the king to whom they apply. Then use the joystick button to execute the option.

The PLAGUE option clobbers the king's army with disease.

The PESTILENCE option clobbers his crops.

The CHANGE option makes the king like you more, temporarily.

The SEE option is rather complex. When you press the button for the SEE option, you suddenly find yourself in the treasury room of the king whose name was at the bottom of the screen. You may inspect his finances, but you can change nothing. The Throne Room in the other king's castle differs from your Throne Room: it has no map of Britain. Instead, it shows how the king feels towards each of the other kings. Every other king is represented by a small crown. The farther to the left a crown is, the more the host king dislikes that king. The farther to the right, the more he likes him. Remember, these are the feelings of the king of the castle you are visiting. Visit his Round Table Room to see how many knights he has at his castle at that moment. If a crown is on the table, the king is home. If not, he is away on a military campaign. To return to Camelot, go up to the equivalent of Merlin's Room, to the SEE option there. Press the joystick button and you are transported back to the true Merlin's Room. There is no exit up from Merlin's Room.

TRAP ROOM

You cannot choose to go into the Trap Room; you are taken there when another king invades Camelot. The Trap Room has a solid red background and the message "KING SO-AND-SO HAS INVADED KING ARTHUR WILL YOU FIGHT?" is displayed, along with the total sizes of both armies: kings, knights, and men-at-arms. You have only two options: to fight or to wait. If you wish to fight, press the joystick button: you go directly into battle. If you wish to wait, push the joystick sideways so that the question reads "WILL YOU WAIT?" Then press the joystick button. Each time that the invader pillages crops, you will be asked the question again. You cannot leave the Trap Room until the invader leaves, either through your victory in battle or voluntarily.

BRITAIN

You enter Britain by moving down from the Round Table Room. Whenever you do, any knights whom you have chosen by using the SELECT option will accompany you, along with their men-at-arms. After a slight pause and some whirring from the disk drive, you see a portion of a map of Britain. Your crown will be just below the castle of Camelot. You may scroll around the map with the joystick. The groups of green squares are cropland; the more squares in a cluster, the richer the cropland is.

There are also the castles of other kings. The color of the castle indicates the king's relationship to you. A white castle is either Camelot or one of your vassals; you may enter that castle. A blue castle is an enemy's. A red castle belongs to a king who is paying tribute to you. A green castle is neutral.

You may also use Merlin's raven to help you. Merlin's raven is available only if Merlin is not fatigued. To make use of the raven, press the joystick button to raise it from your crown, then move it with the joystick to a castle. When it touches the castle it will tell you the name of the castle's king and the number of men-at-arms inside. Return the raven to your crown to resume your journey.

If you enter a vassal's castle, you will be able to set his taxes and the size of his army in much the same way that you set your own in the Treasury Room. You may also set the tithes that the vassal pays you. If an enemy invades the vassal's domain while you are visiting, you will be taken to that castle's Trap Room.

If you have declared war on a king by using the ATTACK option, you may pillage his crops. You do this by touching the crops with the jewel of your crown. When you do, the jewel disappears and you are bound to the cropland for one week while your men pillage it. If the enemy king decides to defend his land, a blue sword emerges from his castle and approach you. When it reaches you, the BATTLE begins.

BATTLE

When this scene begins, your army is at the bottom of the screen, and your enemy's is at the top. The message "PEASANTS KILL #" tells how many invading men-at-arms were killed by defending peasants. Press the START key to begin the battle.

You move the square cursor with your joystick. By placing it onto a knight or king and pressing the button, you can read the strength of that unit. If the cursor is placed over one of your men, hold down the joystick button and move the joystick forward slightly, you will see an "X" that you can move by using the joystick. This "X" is the knight's objective. Move the "X" to the point you want your knight to reach, then release the joystick button. During the battle, he moves toward the position marked by the "X" that you have set. This can be done at any time before or during the battle. You may want to wait until the battle is under way before you assign some of your men their objectives.

If one of your knights collides with an enemy along the way, he attacks that enemy. If he collides with a friend, he will wait for the friendly knight to move out of the way. When knights fight, the attacker is marked with red, and the defender yellow. When a knight or king loses heart, his crest is replaced with a checkerboard pattern; if he is one of your men, he will no longer take your orders. When a knight panics and runs, his shield dissolves. The enemy's men may retreat off the top of the screen; Arthur's off the bottom of the screen. The battle ends when one king exits the battlefield or dies. The initial and final strengths of both victor and defeated are displayed. Press the START key to continue play.

GENERAL NOTES

Except during battles, you may save the game by pressing the OPTION key. You may pause the game at any time by pressing the SELECT key. Remember that you are always represented by a crown. A fanfare means that you had better go to the throne room and read the news. If your crown is flashing, it means that an enemy king has set out to pillage your kingdom. He will arrive in a short time.



Designer's notes

CHRIS CRAWFORD

This game consumed far more time than I ever imagined possible. I had originally intended to do it myself in about 12 months' time. Twenty months have passed and two other people have been sucked in. The first deadline was March 1. That got pushed back to April 1. Then we fell all the way back to July 1. Today is July 24th, and woe betide any creature that attempts to stop us from delivering final code on July 29th. As with any properly done game, I am sick and tired of the whole enterprise, so tired that I no longer care about it.

I look back on this project with both intense pride and deep regret. I take great pride in the many advances built into EXCALIBUR. It has some fantastic graphics, excellent sounds, a powerful collection of algorithms, and a magnificent manual. Towering over all these features, though, is the sheer size of the design. All the game subsystems are complex and tie together in the most intricate manner. The end result is a game with more texture, color, and feel than any other I am aware of. That is the greatest achievement of EXCALIBUR -- the creation of an entire, working world.

The size of the game is also the source of all my regrets. There are far too many jury-rigged sections of this design, places where two structures intersected clumsily, and I was forced to mate them by brute force. Moreover, this game is not as well play-tested as it should be. A game this size needs thousands of hours of play-testing, not the hundreds we gave it. As a result, the game factors are not finely balanced enough to keep the player perpetually balanced on the fine edge between triumph and disaster.

My greatest regret, though, is that I failed to capture a reasonable fraction of the beauty and majesty of the Arthurian legends. I love this body of literature, these glorious tales of human greatness and folly, and I fear that I have not done them justice. Someday I will have to come back and try again, if only to make up for the shortcomings of this attempt.

Despite all the shortcomings and the failures, I remain immensely proud of the end result. It is the finest and best design I have worked on to date. Many of its best features are directly attributable to the contributions of Larry Summers and Valerie Atkinson. Both Larry and Valerie labored long and hard to translate my sketchy design into reality. In the process, they exposed numerous flaws and suggested many excellent corrections and improvements. Towards the end of the project, I refused to make any important design decision without first seeking their advice. They began the project as implementors and ended it as co-authors.

LARRY SUMMERS

I enjoyed building EXCALIBUR because of its size. It is an extremely complex program, and it provided a great challenge to me. I look forward to building something this big again, but first I have to find a fantasy worthy of such effort.

I hope that players won't mind the occasional odd behaviour exhibited by the artificial intelligence routines. It's very difficult to get good artificial intelligence out of an eight-bit microcomputer. We ran out of steam before we had the time to test the code ferociously. We did wrap it up properly; when we decided that it supports its fantasy clearly, we knew it was time to deliver it.

I have progressed a great deal as a result of working on EXCALIBUR. The effort helped crystallize my thoughts on the art of computer game design. Game design is not easy, nor is it easily explained to another person. I learned much by watching Chris resolve the design problems that developed during the course of the project. He often projected the living essence of the game with great animation.

Please feel free to write me if you have any questions or comments about the design. No one person knows everything about the game. It is so complex that it is difficult to predict what it will do.

VALERIE ATKINSON

I'm glad that we are finally done with EXCALIBUR. It's been fun, at times, and I've learned a lot, but the project has dragged on for too long now.

It's exciting watching others play the game and hearing about how much they enjoy it. EXCALIBUR is a game you can really get involved with if you just make the time to get to know it.

I am the architect and builder of Camelot. Notice those gorgeous Gothic letters. Aren't they beautiful? I hope you appreciate them. Actually, bit-mapping them wasn't too bad. The only painful part was three months later when I found out I had numerals to bit-map too. I suppose they should be roman numerals, but our screen isn't large enough. And I'm not about to convert from hex to Roman.

Perhaps the greatest thing to come out of writing EXCALIBUR was the OS DDT card. We were quickly running out of memory in the 800, and couldn't spare the RAM our debugger required. So Jim Dunion teamed up with Bob Johnson to write a special version of the OS card in the 800. Dave Mathis and John Lozano designed and built a very complex hardware modification that allows the system to function properly. To these men I give many thanks. The DDT card is a wonderful tool. Without it, life would be a lot harder, and the completion of EXCALIBUR almost impossible.

Finally as I walk through the hallowed halls of Camelot, I can remember the time and effort I spent designing and coding the castle so it would be a haven of peace during your valiant struggle to become king (or queen) of all Britain.

P.S. By the way, if you find any bugs, they won't be mine!

Map of Britain showing

kings and kingdoms in EXCALIBUR



Some commonly-asked questions

The first round of playtesting generated a great many questions from people who had difficulties with the game. Here are answers to some of the questions asked.

How do I get back to Camelot from the map of Britain?

All you have to do is touch the castle of Camelot with your crown and you will go into Camelot. The trick is knowing which castle is Camelot. You could use Merlin's raven to identify the castle. Or you could use the map on the previous page to figure out where you are.

How do I get back to Camelot from inside another king's castle?

If you used Merlin's magic to get there, just go up to the room that would be Merlin's Room and press the trigger button. That will take you back to Camelot. If you were in the castle of one of your vassals, go out the door at the bottom of the screen and into Britain; go from there to Camelot.

One of my vassals is no longer my vassal. How come?

As liege, you are expected to defend each of your vassals against all attackers. If you fail to defend one of your vassals against an attacker, the vassal may well decide to seek another liege who will protect him.

The news sure is slow!

Every news message has a corresponding representation on the map. If you learn to read this pictorial representation, you will be able to go through the news much faster.

I can't figure out when things are happening from the news.

That's one good reason to read the news often---the only way to get a good feeling for the news is to watch it unfold as it's happening. If you go away on campaign and then return to a pile of old news messages, you should expect it to be a little confusing. Ye Liu Chutsai, advisor to Ghengis Khan, said it best: "You can't rule a kingdom from the saddle!"

How many news messages can there be in the pile at one time?

About a hundred. If you don't read your news, and the pile of messages gets too large, a fanfare will sound to remind you to go read your news before it gets lost. If you still don't read your news, the oldest messages will be erased to make room for the newer messages.

The news message "KING X OFFERS TRIBUTE": to whom is he offering tribute?

To you, Arthur. Remember, though, that a king will stop paying tribute as soon as he is attacked.

I can't figure out what's going on in the Round Table Room.

Each shield stands for a knight. Knights that are standing close to each other are good friends. Knights standing far apart don't like each other. If a knight is close to your crown in the center of the Round Table, then he is loyal to you. If he stands far away from your crown, then he is not very loyal. If a knight is standing directly on top of Queen Gwynivere, then he is VERY good friends with Gwynivere. VERY, VERY, good friends with her. How do you think the rest of the knights will feel about that? What do you think you should do? ("Gimme a B; gimme an A....")

How can I tell if or when my knights will revolt?

If the knights inside Camelot (i.e., alive but not accompanying you on campaign) are disloyal, they will revolt. Don't leave disloyal knights behind without some loyal knights to counterbalance them!

I can't kill enemy kings in battle; they always escape!

If you were losing, would you hang around and get killed?

How come Arthur is so weak on the battlefield? After all, he has Excalibur!

The best answer to this comes from Merlin in the movie, Excalibur. When Uther Pendragon demanded, "The sword! You promised me the sword!", Merlin replied, "And you shall have it---but to heal, not to hack." Excalibur is NOT a Dark Ages ultimate weapon.

When I'm in the throne room and I use my joystick, the names of the kings and kingdoms change. What does it mean when the colors of the kingdoms change?

Merlin built this map table to allow you to see the state of relations between you and the other kings. The color of the kingdom shows your relationship with the king whose name appears at the bottom of the screen. If his kingdom is green, it's neutral -- neither for you nor against you. If it's blue, it's your enemy. If it's pink, you've just declared war on that king. A gray kingdom is your vassal. A purple kingdom is your tributary -- its king is offering you tribute to win your favor and avoid your wrath. The amount of tribute he is paying appears at the bottom of the screen beside his name.

This game is impossible to win!

See next question.

This game is too easy!

See previous question.

Okay, so what's the secret to winning?

That's easy; it's leadership.

EXCALIBUR quick reference

TITLE SCENE

Press OPTION key to load an EXCALIBUR game you have played previously and saved. (To be able to save a game, you must copy EXCALIBUR to an unprotected diskette before you begin play.)

ROUND TABLE ROOM (blue)

Exit down to BRITAIN map.

Exit up to Throne Room.

Positions of knights indicate quality of social relationship; geographical distance equals emotional distance.

Distance from center of table indicates loyalty to Arthur.

Move joystick sideways to change knight; number at right of name shows knight's men-at-arms.

Press joystick button to execute menu option.

Use SELECT option to choose the knight to accompany you into Britain. Press the joystick button to set your selection.

A SELECT decision can be cancelled by pressing the joystick button a second time.

Use BANISH to banish a knight forever.

Use HONOUR to accord military honors to a knight by increasing the number of men-at-arms under his command.

Use GIFT to award a knight a gift of five gold pieces.

THRONE ROOM (orange)

Exit down to Round Table Room.

Exit up to Treasury Room.

Move joystick sideways to change the king's name displayed at the bottom of the screen.

Use the joystick button to execute menu options.

NEWS displays international news; press the joystick button for each message.

Locale of news item is shown on Merlin's map of Britain.

PRESTG displays your prestige and executes no action.

ATTACK declares war on a king; war must be declared in order to pillage an enemy's land.

ATTACK decision can be cancelled by pressing the joystick button a second time.

You cannot attack a king who is already engaged in battle.

TRIBUTE option pays tribute to selected king; amount of tribute set with joystick sideways after pressing joystick button.

Press joystick button a second time to pay tribute.

Amount you are paying shown next to word TRIBUTE.

Tribute payments continue until you reset tribute to zero or pay tribute to another king.

Tribute you receive from a king is shown next to that king's name.

TREASURY ROOM (green)

Exit down to Throne Room.

Exit up to Merlin's Room.

Move joystick sideways to change alterable numbers. Press the joystick button to execute options.

WEALTH: left number is national wealth remaining with the people after weekly taxes.

Right number is money in your treasury.

TAX: left number is amount you demand per week (joystick-alterable).

Right number is amount you receive per week.

ARMY: left number is amount you spend per week (joystick-alterable).

Right number is number of men-at-arms in army.

TITHES: left number is amount of tithes you have demanded from vassals.

Right number is amount of tithes you receive.

EXPERIENCE is average military experience per man.

MERLIN'S ROOM (black)

Exit down to Treasury Room.

No exit up.

Move joystick sideways to change king. Use joystick button to execute options.

Brightness of Merlin's face indicates his strength.

If Merlin doesn't appear, joystick button is inoperative (you can't use the options).

SEE option puts you in another king's castle; your joystick button is inoperative in other castles.

Foreign Throne Room shows how that king feels about other kings. (Crowns on left: kings who are hated; crowns on right: kings who are liked.)

Foreign Round Table Room shows how many knights king has.

If crown is not on Table, king is absent on campaign.

King being campaigned on is shown in bottom text window.

Return to Camelot by locating your crown at the SEE option in the foreign castle, then pressing the joystick button.

PLAGUE clobbers other king's army.

PESTILENCE clobbers other king's crops.

CHANGE makes another king like you more (temporarily).

TRAP ROOM (solid red background)

You are automatically moved here when another king invades your domain or the domain of a vassal you are visiting.

Size of the invading army and the size of your defending army are displayed.

Move joystick sideways to select fight or wait; joystick button sets choice.

Only way out of the Trap Room is victory in battle or departure of invader.

BRITAIN (map of kingdoms)

Entered by going down from Round Table Room.
Use joystick to move in any direction.
Groups of green squares are cropland.
More green squares means richer crops.
Green castles are neutral; blue, enemy; red, pays tribute to you; and white, vassal or Camelot.
To pillage crops, touch crops of attacked king with the jewel in your crown.
Jewel will disappear and crown will stick to crops for one week.
If enemy decides to defend, BATTLE will begin.
Press joystick button to raise Merlin's raven.
Use joystick to send raven to identify castles and number of men-at-arms inside castle.
Return raven to your crown to continue your travels.
If Merlin is unavailable, no raven will appear.
Only vassals' castles or Camelot (white) may be entered.
You may set vassal's tithes, taxes, and army in his castle.
There is a Trap Room in a vassal castle. If vassal is attacked while you are there, you are automatically moved to that Trap Room.
Pillage crops, enter white castles, by touching with jewel in crown.

BATTLE

Your army is at bottom, enemy's at top.
PEASANTS KILL tells losses of invader.
Press START key to begin battle.
Move square cursor with joystick.
Place cursor onto shield, press button to examine knight.
Hold joystick button down, then use joystick to mark objective with "X".
Release button and your knight begins approaching objective.
Collisions between enemies cause combat.
Red spot indicates attacker; yellow indicates defender.
If a knight collides with a friendly knight, he waits for the other knight to move out of the way.
Checkerboard pattern indicates disorganization; your men won't take orders.
Fadeout indicates dissolution.
Arthur's army may retreat off bottom edge.
Enemy army may retreat off top edge.
At battle end, (I)nitial and (F)inal strengths of both sides are displayed.
Press START key to continue game.

GENERAL

Press OPTION key at any time to save current game (except during BATTLE).
Press SELECT key to pause play; press SELECT key again to resume play.
You (Arthur) are always represented by a crown.
Fanfare means "Go read the news".
Your crown flashes when an invader sets out to pillage your kingdom.

HINTS

To attack somebody, declare ATTACK in throne room.
Then SELECT knights who will accompany you.
Leave enough behind to defend Camelot, if need be.
Go to BRITAIN, and march to enemy kingdom.
Identify enemy kingdom with Merlin's raven.
Move center of your crown onto enemy cropland (green squares).
If he defends, sword will emerge from castle, and BATTLE begins.
The only reason to go to BRITAIN is to attack somebody or to visit a vassal.
The two reasons to visit a vassal are to defend him directly or to set his taxes, army, and tithes.
If Merlin isn't visible, or if the raven doesn't appear, Merlin is resting.
If everybody is attacking you, your army is too small.
If peasants kill many of your men, your army is too inexperienced.
If you can't raise a king's name in ATTACK row, it's because somebody else is already attacking that king.

