'Utterly enchanting'
REBECCA YARROS,
FOURTH WING

'Fresh and engrossing'
GEORGE R. R. MARTIN,
A GAME OF THRONES

THE BRIGHT SWORD



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LEV GROSSMAN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE MAGICIANS TRILOGY

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For my family:
Sophie, Ross, Hally, and Baz

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anoeth bid bet y Arthur
a hidden thing is the grave of Arthur

—"The Stanzas of the Graves,"
from *The Black Book of Carmarthen*

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BOOK I

A WAR OF WONDERS

Strange women lying in ponds distributing
swords is no basis for a system of government.

—*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*



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One

Azure, Three Scepters, a Chevron Or

Collum punched the other knight in the face with the pommel of his sword gripped in his gauntleted fist, so hard the dark inlaid metal dimpled under his knuckles, but his opponent showed absolutely no sign of falling over or surrendering to him. He swore under his breath and followed it up with a kick to the ankle but missed and almost fell down, and the other knight spun gracefully and clouted him smartly in the head so his ears rang. He would've given a thousand pounds to be able to wipe the sweat out of his eyes, not that he had a thousand pounds. He had exactly three shillings and two silver pennies to his name.

The two men backed off and circled each other, big swords held up at stiff angles, shifting from guard to guard, heavy shards of bright sunlight glancing and glaring off the blades. They'd dropped their shields after the tilt to have both hands free. No mistakes now, Collum thought. *Circles not lines*, Marshal Aucassin whispered in his mind. *Watch the body not the blade.* He threw a diagonal cut that glanced harmlessly off the other knight's shoulder. The inside of his helmet was a furnace, sharp smells of hay and

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sweat and raw leather. He'd come here to test himself against the flower of British chivalry, the greatest knights in the world, and by God he was getting what he came for. He was getting the stuffing beaten out of him.

They stepped lightly, testing, offering, up on the balls of their feet. Every tiny movement made their armor squeak and clank and jingle in the quiet of the meadow; even the tips of their swords made tiny *whips* in the stifling air. Why—why had he thought this was a good idea? Why hadn't he stayed back on Mull? Heatstroke prickled at the back of Collum's neck. They weren't fighting to the death, but if he lost he'd lose his horse, and his armor, which he hadn't gone through all the trouble of stealing it from Lord Alasdair just so he could hand it over to some nameless knight who probably had half a dozen spares waiting for him back at his cozy castle.

And without his horse and armor Collum was nobody and nothing. An orphan and a bastard, poor as a church mouse and very far from home. And he could never go back. He'd made damn sure of that, hadn't he?

He didn't even know who he was fighting; he'd stumbled on this man purely by chance, or possibly by God's will—thanks a bunch, as always—sitting under a crooked ash in a meadow, head in his hands, as if the weight of the sunlight itself were too much for him. He'd looked up and shouted a challenge at Collum, and who did that anymore? It was like something out of the stories. Whoever this was, he was a knight of the old school.

His armor was old-fashioned, too, the breastplate black steel damascened with a pattern of fine silver whorls and a rose at the center. A rich man's armor. A nobleman's. His helmet had a pointy snout like a beak, and like Collum he bore the *vergescu*, the plain white shield of an unfledged knight. Collum bore it because he was not

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technically—as he'd tried to explain—a knight at all, not yet, he hadn't sworn the vows, but there were other reasons to bear the vergescu, like to hide your identity if you were in disgrace. Or Sir Lancelot bore it sometimes because otherwise no one would fight him.

This man was no Lancelot, but he was pretty damn good. Thoroughly fledged. Collum was taller but the mystery knight was faster—he barely saw him move when *bang!* his wrist went numb and *ping!* a tiny fastening pin sprang off his gauntlet and disappeared forever into the grass. He stepped neatly inside Collum's reach and grabbed for his wrist with his off hand, and Collum skipped back, panting like a bellows, but he stumbled and the man jammed his blade in the gap where his gardbrace didn't fit right, shaving off a sharp curl of bright steel.

He pressed his advantage, whipping a backhand strike at Collum's head that just missed—

There it was. The knight let his follow-through pull him round just a little too far. He was tired, or he'd overcommitted, either way he couldn't quite stop the stroke and it left him off-balance. Collum's blood broke out in a martial chorus and with the last of his strength he barged ahead behind his gauntleted fist *MANG!* to the side of the knight's helm, and twice more, *MANG! MANG!* Just like that he was through and into that other place, the one where he felt like a solid shining steel godling and nothing could stand against him, certainly not this soft, staggering wretch he saw before him! Collum regripped and delivered a clean, high, two-handed horizontal cut and the knight's head snapped round and he sat down backward on the grass.

Sir Vergescu tried to raise his blade but only dropped it again, as though fairies had cursed it so it weighed a thousand pounds. Collum let himself bend over panting, hands on hips. Sweat stung his

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eyes and gathered and dripped under his chin. Had he won? Really won? The man just sat there. He'd won.

He dropped to one knee and pressed the top of his helm against the cross of his sword. Thanks be to almighty God in Heaven! Thank you God for giving me—your unworthy servant—this magnificent fucking victory! He'd fought a British knight in a British hayfield and he had won. He could keep his precious armor, for now at least. In the darkness of his helmet un-knightly tears prickled in his eyes. Somewhere inside him there was strength, the strength he'd always longed for but never quite believed in. Not really. Not truly.

Or was there? Was there not something about this victory that was just a little bit too easy? Collum pushed that unappealing idea away, sniffed, and hauled himself to his feet again.

"Well fought, sir," he said. "Do you yield?" Collum thought in Gaelic, the language of the north, but for the occasion he used the courtliest, most correct, most Roman Latin he could muster.

The man didn't answer. That beaky bird-helmet just gazed up at him, expressionless. It looked quizzical and a bit funny.

In fact, now that Collum had a second to take it in, the man's appearance was stranger than he'd realized. Armor hid his face but in other ways it spoke volumes. That pretty silver rose on his chest had been scratched and scribbled over; somebody had taken a nail or a sharp rock to it. On top of the knight's helm, where a lady's favor might have been, a knotted hank of dry grass was tied instead.

There were streaks of rust on his mail undercoat where the armor plates overlapped and trapped the wet. Sir Vergescu's cozy castle was far away, if he even had one. He must've been out on the road a long time. Maybe not so different from Collum after all.

He shook off his gauntlets and fumbled with his bare fingers at

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the buckles and catches at the back of his head and tore his helmet off and dropped it on the grass. The bright world blasted in on him from all sides, loud and acid-green. He rubbed his face vigorously with both hands. The hot summer air felt marvelously cool. The rush of victory was fading now, and the heat and hunger and thirst were coming back. His knees felt weak. He hadn't eaten in two days.

He hoped the man wasn't hurt. He'd actually been looking forward to having a chat with him. Breaking down the combat, talking some shop. Maybe he knew how things stood at Camelot. Maybe he even knew Sir Bleoberys of the Round Table.

"Well fought, sir," Collum said. "Do you yield to me now?"

"Fuck your mother."

The man's voice was hoarse and weary. Somewhere a woodlark sang: *loo-loo-loo-loo-loo tlooeet tlooeet tlooeet*.

"Beg pardon?"

"Your mother." His Latin was surprisingly refined. A lot better than Collum's. "Fuck. Her."

Maybe they weren't going to be having that chat after all.

"That is ill said of you, sir." Collum cleared his throat. "I ask again: Do you yield to me now?"

"Well, that all depends," the man replied, "on whether or not you've fucked your mother yet."

He was angry, obviously. It was embarrassing, losing to an unfledged knightling. God knows he, Collum, wouldn't have wanted to lose to himself. But it wasn't his idea to fight, was it?

Maybe he was hurt after all. Maybe he was in pain. Collum put out his hand to help him up, and the mystery knight held out his own—but then quick as a lizard he grabbed Collum's wrist instead, and with his other hand he whipped something thin and dark out of a sheath at his waist—a misericord, a long, thin knife

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made for slipping between armor plates—and thrust it up at Collum's groin.

Purely on instinct Collum twisted his hips and took the blow smartly on his steel skirt. He caught the man's knife hand and for a heartbeat they strained against each other, trembling. The knight kicked Collum's ankles out and rolled on top of him with all his weight, and Collum lost the knife hand—God's blood!—and panicked and scrabbled and caught it again just in time to keep his throat from getting laid open.

He threw his other arm around the man's shoulders, heaved with his hips, and rolled them back over.

"God's nails, stop!" His voice cracked hysterically. "Just yield!"

Collum fumbled for his own knife and forced it through the slit in the knight's helm. The knight trembled like a rabbit in a snare and clawed at Collum's face and thrust wildly with his pelvis. Then he coughed once and went still.

The sound of insects was loud, like dry seeds rattling in a dry pod. Silent pillars of golden country sunlight were slowly burning the green timothy grass into hay.

The knight lay flat on the ground as if he'd fallen there from a great height.

Jesus. Collum scrambled to his feet, breathing hard. *Shitting Jesus. Thou recreant knight.* He'd never killed a man before. *God have mercy on us both.*

The man kicked once and then stopped moving forever. The only part of him that was exposed was that one fish-pale hand, the one he'd bared to go for his misericord. There were brown speckles on the back of it, some ropy blue veins. Sir Misericord had not been in his first youth.

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And now he was dead. And for what? Nothing. A game, played for no one, in an empty field.

And to think that they were barely a day's ride from Camelot, the sun that bathed all of Britain in the golden light of chivalry.

