MERLIN

The magician between the worlds

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The Boy from the Fog

The fog arrived every morning like a hungover ghost that had forgotten to go home. It hung heavy over the village huts, crept into cracks, filled the lungs, and settled over one's thoughts until one hardly knew whether one was awake or half-dreaming. To the people, it was merely an annoyance—to the boy, it was home.

No one called him by name. Actually, he had one, but it was lost in the smoke and whispers. "The Bastard Child," "The One with the Eyes," "The Mist Boy"—those were the titles he received. Children can be cruel, but adults are true masters of it. And in a village that had little but dirt, hunger, and mistrust, it was easier to use the boy as a lightning rod.

His mother was a woman who had once lived in a convent. Then something happened, something that was never spoken of openly. She claimed that one night a man who wasn't one came to her. Some said it was the devil himself. Others said it was just a knight errant with too much wine in his head. Whatever the case, in the end, a child remained. A child who was different.

The boy spoke late, but when he spoke, it was with a clarity that silenced people. Once he had said, "The goat will die tonight." And it died, for no reason, in the middle of the night. Another time, he warned a fisherman not to go on his boat. The fisherman laughed. He never came back. From then on, the boy was no longer seen as a child, but as a walking threat.

Strange things clung to him like flies on a sheep carcass. Birds landed on his shoulders as if they weren't afraid. Dogs growled at him, then whimpered as if they'd been beaten. He stared into the fog as if reading writing only he understood. And sometimes he smiled, for no reason, as if he heard something the others couldn't hear.

People said, "He's half human, half demon." But when you asked them what a demon looked like, they just shrugged. Maybe a demon was just what they didn't understand. So maybe the boy was just what they couldn't grasp: a mirror for their fears.

His mother loved him as best she could. But love in misery is like bread from dust: It doesn't satisfy hunger. She washed him with cold water from the well, sewed him clothes from scraps of fabric, and said prayers that were never answered. She sometimes saw a depth in his eyes that frightened her—as if she were looking into a never-ending ravine.

The nights were the worst. The fog crept through the cracks in the hut, filling the room as if it wanted to swallow the boy. He lay on his straw bed, listening to the dripping rain, the howling of dogs, the distant cry of an animal being torn apart. And amidst it all, he heard voices. They weren't loud, more like a whisper behind thoughts, like a second layer of reality. They spoke of things that had happened, and sometimes of things that would happen.

"You will make the king," said one voice. "You will destroy the king," said another. And the boy didn't know which was right.

The next day, he saw the people in the village square. They stood there, smoky faces, hands covered in calluses, eyes filled with suspicion. They whispered about him the way one talks about bad weather: inevitable, but unpleasant. One spat as he passed. Another made the sign of the cross, as if he were the plague itself.

He didn't think much about it. Children who learn early on that they are outsiders eventually stop asking questions. They accept the pain like an old shoe that pinches but never completely goes away.

One day he went out into the forest that rose behind the huts. The fog there was even thicker, thicker than any breath. He wandered among the trees, heard the cracking of twigs, the whispering of leaves. Suddenly he stopped. In front of him sat a crow on a branch. Its gaze was black as burnt stone, yet it seemed full of meaning.

"Who are you?" asked the boy. The crow cawed as if laughing at the question.

At that moment, he felt something. It was as if the fog were opening, as if he were looking through a wall of glass into another world. Shadows moved within it, figures that were half human, half smoke. One reached out a hand to him. He was startled, stumbled back—and the fog closed.

He ran home, but something inside him had changed. He now knew that the fog was more than just water in the air. It was a door. And he himself was the key, or perhaps the one cursed to stand before it, never knowing what lay beyond.

His mother looked at him when he returned. His eyes were different, people later said. Deeper, more restless, as if they had swallowed a piece of darkness. She asked him, "Where have you been?" He replied, "Between the worlds."

His mother was a woman who had learned to live with her eyes lowered. When she carried wood, drew water, walked through the market, her eyes were always lower than the ground actually deserved. The boy knew why. A glance could be a judgment, and in the village, judgments were made faster than one could breathe.

"Devil's whore," an old woman once hissed as she passed her. His mother heard, pretended not to hear, but the boy felt the cut in her skin. Later, in the hut, she washed her hands, scrubbing them as if the word could be washed off like dirt. But words aren't dirt—they stick like pitch, and the water only makes it worse.

The boy often watched her. He saw her sitting at the table at night, her forehead in her hands, as if she were holding the weight of the world there. She barely spoke about his father—the one who maybe existed, maybe not, the demon or knight, or whatever people said. She only said, "You're here. That's enough." But he sensed it wasn't enough. Not for her, not for the others, not even for him.

And yet her love was there, raw, unpolished, like bread without salt: not beautiful, but satisfying. She held him when he cried, even when she herself could barely stand from exhaustion. She stood before him when people had stones in their eyes. She was his shield, even though he knew the shield was cracked.