Sample Screens for EXCALIBUR

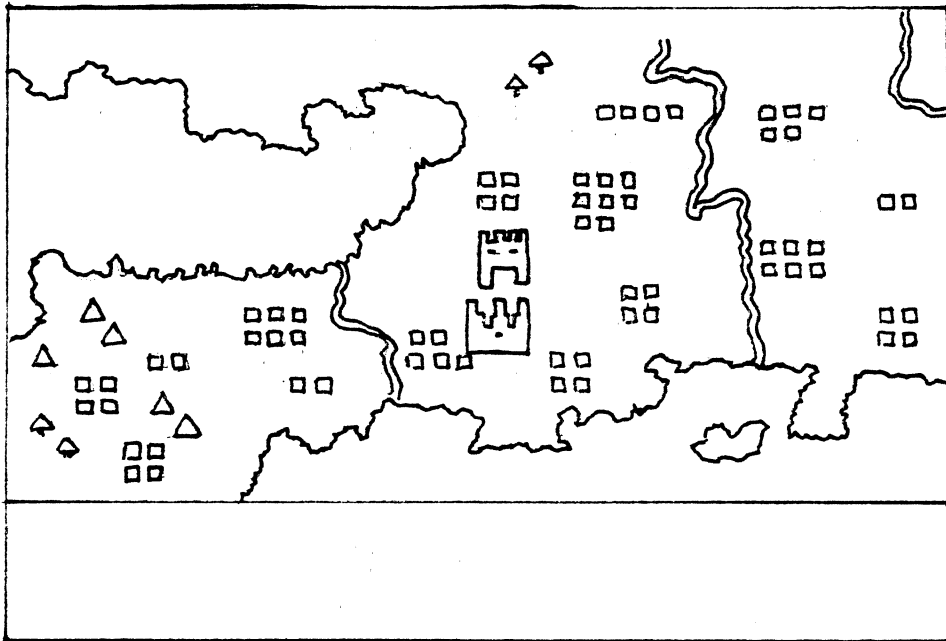


Figure 1. Britain



Tribute 0		
Attack		
Prestg 26		
News		
King Augusel 0		

Figure 2. Arthur's Throne Room



Change Pestilence Plague See		
King Augusel		

Figure 3. Merlin's Room


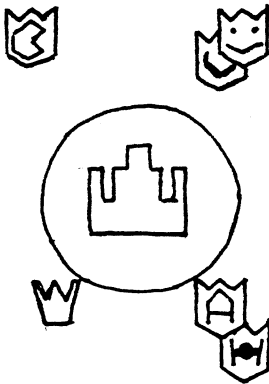
Gift Honor Banish Select		
Sir Rosnikta		

Figure 4. The Round Table Room


Wealth	42		20
Taxes	8		8
Army	7		6
Tithes	5		5
Experience			3

Figure 5. The Treasury

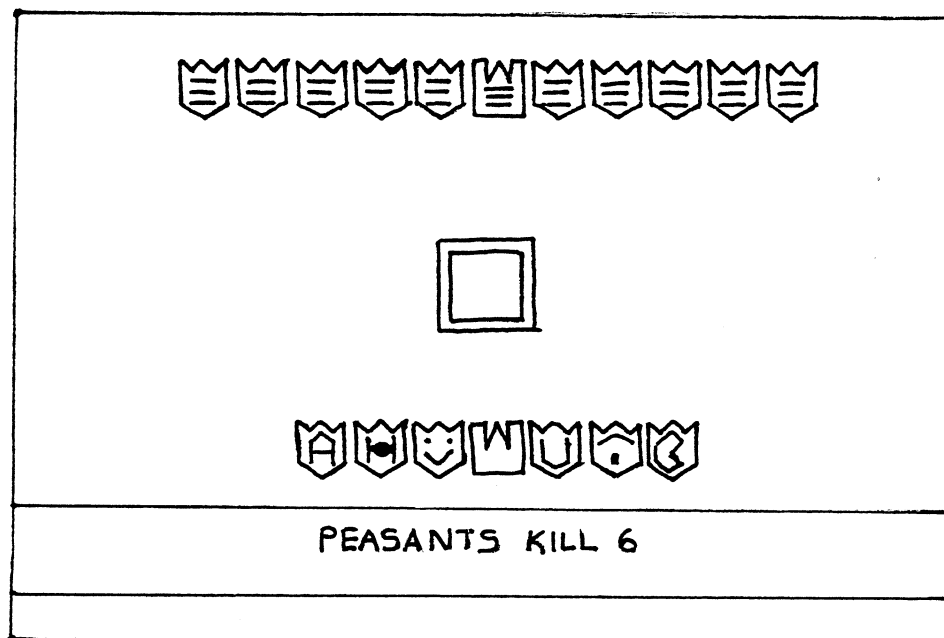


Figure 6. Battle


King Sater	25
has invaded	
King Arthur	26
will you  fight	
Crops left	70

Figure 7. The Trap Room


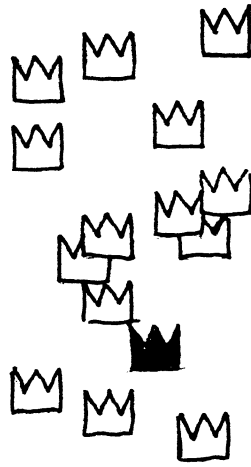
Tribute	5		
Attack			
Prestg	35		
News			
King Hengist			0

Figure 8. Arthur visits another King's throne room

EXCALIBUR

THE NEW KING

Necks craned. A jumble of voices assaulted the ear. Fingers pointed down the road. Occasional shrieks of laughter rent the air. The peasants milled about in the open space that served as the entry road to the castle of Camelot.

"Can you see him yet?"

"Yes!"

"No!"

"Use your own eyes!"

"There he is!"

"No, that's just a pennant!"

At the far end of the ragged group of thatched huts lining the road, a horseman appeared. His horse, large and powerful, fidgeted as the rider urged him forward. After a few uncertain sidesteps, the horse obeyed the man, and stepped forward. "That's him! King Arthur!"

"Hooray for King Harter Hooray for King Harter!"

"That's Arthur, stupid!"

"He certainly looks young to me. How could he have pulled that sword out of that rock?"

"Because he's the rightful king of all Britain. Excalibur will only obey him."

"Sounds to me like some sort of shenanigan."

"Hooray for the King! Hooray for King Arthur!"

Arthur rode slowly through the crowd of peasants, trying to smile to them while maintaining what he thought to be the appropriate regal aloofness. Behind him were a few men-at-arms who had accompanied him from the church at Uintancaestir.

Ahead of him lay the drawbridge of Camelot, and inside he could discern squires and servants clapping and hurrah-ing. The mighty horse quickened to a trot as it crossed the drawbridge, and he was inside the courtyard. Dismounting, he strode toward the main door, pushed past the excited stableboys, and entered the building.

He was in the main eating hall. A large round table dominated the hall. The room was full of people, mostly servants, all staring at him. As if by command, they fell on their knees. Six knights remained standing next to the Round Table: Sir Drofwarc, Sir Nosnikta, Sir Sremmus, Sir Lucas, Sir Lamerok, and Arthur's brother Sir Kay. As Arthur approached, each in turn dropped to one knee momentarily and saluted him: "My Lord."

Arthur acknowledged each and moved on to the next room.

This second room was smaller than the Round Table room, but much more imposing. At one end of the room stood an elevated throne. It was a simple throne, carved out of solid oak and boasting no decoration, but its massiveness and solidity bespoke quiet, self-assured authority. Arthur ran his finger along the arm, feeling the grain of the wood.

In the center of the room stood a table; onto its surface had been carved a map of Britain. Here were shown the sixteen kingdoms and the sixteen kings who ruled them. There was Camelot, in the south, and next to it, in bright new lettering, the caption:

"Arthur, wielder of Excalibur, sword of
kings, and rightful king of all Britain"

On to the next room. This room, also empty of people, was quite small and held nothing more than a large chest and piles of parchment on a table. Examining them closely, he saw that they contained lists of numbers, many numbers. There were names of people, each one followed by entries detailing numbers of pigs and cows, bushels of grain, and acres of land. "Pigs and cows?!?", he muttered. "Why would anybody..." He broke off as his eyes fell again on the chest. "Taxes!" he exclaimed. Looking about furtively, he examined the chest. It was secured by a huge rusty lock. He scanned the room for the key, but it was nowhere to be found. He tried to heft the chest, but it was much too heavy, and when he dropped it an enticing ring of coins sounded from inside. There was a great deal of money inside. Embarrassed by the noise he had made, he backed off. Perhaps it would be better to wait for the key to turn up. He went to the next room.

He entered the next room cautiously, for it was quite dark inside. At first, he thought it was empty, for he could see nothing. But as his eyes adjusted to the darkness he began to recognize strange shapes, odd contraptions, and piles of books. With a start, he realized that someone else was in the room, watching him. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Merlin. And you are Arthur."

"That I am, and more. I am your king."

"Even more -- you are king of all Britain, a fact in which I take both pleasure and pride, for it was my magic that allowed Uther Pendragon to lay with Igraine and beget you."

"My father was Uther Pendragon?"

"Even as your mother was Igraine, wife of the Duke of Domnonia."

Arthur was dumbfounded. He had heard the tales of Uther Pendragon, the last king to rule all Britain. But he had never dreamed that he was Uther's heir. He knew he was an orphan, and was just coming to accept his new kingship without questioning its cause, but this explained everything. He stepped backward, uneasy, then sat down heavily on the bare floor. He thought for several moments, trying to adjust to this revelation. "Merlin, tell me, what kind of man was my father?"

"Your father was a great warrior, and a good general, but a poor king. He never understood the difference between the sword and the scepter. Long and futilely did I tell him that the Muse of Peace doth demand as much homage as the God of War. The delicate and subtle ways of peace taxed his patience.

"And when his patience was expended, he always had his ready solution: the sword. Ah, yes, he was good at it -- he never lost a battle. But neither did he accomplish anything. He conquered all Britain without unifying it. His conquests fell apart within months of his death. His lifework lies forgotten and half-covered in dust. I tried so hard with him, but I failed. "

Merlin's voice lowered, and he stared into a tiny brazier for a long time. Then he turned to Arthur. His face illuminated from the eerie glow of the coals, he spoke slowly and carefully. "You must finish what your father could not. You must unify the land. You must bring all the warring nations together under your rule, as king of all Britain."

"And how am I to do that? I am not the general my father was. My kingdom is not the strongest kingdom in the land. My army is ridiculously small. What chance have I?"

"Ah, young one, you have so much to learn. Show me thy sword".

Arthur drew Excalibur. He was stunned to see that it glowed faintly in the dark room, emitting a color that changed from green to blue to pink so rapidly that his eyes could not at first take in the color. "What is this sorcery that you are doing to my sword?" he demanded.

"I am doing nothing. Excalibur is no ordinary sword. It still glows from the thundering fires that forged it many centuries ago in the heart of the earth. From it you can feel the power that lies so calmly within the earth. It is the sword of kings, and so long as you are true to your kingly ideals, it will serve you and you alone. Can you feel the power within it?"

"Yes...yes, I can. It...it feels very heavy."

"It is heavy, indeed so -- heavy with power. That is why no other man could lift it from the stone. The stone did not hold it tightly. It was the weight of the sword that held it in place. Only you, Arthur, the true king, can lift it, for only you are blessed with the capacity to wield power. When you are a wiser king, you will find Excalibur to be as light as a feather. Do you see now why you can indeed overcome the obstacles that face you?"

"Yes, but one sword cannot conquer Britain."

"Conquest! It is a vile game, easy to learn but impossible to master, and ultimately pointless. That was the lesson your father never learned. You must not make that mistake. Remember, you have many other possibilities."

"How do you know? Who are you to say all these things?"

"I am Merlin, a magician."

"What manner of man are you, Merlin, to say such things?"

"I am no manner of man. I am oak, and rock, and air. I am an illusion, a voice of the meadows, forests, and hills. The contentions and fractiousness of men puts a dissonance into the gentle harmony of the land. I am here to help restore the quiet song of this island."

"How will you do that?"

"I will advise and guide you. And, should my advice be insufficient, I can also work my magic. I can do much for you: I can bring pestilence down on the land of your enemies to ruin their crops, or I can rain foul plague down on their armies. I can let you see their innermost secrets; I can even change their hearts towards you. But my powers are not limitless. The exercise of my magic will surely wear me away, even as the bearing of infants doth wear away the mother, or the plucking of the rose doth weaken the bush. You must use my powers with restraint. "

"How do I use your powers?"

"All in good time, young one. But more important duties call. Your people await you. You must not disappoint them."

Merlin opened the door, flooding the room with what now looked like blinding light. Arthur followed him out. "This is the treasury room. From this room you will make the important decisions that govern your people's wealth. Here you impose taxes to raise income. The wealth you thereby gather can be spent to raise an army of men-at-arms. Or you can save it, and build up a large treasure chest. Or you can have no taxes at all."

"What?! No taxes? Do you really think I would be such a fool as to forswear my right as king to levy any tax I so choose?"

"No, I don't think that you are that kind of fool. You are the kind of fool who would destroy his own taxes."

"What do you mean by that? If I am king, I can declare any tax I so desire. Neither you nor any man can stop me."

"You cannot tax what isn't there. The kingdom has only so much money to give. You cannot take more and you should not even take most. You should leave some for the kingdom."

"And why should I?"

"So that the kingdom may grow and prosper. Your people are not fools. They do not expend their excess money on idle recreation. What little you leave them, they use to better themselves. They build barns to store their hay, fences to keep their cattle, wagons to carry their crops. The more you leave them, the more they will build, and with these things, they can grow ever more crops and cattle, and grow even wealthier. But if you leave them nothing, they cannot build anything, and the kingdom will stagnate."

"Very well, then, I shall not tax at all. They can take all the money, and they can build miles of fences and whole villages of barns. And they shall all be rich."

"As long as no one comes to take it away. What happens, King Arthur, when yon King Hengist hears of your vast wealth, with not a single man-at-arms to defend it? What good be his army if he cannot use it to good profit, and what fruit could be tastier than that requiring no exertion? It seems to me that old King Hengist's worst problem would be stripping the tree clean before the other kings arrived for their share."

"Very well, then, O Wise One, you tell me: how does the good king tax his people without hurting the prosperity of the kingdom?"

"With balance, my lord", said Merlin, "with balance."

Merlin was already moving toward the door. Arthur was about to command him to explain more, but Merlin suddenly whirled around and tossed something to him. "Oh, yes. You wanted this a few moments ago."

It was the key to the treasure chest. Arthur meekly pocketed it and hurried to catch up with Merlin. "This is the throne room, from which you treat with other kings. Here you decide the crucial affairs of international conflict. Here you receive messengers from far and wide, bearing news of distant events. Here you consider the complex web of relationships between the 16 kings of Britain. And here, here you declare war."

Merlin stepped over to the large map table. "I built this device to assist you. It will show you the other kings and their kingdoms. The color of their kingdom will tell you the king's stance toward you. A green kingdom is neutral -- neither for you nor against you. A blue kingdom is your enemy. A pink kingdom is one upon which you have just declared war. A grey kingdom is your vassal. A purple kingdom is your tributary -- that king is offering tribute to you in the hope of winning your favor and avoiding your wrath.

"All you do is select the king and his kingdom will appear on the map; his name and any tribute he offers you will appear here at the bottom. You see?"

He moved his hand from kingdom to kingdom, illustrating his point. One of the sample kingdoms, though, turned a sickly brown under his call. Obviously chagrined, Merlin bent down, opened a small door, and poked at something inside. "Bah! Will I never be rid of these fiendish insects that assail my every work? It must be my old and worn-out tools; I must get better tools! There!"

Satisfied, he straightened up. The map now appeared to function properly. "That's better. Now, whenever messengers arrive at Camelot, they will come to this room and await your command. When you are ready to hear them, you signal, and one by one they will tell their tales. A wise king listens often and well.

"Ah, yes, I have left out a most important item -- your crown. Here, try it on; does that not make you feel more royal? This is no ordinary crown. It will warn you of danger, of enemies coming to attack you. If ever you see it flash brightly, gird yourself for danger."



Again Merlin was off before Arthur could question him. This time, though, he opened the door for Arthur and invited him through with a sweep of his arm. Arthur emerged into the large dining room with Merlin immediately behind him. "This, my lord, is the Round Table room. Here you mingle with your noble knights."

Merlin's voice and demeanor were more subservient in front of the other people. "My lord can while away many pleasant hours listening to the tales of valor and deeds of chivalry wrought by the knights of the Round Table."

One of the knights stepped forward. "I am Sir Nosnikta", he said. "I shall serve you as my king with my sword and my sacred honor."

"Well and good, Sir Nosnikta", replied Arthur. "I may well need your services soon."

The second knight approached. "My lord, Sir Sremmus pledges his sword to your service."

"I accept the pledge of such a fine knight with pleasure."

"My lord, my companion is Sir Drofwar, as fine a knight as any in Britain."

"Greetings, Sir Drofwar. You look hungry. Have you not partaken your fill at the Round Table?"

"Yes, my lord, I have; but I am always hungry. Eating neither sates my hunger nor increases my girth."

"You are both cursed and blessed, Sir Drofwar. Let us hope that your blessing outlasts your curse, lest we come to be called the Round Knights of the Table."

Sir Sremmus broke out laughing. Sir Drofwar smiled in amiable embarrassment. Even Merlin could not erase the smirk creeping onto his face. This young king has a sense of humor, he thought. Let us hope that he can apply it to himself.

Sir Lamerok and Sir Lucas approached the king together and knelt without saying anything. "Rise, good sirs. How came you to Camelot?"

"We were banished from the court of King Augusel. We seek a noble and fair king who is worthy of our swords. The wielder of Excalibur must be such a king."

"He shall be, fair knights."

The last knight now presented himself. "Ah, Kay, you need not humble yourself so. I am still your brother."

"But you are now my king, and I owe you the loyalty and deference any other knight would."

"Very well. Rise, Sir Kay."

At this point, Merlin reclaimed Arthur, steering him over to the side of the room. "These are your knights, your most precious allies. They will fight your battles for you. Each one has distinguished himself in some exploit of valor. Each one has the fighting strength of three regular men-at-arms. You must treat them well and keep them happy."

"And how am I to know when they are unhappy?"

"There is no easy way to see into men's hearts. You must watch them closely. See how they gather together in the hall? That tells a great deal. See how Sremmus and Drofwarc stand close by each other? They are good friends. So do Lucas and Lamerok, but a little further away; they do not feel comfortable yet."

"Sir Kay, your brother, does stand close by the Round Table out of his love for you. But yon Sir Nosnikta does stand too far out, at the edge of the room. Clearly, something troubles Nosnikta that he would stand so aloof from the Round Table. He cannot be trusted now while his love for you is so weak."

"What am I to do with him, Merlin?"

"You could make him a gift of gold: five pieces is the customary amount for royal bequests. Mayhaps that will buy his heart. Or you might heap honors upon him -- some new sword of honor, or perhaps a sash to wear in battle, or even a medal. These things wear well on a knight, and may coax his heart towards more warmth. Each knight charts his own course; the honor that one craves, another disdains. The glitter of gold sparkles more brightly in one man's eyes than another."

"Be warned, however, that knights upon whom you bestow your honors command a larger share of the army on the battlefield. You may not wish to commend many of your men to a less competent knight."

"But what am I to do if none of these strategems works? Have you not some magic spell or potion that may still the treasonous stirrings in every man's heart?"

"Sadly, no; I can change the heart of a king a hundred miles away, but I cannot touch the heart of a knight in the very same room. It has something to do with royal blood. Patience. I am working on it, and may have something for you someday. For now you must rely on more traditional methods."

"But what am I to do if all other methods fail? How do I deal with a knight whose heart is hopelessly treasonous?"

"In that case, you must banish the knight from your kingdom forever. It is a sad thing, to cast out one of your closest and most valuable men, but you must be prepared to do it if the need arises. If he stays, he will subvert the loyalty of your other knights and poison your entire Round Table with the venom in his heart. Such a one can only be banished."

They were interrupted by a swelling roar arising in the courtyard. Of a sudden, the occupants of the Round Table room crowded toward the door, straining to see the source of the excitement. Arthur moved to join the press, but was held back by Merlin. "Be still; you are king now. Whatever is happening will come to you. Await it with kingly dignity."

The crowd at the door began to separate to let someone pass. The ripple moved through the crowd until at last Arthur could see the source of the excitement. A beautiful young woman emerged, led by one of the ladies-in-waiting, and halted before Arthur. The stranger knelt, eyes cast downward.

"My lord," the lady-in-waiting began, "this is Gwynevere, daughter of Hoel, king of Domnonia. Her father has sent her to be your queen as you have agreed."

"Welcome, Gwynevere. Would you be my queen?"

"I will most happily do the bidding of my father."

Arthur paused, wondering at the implications of her answer. But there really was nothing to wonder about. This marriage had been arranged even before Arthur's anointment at Uintancaestir. It added some legitimacy to his authority as king. It was also an excellent way to bind his kingdom to a stable, well-established one, thereby gaining a possible ally in times of war.

Moreover, King Hoel was getting on in years and had no male heir. Even if he didn't die for a long time, he might well present his kingdom to Arthur in vassalage to relieve himself of the burden of leading his own army in battle. All in all, this was a shrewd and well-planned marriage, and the reservations, pride and insolence of one spoiled princess were not going to ruin Arthur's plans.

Very well. We shall be married this very afternoon. Rise, Gwynevere. Go prepare thyself for the wedding."

The wedding was held in the throne room. While the important personages of the kingdom looked on, the Bishop of Uintancaestir, in Camelot for this duty, joined Arthur and Gwynevere in marriage. Arthur gave Gwynevere a small piece of granite to symbolize his faith and constancy. Gwynevere gave Arthur a sprig of oak leaves to symbolize her strength and fertility. Then Arthur presented Queen Gwynevere to the assemblage for their approval. That evening they all feasted together in the Round Table room. So ended Arthur's first day as king.

FIRST BATTLES

Arthur spent the first few weeks settling into Camelot and learning the skills of a king. He concentrated especially on meeting with every person at Camelot. Many long hours were spent with the knights, listening to their tales and probing their natures.