"God have mercy," Collum whispered. An hour ago he'd been no one, then he was a hero, and now he was a murderer. He stood there for a long time, he didn't know how long. A cloud passed in front of the sun. The two horses, his and the dead knight's, watched him with long-lashed disinterest.

Then Collum knelt and with a shudder drew his knife out of the man's eye socket. He walked over to where the fallen knight's shield lay face down on the matted grass and turned it over with his toe. You could still make out the arms under a hasty coat of white paint: Azure, Three Scepters, a Chevron Or.

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Two

Roman Roads

It was late afternoon. Collum rode on through a cool June rain, sitting bolt upright in the saddle, staring straight ahead into the misty distance. The drops stepped down from leaf to leaf through the trees overhead and strained ticklingly through his armor. Why didn't he just yield? Collum was a problem solver by nature, but his mind could get no traction on this one. Or on this: What was a knight that skilled, that well armored, doing fighting and dying in the middle of nowhere? Against a nobody like him? Just a big boy with a sword, from a nowhere island at the edge of the world, green as grass and fresh as dew.

The low sky was like a tent the pale creamy gray of unwashed linen. The water was cool on his face, which burned where the dying knight had scratched it.

Death itself didn't shock Collum. People were guttering candles, always on the brink of going out, from measles or pox or childbirth or a cough. They starved or shat themselves to death or were eaten by bears or wolves. But nobody should die the way that man had. The doorway from life into death was a perilous one, fraught

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with misadventure, and he'd stumbled through it naked and unprotected, with no friends or family around him, no priest to absolve and anoint him. Only his murderer for company.

Before Collum rode on he had buried him—he could do that much, though the dirt was packed with roots and stones and he had to use the dead man's own sword to dig with, a fine, slim blade with a pommel shaped like a wheel, thereby ruining its edge. Then he laid the knight to rest under his crooked ash tree and hung his white shield over him on a crooked branch. Unlucky tree, ash. Any crops its shadow fell on would wither. Collum couldn't bring himself to take the man's fancy armor, he wasn't going to strip his corpse like a scavenger, but he did have a silver medal on a thong round his neck with a curious device on it: a twisted rod of knotty wood like a crooked walking stick. The metal had an old look about it. Collum added it to his St. Christopher and St. Lawrence. You could never have too many medals.

And he took a brown apple and some dried beef from the knight's saddlebags. Sorry, friend. Should've yielded. He spent an eternity on his hands and knees combing through the grass for that damned fastening pin and not finding it.

Then he rode on toward Camelot.

He wasn't sure what would happen when he got there. At seventeen Collum was tall, ungodly strong, virtually ambidextrous, and terrifyingly quick on his feet, with the shoulders of a stevedore and the delicate hands of a goldsmith. He was the best fighter on the island of Mull, not just now but in living memory.

But Mull wasn't exactly a hotbed of world-class knightly talent. It was a cold, humpy place of treeless green hills, their flanks streaked with silvery streams, their peaks dragging low white clouds like tufts of wool caught on brambles. If it had a distinction it was probably

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that it was, in the face of stiff competition, the rainiest of the Out Isles. Wind scoured it. Chilly lochs penetrated deep into its interior. Huge shaggy red cows and tiny brown kittenish sheep wandered its coarse meadows.

Not many knights wandered the meadows of Mull. It had been years since Collum had faced anyone in his own league or anything like it, not since he was thirteen and beat the house knight at Dubh Hall who said he'd fought with Arthur at Bedegraine, in the War of the Eleven Kings. He was good, but was he good enough? The knights of the Round Table were fantastically, legendarily elite. The Table was a golden hoop that bound this shattered world together, and it drew to itself the greatest fighters in Britain and beyond: Sir Tristram from Cornwall, Sir Marhaus from Hibernia, Percival from Northgalis, Lancelot from Gascony, and Palomides from even farther away, the far East, Sarras, or wherever the hell he came from.

But if there was a place for Palomides, maybe there could be a place for Collum. He couldn't be more of an oddity than a Saracen. And he did have one single gossamer-thin connection to the world of the Table, namely Sir Bleoberys, who supposedly was his brother's wife's godfather's second cousin.

It was a long way from Mull to Camelot. Adventures were quick and exciting when you heard about them, but when you were inside one they happened very, very slowly. There were no maps of Britain, and Collum followed the sun and the coast and the drovers' roads and directions from strangers, some of whom spoke unfamiliar tongues and seemed never to have seen a man in armor before. They stared at him as if he were a gleaming metal angel who'd fallen to earth.

Collum passed through a dog's breakfast of northern realms: the

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Royaume Sauvage, whose fractious kings and queens claimed descent via Brutus Greenshield from the first of the Britons, Brutus of Troy; mountainous Rheghed, domain of the boy king Carmac; the Duchy of Cambenic, ruled by Duke Escant, whose people had been driven off their land by Picts and forced to lay claim to a sere and bitter peninsula. These rulers had their own kingdoms but all of them were kings under King Arthur, High King of Britain. Arthur's law governed them, and it was at his pleasure that they sat in their thrones.

For long stretches, days sometimes, Collum saw nobody at all. The world was vast, and people were few. He bedded down in fields, wrapped in his cloak, with the Milky Way howling across the black sky above him. He clopped along sunken holloways and past isolated farmsteads, their little square fields scratched lengthways and crossways like a chessboard. He circumnavigated more lochs than he could imagine a rational Creator creating. Innumerable dogs barked at him. The further south he went the more verdant and lush the land became.

But the most amazing thing about Britain was Rome.

Collum knew that Rome had ruled Britain for three hundred and fifty years, in theory, but the Romans had never reached the Out Isles in person. He knew Rome only in the form of little things, bits and bobs, glass beads, coins with the heads of emperors on them. Errant particles of a distant empire.

But here in the southlands Rome had thrived and built, and its ruins were everywhere, the bleached bones of an empire. Having crossed Hadrian's world-girdling wall at Luguvalium, Collum found himself on a magnificent Roman road, level and cambered and paved and astonishingly straight, bashed uncompromisingly through woods and swamps and over rivers and chasms. He peered

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into collapsed villas with rain-worn mosaic floors and terra-cotta tiles scattered all around them in the tall grass. He passed crumbling aqueducts, roofless granaries, dry baths, entire empty towns slowly being picked apart by scavengers.

It all seemed desperately sad, like the broken architecture of Heaven. The Romans had brought civilization to Britain. They'd brought apples and pears and glass and plumbing and fine pottery. They'd brought God and the written word. They gave Britain trade routes to the Continent and beyond, as far as India and China. The Romans brought peace too. Before they came, every man's hand was at his neighbor's throat.

And then they were called back over the sea by their distant emperor, and the light went out. The secrets of civilization were lost and forgotten in the lengthening shadows. People scurried back to the old hill forts, which they barely remembered how to live in. Abandoned legions became tribes, and masterless legates became warlords. Britain went back to being a dark, fractious, divided place. A crackwork kingdom.

And through that kingdom rode King Arthur, and wherever he rode, order and peace returned. He was the last light in the darkness.

Collum chopped the heads off cow parsley with his sword. He chewed clover and sorrel to stop his stomach rumbling and picked at the peeling calluses on the palm of his sword hand. He stopped and prayed by the roadside. He snapped a thin branch off a tree and shoved it down the back of his armor in a desperate attempt to scratch his back. Gradually his horror at the events of the day began to give way to the boredom of the road. He told himself the man was just a villain, that was all. The world was full of villains, they were the darkness that King Arthur was driving out, which

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Collum was—possibly, hopefully—going to help him do. For an hour or two his whole world had wobbled on its axis, the incident in the meadow bespoke some deep chaos, deeper even than evil, from which his soul instinctively recoiled—but now the world was regaining its balance. He'd met an uncouth knight on the road, they fought, and Collum slew him, as any knight of the Round Table would have done. As God had willed it. And God would forgive him.

It was a good story. It made him feel better. Stories were useful that way, they smoothed over the gaps and sharp edges of the world. There was no great mystery here, or if there was then there was no need for him to solve it. And if it wasn't quite the whole story, well, it wasn't the only lie he was going to tell when he got to Camelot.

Collum could tell he was coming to a town because there were no more fallen branches under the trees. The locals gathered them all up for firewood. He found the town itself around sunset, a jumble of sprouting gardens and wattle-and-daub houses standing at odd angles to one another, as if a giant had thrown them as dice. It had an inn, too, a sturdy, respectable-looking building with an arched doorway and a sign painted with two crescent moons.

A drunk was passed out on the grass outside, an absolute giant of a man, his greasy tunic riding up over his white belly. A couple of kids were throwing clods of mud at him.

"Oi! Leave off!"

Collum scowled at them. The children looked at one another and collectively made a calculation, correct as it turned out, that he wouldn't actually chase them, and went back to clodding the drunk.

He doubted he could afford a bed for the night, but he left his

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horse in the courtyard anyway and ducked into the hall. The innkeeper, a middle-aged man with a torch of red hair and the iron face of a jailer, sniffed at Collum's northern accent but informed him that the village he had attained was called Ditchley, in the kingdom of Logres, and that Camelot was only ten miles to the south and east. Follow the river Brass and the trail of countless other naive, hopeful young men.

Ten miles. After all this time, tomorrow would be the day. In a grand gesture Collum handed over a quarter of his life savings for a bed and a meal. He'd never stayed at an inn in his life before but he'd need a good rest, and after all, if things went right, if he did win himself a place, he would never have to worry about money again. The innkeeper lifted his chin toward a woman in a green smock who was scrubbing the floor.

"Watch out for her, she's a live one."