He found Sremmus to be an outgoing and warm person, always ready with a laugh. Sremmus was a steady and reliable man; most people, sensing this, brought their troubles to him. He was not, however, the kind of man whose opinions commanded wide respect. Nor was he the greatest of warriors; perhaps his humanity and lust for life prevented him from excelling at the terrible art of killing. Nevertheless, he would certainly perform his battlefield duties with competence.

Lamerok, on the other hand, was a poor fighter. He seemed eager to please Arthur and strove hard for recognition, but he lacked the fortitude of a great knight. Arthur could tell that this man would never tap the greatness that lives trapped inside all men. Lamerok's great love was for horses. He had a number of fine animals, and was always looking for more, although he could ill afford to maintain the ones he already had. On the battlefield, Lamerok's gigantic charger would undoubtedly put fear into many an enemy heart. If only they knew that the knight riding the mighty steed was not half so imposing as the horse.

Drofwarc was perhaps the least interesting of the knights. He was not a particularly good or bad knight; other than an uncanny talent for speaking backwards, he had no special interests, virtues, or vices. In social gatherings he followed along with everyone else, participating enough to be a member of the group, but never so much as to make a mark or even be noticeable. Drofwarc was a pleasant, bland fellow.

Lucas was definitely a warrior at heart. He stayed on the training field long after all the others had gone to meals. An intense fire burned within Lucas, a raging desire to be the mightiest knight on the face of the earth. He was very, very good, certainly Arthur's best fighter, and all the men held his skills in high esteem. He seemed to care little for the entertainments and pleasures that were available to all the knights, preferring always to sharpen his martial skills. He took immense pride in teaching the other men the martial arts, and especially in leading them. Yet he remained a loner, isolated from all other men.

Arthur found Nosnikta to be the most difficult knight to understand. He was very distant, seldom speaking with anybody. At meals he ate quietly and left early. He never seemed to smile. He didn't seem unhappy; Arthur decided that he was a loner through and through. He did seem extremely pleased when Arthur presented him with a fine new sword. Arthur could not fathom the man's fighting skills, either. They seemed adequate without being extraordinary. Nosnikta remained an enigma to Arthur.

Arthur enjoyed sharing in the camaraderie of his knights, but Merlin frequently dragged him off for lectures on economics.

"Why do you insist on boring me with all this nonsense when you can plainly see I have neither interest nor skill in it?"

"It is indeed for both reasons that I lecture you. Because you have no skill in the matter, you must learn how to manage your kingdom's wealth. Because you have no interest, you must be taught why it is so important."

"But it isn't important. The people are perfectly happy right now and I have good knights and a good army; why fidget and fumble with all this nonsense when the kingdom is in such good condition?"

"Because there is no way of knowing how long matters will remain so pleasant. What will you do when a conquering king leads a mighty army into the kingdom and begins to lay waste the land?"

"I will lead my army out to destroy him."

"Six knights, one king, and six men-at-arms against an army of 50 men-at-arms? That's a heroic way to die, surely the stuff of legends, but not very practical."

"Then I shall build an army."

"With what, young one? Twigs? It takes gold to hire and train a man-at-arms, one piece of gold every week for his pay, food, squire, horse, and weapons. A mighty army of 50 men-at-arms would cost you 50 pieces of gold every week. That is more money than the whole kingdom could supply you with, even if you taxed it to the limit."

"Then how am I to get that much gold?"

"Perhaps you should study economics!"

"Very well, you clever teacher, you have won the joust. You may do your worst to me. Please begin by telling me how I might raise the money for such an army."

"The good king determines the total wealth of his country, and divides it into three portions. One portion is set aside for the growth of the realm; it is untaxed. In peaceful or secure times, the good king will leave three parts out of four for his kingdom. In normal times, perhaps one part of two will go untaxed. In dangerous times of war, three parts of four must go to taxes. And in extreme emergencies, the good king will take all of the kingdom's wealth for his taxes. But remember that there is a difference between the taxes you demand of your people and the taxes they actually pay. If your demand is reasonable, it will be paid. But if you demand more than can be paid, you will collect less than you demand."

"The other two portions that the king considers go to his treasure chest and to his army. Of these, the army is the one you are most immediately concerned with. Most of your regular taxes will go to your army. One gold piece will pay for the maintenance of one man-at-arms. Whatever money you do not spend on the army goes to the treasure chest. If all goes well, you will never make use of your treasure chest except to put gold into it. Your treasure chest allows you to weather the bad times. If you suddenly need a great deal of money, you can take it from the treasure chest. The good king insures that the treasure chest has enough gold in it to sustain his army for at least 4 weeks, 6 weeks is better, 8 weeks is very good."

"What kind of bad times do you speak of?"

"You'll have plenty of opportunity to hear about bad times later. For now I want to continue with the subject at hand. To summarize! you raise only enough taxes to keep the army going and the treasure chest happy. Do you think you understand all that?"

"Verily, and quite simple it all is. All I need to do is keep the treasure chest full and when trouble threatens, spend lots of money from it on a large and powerful army. When the battle is over, I disband the army. That way I don't need to pay for it every week."

"Your thriftiness is exceeded only by your ignorance. Do you seriously believe that you can turn a country bumpkin into a man-at-arms by throwing some armor onto his shoulders and putting a sword into his hand? It takes years of training before a man-at-arms becomes an experienced and powerful fighter. He can fight from the first day, but he will be only an armored peasant. An experienced army would cut down your instant army like a farmer cutting down hay."

"For this reason you must never, never lightly waste even a single man-at-arms. Far too much time and training has gone into him to throw his life away lightly. Nor can you reduce spending on your army. Once you have trained a man-at-arms, it is the height of folly to send him away. You must slowly expand your army as your wealth accumulates, never allowing it to shrink."



A trumpet sounded from the throne room. "It seems you have a message awaiting you. Shall we go see what the world has laid at your doorstep?"

Arthur followed Merlin out the door. A large crowd had gathered in the throne room to see what event had transpired. A messenger waited nervously before the throne itself. Arthur stood in the doorway, waiting for the tumult to die down in his presence, then strode to the throne and seated himself.

"What news bring you, messenger?"

The messenger knelt before Arthur and looked downward, clasping his hands together as if in prayer. "O most noble, most exalted King Arthur, wielder of Excalibur, friend of all men, kind and merciful king, I bring you a message from King Hengist, written in his own hand, in his own words, in which I had no part."

"Read the message, messenger."

The messenger looked upward for an instant, his face white as a sheet. He fumbled at his bag for a few seconds before pulling out a parchment. He unrolled it with trembling fingers, cleared his throat, and started to speak, but only a guttural croak came out of his mouth. Clearing his throat again, he started to read. "The upstart whelp Arthur has usurped the throne of Camelot with the help of a band of rogues who dare to call themselves knights. I, Hengist, king of Lundenwic, will not tolerate this insult to all royal blood everywhere. I will dine in Camelot within a fortnight, and hang the heads of these villeins from the battlements."

The silence was broken by a single gasp from somewhere in the room. "O great and merciful king, look kindly upon this miserable messenger whose bitter task it was to carry this terrible message. Suffer me to go my miserable way in peace."

Arthur did not respond. He stared at the wall across the room, frightened and trying to look angry, brave, and nonchalant. He was intensely aware that all eyes (save those of the groveling messenger) were focused on him. There was nothing to be done here, in front of everybody. He would have to discuss it with Merlin. He stood up, which act triggered a paroxysm of shuddering and groveling from the messenger.

Noticing the messenger's distress, Arthur at last spoke. "Go your way in peace, messenger."

Then, to the assembly: "Let no man fret over this news. Hengist and his army are no match for Excalibur. I am the rightful king and Excalibur will carry my message to Hengist. I go now to rest."

He strode toward the door, followed by Merlin. They went to Merlin's room. "What am I going to do, Merlin? Who is this Hengist? How big is his army? Is he any good? Can I beat him?"

"Hengist is king of Lundenwic, a kingdom to the east of us. He is a hard, fierce man, full of hate, who spends all of his life on the battlefield. The only surprise in this is that he chose you from among all of his enemies to attack. He is a good general and his army is well led. He can probably beat you."

This was definitely not the answer that Arthur wanted to hear. He sank down to the floor and covered his face with his hands. "We shall all be killed. We are all going to die!"

"Nonsense. You will fight, and you will lose, but you will not die. There is always this castle to come home to. Hengist can never break the defenses of Camelot. You are perfectly safe inside these walls."

"Really? You mean, there is nothing to worry about?"

"There is much to worry about. Hengist knows full well that he cannot break into Camelot. The only way he can get to you is if you come out to fight him. That is why he sent that nasty message! to anger you into fighting him at the first opportunity. And if you stay inside Camelot castle, he will surely ravage the land, burning and killing in an effort to bring you out of the castle. If you do not fight him, your land will be ruined and Hengist will take back to Lundenwic the wealth of your kingdom. You must fight him, but at the same time you must not be killed."

"And how am I to manage that?"

"Ho-ho, do not worry about that. Just do what comes naturally."

Arthur did not understand Merlin's advice, but he did not press. He had much to do. For the next few days, he commissioned four more men-at-arms and worked furiously to train these green soldiers into effective fighters. Merlin tried to dissuade him from this rash course, warning him that raw soldiers were useless, but Arthur would have none of Merlin's logic. With the decision to fight made, he had resolved to fight with the largest army he could raise.

A few weeks later, plumes of smoke announced the arrival of Hengist. Arthur and Kay stood in the watchtower of the castle, watching the arriving enemy. "I count 10 knights and 20 men-at-arms", announced Sir Kay. "Those are not very good odds for our six knights and 10 men-at-arms. What say you, Arthur -- do we fight or do we wait?"

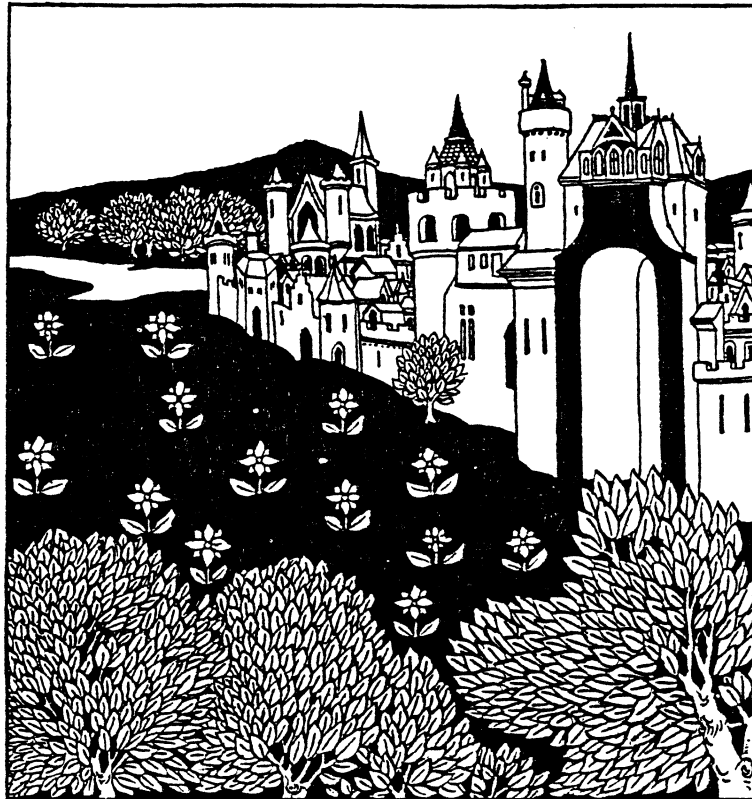
"We have nothing to wait for. We shall fight."

The little army gathered in the courtyard. The men mounted their war horses, set their armor straight, and checked their weapons. Then, when all were ready, the drawbridge was lowered and out they rode, through the town, to the field outside the town.

There Hengist waited with all his men drawn up in line for battle. Unlike Arthur's knights, each of whom had his own distinctive crest, Hengist's knights all bore the crest of their king on their shields. It was an impressive sight, all those knights and men-at-arms lined up and waiting for battle. Arthur put all his men into line, organizing them in the sequence he thought best. Each knight had one man-at-arms under his leadership; Arthur had two men in his royal guard. By contrast, Hengist had four men-at-arms in his royal guard, while most of his knights had two men-at-arms.

A large crowd of peasants was gathering on Arthur's side of the field. They knew the fate that lay in store for them if Arthur were defeated. Their homes burned, their cattle stolen, their crops destroyed, they would have little chance of surviving the coming winter. For them, this battle was a life-and-death matter. They came armed with clubs and sticks, pitchforks, shovels, whatever they could lay their hands on. They meant to fight. Neither side acknowledged their presence; they were "residue".

When Arthur was ready with his army, he raised his arm. Hengist raised his arm. They both dropped their arms and the two armies began slowly moving towards each other.



At this moment, the peasants raised a ragged yell and dashed across the open space towards the enemy. Reaching them, they began to hack and bash the slowly riding soldiers. The enemy knights regarded them with disgust, only bothering to kill the most persistent of them. It was the task of the men-at-arms to dispose of the scum, a job they seemed to enjoy. An armored man-at-arms, wielding a two-handed broadsword, has little to fear from untrained peasants. Each swordstroke sank home with a satisfying thud, while the peasants' ripostes were mere annoying bangs on armor plate. But some of Hengist's men-at-arms, perhaps the less experienced ones, did not find the slaughter so easy. Indeed, they were hard put to defend themselves. Perhaps four or five of them fell to the peasants' blows. Ten times that many peasants fell; the rest quickly lost their courage and ran.

The odds were now a little better. Arthur's men looked a little less frightened. Slowly the gap between the armies shrank. They collided with the clanging of sword against shield. Arthur raised Excalibur high and shouted a mighty war cry, but was cut short by a blow to his helmet. Somewhat chastened (when a sword hits your helmet it can make an earsplitting racket), he set to work pounding on his nearest opponent. His opponents smashed back, pounding on Arthur.

All of this pounding created a horrible din but accomplished very little, armor being quite effective. Eventually, of course, someone would get a lucky stroke in and penetrate a weak spot, or perhaps simply crush a section of armor. But that would take a while. The real problem would come when men tired and began to lose heart.

Lamerok was the first to hesitate. Arthur, seeing him falter, shouted at him to fight, but already fear was welling in him. He looked wildly about, then suddenly bolted and ran, his man-at-arms following.

"Coward!" Arthur screamed. "Come back and fight!"

But Lamerok was gone. Too late, Arthur realized that one of his own guard had already been struck down by Hengist himself. That left Arthur and one man to fight Hengist and three men. Grimly he fought on, but then Sremmus lost a man and bolted. At about the same time, Nosnikta lost his nerve and took to his heels. All along the fighting line, men were looking around anxiously. They could all see the fleeing knights. If the odds were bad earlier, they were worse now. There is no point in fighting when everyone else is running. Suddenly, the whole of Arthur's army simply broke ranks and ran.

Even Arthur was overwhelmed by the mad panic of the moment and joined in the scramble to get back to the castle. It was a wild, chaotic rush, a desperate attempt to get to safety regardless of cost. Men trampled one another, abandoned their belongings, clawed their way to the castle.

When at last they were within the safety of the castle courtyard, sanity returned. Oddly enough, only three men were lost in the entire debacle. Arthur's first battle was over. He had lost, and the shame of having run, the sadness for the three dead men, and the real loss to his kingdom weighed heavily on his heart. But the dominant emotion he felt was joyous relief, relief that he was alive, relief that he had faced the enemy and had not been annihilated. He had expected it to be much more terrible. For having lost a battle, he had gotten off lightly.

But there was time for neither sadness nor rejoicing, for Hengist was continuing to pillage the kingdom. Within a week a delegation of peasants was before Arthur, begging that he defend them from the ravages of Hengist's army, and promising that a sizable contingent of peasants would assemble if only they had Arthur's army as a rallying point. Again Arthur faced the difficult decision, to fight or to wait. He had lost three men in the previous battle, but Hengist had lost five. The peasants weren't very efficient, but they would surely take a few more of the enemy with them. Furthermore, Arthur had already recruited a promising young lad to replace one of the lost three. There was no decision to make; Arthur knew he had to fight.

Once again the men mounted their horses. Once again they rode out from the castle. This time they had to ride 20 miles to the meadow of Peonnum, where Hengist's army was encamped. On arrival, both armies drew up into their battle lines. Hengist had 10 knights and 15 men-at-arms; Arthur had six knights and eight men-at-arms.

As promised, a large and motley collection of peasants converged on the meadow, brandishing a ridiculous array of implements whose value against an armored knight was mostly acoustic. Arthur shook his head sadly; they were going to be massacred. But, he consoled himself, at least this way they had a fighting chance. If his army weren't there, they would be hunted down and massacred anyway. Perhaps this way they could take a few with them.

Once again the two kings raised their arms, and once again the two lines began to move toward each other. Once again the rabble of peasants surged forward. It particularly disturbed Arthur to see so many die so pointlessly. But when the last peasant had fled, the piles of ragged dead included another four armored bodies.

Heartened by this beneficial development, Arthur's men began to shout confidently. They pressed forward with vigor, and when the two lines collided, there was such a mighty din as was heard all the way to the village on Defereal. The men fought hard. Within five minutes several on each side had fallen, including two of Hengist's own knights.

But the tide of battle was slowly turning against Arthur's men. Even though they gave as good as they got, they had been outnumbered from the start, and their disadvantage grew with each casualty. This time Lamerok was the first to hesitate. Then Drowarc, who in the surge of battle had been swept from the main body of Arthur's men, lost heart. Exhausted and isolated, he ceased his attack and tried only to defend himself. A moment later, Arthur saw him go down under the combined blows of many assailants. Then Lucas lost his man-at-arms, and that rattled him. He swung his horse around and galloped back in the direction of Camelot. That did it. Within seconds the morale of the entire army collapsed. Men turned and ran. Once again Arthur found himself caught up in the flight.

This time, however, he was more collected. He single-handedly covered their retreat, warding off pursuers. Once again they found themselves safe in Camelot, nursing their wounds. Again three men-at-arms had been lost. His remaining five men included three who had joined in the weeks before Hengist's arrival. They were quite green. Worse, Arthur had lost one of his knights, Drofwarc the Dull. Arthur's little army had been shattered.

He could again console himself with his enemy's sufferings! Hengist had lost many men and two knights. The battle may have been lost, but he was satisfied with its outcome. He had faced a fierce and terrible opponent and had inflicted heavy losses upon him. Hengist had no choice now but to return home.

As Arthur expected, Hengist struck camp and began moving eastward, toward his own kingdom. He was thunderstruck when word came that Hengist had pitched camp on the plain at Wodness Beorg and was sending out pillage parties who were again ravaging the countryside. "The man is a fool!" Arthur muttered. "He cannot possibly wish to fight again, not after the thrashing I gave him. What possesses him that he should behave so perversely?"

There was nothing left to do save fight again. Having replaced one of his three losses from the previous battle, Arthur had five knights and six men-at-arms. Off they rode in search of Hengist. This time, Hengist's army numbered but eight knights and eight men-at-arms. A large and very ugly collection of peasants was lurking in the forest next to the plain of Wodnes Beorg. The battle began, and they played their role, finishing off six of the men-at-arms at fearful loss to themselves.

The outcome of the battle was almost preordained. Hengist's men fought for a few moments, but they could see the odds. Within a few moments, several of them had ceased fighting. Within another few moments, the whole army was in flight. They left behind another two of their comrades in the dust.

Arthur watched them run, breathing hard from his exertions. He did not feel triumph or exultation. Somehow the elation of victory was lost on him. There had been no doubt in his mind as to the outcome, and so there was no joy when the inevitable came to pass. His men, on the other hand, were beside themselves with jubilation. Twice before they had been humiliated by this invader, and now they were the victors. They galloped around the battlefield, trampling the bodies of the fallen enemy, hoisting his banners high in the air and taking swipes at them, shouting and laughing. Off to the enemy camp they rode, to loot it of its goods. The real wealth of the camp lay in its cattle pens, where stood the cattle stolen from farms all over the kingdom. A hundred head of cattle were there, and they were all now Arthur's. Their peasant-owners were almost surely dead. There was nothing to do but take them back to Camelot and sell them. His treasury would be a little richer, but the loss in revenues from the pillaged land was far greater.

On his way back to Camelot, Arthur toured the pillaged areas. The destruction was almost total. Every building had been burned, every farm implement smashed, every peasant who had not fled, killed. The survivors would rebuild, but it would be a long time before this was productive land again. Arthur grieved for the loss, and he knew he had been right to fight. Had he not fought, this tragedy would have been repeated all over the kingdom. It was a sad king and a happy army that filed over the drawbridge into Camelot.

A LARGER WORLD

The first task facing Arthur on his return was the rebuilding of the army. A new attack on the scale of the last one would surely prove too much for his men to handle. It was also not lost on Arthur that, had his army been a little larger at the outset, he might well have driven Hengist away at the first battle. Arthur therefore resolved to build an army of ten men-at-arms, more than twice as big as the previous army.

At Merlin's urging, though, he raised the army slowly, always keeping the budget for the army just one gold piece more than was necessary to sustain the existing army. This, Merlin assured him, was the thriftiest way to expand the army. It was slower, but it wasted no money. Attempts to raise the size of the army quickly required huge amounts of money, according to Merlin.

Meanwhile, messengers poured into Camelot with tales of war all over the island. Hengist's attack on Arthur had precipitated a series of campaigns. Pellinore, who deeply hated Hengist, had taken advantage of Hengist's absence from Lundenwic to pillage Hengist's own kingdom. Uryens thereupon attacked Pellinore. Augusel campaigned on Lot. Penda attacked Horsa. It was a bewildering collection of stories that confronted the young king.

"Merlin, tell me, what does all of this mean? Why are all of these kings attacking each other? And what course should I take?"

"It is a complex course of events that is taking shape now, my king. All the old rivalries, the ancient hatreds and alliances, are coming back to us now. I fear now that the kings of Britain will all contest with each other for rule of the island.

"I had hoped you would have more time to prepare before your test came, but they will not allow you that. Gird yourself for more battle, Arthur. In the coming months you may have to defend yourself yet again."

A trumpet played a fanfare in the throne room.

"Another messenger! What new confounding tales has he for us? What new twists and turns will this situation take?"

But there was no messenger waiting for Arthur when he entered the throne room. Instead, a knight stood waiting before the throne. As Arthur entered the room, he knelt.

"Greetings, Sir Knight. What journey brings you through Camelot?"

"This is not a way-station for me, my lord -- it is my destination. I have come from far Luel to offer my sword to you as rightful king of all Britain."

"What is your name, Sir Knight?"

"I am Gawain, my lord."

"Luel is in the domain of King Baldulf. Why do you offer your sword to an alien king?"

"My lord, I seek to win riches and glory by proving my worthiness as a knight. King Baldulf cares not for the skills of a great knight. He is a weakling of a king; the men laugh at him behind his back. I felt shame at being in his service. So I have come to Camelot in search of a king who will use my skills."

"You will have ample opportunity to show your talents, Sir Gawain. Welcome to Camelot. Take a place with my other knights at the Round Table."

They feasted in honor of Sir Gawain that night. Gawain told of his early knighthood, how he had fought against barbarians in Gaul, and how he came to return to Britain. All the knights of the Round Table saluted him, and welcomed him as their comrade and brother.

Weeks passed. More messengers arrived, each bringing shocking and sad tales of mayhem, battle, and death. Kings were on the march everywhere. It seemed that the entire island was on fire. What was worse, there seemed to be no pattern to the wars being fought. Arthur built his army even larger, to 15 men-at-arms. This put a strain on his little kingdom, so recently ravaged by Hengist, but Arthur judged it better than risking another destructive invasion. As his men trained, Arthur paced and planned, trying to analyze the events of the last months.

"Merlin, why do the kings fight the way they do? Why does Augusel fight Uryens? Why did Penda attack Horsa, when other enemies were nearer at hand? Why even did Hengist attack me?"

"It is all part of a larger picture, a long story that stretches back far into the past, before your father. When the Romans left Britain, they left behind no one king to rule. A host of minor kings, dukes, and even single knights set up small countries as best they could. Without a strong king to unite them, they fought among themselves.

"Meanwhile, the Saxons, realizing there would be no resistance, began occupying the lands that they once only pillaged. Even then there was no unification, no king to resist them. And their kingdoms grew at the expense of the Celtic lands.

"Then your father, Uther Pendragon, came. He was a strong leader and a mighty warrior. He fought tirelessly, incessantly, against Celt and Saxon alike, conquering all. For 20 years he ranged up and down the island, fighting battles all the way.

"He managed to beat down all opposition and reduce all of his enemies to vassalage, but his grip on them was precarious. He was successful in destroying the smaller dukedoms. But many of his stronger opponents were not beaten, merely reduced to a state of sullen vassalage. They waited only for the chance to revolt. Many were the times they thought their chance had come, only to be proven wrong. I still can't believe some of the narrow escapes your father had." Merlin chuckled wistfully.

"How many times his enemies thought they had him at last, and how many times he confounded them. That man had a charmed life," Merlin winked at Arthur.

"Of course, I had something to do with a few of those miraculous escapes. But the shame of all was that it was so unnecessary. If Uther had only tried a more conciliatory policy, he might have cooled the flames of rebellion and eliminated resistance to his authority. But no, he kept saying that he found corpses far more reasonable than living rebels. And so he fought on, always winning, never succeeding until the day he died.

"On that day his enemies rejoiced, and they all came forward to lay claim to their ancient kingdoms. Saxons in the east, Celts in the west, all scrambled to carve up Uther's empire. The wars that were fought on his death were terrible. The island was bled white, and the people suffered horribly. Nobody won any of those wars. Many lost; they managed to narrow it down to fifteen contenders. But mutual exhaustion set in. Nobody had the strength to fight. A truce was called, and it eventually grew into a general peace. Mind you, nobody agreed to the peace; nobody had the strength to start a new war.

"And so things have stood for the last twenty years, while you, Arthur, grew to manhood. The other kings have grown old and settled. Some of them have died, and new, more foolish ones have taken their places. But for twenty years no one dared break the informal truce, until Hengist attacked you. Armies had withered and wasted as kings concentrated on rebuilding the shattered land. But now a new round of warfare looms, and soon the blood will flow. Every king knows this, and every king all over the land is building his armies."

"Every single king? How can you know this to be true, Merlin?"

"Because I have seen it with my own eyes. I have been inside the castles of the other kings, and I have seen their doings."

"Show me, Merlin. Let me see the castles of the other kings."

"Whose castle would you see?"

"Let me see my enemy Hengist."

"Very well, it is done."

"What do you mean? Nothing has changed. We are still here in your room in Camelot."

"Think ye so, King Arthur? Come inspect your treasury room."

Arthur complied. Opening the door, he stepped into the treasury room, and immediately noticed that something was wrong. Bending over the treasure chest, he looked inside.

"Merlin, a thief has made off with at least a hundred pieces of gold!"

"No, my king, for it is not your gold to start with."

The door to the room opened and in stepped -- Hengist!

Arthur shouted for the guards, but Hengist seemed completely unaware of either Arthur or Merlin. Muttering to himself, he ruffled through some parchments, found the document he sought, and left.

"You see?" asked Merlin. "We are in the castle of King Hengist, as spirits. We are invisible to all eyes. We move in perfect safety."

"Your magic has fooled me again, Merlin. Of what use is this game?"

"You are the one who wanted to visit Hengist. What do you want to learn here?"

"Let us at least determine what we can of his army. Let's see...."

Arthur began rummaging through the parchments in the room.

"He obviously doesn't have much in his treasury. Here's why: his taxes are...20 pieces of gold per week. And his army is...um...also 20 pieces of gold per week. No wonder his treasury is so small! And no wonder that his people are so oppressed! He taxes them heavily to support a huge army. Very interesting!"

"There is more, young king. Let us move to the throne room."

Through the narrow door into the throne room they went, and what Arthur saw was unlike Camelot.

"Where is the map table?" he asked Merlin.

"That is something I built for you; no other king has anything like it."

"What is this that I see? What are all these crowns?"

"This is an illusion that I have created for your benefit. The crowns of all the kings of Britain are shown here. The position of each crown shows how Hengist feels about that king. See, there is the crown labeled 'Arthur'. See how far to the left it is? That is because Hengist hates you. So, too, does he hate Pellinore who pillaged his land while you were gone. Indeed, Hengist seems to dislike almost every other king in Britain. Only towards Uryens and Penda does he seem mildly disposed. This Hengist is definitely a vile man."

"Indeed so, Merlin. He must have few friends."

"A fact of which you may some day take good advantage. Come, let us spy on his feasting room."

They moved on into the dining hall, similar in size and shape to the Round Table room in Camelot. At the large table in the center of the room sat Hengist conversing with a fair damsel, a glint in his eye. His queen, Malmagest, sat quietly nearby, ignoring his flirtation. His knights stood about, boasting, eating, and drinking.

"This room has its magic," said Merlin. "If we journey to a castle and the king is not banqueting, he is gone on campaign. You will see only the knights he has left to defend his castle. The name of his victim will appear in blood on yonder wall!"

"How convenient,"

"It is time to return to Camelot, sire. Follow me," Merlin led him back to the false Merlin's room. In the wink of an eye they were back in Merlin's room in Camelot.



"That is wonderful magic, Merlin," Arthur began. "Let us visit all the castles of all the kings."

"That might strain my magic too much for one day. I have a better way. Let us take a walk through the forest, and I shall tell you about the kings of Britain."

They set off, Merlin leading the way. Soon they were deep in the forest, far from any roads, trails, or people.

"Tell me now, Merlin. Tell me about the kings of Britain."

"Very well, then. I shall begin with Augusel, king of Pictland in the far north."

"Augusel is a strong king ruling a weak kingdom. Pictland has never been a wealthy land, and Augusel's ambitions exceed his kingdom's capacities. He is an excitable man who will respond to adversity with fury, and to warmth with surprising charity. He fears nothing, and treats his vassals with fairness and consideration. He is a poor commander, not known for military prowess."

"This is a man of many contrasts. He loves Garwin, Baldulf, Colgrin, Idres, and Lot, but for Uryens, his closest neighbor, he feels but mild love. For his part, Uryens hates Augusel. Augusel's hate is reserved for Hengist, Horsa, and Royns, but most particularly for Hoel. To you, Arthur, Augusel is indifferent."

"Uryens, king of Daiiriada, is a Celt like Augusel. Uryens is an apprehensive king, deeply concerned about his position. He sees plots and attacks where there are none, and suspects all those around him. He will go to any lengths to achieve the security he craves. He is an excellent battlefield commander. He dislikes his neighbors Augusel, Lot, and Idres, suspecting them of conspiracies against him. He is not a friendly man; Heol is the only king whom he greatly likes. Hoel finds him unpleasant. For you, Arthur, he feels no special hatred; you are the recipient of only Uryens' normal supply of dislike. His greatest hate is reserved for Hengist.

"Lot is king of Lleudiniawn. He created his kingdom out of the lands of Reget and Boernice many years ago. He would very much like to expand his kingdom, but his earlier wars have exhausted the wealth of the kingdom. Lot is an aggressive king; he will surely attack his neighbors as soon as he gets the opportunity.

"The most likely objects of Lot's attacks are Royns, Hoel, and Baldulf. Fortunately for them, Lot is an utterly inept tactician; he will probably lose all of his battles. Lot may well form a pact with his good friend Idres.

"Idres rules Reget. He is the son of the mighty Bagdemagus. In the wars following the death of Uther Pendragon, Bagdemagus conquered the entire northern part of the island. He then set out to conquer the remainder of Britain. But then Augusel led the wild Picts of the north in a revolt against Bagdemagus. When Bagdemagus proved unable to quell the revolt, Uryens, a duke under Bagdemagus, declared himself king and made war on Bagdemagus.

"At this point, Lot, an ambitious duke of northern Boernice, offered to help reconquer the north if Bagdemagus would recognize him as king of a small portion. Bagdemagus agreed, and Lot, who was at the time a mighty warrior, energetically conquered much of his old kingdom, keeping most of it for himself. Only Reget remained his. At this point, Bagdemagus died under very mysterious circumstances; his weakling son Idres inherited the kingdom.

"Idres now resents Lot and Uryens, but has come to good terms with Augusel. He rejects the ways of his father and seeks to guarantee peace for his kingdom. The army and knights that he inherited from his father are magnificent. Man for man, they can defeat any force in the country. You will be pleased to know that Idres is very well disposed to you as a king who can unify Britain without another long series of wars.

"Beornice is the land ruled by Colgrin, who came here from the mainland and conquered it not long after Uther Pendragon died. Colgrin is a charismatic king driven by his ambition. He would rule the entire island, and will gladly spill rivers of blood to do so. He is kindly disposed towards Horsa and Royns, but hates Lot, who stole several counties from his kingdom. His hatred for Lot has driven him into intrigues with Idres, who he hopes will attack Lot.

"His greatest enemy, however, is Hengist. They were rivals on the mainland; they fought the Huns together, but Hengist betrayed Colgrin and his army was destroyed. They both were forced to flee the fury of the Huns and came to Britain with their followers seeking to build a new life. Colgrin has sworn revenge against Hengist.

"Baldulf is a minor Saxon king who came to Britain long ago. He was defeated by Uther Pendragon and accepted Uther as his liege. When Uther died, Baldulf enlarged his kingdom at the expense of several neighboring kings. However, he has settled down now and seems content with his holdings. His kingdom, called Elmet, is in a wild and mountainous area. His strongest feelings are for his Saxon and Angle kin. His hatred for Hengist is unbounded, while he holds Horsa and Cheldric in very high esteem. His army is devoted to the old man even though his military sense is starting to slip.

"Garwin is king of Powys. The son of another of Uther's vassals, Garwin too seeks not the flames of war. But woe to the king who attacks Garwin! His army is excellent, and he is a very clever commander. Moreover, the lust for revenge holds the place in Garwin's heart that ambition holds in the hearts of other kings. Methinks, though, that if Garwin is soundly beaten, he will accept his defeat with good grace and readily become vassal. Like many of the other Saxon kings, Garwin hates Hengist and Lot.

"Sater is king of Deira. He is a small-headed man, with eyes set too close together. There is much meanness in Sater; he will fight wars for spite alone. He hates and fears Colgrin, who took land away from him. For this reason he supports Lot, Colgrin's enemy. He also likes Hoel and Uryens -- I know not why. Beware this king -- he is most dangerous.

"Penda is the powerful ruler of Mercia. He is the only Celtic ruler to successfully resist the foreign invaders. The other Celtic kings have retained their independence mostly through distance from the invaders. Penda has faced them and defeated them in battle again and yet again. His constant wars have inured him well. He trusts and likes no other king; yet neither does he deeply hate any, save of course the universally detested Hengist.

"King Pellinore of Gwynedd may be one of your best friends. He holds you in very high esteem as the man to restore Celtic rule to Britain. He himself does not wish to undertake the task, for he does not see himself as a mighty warrior, even though in truth his army is a very competent force.

"Among his neighbors, he has established a very positive relationship with his Celtic cousin Royns. He dislikes the Saxon Garwin and detests Baldulf. Despite this, Pellinore is a man of generous disposition, not given to violent fits of ill-temper.

"Cheldric, king of East Engle, is the least vicious of the Angle-Saxon invaders. A refugee from the Huns, he came here with no grand plans of conquest. He will strike enemies who attack him, but he will not start a war. He feels great affinity for his fellow Germanic tribes, even Hengist. Although his heart is not so warm toward Celts, he cannot be said to hate them. His peaceful ways are reflected in his army, whose chiefest use is ceremonial.

"And now I come to Hengist, king of Lundenwic, the most hated man in Britain. It is hard to imagine how a man could cultivate such universal enmity, but Hengist has succeeded by dint of tireless evil-doing. His ambition...boundless; his charity...untouched; his capacity for wickedness...beyond measure. He seems to hate the other kings almost as much as they hate him. Only Cheldric and Lot have won his esteem, perhaps because Lot is traitor to Colgrin and Cheldric is so generous.

"Horsa is Hengist's brother, although one could not tell it from their behaviour. It seems that Hengist even betrayed Horsa at one time, so now their relationship is one of mutual distrust. Horsa is not as evil as Hengist, but he still possesses many of the traits of his Angle brothers. He has an ugly side that shows when he is crossed, and can be very stubborn indeed. He hates Hoel only; otherwise, he is disposed to leave kings in peace.

"Royns is typical of the Celtic kings before Uther, although Royns was not king during Uther's time. He has an aversion to warfare, but will fight if need be. He could just as soon be vassal as king, but only if a true king could be found. He leads a potent army but would rather not use it. He feels great affection for his uncle Hoel, but for some reason his affection has not been transferred to you.

"Lastly comes Hoel, King of Domnia and your father-in-law. Hoel is a tired old king. He is weary of battle and seeks to solve all of his problems with a smile and a charitable disposition. Such attitudes might have worked in the days when all Britain was Celtic, but now Hoel survives only because your kingdom lies between him and the rest of the world. Hoel is a weakling and will surely become a vassal if he does not die first.

"Those are the kings of Britain, their stories and their characters. Now that I have told you about them, you can visit each castle in turn and carefully consider all that I have told you. Is this all clear to you?"

Arthur was asleep.



"Welcome to Camelot, Sir Lancelot. We all know of your many exploits. We are honored to have so great and virtuous a knight visit us."

"I come not to visit but to petition for admission to the noble comradeship of the Round Table. Far and wide have I searched to find a cause worthy of my sword; glad is my heart that I find in Arthur a king whose cause is just. I offer you my sword in your service."

"I cannot offer you the wealth and trappings to which a knight such as yourself must be accustomed. I can only offer you a position of honor at the Round Table. Is this acceptable to you?"

"Most acceptable, my lord, for I care not for material possessions. I seek only the honor that I may earn with my sword."

"Nobly spoken, Sir Lancelot. Join us. Let us hold a great feast in honor of Lancelot, our newest and greatest comrade."

He stood up to go, but was stopped by one of the court advisors. "Excuse me, sire, but a messenger begs audience with you."

"Truly? Where is he?"

"In yon corner, my lord. He has been waiting quietly since midday."

Arthur turned in the direction indicated. The people along his line of sight parted to reveal, cowering in a corner, the same messenger who had brought Hengist's first message. "You again?" Arthur asked. The man nodded slowly, saying nothing. Although his presence spelled evil tidings, Arthur couldn't help but smile at the poor man's terror. "I assume you bring to me a message similar to the last," Arthur said.

The man stepped forward a few feet from the corner and fell to his knees. "Yes, most noble King Arthur, victor of W-W-Wodnes Beorg, w-w-wielder..."

"Yes, yes, I know. And your master sends his usual courtesies?"

"Um...m-m-my lord..." the messenger stammered, not taking Arthur's meaning.

"Tell your master, the mighty King Hengist, that Arthur sends him warmest greetings. That Arthur looks forward eagerly to the day when they may embrace again. And that Excalibur is also eager for that day."

The messenger stifled a groan. A new burden to bear, a new risk to take. Messengering was much safer when kings exchanged mere pleasantries and idle gossip. "Yes," he sighed. "My lord." Then he scuttled out on his new mission.

Arthur stood and addressed the assemblage. "King Hengist marches on us again. His army is bigger than it was when last we met in battle. But this time we are ready. We shall drive him out of Camelot in our first battle."

SECOND BATTLE

In the weeks before Hengist's army reached Camelot, Arthur and his men trained hard and well. He resisted the urge to frantically increase the size; he added only two new men. For the most part, he concentrated on building the morale of his men. He knew that this battle would be won or lost not with numbers, but in the hearts of his men.

Arthur used Merlin's magic to check on Hengist's army a second time. To his dismay he discovered that Hengist had raised the size of his army to 40 men-at-arms, much too large to face. After deep deliberation, he decided that he needed further use of Merlin's magic.

"I need you again, Merlin. You must cause a plague to descend upon Hengist's army. Only then will I be able to face Hengist."

"A plague you desire? That is difficult magic -- it will take much of my strength to do it."

"But you can do it, can you not?"

"Yes, I can, but must you take so drastic a step?"

"Hengist marches on my country with an army that could be twice the size of my own! Can you imagine a better time for drastic action?"

"No, I suppose not. Very well, it shall be done. But after I have done what you require, I shall go take my rest, and I shall not return until I am recovered."

"Yes, yes, do it. Hurry!"

Merlin's magic worked perfectly. A terrible plague descended upon Hengist's army, and many of his men died. Arthur was satisfied. His men, hearing the news, were overjoyed that so formidable an opponent had been laid so low. Yet Hengist did not allow this disaster to deter him from his object. He continued toward Camelot.

When the word came that Hengist's army had reached the kingdom, all the knights and men-at-arms cheered. They were ready and eager to meet Hengist on the battlefield. They were confident of their ability to conquer his depleted army. They rode out of Camelot boisterous and confident. The contrast with their earlier battles was a joy for Arthur. Then they had ridden out to do their duty, expecting to lose, fearing to die. Now they were full of fight. With an army like this, Arthur thought, I really could conquer all of Britain.