The woman winked at him.

Upstairs, Collum took the opportunity to get out of his armor for the first time in a week. Like a lobster carefully molting its steel shell he removed all thirty-seven pieces, one by one, each with its own hinges and pins and buckles and fastenings, and piled them on a bed. There were a couple of replacement parts that didn't quite match—right cuisse, left gardbrace, now scratched—but only a couple. (And now that missing fastening pin, too, dammit.) Collum traveled with a little hammer and a metal file to hammer out dents and smooth out nicks and dings. Etched on the inner face of each piece were the maker's mark and the lioness of Brescia. There were few decent armorers in Britain.

He dried each piece and rubbed it with mineral oil. If you left them too long, like the late Sir Chevron Or had, they got rusty and you had to roll them in a barrel of sand to scrape them clean.

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He cleaned and oiled his blade too—for a killing weapon swords were surprisingly sensitive. Even touching one bare-handed would leave fingerprints that could turn into rust spots. When he was done he let his hair down—like most knights he grew it shoulder length and then pinned it up under his helmet for extra padding. He washed his grubby hands and feet and face in a basin. Then, feeling almost human again, he went downstairs.

The woman in the green smock placed a cup of ale and a plate of lamb stewed with onions and red wine in front him, and after that he couldn't think about anything else for a long time. He ate till his stomach hurt. His damp clothes steamed in the warmth. He was full, he was safe, he was almost there.

The sun was down, and the innkeeper prodded the fire to life. He argued with two customers and the woman over whether or not the big drunk in the gutter outside should be removed, and if so who should do it, and how, given how very big and drunk he was. Collum couldn't help noticing the woman watching him, bold and unembarrassed. People were always interested in a man in armor. She said something and the others laughed. Her hair was cut very short, shorter than he'd ever seen a woman's hair. Lice maybe. Or they shaved your head for adultery. Shave a cross on your head, cure for madness.

He'd turned away and decided he'd be better off ignoring her for the rest of the night when she abruptly sat down across from him.

"You a knight?"

Her age was hard to guess. Her eyes were a curiously pale gray.

"Not yet."

"I told them a real knight wouldn't stay in a shithole like this. Where from?"

"The Out Isles." He had to clear his throat. Collum was out of

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practice at making conversation, not that he'd ever had much practice in the first place. "And yourself?"

"Local girl." She had a winsome, lopsided smile and a funny accent that didn't sound local at all. "What happened to your face?"

"Lost a fight with a hawthorn bush."

She snorted.

"They won't let you lie like that when you're a knight. What's this?"

She reached across the table, so suddenly he flinched, and took the dead knight's silver medal in her hand.

"Medal."

"Obviously it's a medal." She weighed it in her palm. "Where'd you get it?"

He'd already resolved never to tell anybody what happened with the knight in the meadow; in fact, he'd firmly resolved to drink some water, go upstairs, and get the best night of sleep he'd ever had. But now he found himself spilling everything: the challenge, the fight, the ugly words, the ugly end. It just came tumbling out, as if she were his best and oldest friend.

He supposed he was lonely. He'd talked to two people in the last week, one of whom he'd killed. Her eyes were wonderfully large, and she had a way of looking at him as if he were the most interesting person she'd ever met.

"Dark times," she said. "I hope you buried him."

"Yes."

"Can't leave a body out like that. Spirits'll take it. Owls, even."

"Mm-hm."

"Can't have an owl running around in a knight's body."

Collum agreed that one absolutely could not have owls running around in knights' bodies.

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"His arms were three gold scepters and a chevron," he said. "Do you know them?"

She shrugged.

"I can never keep track of that stuff."

"But here's what really bothers me." Collum stared into the fire. He'd called for ale because it felt like the kind of thing a knight would do, but he wasn't used to it and now he felt woozy. "I don't think that knight was trying to kill me. I think he was trying to make me kill him. I think he wanted to die."

The woman tapped her lips with a finger, thinking, her large eyes gleaming.

"Of all the animals," she said, "only man can feel a despair that is beyond his power to endure."

"God wouldn't've sent him more than he could endure."

"I find your God is a great optimist when it comes to the question of how much people can endure. Can you read?"

Your God. A pagan then. Collum felt like he'd begun this conversation with one person and now was having it with someone completely different, who was several times more intelligent than he was.

"I can read."

"Just Latin? Or do you know your Beith-luis-nin?"

"Just Latin."

Beith-luis-nin meant Ogham, the old writing of the druids. More pagan stuff. Each letter was supposed to be a tree: *beith* was a birch, *luis* was a rowan, *nin* was an ash, or something like that. Back on Mull the elders made you feel guilty if you didn't learn it. Collum hadn't. He was a good Christian, like King Arthur.

Still he couldn't help wanting this woman to like him. There was something terribly exciting about her—her quickness, her smile, that wonderfully attentive gaze . . .

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"Stay with me, Collum." She snapped her fingers under his nose. "You're off to Camelot tomorrow, yes?"

An enormous iridescent beetle lit on her shoulder then flitted away again, so quick he wasn't even quite sure he'd seen it. There was a cold smell, like winter woods.

"I cherish the hope that—"

"Yes, of course you do. Well, I can't stop you. At least you can use a blade. Or stab somebody in the eye with it anyway." She stood up as suddenly as she'd sat down. Whatever game they were playing, she'd gotten tired of it. "Just don't waste any more time, you're late as it is. The sword's in the sea, and the last ship has sailed."

"I don't know what that means," he said, feeling stupid.

"I know you don't. I'm telling you now so that when you find out, you'll know that I knew."

She took off her smock and dropped it on the table.

"I quit," she called to the innkeeper.

Then she walked right out into the night. Collum stared at the open door.

He supposed it was traditional for a knight errant like himself to be accosted by mysterious maidens. Though usually in the stories they had longer hair. And what did she say about the sword in the sea? And there was something else, something important that he'd forgotten the moment she'd said it. He took a swig of his sour ale. She was one of those vibrant people who seemed to be part of a more interesting story than he was, and when she left she took it with her and left him behind in the dreary margins. She, the damsel, was the hero, and he the foil, soon discarded and forgotten. He fingered the rough fabric of her abandoned smock. *Stay with me, Collum.*

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But that was it. He sat up straight. That was it. He'd never told her his name.

The bench clattered over behind him as he got up and ran out into the courtyard, three-quarters drunk. The noise and light and heat of the inn shrank away to nothing. The woman was nowhere in sight. He jogged out into the wet road.

He dithered frantically then picked a direction at random and set off at a brisk walk, past a looming barn, a well, a market square with a carpet of mashed onions and cabbage trampled flat. The cozy inn dwindled away behind him. He'd forgotten all about Camelot, now it seemed like the only thing that mattered was that he find the short-haired woman and receive whatever message she had for him. Adventure had come looking for him and like a fool he'd let it slip away!

The rain started again. Somehow the road had left the houses behind, thinning down to two wheel ruts with a tall ruff of green grass sticking up between them. A loose-limbed hare lolloped lazily across the road. Bugs burred and trilled in the night around him. Maybe he'd made a mistake. Maybe she was an enchantress who'd lured him out here to do him mischief. The nape of his neck prickled. The world was coming undone again, like it had with the knight, just when he'd almost got it back together again. Why couldn't it behave?

Maybe she was a fairy. He stopped walking. This felt like fairy business. Collum swore under his breath and patted his thigh softly, but he'd left his sword back at the inn. Stupid. Stupid. He touched his medals—but she'd touched them, too, so were they cursed now? Fairies liked a bit of fun, but they played rough and didn't care if their toys got broken. They'd been gods once, who'd shrunk and faded with the coming of Christ, and now they lurked

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in hollow hills and at the borders and edges of things, places even God seemed to forget about or else why wouldn't He just get rid of them? They had their own world, too, the Otherworld, and if you put a foot wrong, on a thin place, you could fall right through into it and be trapped for a hundred years . . .

He bounced nervously on the balls of his feet. Did the ground feel thin? God's neck, he was an idiot. Just when he was almost there. "Grant unto us, we beseech Thee, O almighty God," he whispered, "we, who seek the shelter of Thy protection . . ." He should've just gone to bed. He swore a solemn vow that if he survived this he would always, for the rest of his life, if given the choice, go to bed.

He squatted down in the grass, his head spinning, and prayed to God some more. Maybe they'd get bored and leave him alone. How precarious this world was, he thought, how easily one left the straight path, even with the best of intentions. Or at any rate with pretty good ones. He thought about tomorrow. If he didn't win a place at Camelot he'd just have to keep going. To Astolat maybe; he'd heard the duke there wanted men. If not there then Londinium. If not Londinium then Rhydychen, Norholt, Caer Loyw, Aquae Sulis, cities he'd never seen, where he would swear service to a lord he'd never met, and fight for him, and kill for him, and die for him. It was nothing out of the ordinary, thousands of people did it, landless, masterless knights like him. But how strange that that would be his life.

But first Camelot. He didn't have to be a knight, he'd be a squire, a servant, he would do anything if they would just let him stay, anything! He would work in the kitchens like Gareth Beaumaynes had . . .

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A footstep crunched behind him in the road. For a moment of total horror he thought it was the recreant knight, restless and owl-possessed, back to take his vengeance—

But it wasn't. It was just the big drunk. The one who'd been lying on the grass outside the inn.

"Evening, friend."

He was tall, even taller than Collum, and he had a missing hand, the sleeve tied off short with a piece of twine. An old wound. How did he get all the way out here? But Collum wasn't all the way out anywhere. He was sitting in the wet road right in front of the inn, right where he started. The whole thing had been some kind of trick.

"Evening," Collum managed.

"You're from the north."

"Mull." His accent didn't seem to be fooling anyone.

"That's an island."

"It is an island." He picked himself up. His bum was wet with cold mud. Suddenly he was very, very tired.

"And what brings you all the way down here?"

"I'm on my way to Camelot."

"Camelot? Ha!" The man seemed to find that hilarious. Like Collum was the filthy broken-down drunk.

"Yes, Camelot," Collum said, with a heroic effort at manly casualness. "I'm looking for a knight, his name's Sir Bleoberys."

"Oh, you're too late for that." The big drunk chuckled some more and shook his head. "Old Blueberries is gone. Long gone!"

He turned and walked away, still laughing, looking for a better party than this one.

"Camelot," he muttered. "Good Christ. Too late for that. Go home."

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Something about the way he said it made Collum's mind go still, the way small animals do before an earthquake. The rain was gone now, the clouds swept clear, and bright stars swarmed overhead. In the moonlight the fields and gardens, having drunk in the rain, were breathing out a white fog.

The moonlight showed him something else too: he was standing in a perfectly round fairy ring of bone-white toadstools.

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Three

A Yong Knight

The next morning Collum rode to Camelot.

He hadn't slept well. All the way here he'd had actual fantasies about spending a night at an inn, in a real bed, but when he was finally in one—alongside an itinerant ropemaker from Garlot—the mattress felt like it was stuffed with needles, and he couldn't seem to force his thoughts down into sleep. First there was the disaster of the uncouth knight. Then there was the clever fairy-woman at the inn, and then the giant drunk who said Bleoberys was gone. None of it meant anything, or it shouldn't have meant anything, but in the Otherworld of the night things had a way of meaning things they shouldn't. And what they meant to Collum in the darkness of the inn was that something was wrong where nothing could be wrong, where he needed nothing to be wrong. At Camelot, the heart of the heart of the world, something was wrong.

By the time the sun rose his mood had cooled and stiffened into grim determination. He roused the innkeeper's daughter—who remembered nothing about any woman in a green smock with short

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auburn hair, none, never seen or heard of her—grabbed a heel of barley bread, and set off just as the sun pulled stickily free of the rim of the world and began heating the steaming meadows.

He kept saying it under his breath rhythmically as he rode: "going to Camelot—going to Camelot—going, going, going to Camelot." This was it, the greatest day of his life. He pushed his horse for no reason, his jaw set like cement. It felt like if he didn't hurry he would miss it. It would all be over, Camelot would've collapsed into a heap of rubble before he got there. *You're late as it is*, said the woman with the short hair. *Too late*, echoed the drunken giant. *Go home.* But that was nonsense. Camelot was eternal. He pasted a smile on his puffy sleepless face. It was time. Today his future would be decided one way or the other.

Though probably, if he were being brutally honest, it would be the other. He'd been strenuously trying to avoid thinking about it, but it was entirely possible that he was about to be publicly humiliated in front of the greatest men in the kingdom.

The problem was not that he wasn't a knight yet. That was easy enough to explain. If anybody asked, you just said that they'd wanted to knight you—they'd begged for the august privilege of knighting you!—but you'd refused to be knighted by any lesser hand than King Arthur's. The problem was that although in theory membership in the Round Table was awarded on the basis of virtue and chivalry and skill-at-arms, in actual fact every knight at the Table was of noble birth, and most of them were royalty of one stripe or another. Even when they did let someone of humbler origins in, it would inevitably come out after the fact, surprise surprise, that he'd had noble blood in him all along, only nobody knew about it. Like Sir Gingalin, Le Bel Inconnu, who turned out to be Gawain's son. Or Percival, who was raised in such total isolation

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that he didn't even know what a knight was, let alone who his father was. (His father was King Pellinore.)

But Collum wasn't bluffing. His father was a tradesman, a wool broker, and while it was true that he was a candidate for knighthood, it was only in the most technical possible sense. Furthermore his father wasn't even really his father at all. His mother had had him out of wedlock with a fisherman who was lost at sea before he was born, which meant that Collum wasn't just a commoner, he was a common bastard who had no business showing up at Camelot looking for a place at the Round Table. He knew this and he'd come anyway. He couldn't stop himself, it was like he craved humiliation, like he had a perverse compulsion to see the greatest in the land and to prove to himself and them and the whole world once and for all how definitively unworthy he really was.

The whole disaster had begun with Alasdair, Lord of Mull; he'd been the laird of Mull once, but after King Arthur took his conquering armies north of the wall the local clan leadership had been made over in the image of the southern aristocracy. An idle, feckless man, Alasdair had run up significant debts with various moneylenders, goldsmiths, wine merchants, mountebanks, and gambling buddies, adding up to the stupendous sum of forty-five pounds.

Collum's stepfather, Peadar, wasn't noble but he wasn't poor either, nor was he stupid. He needed some way to dispose of his illegitimate stepson, who wouldn't inherit his livelihood, so he sent Collum to Lord Alasdair's household, Dubh Hall, where Alasdair promised to educate him as a knight. In return Peadar would pay Alasdair, in regular monthly installments, enough money for him to service his massive debt. So far as he was concerned he was giving Collum the greatest gift a boy could have.

Dubh Hall was deep in the countryside, miles from the muddy

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streets of Mull's only proper town, but it wasn't a terrible place to be a little boy. It was drafty and leaky and constantly at war with creeping damp, but at its heart was a massive, double-sided, ever-warm stone chimney stack that supposedly went back to before Roman times—they'd found it standing alone in a field and built the manor around it. One of its stones had a crude image carved on it of a naked woman with her legs apart, and the other boys of the house made jokes about it, but when the older servants passed they always touched it for luck.

Collum touched it too. But it didn't bring him luck.

He quickly discovered that Lord Alasdair had no intention of training or educating him. He had no interest in Collum at all except as a scapegoat on whom he could vent his anger at the many humiliations of his life, which included being conquered by King Arthur (through base southron trickery) and having to beg a tradesman to get his title out of hock for him. Nobody was permitted to speak to Collum. He was dressed in discarded clothes. A motherless boy—she'd died when he was three—he'd always loved cozy, warm places, but now he slept with the servants on a thin pallet on the floor of the drafty cruck-roofed great hall, with a log for a pillow, listening to strangers all around him, grown-ups, sniffling and shifting and muttering and farting and sometimes—though he couldn't admit it to himself—having sex.

Alasdair beat and whipped Collum for the tiniest infraction. He sent him crawling up the chimney to sweep out the soot, where he nearly suffocated. There were other adults at Dubh Hall with a taste for cruelty, and Alasdair encouraged them to indulge themselves. There was a baker who held Collum's hand over a candle after he dropped a loaf of bread in the ashes, and a chaplain who forced his head underwater in a bucket for no good reason at all

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that Collum could see. He was locked out of the house at night and kicked down flights of stairs; on one such occasion he broke his leg, and it was badly set, leaving it forever slightly shorter than the other. Once somebody sprinkled lye on his blanket.

And that wasn't the worst thing in his bed. There were men at Dubh Hall who wouldn't scruple to make use of a well-made boy with no powerful protectors, who couldn't afford to make trouble or throw around wild accusations.

All he could think was that it was his fault somehow. There was something wrong with him, and this was just what he deserved. He never once resisted, though when he slept outside he sometimes prayed he wouldn't wake. He didn't even dream of freedom, or rebellion, or revenge. He despised himself as much as they despised him. Collum worked and ate and slept at the bottom of a dark ocean of misery, head down, lost in the depths where no light reached him. He felt like the weight of it all would crush him. Father Conall called this listless despair *acedia* and he told Collum it was a sin. If it was, then Collum sinned and sinned and couldn't stop sinning.

His one refuge was the smithy, a snug bolt-hole where he would retreat sometimes when it was cold or rainy or snowy out. The smith kept it dark even in the daytime; he explained that it was so he could see the heat in the metal. Sitting in a corner, hugging his knees and rocking, Collum imagined the forge as a demon—the fire was its demon brain, tormenting it with red-hot thoughts. He watched sparks scatter across the stone floor and followed their individual fates as they shone defiantly and then winked out one by one. As his father's spark had, and his mother's. As his own spark one day would.

The blacksmith had come to Dubh Hall from a post at Caerleon,

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which he had left for reasons he firmly declined to elaborate on, and he brought with him a deep fund of stories about the knights of the Round Table, which he liked to tell as he worked. Most people on Mull dismissed such tales as propaganda for the despicable southrons, but the smith found a rapt audience in Collum.

Like him, the knights of the Round Table were despised and forsworn, but unlike him they weren't fazed by it. They were too far away and too strong. They lived in a warm, safe world wrought of old gold, rich with strength and love and fellowship, where evil was great but good was greater, where God was always watching, and even sadness was noble and beautiful. That was the world Collum wanted to live in. Those were his people. It was only after he heard those stories that for the first time he actually wanted to be a knight.

That meant being a Christian, too, though Jesus was if anything even less popular on Mull than Collum was. Good Gaelic folk mistrusted Jesus as a newcomer who stank of the south. But King Arthur loved Jesus, and God, so Collum resolved to love Them, too, and worship Them, though he had to row across a narrow, icy strait to do it, to a tiny island off Mull that had a monastery on it. Services there were presided over by chipper, bent-backed Father Conall. The few other churchgoers were mostly there to catch up on gossip—which they did during the service, over the persistent objections of Father Conall—and to collect the bits of magic bread he gave out, which were well known to bring good luck.