They met Hengist on a small field at Cerdicesford. Hengist had brought eight knights and 20 men-at-arms. Arthur had seven knights and 20 men-at-arms. But when the peasants had finished their work, the odds had shifted: three of Hengist's men-at-arms were killed by the ferocious peasants.

Arthur, anticipating this, was confident of victory and had a simple battle plan. Each knight was to drive straight forward into the enemy. Once battle had been joined, he would modify their orders in accordance with the circumstances.

Nosnikta's men charged forward with more enthusiasm than discretion. Arthur was pleased to see such spirit and energy. Lamerok raced up on his great black stallion. The horse pivoted and stopped within inches of Arthur.

"Stop that idiot!" Lamerok shouted, gesturing toward Nosnikta. "His men are spurring their horses too hard. Those horses will be blown by the time battle is joined."

Arthur hesitated. "But..."

"If their horses are blown, those men won't stand a chance against Hengist's men. It takes an experienced horseman to charge a horse like that and keep it moving during battle. Make them rest those animals."

Arthur signalled to a squire, who galloped off to relay the order. Lamerok shot an evil glance at Nosnikta, shook his head, and went back to his place. Arthur muttered a Celtic obscenity to himself. Battle had not even been joined and already confusion reigned.

Nosnikta's men were halted but not soon enough to rest the horses properly. Hengist's men hit with surprising impact. Nosnikta's men were quickly killed and Nosnikta himself, shaken and badly outnumbered, fell back under the pressure. Gawain also had problems, and Arthur pulled him back for a moment to rest.

But Sremmus, Kay, and Lucas hacked through Hengist's men with wild abandon. The entire right flank of Hengist's army folded up and ran. Arthur sent Lucas after the remnants to make sure they did not return. Meanwhile, Sremmus swung around to attack Hengist himself, who was pressing Arthur fairly hard. Kay came around from behind to support Nosnikta, but he was too late; Nosnikta fell in a single duel with one of Hengist's knights.

Hengist's left flank, having gained the upper hand over Arthur's men, was now pressing them hard, trying to drive them off the battlefield. This was the crucial test of Arthur's training. Would the men break and run, or would they hold until Kay and Sremmus arrived to right the situation?

They wavered; Arthur could see they were in dire straits.

His worries about his army were interrupted by a hard bang on his arm. He turned to confront Hengist himself, raising his sword for another blow. His last guard had just been killed, and Hengist, instead of running for the protection of another knight, had charged straight through Arthur's two guards to force a final duel himself.

Not having time for a proper defense, he tried to back his horse away from the descending blade, but it balked and nearly stumbled. Just then the heavy sword crashed down on the bottom of Arthur's shield, glanced off his leg, and buried itself in his horse's side. The horse screamed; blood spurted over Arthur's leg. Arthur raised Excalibur to return the thrust and heard someone cry, "The king is sore wounded!"

Down came Hengist's blade again, to be met this time by Excalibur. Thrusting Hengist's sword sideways, Arthur swung Excalibur straight into Hengist's shield, making a deep dent, but failing to shake Hengist's grip on it. He struck a second time, even harder, but still without effect.

Again and again he hacked away at Hengist's shield, cursing, trying to break Hengist's defense, but he would not let go. Hengist's own attempts to parry Arthur's strokes were unsuccessful. Seized by a wild fury, Arthur chopped futilely at Hengist. Suddenly Hengist slumped and fell out of the saddle, a spear protruding from his back. Breathless, Arthur looked up from the body. Sremmus smiled back at him.

The column of men wound down the little road that led to the castle. Leading them was Arthur, followed by his knights, then the men-at-arms. As they approached, the drawbridge lowered, and in they rode, into Hengist's castle. Anxious eyes awaited them. Hengist's queen, Malmagest, stood in front of a group of nobles, tragic and proud. Arthur dismounted and she knelt before him.

In the throne room Arthur seated himself on the throne that had once been Hengist's. One by one, the nobles of Hengist's domain presented themselves to Arthur. Arthur would extend his hands toward the noble, holding them about a foot apart. The noble would respond by extending his clasped hands toward Arthur, placing them between Arthur's. The ceremony of vassalage completed, Arthur stood up and went into the treasury room, accompanied by the noble responsible for collecting taxes.

He examined the documents there, pretending never to have seen them before. "My lord, as you can see, we are a poor country. King Hengist wrung every last drop of wealth from us. Now we are destitute."

"There can be no doubt that Hengist was not wise in the ways of wealth", Arthur began, "but I am sure that your country can afford its fair contribution to the treasury at Camelot. After all, if I am to accept the responsibility as your liege to defend you from all attackers, you must surely be able to defray my costs. I must agree, however, that you do seem quite impoverished."

"The documents make that clear, my lord."

"You do seem to be missing something, though. Where is the long parchment dating from two years ago?"

"My lord? Long parchment?", the minister said, trying to sound confused instead of stunned.

"The long parchment with the creased upper right corner. It lists possessions in the southeast of the kingdom."

Panic grew in the noble's eyes. Arthur could not possibly have known about that document. But somehow he not only knew of its existence, but had actually seen it. Groping for words, he looked down at the floor in a feigned search for the missing document. He officiously ruffled through piles of old documents on the shelves. Then he stooped under the table, loudly musing that perhaps the parchment had fallen under it. Sure enough, he emerged a moment later grasping the missing list, wondering how such an important document could have been allowed to fall, remonstrating against his own carelessness.

Arthur smiled knowingly and thanked him. That little visit with Merlin had been more valuable than he had suspected. He scanned the list. "This indicates that the kingdom can afford a good deal more in tithes. Yes, a good deal more. Very well, I have made up my mind."

Back in the throne room, Arthur announced his findings.

"Your kingdom has been struggling under the burden of too large a military budget for too long. My protection will relieve you of that burden. Henceforth, you will maintain only eight men-at-arms. You will send me a tithe of ten pieces of gold per week. This will reduce your overall taxation and allow you to prosper. However, as you prosper, so will I. I will be back to increase the tithes every year. Fare ye well."



PENDA

"Well, Merlin, what think you of young Arthur now? I have conquered and slain the hated King Hengist and his kingdom is now my vassalage. A fair week's work, would you say? When shall we begin the conquest of the rest of Britain?"

"Indeed you have done well, my king, but your small success has robbed you of your senses. You would do well to wait awhile before taking any action."

"What? Wait? My men are eager for action and ready to conquer any enemy I signify. Hengist led the finest army in southern Britain. If we can beat his, we can beat any army."

"But you did not defeat Hengist's army. You killed Hengist. Had you not been so lucky, you would have won the battle, but Hengist would have escaped to fight again."

"Lucky? It was not luck that planted that spear in Hengist's back."

"I tell you that Hengist's attack on your person was not the foolish gesture you thought it to be. He meant only to surprise and stun you, and then to retreat from the battlefield. So intent were both of you on your single combat that neither one saw Sremmus steal up from behind. Luck, my boy, created your good fortune. It is therefore unseemly for you to swagger about so."

"I shall accept your verdict, Merlin, but I will not tell my men; after so many defeats at Hengist's hands I will let them relish their victory. What next, then? You say I should wait. Why so?"

"You have been weakened by the wars with Hengist. Your army is of only moderate size and has suffered some losses. Moreover, you have lost two good knights, Drofwarc and Nosnikta. You need time for other knights to offer their services, and time to rebuild and enlarge your army. Above all, you need time to allow your men to train themselves so that they can meet a veteran army on the field. They are still relatively inexperienced -- probably adequate for defensive battles, but hopelessly unprepared for campaigns outside the kingdom. Someday you will need to lead your army on campaign. When that day comes, you will need an army up to the task."

"Finally, you may not realize it, but you are not fully in control of your fate. There are other kings, kings with ambitions to rule Britain. You are a threat to them, a threat that can no longer be ignored now that you have conquered Hengist. Your prestige has increased enormously, for Hengist was widely feared. Ambitious kings now look on you with envy and fear; timid kings will look to you for protection. The enemies of Hengist, and they were many, look on you warmly, while his few friends are now your enemies. You have set the pot bubbling, and there is no way to say what will come out of it. But it is certain that you do not need to stir it. Be patient! Trouble will come to you soon enough, impatient young one."

They were interrupted by a page announcing the arrival of a contingent of knights from Lundenwic. The knights bore the weekly tithe of ten pieces of gold.

Arthur repaired to the treasury room to adjust his budget accordingly. This new income was quite a boon. He raised his army expenditure to twenty pieces of gold per week and at the same time lowered his taxes slightly. This still left a small surplus to go into the treasure chest. Arthur decided that he very much liked receiving tithes from vassals. The only liability was the requirement to defend them against all attackers. Up to half of his home army would be required to ride to the aid of the resident army if Lundenwic were attacked. He could inherit much trouble. Still, an increase in his budget by half again made it all worthwhile.

Months passed. The new recruits trained and the army slowly rebuilt itself. A new knight, Percivale, was added to the comradeship of the Round Table. Percivale was a country boy who had become one of Arthur's men-at-arms. He had distinguished himself with exceptional bravery at the battle of Cerdicesford. Friendly and outgoing, Percivale was well liked by all the knights. Moreover, behind his rude ways there lay a goodhearted honesty and basic common sense that impressed all who knew him. The other knights made jokes about him that even Percivale laughed at, but they all listened when he spoke. When Lancelot suggested that Percivale be knighted, they all acclaimed Lancelot's proposal. And so Arthur tapped Percivale's shoulders with Excalibur and proclaimed him a knight. Still a country bumpkin at heart, Percivale was uncomfortable with the trappings of knighthood. He enjoyed the income and wealth that accrued to any knight, but was uneasy with the command of other men.

Meanwhile, Britain reverberated with the marching of armies. Kings campaigned on one another with violent enthusiasm. In the north, Vryens and Augustel were locked in a relentless war. From his distance, Arthur could not tell who had the upper hand. South of them, Lot and Colgrin engaged in a complex pattern of campaigning against each other and their neighboring kings.

Despite a great deal of maneuvering and campaigning, very few battles were fought; as soon as a king left to campaign on another king, a third king would set out to ravage the absent monarch's territory. This forced the original aggressor to return to defend his homeland before his campaign could be won. Thus, despite all the marching, precious few battles were fought.

Arthur's most immediate concern was with Penda, King of Mercia, due north of Camelot. Penda attacked and cowed Sater into submission; it was one of the few successful acts of aggression in the series of wars then being fought. Its success stirred Arthur to pay closer attention to Penda. He sought the advice of Merlin.

"Tell me, Merlin, what manner of man is Penda?"

"Penda is a dangerous man. He possesses not the all-consuming hatred that so dominated Hengist, yet neither is he constrained by charitable feelings. Penda is instead stubborn and will hold a grudge to extremity. Above all, however, he is ambitious; he craves power and glory. The combination of such strong ambition in a king so determined and willful makes Penda a most dangerous opponent.

"Fortunately, his military prowess is not so keen, although his men are devoted to him. You would do well to watch Penda closely and be ready for his attack."

"Why not visit his castle?"

"Shall we go?"

In the twinkling of an eye they were there. Arthur spent less time gaping and went straight to the matter at hand, poring over Penda's fiscal documents, sizing up the nature of this king. What he found disturbed him deeply. Penda's kingdom was already quite rich and yielded considerable revenues with little strain. Moreover, the tithes from Sater's kingdom were much larger than those Arthur was receiving from Lundenwic.

All added up to a huge budget, and Penda was using it to build an appropriate army. More than 40 men-at-arms stood in Penda's service. Even worse, Penda's battles had all been victories, and his losses had been low. Consequently, his army's ranks were filled with many veterans, far more experienced than Arthur's men. Arthur shook his head in dismay. Here was an army that could crush his, should Penda decide to march.

The situation in the throne room was more reassuring. Merlin's magic showed how Penda felt towards each of the other kings. With great relief, Arthur observed that Penda felt no great hatred for him.

"At least I have time before I have to face Penda. See how he hates Augusel, Lot, and Colgrin more than me."

"Do not deceive yourself, Arthur. Penda loved Sater more than he loves you, yet Sater was his first victim. Penda is not the slave of his feelings. He will attack whomever he calculates is best to attack."

Merlin winked -- they were back in Camelot. A page appeared and begged Arthur to come to the throne room, as a messenger had arrived. Ignoring Merlin's baleful "I told you so" expression, Arthur went to the throne room, full of misgivings. As he entered the room, the messenger dropped to his knees. "Most noble King Arthur, I bring you greetings from King Horsa of Cantwale. My king sends his congratulations for your defeat of the evil King Hengist and your acquisition of his kingdom. He also sends as token of his goodwill this tribute of six pieces of gold per week. This is the first payment."

Arthur took the small bag and set it on the arm of the throne. He was too stunned to respond immediately. Merlin had certainly been right when he had predicted that Arthur's victory over Hengist would attract attention all over the island. But this was hard to believe -- another king voluntarily offering tribute because of a single victory!

"King Arthur thanks King Horsa for the tribute offered. Arthur will always look on Horsa with goodwill."

"Indeed, most noble Arthur, my master King Horsa has always felt the deepest affection for you, and rejoices greatly in your victory."

"You may tell your king that Arthur doth love him equally. Go now and give him my message."

Arthur could hardly contain himself. He hastened back to Merlin's room. "You must be slipping, old man. You spoke of gloom and despair, but the messenger was not here to announce my demise at Penda's hands. Instead, he came to offer tribute from Horsa. It seems that King Horsa has realized that I am indeed the true king, and is hastening to make his peace with me."

"Think ye so, young fool? Think again! now that Hengist is no more, what possible enemies could Horsa have? Not Hoel; he has no ambitions of conquest. Not Royns or Cheldric; they have their hands full living in the shadow of Penda. Most of the other kings are too far away to matter much. That leaves just you and Penda as threats to Horsa. But Horsa neither loves nor trusts Penda, knowing his character. Would it not be best then to insure that Penda and Arthur keep each other fully occupied? By offering you a trivial amount of tribute, he guarantees that you will not attack him and that you will be stronger in defending yourself against Penda. He therefore neutralizes the only two kings who could be a threat to him."

"But, Merlin, it matters not why Horsa offers tribute; his act will be interpreted everywhere as a further confirmation of my rightful claim as king. This may well convince old Hoel to accept me at last as his liegelord. And when that happens, I will rule, directly or indirectly, all of southern Britain. I will not be stopped."

"True. Even as we speak, King Hoel weighs the arguments in your favor. Yet he is reluctant to cast his lot in with a young king who may only drag him into deeper wars. Hoel wants a king, not a conqueror. Even as Hoel dithers, Penda prepares. Which will move first?"

Three weeks later, Merlin's question was answered. A messenger arrived at Camelot. As Arthur stepped into the throne room to receive his message, he told himself, "This is it -- victory or defeat!"

The messenger unrolled his parchment and began to read. It was a declaration of war from Penda.

It was a calm time of preparation for Arthur and his men. They knew of the size of Penda's army, but they had been outnumbered before. More important, they were much more powerful, too. They were confident of their ability to handle Penda as they had eventually handled Hengist.

The two armies confronted each other at Cynemaeresford, just inside the border of Arthur's domain. Penda's army was huge; he had brought along 30 of his 40 men-at-arms, leaving behind only 10 men to defend his kingdom from opportunistic enemies. Compared to them, Arthur's army of 20 men-at-arms looked weak. Yet there were always the peasants, who had repeatedly decimated invading armies and who would surely take their toll this time as in times past. Arthur was apprehensive but ready to fight.

He even had a plan this time. Realizing the numerical superiority of Penda's army, he intended to swing his men over to his left, thereby concentrating the bulk of his forces against Penda's right wing. If the maneuver were carried out smoothly, he would be able to roll up Penda's army, always concentrating more men against Penda's front than Penda would have available. The risk of his plan was to his own right wing, which would face Penda alone.

The battle began, and the peasants charged forward for their customary role. Penda's veterans did not disdain them as Hengist's had. They reacted to the peasant charge by deploying into a looser formation in which each soldier could fight more freely. Against heavy cavalry a loose formation would fail, but against undisciplined peasants it was ideal. Penda's knights then met the peasant charge with a short countercharge of their own. It was all over in less than a minute. Fighting furiously, they slaughtered the peasants with almost no loss to themselves. The survivors fled the field in shock and terror. Then Penda's veterans re-formed and continued their advance on Arthur.

Fortunately for the morale of Arthur's men, they had been much too busy cross-marching to observe the ignominious slaughter of the peasants. The maneuver Arthur had planned was a little too tricky for them to pull off smoothly. They were still juggling their positions when Penda's men bore down on them. Some were so involved in their maneuvering that they were unable to turn to face their opponents before combat began.

Despite this, things went reasonably well on the left. Arthur had a solid numerical advantage there and pressed hard with it. Much to his dismay, however, he found that it was his men and not Penda's who were not being properly brought to bear. Frantically he shouted at Gawain to bring his men around and into the fight, but Gawain couldn't seem to turn the corner and get behind the enemy men-at-arms. Lucas's men were in the way. Penda's men, however, were experienced veterans. They sagged under the pressure but they held firm.

The situation on the right was much worse. Arthur's men there -- Lamerok, Lancelot, and Sremmus -- had to face almost all of Penda's army. Their losses began to mount. Lancelot was a lion and faced Penda himself. But when Lamerok and his men were wiped out, Sremmus succumbed to panic and fled the field.

Arthur pulled Lancelot back, but Penda's men were already turning onto Arthur. Arthur suddenly found himself facing Penda, two enemy knights, and about 10 enemy men-at-arms. He tried to backpedal but stumbled into Kay. At this point, Lucas lost his nerve and began to fall back. Gawain, having finally gotten around Lucas, was now cut off from the rest of the army.

At this point Arthur realized that the battle was lost and that his greatest concern was extricating as many men as possible from the battlefield. He ordered Gawain to come back around and hoped he could hold on long enough to cover Gawain's retreat. Kay, Arthur, and Lancelot were the only effective men left on the field. He forged a short line, trying to hold off Penda's masses while Gawain fell back. But the force of Penda's attack was too great. Arthur realized that he would lose Lancelot and Kay if he tried to stay any longer. There was nothing to do but run. His last guard fell before him; he now had to face Penda's men alone.

Lancelot and Kay got away with their men; Arthur was right behind them. He had one last glimpse of Gawain desperately trying to cut through the wall of men between him and safety. He did not see Gawain fall and did not care to witness it. Conscious of the danger still hanging over his army, he put spurs to his horse and fled.

It was a bitter defeat. Two knights, Lamerok and Gawain, had been lost. Half of Arthur's army, ten men-at-arms, had fallen. Only six of Penda's men had been killed. It was a black day indeed. Penda spent several weeks pillaging the kingdom, but Arthur would not emerge from his castle.

Fortunately, Penda was forced to return to his kingdom to beat off an attack by Cheldric. This small scrap of good news was offset by the announcement that Horsa would no longer pay tribute to Arthur. "What am I to do now, Merlin? Why have these calamities befallen me?"

"You have suffered a great loss of prestige, young king. The defeat you suffered at the hands of Penda has tarnished your image in the eyes of the other kings. Perhaps you are not the successor to Uther Pendragon, they muse. King Horsa feels bolder, and decides he has nothing to gain by paying you tribute, for you are no longer either a threat to Horsa or a counterbalance to Penda."

"Is it all over, Merlin? Will I never regain the strength I once had? Am I doomed to spend the rest of my reign cowering in Penda's shadow?"

"If you keep fighting battles like that last one, I can console you that your sufferings will not last long. As to your other future, despair not. The road in front of you is a long one, but there are many twists in it. Penda is but one of many kings. You are well loved by other kings, and Penda's attack on you has earned him many enemies. Things can turn for the better."

"But how can I prevent Penda from pillaging my land at his leisure? I feel so helpless."

"Helplessness is only for those who lack imagination. You have many options. You can rebuild your army. Your best short-term option is to pay tribute to Penda."

"Me? King Arthur? Pay tribute to my worst enemy!"

"You certainly wouldn't pay tribute to your vassals, would you? Penda has demonstrated that he can take your wealth at his pleasure. If you give him tribute, he may be satisfied, and it will cost you less than an invasion."

"But then I will never be able to afford an army capable of defeating Penda."

"Not so long as you pay him tribute. But you will not need to pay tribute forever -- only so long as Penda has the advantage. Pay him now, keep him happy. As soon as he loses a big battle, you can suspend payment of tribute as Horsa did with you."