And unlike the chimney stone, the magic bread did bring Collum good luck, or something did. On one unseasonably warm morning in April, two years after he'd come to Dubh Hall, it happened that, miraculously, there was nothing for Collum to do. He'd cleaned the other boys' boots. He'd been shooed out of the

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kitchen and the stables. Nobody anywhere needed him. So he wandered out to the practice yard.

Collum had seen the other boys there, training with swords. There were three of them, Alasdair's son, Marcas, and two fosterlings from other islands. At first he just watched. Nobody looked at him. The boys weren't fighting one another, they were just cutting and thrusting at the empty air in response to the barked commands of the marshal, a slender, dark-skinned Frank who looked like he had more than a dash of North African blood in him.

This was what Collum had been promised. This was why they'd sent him here. He'd almost forgotten. The boys were red-faced and sweating in their lumpy padded clothes. They complained about the heat. When they stopped for a rest Collum cleared his throat and spoke. It was like a voice spoke through him, he didn't know how or whose it was. It was like a wonder from the stories—a sword offered up from dark water.

"May I start my training now?"

The boys burst out laughing. The marshal looked at Collum with heavy-lidded eyes: a ragged child, desperately thin and ill-kempt, with a sore on his dirty cheek.

"Not today, boy."

"But when may I?"

"The hell would I know? Take it up with Lord Alasdair."

"He won't say." Collum's face was on fire, but he couldn't let it go. "He promised my father!"

He found he couldn't say "stepfather."

"A lord always keeps his promises, but till he does it's none of my business."

Every instinct told Collum to slink back off to the smithy. But somewhere inside him, somewhere even he couldn't see, he had

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come to the end. He'd waited and suffered as much as he could. It was like a plough hitting a buried boulder in a field, and the blade striking a secret unseen spark underground and stopping dead.

He stepped up to the nearest boy, a wide-eyed, jug-eared child whose name he didn't even know, and yanked the sword out of his hand. The boy was so surprised he didn't even resist.

The others grinned and hooted. This was going to be good.

Collum didn't hear them. He was looking at the sword in his hand. He flipped it round and grasped it by the hilt. He'd never held one before. Branches, broomsticks, any number of pretend swords, but never a real one.

Even this one wasn't real, it was just a wooden training sword—wasters, they called them. It was surprisingly heavy; later he would learn that they were weighted with lead to be heavier than the real thing. But to Collum it felt like he'd grasped a lightning bolt directly from the hand of Jupiter himself. He had a dizzying, rising feeling, as if he were shooting up from the very bottom of his ocean of acedia, from the black depths all the way to the sunlit surface in one glorious go. The crushing weight was gone, all the colors were bright again, and he could breathe sweet air. It was like waking from a terrible dream.

The jug-eared boy tried to grab his sword back but Collum wasn't ready to let go. He scurried back out of reach. Jug Ears then made the mistake most boys do in a fistfight, and a lot of men, which is that he reared back to throw a great big punch, which meant that Collum saw it coming a mile away. Before he could throw it Collum whacked the boy on the side of the head then quickly jabbed him in the eye with his free hand. The boy put his hands over his face; Collum punched his face through his hands three more times and then kicked him in the balls.

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He wasn't weak or a coward. He'd just had the bad luck to be in the way when Collum discovered the one single thing in life he was good at.

Now Marcas and the other fosterling closed in, swords held in both hands in front of them. They had him two to one, but Collum understood instinctively that he had several advantages in this situation. They had the numbers, but that made them overconfident. It also meant they had to avoid each other, and that each of them was waiting for the other one to go first. Collum noted that he was the only left-hander in the yard, which made him an unfamiliar challenge, and even though the other boys had always seemed like giants to him, he saw now that he was actually spotting them both a couple of inches. Also unlike them, Collum was untroubled by any inconvenient notions about the correct way to use a sword.

Circling to the left, so his adversaries were lined up in front of him, he batted Marcas's blade aside with his own, then bashed him on his hands so that he dropped his sword, and rushed in and kicked him hard in both shins, one-two, and kneed him in the nose when he doubled over.

The third boy's fighting spirit was rapidly deflating. Collum screamed at him and charged, and he turned white and ran for the safety of the house.

To this point the marshal hadn't interfered, just observed it all silently, arms folded. He was a small, elegant man. His name was Aucassin. Now he sighed and slowly, unhurriedly, bent and picked up Marcas's fallen waster from the worn grass.

Collum had moved beyond fear into a state of total focus that bordered on the mystical. He was no longer Collum, he was a god among mortals, Jupiter Triumphans. He was Sir Lancelot du

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Lac himself, the lightning-struck sword Arondight bright in his hand!

He woke up an hour later with bruised knuckles, a splitting headache, and a broken nose.

Marshal Aucassin didn't exactly take an interest in Collum after that, but he made room for him in the yard. The marshal seemed to be above the rules that required the other masters of Dubh Hall to ignore or abuse Collum; maybe it was the fact that he could've beaten any of them with a sword, or maybe it was his air of Continental sophistication. For the marshal of an utterly obscure household in the Out Isles, he was a pretty well-traveled fellow. He could speak any number of languages, though he spoke them all with a thick Frankish accent. He'd fought under King Bors of Gannes and later King Claudas of the Land Laid Waste and studied with several interesting Continental swordmasters. He'd sought out the Saxon adepts Octa and Baldulph, and even an Egyptian master who'd somehow fetched up in Paris.

He had a pronounced mystical bent, and his training often took the form of obscure aphorisms—*A straight arm is the essence of manhood; a moving leg is the manhood of essence*—and cryptic verses:

> *Only circles, never lines*
> *Only movement, never still*
> *Nimbly wind and counter-wind*
> *Long the journey to the kill*

But over time Collum began to discern in all the flowery talk and puzzling metaphors an orderly system that reduced the chaos of

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combat to something almost comprehensible. In the art of the longsword there were fourteen guards, five major and nine minor. No more, no fewer. There were eight cuts, all linked by flowing motions and arcs that chained them together. There were four thrusts and four parries. All else arose from combinations of these fundamental elements.

Collum's world was now sharply divided between the humiliating abuses of his life as a servant and his steady progress in the promised land of the training yard. It occurred to him early on to steal a real sword and kill Lord Alasdair with it, but that seemed unnecessary now. He wasn't worth it, it would just be a distraction. As prodigies will, Collum outstripped first his peers and then the motley gang of household knights who lodged at Dubh Hall, who learned quickly that they wanted nothing to do with Alasdair's terrifying feral fosterling. He spent a lot of time alone fighting the pell, a thick, stripped-pine post six feet tall that was a staple of knightly training. Aucassin taught him an antique poem about it, called, naturally enough, "The Poem of the Pell," which began:

Of fight the discipline and exercise
Was this: to have a pale or pile upright
Of mannys hight, thus writeth olde wyse;
Therwith a bacheler or a yong knight
Shal first be taught to stand & lerne fight

The pell had a red demon face painted on it by hands unknown, a cousin to the forge-demon, with a wide fangy mouth that gleefully ate up the blows he rained on it.

Collum bashed the pell to the point of exhaustion, day after day, year in and year out, the courtyard echoing with the dull,

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arhythmic clonking sound of wood on wood. High cuts and low cuts and cross-cuts, diagonal and vertical, upward and downward, weak edge and strong edge. The Squinting Cut, the Scalp Cut, the Battle Cut. The Father Strike, the Crooked Strike, the Crosswise Strike. A hundred of one, then on to the next, then start the cycle over. All he could think was that if he kept training and fighting he would one day refine the taint out of himself, burn it away, the one that made it impossible for anyone anywhere to love him. He would fight his way off this island, over the sea and all the way to Camelot.

As he got bigger Collum was no less resented and despised by the folk of Dubh Hall, not just for his connection to Lord Alasdair's debt but also increasingly for his vocal Christianity and allegiance to the southern swine at Camelot. The beatings he received were no less harsh, though he found himself better able to tolerate them. His body accumulated scars, from burns and whippings, but that did not stop it growing strong. He was biding his time now. This wouldn't go on forever. Once he was eighteen they would have to give him his knighthood and let him go. If nothing else they had to give him that.

Since they couldn't face him one-on-one, the other boys would track Collum down when he was alone and attack him in a gang, any way they could: sand in the face, stone in the fist, thumb in the eye, knee in the groin. Practice yard rules did not apply.

Collum complained to Marshal Aucassin.

"Let those boys be your masters," the marshal said, "as I have been." He was whittling a votive figurine, which was his hobby, though he was in no other obvious way devout.

"What, fight like them?" Collum said irritably. "Like a dirty coward?"

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"Is that what I've taught you? To fight the way your opponent does?" Aucassin closed his heavy lids and shook his head at the tragedy of Collum's stupidity.

"No, master."

"No. Not like them. You must fight worse."

So when they went low, he went lower. He went for the nose, the Adam's apple, the corners of the mouth. The knees, the instep, the balls. He shouted "For Camelot!" while he did it.

Collum was right that it couldn't last forever, but wrong about everything else. An incurable optimist, Lord Alasdair invested in another one of his friends' speculative enterprises, a scheme to send ships full of otter and seal skins to the Frankish kingdoms and bring them back full of wine. Contrary to all historical precedent, the business was a spectacular success, and Lord Alasdair was able to scratch his way back to a state of solvency and then modest wealth. That meant he didn't need Collum's stepfather's money anymore. One cold spring afternoon he told Collum to collect his things and get out by sunset.

Collum took this news as stoically as any beating. It would be the end of beatings, at least there was that. They would never whip and burn and drown him again, though he would always have the scars. He would always have a limp. But where would he go now? He'd been at Dubh Hall for so long he could barely remember the time before it.