"It makes sense...."

"Indeed so. Everybody does it."

So Arthur offered tribute of five coins per week to Penda. The tribute seemed to work, for on his next campaign, Penda marched not against Arthur but against Hoel. Penda's men brutally ravaged the land, and Hoel's kingdom was devastated.

Arthur's cheeks burned as he learned of the destruction of his father-in-law's kingdom. Gwynevere cried out for revenge. She wanted Arthur to march immediately to Dumnonia to help Hoel defend his land against Penda. Together, she said, they could defeat Penda.

The knights all supported Gwynevere's pleas, for they were eager to revenge the defeat at Cynemaeresford. Moreover, they all loved their charming queen and felt deeply her anguish.

But such an act would have violated all the traditions of the land. Kings do not join forces on the battlefield, for that would dishonor their sovereignty. A liege can and indeed must come to the aid of his vassal, but not another king.

Arthur considered launching a diversionary attack against Penda's homeland in the hope of drawing Penda off, but Merlin counseled against the idea. In the first place, it was the wrong time to be antagonizing Penda. In the second place, there were undoubtedly other kings considering the same course of action. It would be prudent to let a stronger king tackle Penda. For now, the best course of action would be to wait.

Gwynevere fumed in silence.

When Penda finally returned to Mercia, he left behind a wrecked and burned land. Its farms were in shambles, its people decimated, its army destroyed. King Hoel, beaten and despondent, appeared in Arthur's court. "My kingdom is ruined," he said. "I appeal to you for protection and offer myself as your vassal in the hope that you will protect my land from further ravages."

"Why do you turn to me? I am not as strong as I once was. Why do you not turn to Penda?"

"I may be beaten, but I am still a king. I will not crawl on my knees to a king I hate so strongly. You, Arthur, are a good and fair king. You are the rightful ruler of the land. You have never done me nor my friends wrong. Your enemies, Hengist and Penda, are my enemies. I shall cast my lot in with yours. Even if you are weak now, you will be stronger soon enough. I doubt not your star."

Together Arthur and Hoel returned to Hoel's castle. After examining the situation, Arthur asked for a tithe of only five gold coins per week. It was a small tithe to ask in return for the responsibility of protecting Hoel, but it was all the devastated kingdom could afford. Someday, when it had recovered, Dumnonia would make a larger contribution.



THE TRIAD EMERGES

Peace settled over the troubled isle. It was not a peace of resolution, a peace of victory, or a peace of concord. It was instead an uneasy peace, a wary peace of preparation for more war.

Penda's many campaigns had begun to weaken even his mighty army. He had been able to make good all of his losses, but the new men were not as experienced as Penda's original army, and less experienced troops tend to suffer higher losses in battle. A vicious cycle: green troops die more quickly, to be replaced by still greener troops, who die even more quickly. Penda decided to halt the cycle by suspending his campaigns for awhile so that he might bring up the standard of training within his army.

Penda's respite forced the other kings of southern Britain to cease their campaigns. Penda on campaign brought terror to one king and relief to the others; Penda at home threatened all alike. Any king foolish enough to take his army away from his homeland would almost certainly return to a ravaged land.

Further north, Uryens, Augusel, Idres, and Lot settled down to an equally uneasy truce, this one dictated by exhaustion from frequent unsuccessful campaigns. Uryens had emerged as the clear leader with the most successful army, but he had been unable to force his will on any of the other kings.

And so the kings of Britain stayed home for a time, rebuilding their armies and biding their time. Only Garwin, Colgrin, and Cheldric continued to embark on occasional raids, and these were minor nuisances to all concerned.

For Arthur, the respite was welcome. He had his hands full dealing with a ravaged land and a shattered army. If Penda's army was inexperienced, Arthur's was utterly green. It would take a year, perhaps, to bring these men up to an acceptable standard of performance. He intended to refrain from any military offensives until his army was truly ready for battle. Until then, he would continue to pay tribute to Penda.

The loss of Lamerok and Gawain was made up for by the arrival of three new knights: Bedivere, Galahad, and Mordred. Mordred was a vain charlatan with little aptitude for battle. It was obvious to Arthur that Mordred was almost useless on the battlefield. Yet Mordred had a sweet and facile tongue with which he charmed the objects of his machinations. The more saintly knights resented his brashness and greasy glad-handing. Many of the knights, though, enjoyed his company. He had a talent for inspiring the confidence of the uncritical. Mordred lusted after any form of advancement he could lay his hands on. He lusted for money, and for power, and for the trappings of a good life.

Galahad, on the other hand, was in all ways the very opposite of Mordred. Where Mordred was a bumbling coward on the battlefield, Galahad was a lion. Where Mordred was consumed by his lusts for money and honor, Galahad cared for neither. Of all the knights of the Round Table, Galahad came closest to the knightly ideal of purity and modesty combined in a mighty warrior. Yet Galahad's ascetic ways earned him the distrust of the other knights. Mordred, the champion of their foibles, seemed more human, more accommodating than Galahad, the embodiment of their ideals. As Arthur learned more and more about this noble knight, his appreciation for him increased.

Bedivere was a decent if unimaginative sort. He was not a very good warrior, but he took his craft seriously and worked hard to improve his meager skills. In his quiet moments he dreamed of being the equal of Lancelot, of sharing glory and wealth with the other magnificent knights of the Round Table. But he was modest enough to know that these things were reserved for more gifted knights than he.

These new knights joined a Round Table that was no longer the happy place it had once been. Of the original six knights of the Round Table, only three still lived: Sremmus, Lucas, and Kay. The room now seemed more filled with memories than expectations. And they were sad memories of lost comrades.

The loss of Gawain was most rankling to all. The others had died fighting in fair combat, but Gawain had been abandoned, left trapped to face Penda's men. Although everyone acknowledged the military necessity of Arthur's decision, there remained an unspoken resentment against the king who had left his knight to die. Penda's greatest success had been not the ravaging of Arthur's land, nor the shattering of his army, but the destruction of the spirit and unity of the Round Table.

Arthur noticed it quite early. The knights no longer spoke freely with him. Their conversations with him were short and businesslike. Lancelot was distant and aloof. Lucas, who had never been particularly friendly, was now almost pointed in his avoidance of Arthur. Kay, Arthur's brother, was supportive but subdued. Even he was affected by the rot. Sremmus was strange; he stayed close by Arthur and Gwynevere at meals, and went to great lengths to be of good heart, but on the training ground he paid little heed to Arthur. It seemed to Arthur that Sremmus was putting on some sort of show, but to what end Arthur could not guess.

Much to Arthur's dismay, the new knights were quickly caught up in the black mood of the Round Table. They shared the excitement and optimism of their new lives with the other knights, but when Arthur appeared, they became as quiet and evasive as the others.

"What am I to do, Merlin? My knights behave most sullenly around me. I have no authority over them; when I speak they seldom listen. If they do listen, it is only to argue with me. Each of them acts as if he were my equal, nay, my superior. How many times have I been lectured on proper military technique! Suddenly they are all experts and I am but a squire to whom everything must be explained.

"If I could but find the proper excuse, I would surely challenge one of them to single combat and spill the ingrate's guts onto the dust to show the others that I am still king."

"Take care that it not be Lancelot, or you may be washing the dust from your own guts. Oh, foolish young one, you are mighty king and helpless child at once! Where a wise king would see problems, you see strife. You still cannot help but see all problems through the twisted eyes of your own pride."

"The matter at stake is not Arthur's authority, or the insolence of his knights. What has been lost is the group unity, the sense of comradeship that binds men together and makes kingdoms. You are the king, the personification of the kingdom. Their confidence in the kingdom and in you has been shaken to the core. They are no longer sure of the dream that you promised them of a Britain unified under one king."

"Foolish one, you cannot make men believe in a dream by spilling their guts in the sand. And you must not confuse your person with that dream. You can and must use Arthur the king to help them believe in that dream. If they believe in Arthur, they will believe in the dream. But the king himself must always keep in mind the difference between the two."

"How can I make them believe, Merlin?"

"You must prove to them that the dream works, that the dream offers hope. There is nothing so effective in this as a victory in battle, nor anything so destructive to the dream as a defeat. That is why the dream is now so dim to your knights; they have just suffered a devastating defeat. Time will heal the wounds of that defeat, even as it leaves scars."

"Should I fight a battle? Provoke a war with Penda?"

"Only if you wish to suffer another defeat. Battle is too risky a place to nurture dreams. For now, you must rely on less dramatic approaches."

"Perhaps I should offer them gifts of gold."

"Perhaps. But you are not wealthy enough to give freely, so you must weigh your charity carefully. Consider the impact a gift might have on each of the knights. For example, do you think that the saintly Galahad would be much impressed with a gift of gold?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Indeed not. Galahad is far too idealistic to allow mere gold to bend his heart. Sir Sremmus, on the other hand, does seem to enjoy his wealth. A gift to him might well be appreciated. The same can be said of Mordred."

"Mordred! Who cares about Mordred! The man is useless in battle. I care not how Mordred feels about me."

"It is true that Mordred's loyalty or treason is of little direct concern, but there are other considerations. Mordred's tongue may well influence other knights, and if so, it is best that it wag in your direction."

"Well, perhaps a small gift might be acceptable. But could I not give him some useless honor?"

"Absolutely not. Remember, when you march to battle, the men-at-arms are divided among the knights according to each knight's stature at the Round Table. Knights whom you have honored receive a larger share of the men-at-arms to command. To honor Mordred is to give him more men-at-arms to misuse."

"Then I shall honor my fine warriors, Galahad, Percivale, and Lancelot."

"Think again, King Arthur. It is true that Galahad is a fine warrior who will lead your men-at-arms well. But Galahad cares not for power over other men. Honoring Galahad will make your army more effective but it will not win Galahad's heart. On the other hand, Lancelot, who cares naught for wealth but lives for his honor and the approbation of his king, will deeply appreciate any honors you bestow upon him."

"And Lancelot is a magnificent warrior who would lead my men-at-arms well. I shall honor Lancelot hugely and the others not at all."



"Hold, king. One knight does not an army make. Lancelot may be the finest knight in Britain, but he cannot win all of your battles for you. You need to bring many knights with you to your battles, for the leadership of even so great a knight as Lancelot is strained when he commands so many men. It is good to give Lancelot a larger share of the men, but do not overwhelm his talents. The more knights you bring, the more powerful you will be, yet you want to give many of your men-at-arms to your best knights.

"And honor my knights in such a way as to win their hearts as well."

"Indeed so."

"Yes, and I'm not sure I like it. What you ask me to do is impossible. How can I weigh the pride of all of my knights against their prowess in battle and further, against my need to have them all accompany me to battle?"

"You are the king, Arthur. I am only a magician."

The months passed. Arthur doled out gifts and honors, and with the passage of time, the knights' hearts warmed to Arthur. The men trained hard, honing their skills to match the sharpness and brightness of their blades. The kingdom recovered from the ravages of Penda's attack, and the treasury slowly grew.

The day came when Arthur decided that he could pay his tribute and pay for his army without taxing the kingdom excessively. Using Merlin's magic, Arthur visited the castles of all the kings of Britain. He observed their different attempts to recover from the travails of the series of wars.

Slowly, a plan began to form in his mind. King Pellinore was the focus of this plan. Like Arthur, Pellinore was paying tribute to Penda, considerably swelling Penda's treasury. The tribute payments so weakened Pellinore that he was unable to maintain a large army. A victory against Pellinore would greatly enhance Arthur's prestige, both with other kings and with his own men. Arthur was surprised that nobody else had attacked Pellinore for a long time; perhaps they feared Penda's wrath. In this, Arthur felt safe; his tribute to Penda and his burgeoning army gave him a measure of protection.

And so Arthur cast the die. He gathered all the notables of the kingdom together and declared war on Pellinore. In accordance with long-standing custom, he dispatched a messenger to Pellinore to announce his intentions. He then gathered his men for their first foreign campaign. The main task was to determine who would go and who would stay behind to defend Camelot.

At first, he was of a mind to leave behind Mordred and Lucas, but they both begged to be allowed to join in the grand campaign. There was also the delicate question of treachery to be considered. More than one king who had left his castle in the hands of untrustworthy lieutenants had returned to find the gates closed and the battlements manned against him. Arthur considered this possibility, but was loath to leave behind a loyal and noble knight to watch the likes of Mordred. So Arthur decided to take a chance.

He had no real interest in pillaging Pellinore's kingdom. In fact, he had an aversion to the thought of the horrible destruction his men would wreak on the helpless peasants of Gwynedd. Pillage was not Arthur's prize; prestige was. Arthur needed to win a battle and Pellinore was the most likely candidate. He would therefore leave Camelot undefended, sweep into Gwynedd, fight a single battle against Pellinore, and return home in all haste. With luck, they would arrive home ahead of any invading army.

The timing was tight: if Penda chose to strike, he might beat Arthur and ravage the countryside again. The other risk was that if Arthur's losses against Pellinore were high, he would be weakened and invite invasion.

Merlin advised against the attack, claiming that it was far too risky, but Arthur was willing to take the chance. The longer he waited, the more powerful Penda became. He had to do something to break the cycle. This was his best chance.

On the appointed day, Arthur stood by the gate at Camelot. Each knight approached in turn and dipped his lance to Arthur. Arthur draped an orange pennant over the lance, signifying that the knight was selected to accompany Arthur on the campaign. Not a single green pennant (signifying that the knight must remain to defend Camelot) did Arthur drape over any lance. Thus he marched from Camelot at the head of his entire army: 20 men-at-arms with seven knights. They marched due north, toward Gwynedd. Merlin accompanied them in the form of a black raven. After five days, they came in sight of a magnificent castle. The men were deeply excited, thinking that they had arrived at Pellinore's castle.

"Merlin, said Arthur, "Fly to yon castle and discover who rules it."

The raven wheeled and flew off, its great black wings beating the air. It circled over the castle for a moment, then headed back. Upon returning to Arthur, it changed its form to Merlin. "That is the castle of King Royns, sire. Twenty-five men stand ready to defend the kingdom against attackers. You must travel farther north before you reach Pellinore's kingdom."

Onward they trekked, passing peacefully through Royns's kingdom, until they arrived at the southern edge of Gwynedd. There they began a perfunctory campaign of pillage to draw Pellinore out of his castle. Pellinore did not disappoint Arthur; the very next day the two armies faced each other across the meadow at Pontesbury.

Pellinore had brought with him six knights and twelve men-at-arms. Arthur had the clear advantage. His plan of battle was much simpler than the disastrous plan he had used against Penda. His men would await Pellinore's advance. Galahad, on the extreme left flank, had no opponent facing him and so would advance ahead of the main battle line. As Pellinore's army marched past to engage Arthur's main forces, Galahad would hold his position against any attacks and then swing behind Pellinore's men to trap them.

If Pellinore attacked Galahad first, Lucas, the closest knight to him, would break out of line and go to Galahad's rescue. Otherwise, the battle was to be a straightforward man-on-man combat.

The first shock was the attack of the peasants. This was the first time that Arthur had fought on foreign soil, and he had not prepared himself emotionally for the

assault of the peasants. His men handled themselves well, driving the peasants off with the loss of only three men. Arthur nevertheless felt some dismay at even that loss. If his men had been better trained, he noted, they would not have lost any men. Nevertheless, the situation was still well in hand.

The rest of the battle was actually rather dull. Pellinore's men advanced, ignoring Galahad. Galahad swung around behind them according to plan. Combat was joined all along the front. On the left flank, Galahad and Lucas overwhelmed Pellinore's men and began to roll up the line. Before they got far, Pellinore's men began to fall back. Soon, Pellinore's entire army was retreating. Arthur's men chased them off the battlefield. That was the end of the battle of Pontesbury.

Arthur wasted no time in pursuing Pellinore or further pillaging his land; there was no need to deepen the hatred he had already engendered. He turned his army back and raced for Camelot. They made it back in six days. To his great relief, he returned to find a peaceful kingdom. His attack had been carried out with such speed that no one had had the time to react.

"Well, Merlin," said Arthur, you were wrong this time. You warned of dire consequences, yet we all came back safe and sound, and not a grain of our wheat was burned. Admit it; this time you were wrong."

"Happily I admit that none of the calamities I feared materialized. Yet, the situation is not so sparkling as you seem to think. You have attacked a king who loved you and never did you harm; now the other kings will not trust you. Five of your men-at-arms lay rotting on Pontesbury meadow; until their replacements are trained, you are vulnerable."

"That's true, Merlin, but I have a way to compensate: I am going to raise the army to 25 men-at-arms."

"Twenty-five men-at-arms? The kingdom cannot afford the cost!"

"Yes, it can. There remains a considerable amount of untaxed wealth in the kingdom."

"That wealth is necessary for the further growth of the economy. If you tax that, you eliminate your future and guarantee that you will never grow beyond your current size. Do you think that you can conquer Britain with an army of 25 men? You'll need a fair lot more than that, and a kingdom that can support it, to complete your task."

"I can raise the money without taxing the kingdom into penury. There will still be growth."

"Yes, but how rapid will the growth be? Fast enough to reach the level you need in your lifetime? I doubt that."

A page interrupted their argument. An important visitor had arrived; Arthur was required in the throne room. The visitor turned out to be none other than King Horsa of Cantware.

Monarch greeted monarch, then Horsa spoke. "Noble King Arthur, I come to seek your protection and offer myself as your vassal. Long was I kindly inclined towards your claim to be rightful king of all Britain. I applauded your victory over Hengist and

offered tribute to you, sire, afterwards. However, King Penda of Mercia did oppress both of us, making war upon the both of us. I offered him tribute in the hope that his depredations against my people would cease, but he has recently resumed his attacks against my land. It is with great gladness that I hear of your victory over King Pellinore. Surely this victory is harbinger of more victories to come. Therefore, great king, I offer myself as your vassal."

Arthur turned and stared pointedly at Merlin. Merlin looked quite vexed and left the throne room.

Arthur demanded and got a tithe of 10 pieces of gold per week. With the additional funds he increased his army to 30 men-at-arms. At the same time he was able to reduce taxes somewhat, guaranteeing continued strong growth for his kingdom.

His army was now very large, not as large as Penda's, but certainly large enough to face an attack from Penda with reasonable hope of success. After all, Penda could not hope to bring his entire army with him on any campaign. Every king in southern Britain would leap at the chance to pillage Penda's kingdom while he was away.

The weakness of Arthur's army lay in its inexperience. In just a few months, it had grown from 15 men to 30. Thus, half the men were completely inexperienced. An army like this could not possibly campaign on foreign soil. But it could defend the homeland well.

Arthur now needed time, lots of time, to train his men and bring up their standard of performance. He had every reason to believe that he would have that time.



In the days that followed, the Fates smiled on Arthur. He was liege lord to three kingdoms encompassing much of southern Britain. His only rival, Penda, had subdued two other kings and was now embarking on a new round of pillage, but he seemed content to leave Arthur alone. Instead, Penda terrorized the smaller kings of middle Britain, trying to bully them into submission. Arthur's army was strong and growing stronger daily as the men trained. The kingdom of Camelot was also growing stronger, with increasing wealth every week. Even Arthur's vassals shared in the general prosperity, for their military expenditures had been reduced.

Merlin had to admit that even though Arthur had not followed his advice exactly, things were going very well. Yet Merlin understood the ways of the Fates better than Arthur, for they cannot abide undiluted success, and they ensure that unsullied good fortune breeds its own adversity.

Arthur first sensed that something was wrong during a feast at the Round Table celebrating the second anniversary of his wedding to Gwynevere. The crowd seemed strangely subdued, lacking the exuberance that he was accustomed to during such festivities. He shrugged it off; perhaps it was the wine. He worked long days in the treasury room, going over the kingdom's finances, looking for waste and inefficiency.

He meted out justice in the throne room and spent many hours listening to the messengers with tales of the activities of the other kings. But as the weeks rolled by, he became aware of an unpleasant mood in the castle. It was not the sullen, rebellious feeling that had descended onto the knights after the defeat to Penda. This was more a guilty mood.

It seemed to Arthur that all at court were slinking away from him with their tails between their legs. Even Gwynevere shared in it. She certainly tried to put on a brave show -- always off on a round of activities and entertainments, keeping people busy with all manner of projects. But she avoided Arthur, always begging leave to attend to some enterprise that demanded her attention.

The deepening of the gloom became serious. The whole kingdom seemed caught in its grip. It grew to the point that people everywhere were edgy and defensive, fearful and unhappy. Arthur spoke to all he could about it, and each insisted that all was well, that he or she was quite happy and had no complaints. Even Merlin had nothing to offer.