Of course he could go back to his stepfather's house and beg his younger half brother for a place. But he knew he wouldn't. Collum gathered up his things. He felt around inside his thin straw mattress for the four much-clipped silver shillings he kept there. From under a loose flagstone he retrieved a stolen hatchet and silver spoon, both engraved with the arms of Dubh Hall, a hedgehog,

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that were worth two more shillings. They would be worth a spell in the stocks, too, or worse, if he was caught with them.

He went to the practice yard and gripped by a rage he didn't even recognize he hacked at the pell with his hatchet till he'd chopped it off at the root and it flopped over, finally defeated, its red demon face face down in the dust at last. Then he strode back to the house.

Lord Alasdair himself was a knight, of course, and he owned a marvelous armor. Every piece was edged in brass, and its breastplate was set with lines of fancy decorative rivets and covered in rich red velvet. It stood on a stand in a place of honor in the hall. Collum had never seen him wear it.

Slowly, piece by piece, barely knowing what he was doing, he put on Lord Alasdair's glorious armor. It was awkward, and he quickly discovered that you couldn't really do it by yourself, not correctly, but halfway through Marshal Aucassin appeared and wordlessly, with no expression on his narrow face, buckled and strapped and bolted and tied the fine old steel into place. When he was done he knocked his brown knuckles on Collum's armored back.

"Go on, boy," he said.

On Collum went. He walked clanking out into the afternoon sunlight. Lord Alasdair's armor was worth a small fortune, fifteen pounds easily, but in that moment Collum didn't care. He was Collum of Mull, the wool-broker's stepson, and he would sooner be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. Alasdair hadn't expelled him, he'd released him.

He went to the stables, knocking down a house knight along the way (*for Camelot!*), took a horse, and rode the eight miles into town, stopping only for a last look at his father's house. How he'd longed to go back there, night after dark cold night, and how small

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and ordinary it looked now. It held nothing for him. By the time he got to the docks the sun was almost down but the wind was fair, and he traded the hatchet for a ride on a fishing boat across the Firth of Lorn to the mainland.

As soon as they left the shallow bay the wind kicked up, speeding them out past low-lying sandbanks and into open water. Land sounds gave way to soft sea sounds: creaking, sloshing, slapping, the crying of seabirds. The temperature plummeted shockingly fast. Collum had never been to the mainland. You could see it on a clear day, green hills with halos of cloud over the tallest ones, not obviously that much different from the hills of Mull.

Crouching in the stern, he watched the umbilical of wake that connected him to his island home disperse and fade away. The sky above Mull was wild and windblown, here dropping curtains of gray rain, there lighting up a headland with a clear shaft of sunlight that made it look like a lost paradise. The island's bumpy silhouette got thinner and thinner till he could cover it with two fingers, and it became the small, insignificant thing he always knew it was.

Proper ocean swells arrived, and the wind kept rising. He shivered in his stolen armor. Suddenly all his bravado blew away and he longed for his familiar berth on the floor of the Great Hall. Where would he sleep tonight? What was he doing? He knew no one on the mainland. His whole soul burned with regret. He'd given in to a childish impulse to prove that he was something more than what he really was, which was nobody at all. He was the motherless, fatherless stepson of a tradesman. He was a bastard and a thief and a fool, and that's all he ever would be.

He could still go back. Grovel and pay a fine, do his time in the stocks. He could go to work for his half brother. Let his hard-won

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muscles go slack, his belly fill out, his calluses soften, live out his days as an oversize clerk who had once, years ago, shown some promise with a sword.

But he needed to know who he was. They had told him he was nothing and nobody, and before he died he needed to know if that was true.

Night fell, the wind dropped, and the fishermen made him row. By the time they reached land he'd been sick three times. He spent what little was left of the night in a haystack. But he was on his way, seventeen years old, strong and healthy, with a rich man's armor and little money and no prospects whatsoever, and somewhere far to the south was Camelot. He felt so broken that nowhere and nothing else could fix him. Camelot was the one crucible hot enough to burn away all his weakness and shame and confusion, leaving him whole and pure and bright. *Therwith a bacheler or a yong knight.*

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Four

Camelot

He started getting coy glimpses of it, peeking over hills and between trees, but superstitiously Collum avoided looking straight at it till he topped a rise and it was right there square in front of him.

As a castle there was nothing fancy about it, none of your newfangled circles or star shapes. Camelot was a massive stone box, not quite square—irregularities in the terrain and the whims of generations of kings had pulled it from a true rectangle into a lumpy, nameless five-sided shape. It stood on a gently sloping bluff, guarded on four of its sides by a lazy loop of the river Brass, and on the fifth by a moat that had been diverted from the river.

A low, wandering outer curtain wall separated the castle grounds from the town that clung to its skirts. Inside it Collum could make out a high inner curtain with massive muscular towers topped by crenelated battlements. From within that rose roofs and more towers and finally the upraised fist of the inner keep, the oldest part, a huge blunt mass of stormy gray rock.

The sight washed away Collum's sleepless night and soothed his

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bleary red eyes. There was nothing wrong here. Knights could curse at you, fairies could trick you, it didn't matter. Camelot would go on forever and ever, world without end.

As he rode closer, through fields of flowering blue flax seething with brown butterflies, he picked out things he recognized from the stories. The triple-arched Gate of Three Queens. Camelot's notorious Rain Gate. That green strip of cleared ground must be the tiltyard. The tower with the curious domed top was Merlin's Tower, which was sometimes there and sometimes not.

There was the outlying Tower of Stars, linked to the keep by a single delicate footbridge. That fat one was the Bakehouse Tower, and there, tallest of all, was the Godsfall, so named because King Uther was accustomed to hurl the idols of the pagan peoples he'd conquered and converted from the top of it.

Camelot town was quiet, the streets all but empty. A distant hammering came from somewhere, and he smelled baking bread, but otherwise the whole place could've been in an enchanted sleep. A tabby cat lounged slit-eyed in the morning sun. He crossed the drawbridge. He thought he'd have to beg or bribe or bluster his way inside but the crook-backed old man on duty just took his sword and his horse and waved him through, under the heavy ironshod double portcullis.

Strolling up through the gently sloping grounds, Collum startled a couple of tame deer. Camelot was a fortress but it was also a royal palace, with some concessions to civilian luxury: a hornbeam maze, an orchard, fountains, a pond. The famous Rose Garden, planted with seeds from as far away as Crete. He'd never been anywhere so grand and clean and orderly. Everywhere the Pendragon dragon was worked in stone and wood and paths and topiary. Back at Dubh Hall there had been a small cabinet that held the

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household treasures: amber beads all the way from Egypt; a little clasp knife with an ivory handle in the shape of a leopard; a cup made out of a hairy exotic thing called a coco-nut; a dried pressed olive sprig that was said to have come from Gethsemane. But this was a whole world made from treasures, a world of emerald leaves and white stone shot through with threads of golden sunlight.

Camelot wasn't always a seat of British royalty. The curtain walls were speckled with stones and ornaments scavenged from Roman buildings, and some of the exposed foundations belonged to the imperial fort that had stood here once, identical to all the other forts the Romans had stamped all over Britain. And it went back further than that. Broad banks and waves of earth rippled out from around the castle, the kind you saw around the oldest hill forts, made in ancient times by the Old Ones, who worked the landscape like a blacksmith works hot metal. Camelot had always been a place of power.

Collum proceeded on foot through the Rain Gate, so named for the rain of boiling water and hot sand it offered invaders, courtesy of its many murder holes and machicolations. A couple of ancient guards watched him from above—too old, he would've thought, for active service, but Camelot was turning out to be something of a rest home for elderly soldiers.

But that's it. Of course. He was too late. Arthur's court must've moved on to Caerleon for the summer. He'd thought they'd wait till after Whitsunday. Dammit, now he'd have to go all the way to Glamorgan. His journey wasn't over after all.

Well, he could at least have a look around first.

Collum marched unopposed across the outer bailey, which had a great green curtain of ivy spilling down one wall, and through an archway into a huge grassy interior courtyard. The mountainous

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keep peered down at him through narrowed arrow-slit eyes, a few of Arthur's azure-and-gold banners dripping down its sides. A couple of bored white geese were investigating a neat garden in one corner, and an anvil and some smith's tools lay temporarily abandoned in a circle of bare ground. It was all real. The promise of the stories in the flame-lit darkness of the smithy had been kept. White linens had been left to soak in a wooden tub, and he wanted to run over and touch them. The linens of Camelot! What heroes had slept and dreamed in these sheets!

A high slate-roofed hall formed one side of the courtyard. The Great Hall.

There was the door, right there. Did he really dare? Collum's head was spinning. He blinked his eyes hard. He sniffed and tweaked his nose with his fingers. Yes, he dared. He'd waited for this for nine long years, and that was long enough. He whispered a prayer, straightened his spine, and opened the door.

The Great Hall of Camelot was vast and shadowy, more like a forest at dusk than a hall. A massive chandelier hung from the roof beams, a grand celestial double wheel of candles, though only a few were lit. Narrow sunbeams speared down at steep angles through rows of high slit windows. Drifting motes glowed in the light and vanished into shadow again. Sparks on the smithy floor.

He'd arrived at the center of the turning world.

The Round Table was even bigger than Collum had pictured it, a hoop of thick varnished oak a hundred feet across, worn and scarred, darkly gleaming. You noticed the chairs as much as the table, a hundred of them set around it in two perfect fans, one on the inside of the O, one on the outside. Each chair was tall and straight-backed and varnished black, with the name of a knight written across the back in gold; supposedly Merlin himself had

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done it by magic. Collum had always imagined the Great Hall loud and full of people, but on this particular morning it was still and silent.

It wasn't quite empty, though. As his eyes adjusted, Collum picked out a man sitting at the table with his head down on his folded arms, apparently asleep. Another one, wide and frog-mouthed, sat with a cup of wine in front of him, even though the bells were only just ringing for terce. A ridiculously tall fellow with long, loose blond hair stood contemplating one of those green slit windows with his hands clasped behind his back, apparently lost in thought. A fourth man lay full length on his back on top of the Table, his eyes closed, as if he'd been laid out there for burial.

No one spoke. A banked fire slumbered in an old-fashioned open hearth in the center of the circle, a thin spire of gray smoke spooling up from it toward the ceiling, where a complicated-looking system of wooden louvers waited to vent it out into the summer morning air. The broad man took out a steel and began sharpening a long-bladed knife with slow rasping strokes.

He wore armor from the waist down and a thick quilted gambeson with bits of mail sewn into the elbows and armpits. The air smelled of smoke and sweet herbs and spilled beer.

"Boy." His head and jaw were frosted with silver stubble. "What do you want?"

"Boy?" The knight on the table lifted his head. "Magic boy, or regular?"

He let his head drop again with a clunk and closed his eyes.

"Regular boy."

Collum felt like he was melting into pure radiance. With his curious accent and rich brown skin like tanned leather, the man on the table could only be Sir Palomides, the famous Saracen knight.

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The Knight of the Questing Beast. Collum had scaled the cliffs of Olympus and was staring at the gods themselves as they took their ease.

He went to one knee. Gray cathedral light fell around him like sleet. I will not lie, Collum thought. They will look at me and see a nobleman and I will simply do nothing to disabuse them of that notion. Then they will anoint me and gift me with lands and—in a way that will cause almost no actual blame to accrue to me—the lie will thereby become the truth.

"An it please you, my lords." It came out a note higher than he'd meant it to. "My name is Collum of the Out Isles. I have come to Camelot to present myself to the Round Table."

He'd said it too fast. He should've waited. It would've been better if Sir Bleoberys had done it, wherever he was. *Old Blueberries is gone.*

"The what now? The Round Table?" The grizzled knight kept on sharpening. "Never heard of it."

"You're in luck." The man with his head on his arms didn't raise it. "At the present time we find ourselves with several vacancies."

He said it like it was a joke, but nobody laughed. Collum walked a few paces farther into the hall, trying to hide his limp, then went back to one knee.

"God's bones," someone said quietly.

"Gentlemen." Collum cleared his throat. Years at Dubh Hall had trained him to drop his gaze when dealing with his elders, but now he forced himself to keep his eyes up. "It is the greatest honor of my life to be in your presence! An it please you, I beg you to judge of my worthiness!"

There was a deep echoing belch.

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"Who's your f-father, Sir Collum?" the tall blond knight said, not unkindly.

"Lord Alasdair." The lie was so repellent that he nearly choked on it, but it wrenched itself out of him. "Also of the Out Isles," he added miserably.

"I see." The tall man had a slight stutter and an aristocratic drawl. "My boy, I'm afraid that through no f-fault of your own your arrival is ill-timed."

"What my companion means," the knight with the knife said, "is that circumstances bein' what they are, we would much prefer it if at this time you fucked off"—he made his fingers do a little run along the table—"back to those isles you spoke of earlier. An it please you."

"That will I not," Collum said.

"Eh?" The knight did an actual double take. "No, actually, that will you fucking will!"

But no. He wouldn't.

It had happened again, just like it had that first day in the training yard. The plough had hit the boulder, struck a spark, and stopped cold. He would not go. Maybe it was pride, fatal pride, but he wasn't leaving before he'd given them a good look at him.

"With the utmost respect, Sir Villiars, I am your servant in all things but this." Collum could tell the flowery talk was annoying them but he couldn't seem to stop. "I will not go until you and your comrades have judged of my worthiness."

"How do you know my name?"

"Begging your pardon, my lord, but everyone knows your name." It wasn't as obvious as Palomides, but by the man's size, shaven head, pugnacious manner, and thick Northgalis accent, he could

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only be Sir Villiars the Valiant. "You fought with Arthur against the Eleven Kings."

"Yeah, I know who I am. And who I fought."

"Whom," the tall knight said. "You want the direct object. Accusative case."

"I have come many miles to swear fealty to the—!"

"To the what? What? The fuckin' table? Do you see any fuckin' table?" Sir Villiars dropped the sharpening steel and tossed the knife over his shoulder; he did it casually but the knife spun in a precise arc and stuck upright in the tabletop with a soft *tok*. He flowed to his feet in one terrifyingly lithe movement.

"Of course he can see a fucking table." Bored, the knight with his head down rolled a bit of spilled green candle wax into a ball between his fingers. "It's right in front of him."

"I'm going to teach him some table manners."

Chairs scraped in the silence as people turned to watch.

"Don't listen to him, my boy," the blond knight said. "Villiars's table manners are revolting."

Sir Palomides sat up, blinking.

"In Sarras," he rumbled, "we would settle this at the chessboard. But I do not judge."

"I meant no disrespect—!"

"None taken, lad," Villiars said heartily. "My fist here is just going to judge of the worthiness of your face!"

Sir Villiars shuffled toward Collum, massive hands raised. And now for my next trick, Collum thought giddily, I shall fistfight a knight of the Round Table. How was this all going so wrong so fast?! Had he really come all this way just to get yet another beating? Villiars had a heavy jaw and pouchy eyes—he must've been a

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quarter-century older than Collum. One eyebrow was warped by a knot of silvery scar. Boulders rolled around in his upper arms.

Every instinct in Collum's body told him to backpedal, or better yet just cut and run as fast as he could, back to those isles he spoke of earlier, but he didn't. He would give no more ground. Instead he dropped into a boxing stance: hands up, elbows down, chin down, knees bent, feet unsquare. At least they would see him fight. Villiars would be expecting him to back up, but in a fight you always did the unexpected thing, so he shuffled forward, too, setting up for a couple of nice neat jabs to the face—

A whirlwind hook practically knocked him over. It was like being run over by a bull. Collum only escaped with a full-body duck and cover.

"Shit!" He didn't mean to say it.

"Come on, kid!" somebody called, but cracked up at the end of it.

Collum reset himself, breathing fast and shallow. His pulse was a runaway cart clattering downhill. This was his chance, this was the test. Whatever he did next he would remember for the rest of his life. He took a poke at Villiars's side, which was as indifferent to his knuckles as a tree trunk, and followed it with a cross that Villiars dismissed politely with a tiny movement of his bicep.

Villiars jabbed at his face, one, twice, jab-hook. Collum fended off the blows with his forearms, which hurt tremendously. He uncovered, and Villiars's fist glanced off his cheekbone, but it gave him a hard shot at the man's kidney. *Boom* and the joy of the fight flared inside Collum once again! Gentlemen, feast your—!

Time skipped. He was on the floor.

His ears rang, his nose buzzed, and one whole half of his head

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felt hot and twice as big as it should be. It was as though his mind had wandered off in the middle of doing something—but what?—and he'd just decided to lie down for a restorative nap on this pleasantly cool floor.

There were sweet herbs scattered on it: fennel, lavender, pennyroyal, hyssop. His body felt much, much heavier than usual. A pair of large booted feet stood in front of Collum. He couldn't remember who they belonged to, but they made him strangely uneasy.

One of the feet reared back to stamp on his head.

"Enough." The voice was deep and infinitely weary of bullshit.

"Oh, go to hell," said the owner of the feet.

The feet rose clear off the ground. Now they were being propelled backward through the air away from him. Was this a miracle—was this that merciful God Collum had heard so much about, finally making Himself useful? At last! *All glory to Jesus Christ!*

"Apologize to the boy."

Whoever he was, man or god, he'd picked up Sir Villiars with one hand by the front of his tunic and sat him down on the Round Table like a naughty baby.

"Fuck off!"

The man pushed Sir Villiars backward and onto the floor with a clatter.

Collum struggled up onto his hands and knees and a big callused hand hauled him the rest of the way to his feet. His savior was an older man, fiftyish, very big, sharp eyes in a blunt, unsmiling face. He almost looked familiar.

He did look familiar. It was the drunk from last night. But he was transmogrified. He'd washed and dressed and shaved. If he recognized Collum he didn't show it. He was sober now, but along with the drink the light had gone out of his blue eyes. The party was over.

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"We are ill prepared for visitors, but I hope you will accept what hospitality we can offer."

Of course. A man that size, missing one hand. How could he not have seen it?

"Thank you, Sir Bedivere," Collum croaked. "That's very kind of you."

"By our custom I cannot offer you a seat at the Round Table itself, but please, take one nearby."

He indicated an extra, non-sacred chair with the stump of his left wrist.

"I thank you."

"And don't do the thing with people's names," he said, with infinite patience. "Wait till you're introduced."

"Yes. Of course. I thank you."

"You're welcome."

"My name is Collum of the Out Isles."

"Sir Bedivere."

Collum sat obediently, like a schoolboy who'd just escaped a whipping, dabbing at his bloody nose with the back of his hand. It throbbed, and so did his head, and his arms, and his ribs, but the pain was nothing. Sir Bedivere was Arthur's oldest companion, his body man and best friend, there from the very beginning, through all the wars and the quests and adventures.