Arthur climbed to the top of the highest battlement and there he brooded. What was this malaise that oppressed his people? It seemed that they all knew something terrible that he didn't, yet he could feel the gloominess stretching its icy fingers into his heart. There was no reason to be downhearted, yet it racked the soul like a contagious disease.

He pondered all afternoon and past sunset, staring into the distance. In the growing dusk he noticed two people emerge from the forest a mile from the castle. They seemed to be strolling together.

The sight of them cheered Arthur. At least there was still room for love and romance in Camelot, he thought. We are not completely lost yet. He watched them approach the castle, hand in hand, and wondered, what to these happy people have that everyone else seems to have lost? Then, with a start, he recognized them: it was Sremmus and Gwynevere.

Half an hour later, the throne room was packed with all the worthies of the kingdom. Arthur sat on his throne, looking fierce and terrible. Sremmus and Gwynevere stood before him. "For your crimes, I banish you both from my domains. Leave Camelot forever."

Arthur paused. He wanted to say more, to express the love he had felt for both of them, to recall the many battles in which Sremmus had fought at his side, or to convey his regret that they had done so foolish a thing. But there was nothing else to say. Abruptly, he rose and left.

He found solace in the shadows of Merlin's chamber. "It is coming Merlin. I can feel it. The times of happiness, the boyish times of adventure and conquest, they are gone. The clouds of war are gathering. The kings of Britain have been gathering their strength for some time. Now they are ready. For the last six months they have maneuvered for position. Now the death struggle will begin. There will be many battles, much bloodshed, and no quarter will be shown." He turned and walked to the door. Shadows engulfed him. "I am ready." He was gone.

Merlin sighed. "Ah, King Arthur, at last you have grown up. You are a foolish and carefree young man no longer. I grieve for you."

The messenger told Arthur and the court his tale of battles and conquest. Far in the north, King Uryens had emerged triumphant from the wars there. They had built steadily to a climax, each king desperately trying to raise men fast enough to crush his opponent while he was still weak. In their frenzy for advantage, kings had lead armies of untrained youths, hardly better than peasants with armor, into wild and desperate battles. The chronicle of fighting seemed endless. The ambitious Lot had campaigned against one and all in the area, exhausting his forces and his kingdom. He had then faced attacks from all sides, and his weakened armies were unable to prevent his lands from being devastated. Defeated, he eventually sought protection from Idres.

Uryens attacked both Idres and Lot many times, but was unable to defeat them. In a climactic battle, Uryens slew Idres on the battlefield, capturing two kingdoms with a single swordstroke. Augusel, realizing that his position was hopeless, held out for awhile before recognizing Uryens as his liege. Exhausted from his many campaigns, Uryens had paused to rebuild and expand his army with the extortionate tithes he now extracted from his unfortunate vassals.

Meanwhile, in the country's midsection, Penda had continued his petty warfare, driving many of the kings to the brink of ruin but inflaming their enmity against him, thereby guaranteeing their refusal to accept him as their liege. Only Pellinore had succumbed to Penda's ravages. Colgrin, Baldulf, Garwin, Royns, and Cheldric retained their independence, but their armies were all weakened. They engaged in petty warfare against each other.

Thus, from the confusion and chaos of the campaigns, three kings emerged as the dominant kings of Britain: Uryens, Penda, and Arthur. One of them would become king of all Britain. Each one knew that, and each one intended to make himself that king.

THE GREAT WAR

Penda made the opening move. He marched on Horsa in an attempt to destroy some of Arthur's economic strength and discredit Arthur as a liege. It was a serious threat, for if Penda were successful in pillaging Horsa's land, Horsa would undoubtedly reconsider the wisdom of accepting Arthur as his liege. He would not renounce Arthur as his liege and re-assert his independence, for such a vile act would earn the scorn of the kings of Britain. But he could and very well might seek a new liege, a liege who could effectively protect him from marauding enemies. Therefore, when Arthur became aware that Penda was marching toward Horsa's kingdom, he wasted no time. He instantly gathered his knights and marched for Horsa's capital, hoping to beat Penda there. He was successful; his army arrived at Horsa's castle a full two weeks before Penda's.

There he waited, congratulating himself on the trap he had set for Penda. Penda expected to encounter only Horsa's own defense forces plus a small contingent of Arthur's men. He would be in for a brutal surprise when he found himself facing not only Horsa's army, but also Arthur's. Horsa and Arthur laughed together at the prospect of Penda's shock when he discovered their trap.

The two armies met at Basing, not far from Uintancaestir where Arthur had been declared king. Penda appeared with 40 men-at-arms and six knights. Arthur had brought 30 men-at-arms and seven knights; Horsa had 10 men-at-arms under his direct command. The two armies were thus very closely matched. Penda's slight disadvantage in numbers was offset by the greater experience of his men.

Arthur was in command of the biggest army of his life, in the closest battle he had ever fought. He knew that a great deal hung on this battle. If he could defeat Penda here and now, it might give him the momentum to swing Uryens. A victory here could win the entire island. A defeat could just as easily mean the loss of everything that he had been building for the last year. The army could well be destroyed on this battlefield, as it had been destroyed in its last encounter with Penda. There was also the chance that knights might die on this battlefield. And finally, there was the possibility that Arthur himself would die this day.

Arthur laid his plan of battle carefully. He had two more knights than Penda; he would use that advantage. Galahad was put on the extreme left flank, with Horsa on the extreme right flank. Each commander would swing around the flank of the enemy and cut in behind them. Arthur's hope was that, by concentrating his strength on the flanks, he would be able to roll up Penda's army and trap Penda himself in the center. Of course, Penda would have a relative advantage in the center and would press Arthur very hard there. Arthur would simply have to hold out.

To make this plan work even better, he raked his flanks forward, setting himself further back from Penda. This would ensure that the battle would begin on the flanks, where he had the advantage. It would give him a little more time before Penda struck him.

The battle began with the traditional peasant charge. There were many peasants on hand and they fought furiously. But Penda's men were all seasoned veterans; they disposed of the peasants smoothly and efficiently. Only two of Penda's men fell to the peasant assault.

The main battle began at the flanks, exactly according to Arthur's plan. Galahad and Horsa did their jobs perfectly, wheeling about to take Penda's flank units from behind. The rest of Arthur's army joined into the battle a moment later. Penda's flanks were steadily chopped up under the pressure placed upon them. Unable to stand up to the tremendous attack, the group of men facing Galahad collapsed. A moment later, Horsa crushed his opponents. Arthur's plan was unfolding like clockwork.

But things were not going well in the center. Penda's men there had a clear advantage, and they were steadily cutting Arthur's men to pieces. Arthur's royal guard was having a hard time against Penda's royal guard. Outnumbered, they were dying one by one.

Quickly, Arthur gave orders for both Galahad and Horsa to roll up Penda's line before Penda destroyed Arthur's line. This they did with great energy, falling on the next units in Penda's line and doing great damage. But the situation in the center was deteriorating faster than their progress. Arthur gave desperate orders to Galahad and Horsa to desist from their attacks, ride to his rescue and attack Penda from behind. This they set out to do. Too late! the last of Arthur's guard was killed. Arthur found himself alone against Penda's royal guard. He dashed back, looking for a refuge. Both Lancelot on his left and Kay on his right were in similar dire straits. Arthur fell back, trying to find a place to make a stand.

At that point, Mordred raised a shout: "The king is running!" Mordred turned and fled the field, taking his men with him. Percivale tried to close the gap Mordred had opened, but Penda's men were already moving through it. Fortunately, this created a hole through which Galahad could make his escape. Horsa managed to get around the flank and back to the main army. At this point, everything came unglued. It was obvious to both sides that Arthur's plan had failed, that his army was beaten, and that Arthur himself was in grave peril. Penda's men, flushed by the imminence of victory, pressed their attacks with renewed vigor. Arthur's men knew they were beaten but were determined to make an orderly escape. They managed it well, filing off the battlefield in good order, protecting themselves and each other. Nobody was left behind; Arthur was the last man to leave the field.

Back in Horsa's castle at Cantwaraburh, the mood was somber but not despairing. Only one knight, Sir Kay, had died in the battle. Although the loss of his brother was a great personal loss to Arthur, it did not cripple the army. Eight men-at-arms had died in the fighting. By contrast, they had killed two of Penda's knights and ten of his men. By this measurement, they had won the battle, or at least should have won. Only the collapse of the center had robbed them of the victory they otherwise deserved. They were ready for the next battle; they would surely win the second battle if Penda were foolish enough to stay.

Penda was not so foolish. He marched his men back to Mercia, but not for fear of Arthur. Penda had other problems. Uryens had swept down to pillage Mercia, and Penda now had to defend his homeland. Hearing of Penda's predicament, Arthur hurried back to Camelot to pick up fresh troops. Already the replacements for the eight dead men were being trained.

Uryens reached Mercia before Penda, and pillaged Penda's land unmolested for a week. When Penda's main army arrived on the scene, they fought a furious battle in which both sides suffered heavy losses. Uryens emerged victorious. A second battle soon followed, and Uryens won a clear-cut victory there. Penda tried one more time, and was soundly beaten. Upon hearing this news, all of Arthur's knights clamored for an immediate march to Mercia to finish off Penda once and for all.

Arthur considered his options carefully. Then he made a bold move that took everyone by surprise! he marched his army far to the north, all the way to Uryen's kingdom. It took four weeks. Arthur knew that neither Uryens nor Penda would hear of his move until several weeks after he had arrived in Dalriada. Messengers travelled little faster than armies. This would give Arthur time to pillage Dalriada with impunity before Uryens returned. He looted and pillaged the land for three weeks before setting off for Camelot. Arthur's calculations proved correct. Uryens, caught off guard by this unexpected maneuver, hurried home but just missed Arthur's army. Arthur returned home with pillage and with his prestige somewhat recovered from the blow it had taken after his second defeat to Penda.



PEACE AND PREPARATION

Each of the three kings had suffered a defeat in the great war. All three armies were greatly weakened and unable to execute a successful offensive against the others. There was nothing to do but rest and rebuild the armies for a final battle.

Arthur had come out of the wars fairly well. His was the only kingdom that had not been ravaged, and his army had suffered only minor losses. Thanks to his parsimonious military spending policy, he was now wealthier than any other king on the island. He could afford to raise his army to a greater size than any other king's. Yet, he did not immediately expand his army to the largest size he could afford. Instead, he raised its size to only 35 men-at-arms. This was adequate to assure him of a reasonable defense against any attacker, yet still allowed his kingdom enough revenue to grow. He raised the tithes from Hengist's kingdom and from Hoel's kingdom. They had enjoyed a long period of peace and had prospered under it; the increased tithes did not strain them. With this increased income, he again raised the size of his army, this time to 40 men-at-arms. This was equal in size to both Hengist's and Uryens' armies. Arthur was at last the equal of his enemies.

The crucial difference was that the other two kings were bankrupting their realms to maintain their armies; Arthur's domain was still enjoying steady growth. Arthur could now rest assured of the final outcome of the conflict that would soon arise. The only way that they could stop him now was by banding together against him.

During the long period of waiting and building, two more knights, Bors and Tristan, joined the Round Table. Neither was a magnificent warrior in a class with Lucas, Gawain, or Galahad; indeed, Bors was a rather poor warrior, only slightly better than Mordred. Tristan was a moderately good fighter, and Arthur was certain that he could make good use of him. Tristan was obviously very pleased and happy to be a member of the Round Table; he doted on Lancelot and pestered the other knights with questions about the battles they had fought. Bors seemed to have little interest in martial or material advancement. He had an eye for the ladies, especially the young serving girls who were easily impressed by a noble knight. His numerous dalliances made quite a sensation at court.

The court gossip about Bors concerned not the existence of his sexual escapades, but their sheer quantity. The court at Camelot had never been known for any puritanical tendencies, and virginity was generally considered a way station between puberty and adulthood. But Bors's behavior surprised and titillated the court. What fascinated the men, and especially the ladies of Camelot, was Bors's ability to simultaneously carry on a multitude of passionate affairs. How did he do it? His partners, when known, if questioned, presented no explanation other than a distant smile. Even more exciting was the almost daily revelation, real or purported, of new trysts. Where, everyone wondered, would Bors strike next? The question was repeated with dismay by the men and anticipation by the women.

The matter exploded from gossip to crisis when Bedivere chanced upon Bors in the act of seducing one Verrine, a lady whom Bedivere had once championed and whom he

still held most warmly in his esteem. Swords were drawn and reinforcements quickly arrived from all over the castle. Arthur hurried in just in time to avert a full-scale civil war. He firmly reproached all the would-be combatants, and publicly ordered Bors to confine his amorous imperialism to women outside Camelot. That settled the matter.

The months rolled by, with none of the kings willing to make a move. Arthur bided his time, secure in the knowledge that time was on his side. Still, he was beginning to wonder how he would break the stalemate. He dreaded the thought of a gigantic battle among the huge forces available to the three kings. It would surely be a bloody and melancholy affair. There had to be a less sanguineous solution.

Arthur sought the counsel of his magician. "Tell me, Merlin, is there any other way to conquer the kings of Britain without so much bloodshed?"

"A noble question, Arthur; I am glad to hear you ask it. Unfortunately, I must tell you that there is no way to achieve your goals now without battle. You did make matters more difficult by attacking your friend Pellinore. Penda's heart is hopelessly hardened against you. He will never accept you as his liegeland. Uryens is not so full of hate; he can be convinced to accept your claim to kingship."

"So I must fight Penda, then?"

"More; you must defeat and destroy him."

"Might Penda be willing to accept Uryens as his liege, and Uryens then become my vassal?"

"That is a clever idea; it could thwart much bloodshed, but Penda also hates Uryens deeply. It is unlikely that he would cooperate."

"So Penda must die."

"That is the only way."

"A war to the death will be very long and very, very difficult. I cannot simply kill Penda. He will stay inside his castle."

"No, he is so full of hate that he will come out to fight you if you pillage his land. But as soon as the battle turns against him, and his royal guard is destroyed, he will retreat to his castle again."

"Is there no way to kill him, then? Have you not some magic that will do the job for me?"

"No, I do not. There is only one way to do it; you must surround and attack Penda himself with as many knights as you can."

"But when he sees so many knights, he will surely flee. Even if he is surrounded, a man determined to run can easily escape such a trap in the heat of battle."

"True, so you must strike him quickly, before he decides to run. You must kill him before he realizes that he is in danger."

"It sounds very difficult, Merlin."

"There is no other way. He hates you too much."

"If only I had understood these things a year ago. I could have warded off his hatred if only I had acted sooner."

"Indeed you could have. But you were much younger then, and the world was too complicated to allow you to see so far ahead. Even I miscalculated slightly."

"Merlin, could I not merely wait out my enemies? What if I were simply to wait and grow? Every month my kingdom grows stronger. Every month I can add another man to my army without weakening the kingdom. Could I not simply stay here in Camelot, growing ever larger and larger, so that after many years, I am so overwhelmingly powerful that even Penda would be forced to recognize me as liege?"

"Yes, you could grow as you say, but only up to a point. Remember, Arthur, there is only so much land in the kingdom. It cannot grow wealthier forever. The day will come when every field is planted, on every hill is cattle grazing. When that day comes, your kingdom can grow no wealthier."

"And how soon will that day come?"

"Well, I would say....hmmm....when you reach a total wealth of about 125 to 130 pieces of gold per week."

"I see. I will be reaching that in a few more years of peace. Then time will begin working against me, for then the other kings will catch up."

"Very slowly, to be sure."

"Even so, an army of 125 men, is a gigantic army. It could surely conquer any other king. Surely Penda would know that."

"Not necessarily. The bigger an army is, the more poorly it fights. The mighty knights spend less time fighting and more time getting their men organized. It is true that a larger army is more powerful than a smaller one, but not proportionately. Indeed, a knight burdened with 20 men-at-arms fights only twice as well as a knight with only five men-at-arms. Remember, too, that a knight is, by himself, three times more powerful than the average man-at-arms. Thus, adding many men-at-arms does not increase your strength in battle as much as you might think."

"Well then, I suppose I shall have to build it even larger than 130 men, using my vassals' tithes to pay."

"No, my king, you cannot build your army any bigger than 128 men. There are only so many of young men in the kingdom to use for soldiers. You must leave enough men to tend the crops."

"Very well. I shall fight him as you say until I kill him. Let us hope that it happens quickly. In the meantime, I have a request to make of you. I need you to change Uryen's heart so that he might feel warmer towards me. I may need that benefit in the times to come. I would rather have Uryens as my willing vassal than as my sullen victim."

"I will cast a spell that will soften his heart in your direction. Mind you, the spell

will eventually wear off. It may not make him love you, but it will make things easier for him in the times to come. For you, King Arthur, are assured of final success now. I do believe that you fully understand all of the ways of kingship, and that you will reign victorious as king of all Britain."

"Those are heartening words to hear from so demanding and critical a teacher as you have been, Merlin. Yet, I suspect that I will be feeling the lash of your critical tongue even long after I have won my throne. You will always have lectures to try my patience and tax my understanding."

"No, my lord, I shall not, for with this last request you make of me, my work here is done. I shall be taking my leave."

"What!? Leave me? You cannot do that! How will I manage without you, Merlin, old friend?"

"You will manage very well indeed. You need me no more. You are a fit, able, and wise king."

"But your magic is so important to my success. Without it I shall fail."

"You do not need my magic anymore. You can and must win this final victory on your own, without help. I know now that you can do that. Fear not -- you will prevail. And now I shall return to the hills and forests from whence I come, and which have always supplied me with their power. I yearn to sleep in my own home, among the oaks and menhirs, under the stars."

"I shall miss you sore unto my heart, dear friend."

"You need not, for I have always been an illusion. Look about you, at the sturdy oak trees, the serene rolling hills, and the quiet great boulders. Merlin is only the expression of the solemn power and silent wisdom of all these things. If you pause to notice, you will see my face in the moss-covered boulders and hear my voice in the wind. You will only miss me if you forget how to look and listen. Farewell, Arthur, king of men."

He slowly faded from view. A moment later, there was nothing but the wind gently blowing. Arthur could indeed hear Merlin's voice whispering "Farewell, Arthur" again and again and again.



THE LAST WAR

Arthur reined in his horse. The column of men behind him jerked to a stop. They looked down on the broad valley of the river Saefern. The farms and cattle here were part of Pellinore's kingdom and Pellinore was vassal to Penda. Arthur did not want to risk everything on a direct attack on Penda, but he knew that Penda was dependent on tithes from Pellinore. And Penda was far away, in Pictland, pillaging the lands of Augusel, now Uryens's vassal.

Arthur had been stunned to learn that Penda would open the war with so foolish an attack. Clearly no king was strong enough to make a direct attack on any other major king, but there were always the minor kings who had not yet declared themselves as vassals. Apparently all three kings had come to the same conclusion: attacking a minor king would only waste strength and might well drive the defender into the arms of an opponent. That left the vassals as the only avenue to advantage.

Even so, Arthur found Penda's choice of victim strange. Why would Penda march so far to make his attack? Why did he not attack Hengist, Arthur's vassal, whose domain lay next to Penda's? Perhaps he feared another trap, such as the one Arthur had laid for him in Horsa's kingdom. Perhaps he felt that it was too obvious a move to make. Perhaps he suspected that Uryens would never anticipate so distant an attack and would be unprepared. Perhaps, perhaps.

In any event, Penda was gone and his vassals were defenseless. Arthur would not let the opportunity go by.

This pillaging was no perfunctory business as his last visit to Gwynedd had been. Arthur's task this time was to ensure that Gwynedd would provide no tithes for Penda's treasury. He also hoped to shatter Penda's credibility as a liege and force Pellinore to seek a new liege. Arthur knew that he need fear no interference from Penda.

Penda's home army was much too weak to pose any threat to Arthur. His field army was far away in Pictland. It would take weeks for the news to reach Penda that Arthur was pillaging Gwynedd and weeks more for Penda to march his field army home.

He led his men in a thorough destruction of the entire kingdom, secure in the knowledge that he would not be disturbed. Each week they moved their camp to a new site. Then the knights and men-at-arms spread out, burning and killing, and stealing cattle. They could not get everything; the peasants, forewarned of the impending raids, had bundled up their families and cattle and vanished into the nearby forests. The raiders found only those who had failed to make good their escape.

Some peasant clans, bolder or more desperate, had resolved to defend their homesteads and laid elaborate traps for the raiding parties. Occasionally their rude schemes claimed the life of a man-at-arms. It was always the younger, less seasoned men who fell prey to such devices.