By now Villiars had climbed back over the table, but his appetite for violence was temporarily sated. He reached for his cup of wine but it was empty. He threw it into the fire and put his head in his hands.

Two servants in livery brought in more wine and bread and pickled carrots and radishes on a tray. The other knights drifted over and the unsmiling Bedivere introduced them one by one. Sir Villiars,

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you've already had the pleasure. Sir Palomides. The round-faced man was Sir Dinadan, a minor knight with a reputation as a wit. There was a heaviness to Bedivere—like Atlas he seemed to be bearing more of the world's sorrows on his broad shoulders than other people did. He wasn't going to complain about it, but you could see that he'd appreciate it if everybody else could just do as they were told and not add to his burden.

The tall man with the long blond hair, as shining and pretty as a woman's, turned out to be Sir Constantine. Collum knew the name: he was a prince, his father was Cador, king of Cornwall. Of them all he was the only one actually dressed like a nobleman, in a magnificent form-fitting blue doublet embroidered with white lilies and featuring a new fashion that Collum had heard about but never seen: buttons.

"What on earth happened to your face?" Sir Constantine asked. "I mean, besides the o-obvious."

"Lost a fight with a hawthorn bush," Collum said.

"Ah, yes. They can be vicious when cornered."

Sir Palomides raised a cup.

"Muhammad teaches us that wine is the sweat of the denizens of Hell."

"That would explain the smell." Constantine sniffed at his cup of wine and set it aside. Palomides drank.

With that the knights of the Round Table appeared to lose interest in Collum, which gave him the opportunity to observe them as a group. They were a curious assortment, tall and short, thick and thin, with accents from all over. Dinadan looked so ordinary Collum could've mistaken him for a greengrocer. But there was something in the way they all moved—every gesture had a smooth deliberate precision to it, a sense of speed and strength held lightly

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in check. Never for an instant was any one of them off balance. There was a secret they shared, which was that they were all members of the most elite military order in all of Christendom.

Collum just wondered where the rest of them were. Gawain. Gareth. Bors. Lancelot. The heroes. Maybe they were off at Caerleon. Maybe being a hero meant you could sleep in of a morning.

Dinadan drained his wine and strode off to the far side of the room to practice forms, his blade flickering in the half-light. It was an extraordinary weapon, with a broad chunky blade made of blued steel so matte it didn't even look like metal. His left hand, his off-hand, was bandaged. Constantine had a black eye too. They must've seen action recently.

Collum wasn't in such great shape either. Many parts of his body were reporting damage. But he was still here. You couldn't call it a strong start, but they hadn't thrown him out yet. He didn't have to go to Astolat. Not quite yet.

Maybe some wine would help. He took a sip and set it down.

"Is King Arthur at Camelot presently?" he said, in an effort at making conversation.

"The king is dead." Sir Bedivere's face and voice were empty of all emotion. His gaze was fixed on the far distance. "He died at the Battle of Camlann along with most of the Round Table. We are all that's left."

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Five

The Tale of Sir Bedivere

Long ago on a sharp crisp morning in early autumn King Arthur and Sir Bedivere chased a deer deep into the Tamwood, a glittering green forest north of Caerleon.

The campaigns for Pictland and Scandinavia had ended in triumph that spring, after three years of hard fighting, and Camelot was enjoying a rare and welcome interval of peace. Arthur and his court had spent the long lazy summer in Glamorgan, and nobody wanted to make the long trudge home yet along the old Roman Southway to Caer Loyw and then Camelot. So they lingered, trying to stretch out the season a few days longer. Now it was the eve of the autumn Feast of the Holy Cross, the damp gnawed stub of the season, and the weather had finally and undeniably begun to turn, but the king had wanted one last day out.

Arthur slowed his horse in a sunlit mat of white yarrow.

"If I weren't the king of Britain," Arthur said, "I might admit that I'm wondering where the hell we are."

He shaded his eyes and squinted into the half-light of the forest.

"But as you are—"

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"Unlike his subjects, the king does not enjoy the freedom to be uncertain."

"Well, if we find that damned deer we can ask it," Bedivere said. They'd long ago dropped any formality between them when they were alone.

Yellow leaves slipped ceaselessly down through the branches. Arthur was a tall, handsome, black-haired, pale-gray-eyed man, not yet thirty, clean-shaven in the Roman manner—beards were for barbarians. He still had the sharp cheekbones of the half-starved foundling he once was, but otherwise he was radiant with health and goodness and genius and the certainty that there was no problem in this world that he could not solve, whether with laws or with charm or with faith or with an army.

It took some doing for the king to get lost on a hunt. He hunted in the grand manner, *par force*, accompanied by Master Huntsman Edward, five assistant huntsmen, three horn blowers, four archers, ten beaters, and a small army of dog handlers handling relays of lymers, bloodhounds, brachets, greyhounds, and so on, shouting at them *So how! So how! So how! Sa say cy avaunt!*

"I suppose," Arthur said, "that from the deer's point of view this is a great victory. It must think of itself as a mighty hero."

"You don't really think God bothered to give deer a point of view?"

"Of course He did, He's a fiend for details."

"Well, maybe it deserved to get away. Maybe it's a virtuous deer. If animals can be virtuous."

"I had a cat once," Arthur mused, "who has almost certainly gone to hell."

Bedivere wasn't much practical use hunting deer—one-handed, he was clumsy with a bow—so lately he'd been practicing hunting calls with a little brass horn shaped like a bull's horn that he wore

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slung around his neck. It wasn't polished bright but instead waxed a dull green for camouflage, one of many details of woodcraft about which Arthur was obsessive.

He blew it now. There was no echo. The dense fabric of the deep forest absorbed the sound completely.

"That's the wrong call," Arthur said. "You don't want a recheat, you want 'straking from covert to covert.' You know—" With his fist to his mouth the king did a fair imitation of a hunting horn sounding "straking from covert to covert"—but broke off halfway through.

"Shh!"

He pointed.

Bedivere didn't see anything. The silence was so thick it seemed to roar around them. He stifled a sneeze.

"Shh!" Arthur took his arm and pointed again.

Bedivere was sure they'd long since lost the deer—and anyway they weren't going to bay it without the dogs—but suddenly there it was, maybe fifty yards away, alone in the leafy dusk, staring off at something else even as they stared at it. Without taking his eyes off it Arthur slithered down from his horse and nocked a barbed hunting arrow. He gave Bedivere a look that meant, *Stay here you one-handed lumbering lummox.*

Arthur was only middling competent with a sword but the ritual complexity and deep seasonal lore of the chase appealed to his hungry intellect, and he was a past master at it. Bedivere watched him step carefully through the woods, toe-heel, mimicking the gait of his quarry. Most nobles went in for flashy colors on a hunt but Arthur wore the greens and browns that peasants wore, the better to blend in with the forest. To complete the look he twisted

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a small leafy branch off a tree and gripped it between his teeth, to hide his face.

If Bedivere were honest with himself he didn't really care whether Arthur got the deer or not, except that it would make Arthur happy, and Bedivere wanted Arthur to be happy because he loved him. Not just as a king but as a man: Sir Bedivere was in love with King Arthur.

He'd never done anything to betray his feelings. The risks would've been grave; sex between men was a serious sin, as was adultery. But he thought about it. A lot.

Did Arthur love him back? Almost certainly not. Not that way anyway, though it was hard to be sure. No one knew exactly what Arthur and Guinevere got up to in the royal bedchamber, but whatever it was, it hadn't produced an heir. And Arthur definitely spent a lot of his time in the company of a lot of big, strong, sweaty men.

Suddenly the deer raised its head and looked directly at Arthur, curious but still unalarmed, a solemn verger in a chapel of ash and oak. It shivered its hindquarters primly. Arthur paused, his bow drawn. He frowned, vexed, maybe, by some merciful impulse. The hart took the barest beginning of a step toward him.

Then it threw itself violently down headfirst, as if it were trying to burrow into the ground. A long arrow was stuck square through his skull.

A huge knight in bloodred armor came trotting out of the woods on horseback. He dropped smoothly out of the saddle and with monstrous strength hoisted the dead deer on his shoulder like a sack of flour, then remounted and was off again, its head bouncing limply against his back.

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Arthur spat out his leafy twig.

"Look at that," he said. "This isn't a hunt. It's an adventure."

Sir Bedivere was part of Arthur's story from the very beginning, and he was there at the bitter end, but he was never the hero. He led no armies and worked no miracles. He was only ever the companion. The story was never about him.

People liked to speculate about Bedivere's missing hand, but that didn't make much of a story either. He didn't lose it in battle. He didn't trade it for passage home from the Otherworld, or sacrifice it to a demon to save an innocent maiden. He was born without it. His left forearm ended in a rounded pink stump and always had.

His father, King Reitheoir of Dyfed, told Bedivere that God kept his hand because Bedivere was too precious and He couldn't bear to let all of him go. A priest told him that the left hand was the one that did evil, and God had withheld it from Bedivere's body as a sign that Bedivere would do only good. Privately Bedivere thought that if God thought he was so precious He had a pretty funny way of showing it, and furthermore he was confident that he could get up to any amount of evil with his right hand if he put his mind to it. But he didn't brood about it. Until such time as God saw fit to clarify His intentions, he would get on with his life.

After all, he had plenty to live for. He was tall and strong, with fine, tousled dishwater hair and a long, blunt-chiseled face, and as the scion of one of Dyfed's great families he stood to inherit the throne of a small but prosperous kingdom. His good arm was disproportionately strong, and his master-at-arms helped him develop a fighting style that took advantage of it. Not many men had

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