Tristram was ambushed in a dense thicket. They came swinging down on long ropes, trying to unhorse his men by crashing into them. It must have seemed a novel way for dismounted men to attack mounted soldiers. Yet Tristram had seen it before. He coolly skewered one assailant with his lance. Then he turned his horse to face a second swinger directly. Helpless to change his trajectory or even defend himself, the unfortunate fool swung straight into Tristram's waiting blade.

In like manner did Tristram's men dispatch the other attackers. But one man-at-arms, young Patrice, was unnerved by this stratagem and threw up his arm to shield his face. His attacker crashed into him and they both fell to the ground. Stunned and clumsy in his heavy armor, surrounded by hostile peasants, he had little chance to defend himself. Tristram charged into the mob and scattered them, but Patrice was already dead.

Tristram was beside himself with grief and shame for having lost his young charge. Arthur consoled him and extolled his virtue to the heavens, but Tristram was inconsolable.

The bloody work continued. After a week all the easy pickings had been taken and though more destruction was possible, it was time to move to a new area. The wealthier districts yielded much pillage, while the poorer ones seemed hardly worth the effort. They came to one district, at the junction of the roads leading north and east, that had been pillaged many times previously. Not a single building had been left standing. The peasants had long since given up building anything that could be burned, torn down, or stolen. They lived in rude huts and tended small, easily hidden herds of cattle and sheep. As Arthur's army approached, they melted into the trackless forests. Arthur's men found almost nothing.

Throughout all this time, Pellinore remained safely inside his castle. He knew that his army was too weak to face Arthur's in battle. He could not defend his homeland, so he waited for Penda to live up to his obligations as liege and send an army to defend his land. But Penda's army was far to the north, and the small garrison remaining in Mercia was too weak to save Pellinore.

So Pellinore waited, watching in helpless fury the agony of his people. He knew now that he had chosen the wrong king as his liege. Penda demanded huge tithes and gave no protection.

Many times Pellinore considered renouncing Penda as his liege and seeking the protection of another great king. Uryens, however, was occupied with Penda and could provide little protection. Surely he could not seek Arthur as his liege, for Arthur's thorough destruction of his kingdom had left many shattered lives and bitter hearts. An assassin's blade would be Pellinore's only reward if he paid homage to Arthur. So Pellinore sat and waited and suffered.

It took many weeks, but when Arthur left Gwynedd, he left behind a smoking, shattered land. Penda would have a more difficult time maintaining his army now.

Back in Camelot, Arthur concentrated on building his army ever larger. He raised taxes even higher, gambling that matters would be decided in a short time. For now, he wanted many men-at-arms. When the time for battle came, he would need to fight many battles, and he wanted a large reserve of troops for that time. And so he built his army up to 80 men-at-arms, a gigantic figure, far larger than either Penda or Uryens could afford.

Penda's attack on Augusel was marginally successful. He pillaged Augusel harshly, fighting and winning several battles against Uryens's relief forces. But eventually his losses began to mount, and he decided to return home. Both the army of Uryens and the army of Penda had taken losses in the campaign. Arthur was now stronger than both of them together.

A short lull followed. Neither Uryens nor Penda would launch an attack on any kingdom. They awaited Arthur's move.

And after another month, Arthur made his move. He gathered his army in the great courtyard of Camelot and addressed them.

"In times past, we have defended our homeland against invaders. We have pillaged the lands of our enemies and their vassals. But I have declined to force the final battle until this day. We were not strong enough to invade and defeat Penda in his home kingdom. We were not experienced enough, not numerous enough. Now we are ready. We shall take the war to Penda's kingdom. We shall face him in bloody battle. And we shall crush him forever!"

The men cheered mightily. It was the news they had been longing for. One by one the great knights came forward and dipped their lances to receive their campaign pennants. Arthur had planned his choices carefully. Most of the knights received the coveted orange campaigning pennant. Bedivere, Bors, and Tristram drew the hated green garrison pennant. Bedivere and Bors were weak knights; they had little value on campaign. Tristram was better, but Arthur trusted Tristram and needed him to counter any possible treasonous inclinations that might flower in his absence. The conniving Mordred drew an orange campaign pennant; Arthur wanted Mordred safely in the field, away from the intrigues of the court.

So Arthur led his army out of Camelot. The column of men that rode out was awe-inspiring. Each knight, resplendent in his armor and bearing his distinctive crest on his shield, rode out, followed by the men-at-arms under his command. Pair after pair of armored men-at-arms rode forward, pennants fluttering from their lances. The sound of their hooves raised a rumbling that could be heard -- and felt -- far away. The peasant children laughed and ran alongside the soldiers, clapping their hands in glee at the sight. The peasants lined the road, not cheering, but staring in awe. Surely such a force was utterly invincible.

Northward they marched, through the green and prosperous fields of Arthur's kingdom, and into Mercia, where Arthur was resolved to make his ultimate bid for control of Britain. The men were eager to bring the battle home to Mercia after having suffered so long at Penda's hands. They had not a shadow of a doubt as to the outcome of the battle to come. They arrived in Mercia and set to work creating the facts that would force the trapped Penda out of his lair to meet his fate.

True to Merlin's prediction, Penda did not disappoint them, despite the odds against him. On a large and open field at Seccandun, Penda's army fell into line for the great battle. Penda himself rode at the fore of the army, dressed in a magnificent suit of armor with golden fittings and a brilliant plume on his helmet.

Alone, he pranced his horse about in the space between the two armies, boasting of his victories over Arthur and heaping insults on him and his knights. He tossed his great battleaxe in the air, twirling it and catching it with one hand even as he rode.

He challenged Arthur to single combat, and when no response came, he challenged any knight, any man-at-arms to combat. When still no response came from the ranks of Arthur's army, he demanded to know if there were even a squire with blood enough in his veins to face Penda in single combat.

"We shall send you back to your womenfolk," he roared, "on your shields." With that, his men all raised their weapons and cheered. Then they charged.

Arthur had prepared his battle plan well. He intended to repeat the plan of battle he had used at Basing, with some changes. It had failed there because the two armies were too closely matched and because Arthur had kept no reserve in the center to deal with reverses there.

This time Arthur himself would not be in the main line of battle; his royal guard would be the reserve that would ride to the rescue of any knight against whom the tide of combat had turned. His entire battle line stepped forward while Arthur and his royal guards remained in place. This left a small gap in the line that only allowed enough room for Penda and his royal guards to enter. If they were foolish enough to walk into this trap, they would find themselves assailed from three sides.

Penda had only three knights left alive after all his wars, but he brought with him some 30 men-at-arms. Arthur had five knights and 50 men-at-arms with him. The remainder were in Camelot, guarding the realm against a surprise raid by Uryens.

The battle again opened with much the same precision as had the earlier battle at Basing. His flanks were raked forward and closed in on Penda's flanks smoothly. They engaged Penda's men there and quickly pressed them onto the defensive. Penda himself and one other knight pressed on toward the center, hoping to win an upset victory by driving Arthur himself from the field. This time, though, a solid phalanx of men awaited Penda, and when he struck, they stood firm.

Penda's royal guard, composed of his best troops, fought with skill and fury. But Arthur's men were also skilled, and there were many more of them.

The losses on both sides mounted as the dreadful tools of their trade began to find their marks. On the right flank, Galahad broke the will of his opponent, who began to retreat for safety. Mordred hacked away at his appointed enemy. Lancelot, magnificent leader though he was, had difficulty handling this, the largest group of men he had ever commanded. As they advanced, their ranks became disorganized and they fought poorly. On the left flank, Percivale beat his opponent and sent him running.

At this point, Penda realized that the battle was lost. He fell back, trying to regroup, hoping that he might be able to attack a stray knight and retrieve some success from his failure. Arthur's men pressed him hard, giving him no breathing space. Penda's army started to dissolve. Penda found himself virtually alone, facing Arthur's entire army. He, too, turned and fled.

Arthur's men celebrated their long-awaited victory that night. Penda had finally been beaten. But Arthur was troubled. He had not obtained the crushing victory he needed. Penda was still alive and his army had escaped intact. Losses on both sides had been heavy: 12 of Arthur's men-at-arms had died while 15 of Penda's men were killed. Penda could replace some his losses almost immediately; Arthur could not. The

contest remained undecided. Another battle would be necessary.

Arthur's men resumed their pillaging, trying to bring Penda out for another showdown. Penda waited a week for the wounds of his men to heal, then headed out for the second battle.

This time there was no show. Penda looked grim and determined. He knew that his army could not defeat Arthur's. His only chance was to kill Arthur himself in single combat. And he was deathly determined to do just that. Penda's plan was to drive straight into Arthur's army and kill Arthur. Arthur's plan was to entice Penda into a trap, surround him, and kill him.

Again the two armies met. Again Galahad and Percivale swept around the flanks, only this time they swept wider and caught all of Penda's army behind them. Thus trapped, Penda's men had no opportunity for organized retreat. They were good soldiers and fought hard against impossible odds.

One by one, their defenses collapsed. One of the knights got away with a few men in the wild melee. The other two died where they stood, with all their men. Penda, alone with his royal guard, fought furiously, realizing that only moments remained before the battle would end. Arthur's men pressed in excitedly, each one hoping to be the man to make the kill. But Penda was a great warrior, and slew many of them.

At last Penda stood alone amid a shambles -- armor, bodies, and weapons streaked and steaming with blood. He turned to Arthur, his face twisted in rage, his lips black, foam lining his mouth. "Arthur!" he screamed, "You bastard! I shall have my revenge on you yet! You will never kill Penda!"

He turned and cut his way out of the ring enclosing him, killing all who sought to block his path.

The bodies of Penda's men lay swelling on the ground. Arthur's men treated their wounded, comforted their dying, and buried their dead.

He walked among the carnage, wondering if there were anything half so melancholy. How would he ever bring Penda to his knees? There seemed to be no way. Merlin's words came back to him, that much bloodshed would be required. It seemed to Arthur that there had already been too much. He would try one more battle. If that failed, he would return to Camelot and try another approach. Penda was a threat to him no more. Perhaps he could let well enough alone.

Arthur brought his army to the very walls of Penda's castle at Godmundeslaech. He stood before the great gate and challenged Penda to battle. Penda could not withstand the assault on his pride. The drawbridge swung down and Penda rode out leading a tiny band of miscellaneous armed squires and kitchen boys. Arthur shook his head in disgust at the sinful pride and stupidity of a king who would sacrifice his people so wantonly.

Lancelot rode up to Arthur. "I don't like it," he said. "I am a knight of the Round Table. It is dishonorable to slaughter helpless and misguided children. I will not do it."

"I respect the nobility of your intentions, Lancelot," Arthur replied. "Ignore the children; they cannot hurt you. Spread the word among the army -- we do not fight boys. We are here with but one purpose: to kill Penda. Let that be every man's goal."

The combat was joined. It was short and direct. The overnight soldiers were pushed off their horses, disarmed, and chased away. A few had to be convinced by a whack with the flat of a sword.

The real battle was fought around Penda. With his people watching from the castle walls, he could not readily seek safety. He was forced to make a spectacle of his courage and slay a minimum of Arthur's men before he could return to the castle with any honor intact. So on he fought, against impossible odds, striking men down as a man swats flies.

Arthur was moved by the courage and determination of this king who fought for his kingdom alone at the very doorstep of his castle. He called out to his enemy, "Yield, King Penda! Yield with honor, and I shall give you an honored place in my kingdom."

"Never will I yield to the bastard son of a bastard king! My father yielded to Uther Pendragon and suffered the theft of his lands. I will die before I repeat my father's folly!"

The hopeless struggle continued. Penda's strokes became less powerful as he tired of the effort. The circle of men harried him, staying just out of reach of his blows, thrusting and probing for a weakness. Lancelot stepped forward and confronted Penda directly. With a mighty blow, Penda buried his battleaxe into Lancelot's upraised shield. Lancelot absorbed the blow and pushed forward behind his shield, driving Penda backwards. Penda fell among the men behind him and disappeared underneath a flurry of swords, spears, and maces. A few seconds later, silence descended upon the scene.

It was over.

The long silence was broken by the clanking of chains inside the castle. Slowly the drawbridge descended. Arthur entered the castle as the new king of Mercia.

Many days passed while Arthur set the affairs of Mercia in order and waited for the wounds of his men to heal. He was eager to return to Camelot, for he greatly feared an attack by Uryens. His army was at its weakest, and Uryens's only hope was to strike now, while there was still an opportunity. If Arthur could get back to Camelot, he could draw on the 30 fresh men-at-arms he had left there. But 15 men lay wounded in the castle and Arthur was loath to leave them there. So he waited, hoping for their quick recovery.

Then came to Godmundeslaech a messenger bearing the news Arthur had dreaded. Uryens was on the march and approaching Mercia. The only surprise was that he approached from the south, from the direction of Camelot. It seemed that he had set out to attack Camelot in Arthur's absence, but on learning of the events in Mercia, had turned his army toward Penda's castle.

Arthur was frantic. He had only 20 men left, and Uryens had surely brought more. Arthur could stay inside the castle indefinitely, but he would be trapped far from home. If he did not fight, the blow to his prestige could well erase the gains he had made in defeating Penda. Yet if he fought, he could lose everything. He could surely not place any faith in the loyalty of Penda's people, who had sacrificed so much to fight him.

In his despair he wandered out of the castle, into the forest. Alone in the vast green silence, his thoughts seemed to echo in his ears like thunder.

"Merlin, where are you? I need you now, more than ever before. I am trapped in a foreign land without any means of salvation. Did you deceive me when you said I would be king? Or have I somehow failed? Have I made some terrible mistake that will cost me everything? Merlin, am I still the true king?"

Merlin was nowhere to be seen. Arthur stared long and hard, but saw nothing. He sat down on a log, lay his head in his hands, and wept long and bitterly. A strange noise caused him to stop. He looked up, looked about...and saw nothing. But the noise continued -- a low, deep humming. He stood up and prowled about, trying to identify the source of the sound. When this failed, his fear grew, and he drew Excalibur. With shock he realized that Excalibur was the source of the humming. Moreover, the sword was glowing, much as it had glowed that first day in Camelot, only much more brightly. With fear and wonder, he stared at the sword in his hands. He looked all around him, at the trees of the forest, and realized that the humming came from them, too. Then he felt the humming within himself, a soft, subtle purring that seemed to emanate from his very bones. He could feel Merlin's presence and the power that always moved with Merlin, and it was within him.

Without knowing why, he knew that he was the true king, that he moved freely and naturally with the course of fate. Other men might try to divert the flow of fate in their direction, but Arthur knew that his fate followed a greater course, a mighty flow that nothing could divert. There was nothing to do but let that flow take whatever course it might.

The next morning Arthur sat quietly in his room, awaiting the news of Uryen's arrival. Well before noon, Percivale came to him with the news and accompanied him to the watchtower. Uryens's army was filing slowly down the approach road to the castle. Before they reached the castle, they spread into battle formation -- each knight at the head of his knot of men-at-arms, Uryens at the head of the entire army. All held their lances vertical, their bright green and red pennants spanking in the morning breeze. Uryens sat quietly on his horse, waiting for the entire army to take its positions. It was a splendid sight.

"There must be at least 40 men-at-arms, perhaps 50," said Percivale. "We cannot possibly face such an army. They will certainly beat us. What will you do, sire?"

"Fear not Percivale. We have not yet lost. Let us see what Uryens has to say."

Uryens raised his voice and called to the castle, "I am Uryens, King of Daiirada, Liegelord of Augusel, Lot, and Idres. I seek Arthur, King of all Britain, that I may lay my sword at his feet and place my hands within his as his vassal and subject. I beg entry to make my homage."

From within the castle a tremendous din broke out. A mighty shout of jubilation burst toward the sky; knights tossed their helmets aloft. In wild exultation, men-at-arms banged their armored bodies against each other, against walls, against posts. Percivale stared down in disbelief, then at Arthur. "How did you know?" he gasped.

Arthur smiled. "How could it have been otherwise?" He did not mention Merlin's last act of magic.

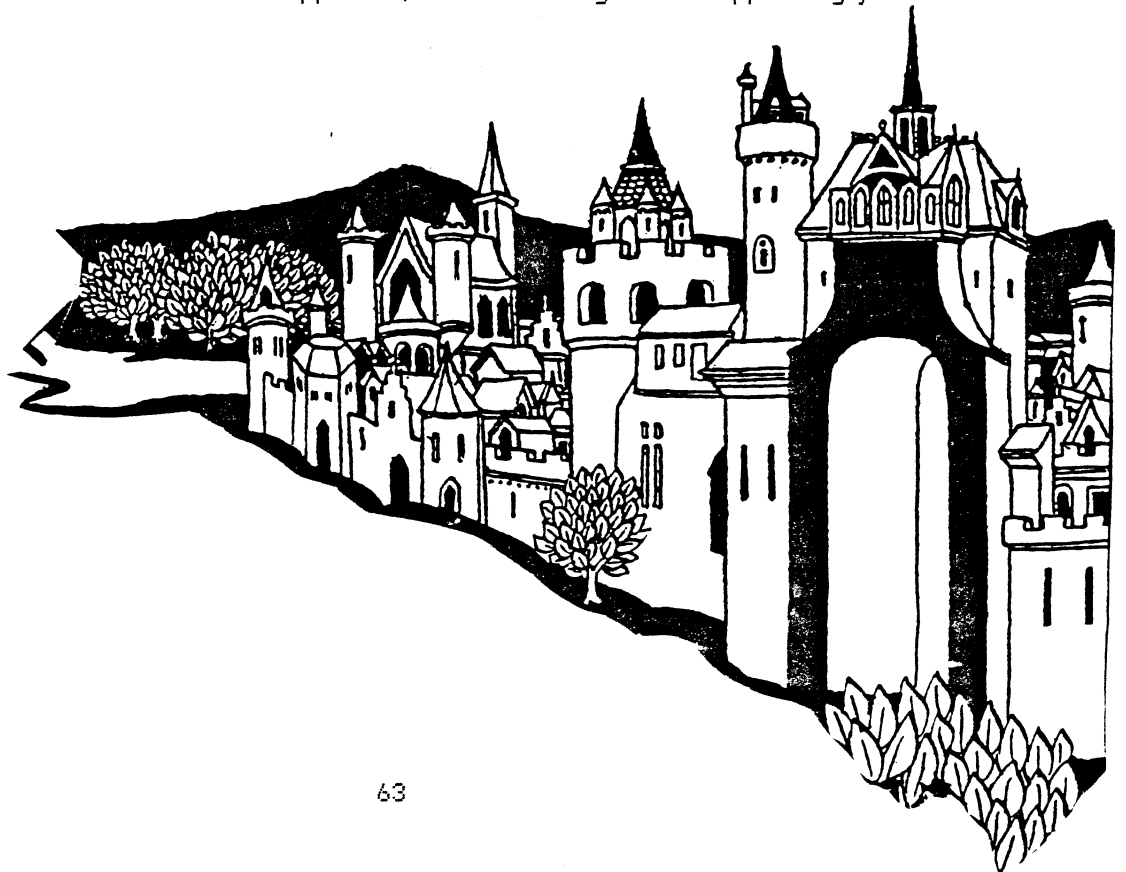
The drawbridge was lowered and Uryens rode in to a tumultuous welcome. Soldiers from Camelot, Mercia, Daiirada, Pictland, and Cantware embraced each other. Knights who had heard of each other's exploits across the chasm of war clasped hands and told tales. Uryens presented himself to Arthur and knelt.

"Noble Arthur," he said, "I no longer doubt your true kingship. I offer myself as your vassal, that all the peoples of Britain may find peace, purpose, and happiness under the rule of one king, forever free from the ravages of wars that serve no purpose."

And so Arthur received Uryens as his vassal. With the last rivalry eliminated, there remained no doubt as to who held primacy in Britain. All the minor kings of Britain, Colgrin and Baldruf, Cheldric Garwin, and Royns, all sent representatives to Arthur to recognize him as the true king of Britain.

At Arthur's bidding they came to Camelot to make their homage. A great ceremony was held on the hillside overlooking Camelot, and all the knights pledged loyalty and obedience forever to King Arthur. Then they all rejoiced that peace and unity had at last been found under a true king.

Arthur stood before them, bearing Excalibur aloft, and the wind whispered its assent, and the trees rustled their applause, and the hills gazed on approvingly.





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7. Describe any technical errors you found in the user instructions (please give page numbers).

8. What did you especially like about the user instructions?

9. What revisions or additions would improve these instructions?

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