He began early on to know things he wasn't supposed to. Once, a man came by with a lame leg; the doctor had said he would never walk again. The boy looked at him and said, "In three days, you'll be walking again." The man laughed, a bitter laugh that smelled of beer and shame. Three days later, he was walking. Not well, not fast, but he was walking. From then on, people no longer laughed at the boy's words—they feared them.

Fear is the mother of invention. Some said he was a sorcerer, born of a whore and a demon. Others said he was proof that God had lost patience. A few clung to the idea that he was just a crazy child. Crazy children are easier to bear than prophets.

But sometimes, when he played with the other children—as much as you could call it playing—he shouted things no one wanted to understand. "Don't go that way, the tree's falling!" And the tree fell, shortly afterward. "Your cow will die." The cow died. Soon, no one wanted to play with him anymore. A game in which every sentence sounded like a curse was no game at all.

His mother noticed he was different and tried to hide it. "Don't say anything if you see something," she begged. "Swallow it." He nodded. But he was still a child, and children don't easily swallow things bigger than themselves.

The dreams grew stronger. He woke up drenched in sweat, seeing images that wouldn't go away: a king lying in a hall covered in blood; a circle of men raising swords; a girl with eyes as clear as glass, staring at him as if she were betraying him. He didn't understand the images, but they ate into him like thorns.

He told his mother about it. She held him as one would hold a caged animal. "They're just dreams," she said. "Everyone dreams." "But their dreams are empty," he replied. "Mine are full."

The village was a place where everyone knew everyone else, and everyone knew who knew too much. Soon, people were whispering not only behind his back, but also in front of him. "Witch boy." "Bringer of doom." "The thing from the fog."

Once, in the marketplace, a butcher stood before him, tall as a tree, with hands like meat hooks. He said, "If you're so clever, bastard, tell me what I'll dream about tonight." The boy looked at him, saw the sweat on his brow, the stain of blood on his apron, and said quietly, "You'll dream about your father. He'll beat you like he did when you were a child." The butcher's laughter froze, his face twisted as if a knife had been plunged into his heart. He swung, about to hit the boy, but his hand trembled, and he let it fall. He turned and left. From that day on, the boy received fewer open insults—but the looks grew colder.

Sometimes he helped his mother in the forest. Gathering wood, searching for herbs, picking berries. She knew plants that healed and plants that killed. She showed them to him, but he often knew beforehand which was which. "How do you know?" she asked. "They tell me," he answered. "Who?" "The plants." She shook her head, but part of her believed him. Another part feared him.

In the forest, the fog was thicker, more alive. There, he heard the voices more clearly. Sometimes they whispered in languages he didn't know, but understood. Once, he heard: "The king still sleeps. But his dream begins." He didn't know what it meant. But the voice was so sure that he felt uncertain himself.

The crow he had seen in the first block often returned. It was like a black shadow that accompanied him. He began to talk to it. "You are smarter than humans," he once said. "You listen." The crow cawed, and he swore it nodded.

His mother found it creepy. "It's just an animal." "No," he said. "It's more." "More what?" He smiled crookedly. "More than most of the people here."

People avoided him, but they didn't avoid him enough. You can avoid a well if you hate water, but not if you're thirsty. And people were thirsty for answers. Every now and then, someone would come to him secretly. "Will my child be well?" "Will I find silver in the ground?" "Is war coming?"

He never answered directly. He said things like, "The child is still laughing, so it's alive." Or, "The earth smells of metal, but not silver." Or, "When men carry too many swords, the field remains empty." The answers were enigmatic enough that they feared him, but clear enough that they needed him.

One evening, he sat by the fire with his mother. The smoke spiraled, the sparks rising as if they were trying to become stars. "Why are you here?" she asked him suddenly. "Because you gave birth to me." "No," she whispered. "Why you?" He looked at her. His eyes seemed older than they should have been. "Because someone needed to listen."

She cried that night. Quietly, so quietly that he barely heard it. But he heard everything.

The priest was a man who looked as if he had been baptized with his own anger. His face was a collection of wrinkles, all pointing in only one direction: downward. When he preached, it looked as if he were driving nails into the sky with his words, just to keep God from falling out.

He had been observing the boy for a long time. At first with that suspicious look men wear when they don't want to understand something. Later, with genuine fear. And finally, with a kind of ambition that was worse than fear. For where fear is silent, ambition wants to speak—and talk until everyone believes what it says.

"The child is a danger," he announced one day to the entire congregation. They stood in the churchyard, the wall covered in moss, the wind driving gray clouds across the sky. "He is the enemy's tool. His words are poison. And whoever drinks poison dies."

People nodded. Some reluctantly, others eagerly. It's always easier to point at a child than at a mirror.

Merlin's mother stood beside him, her hands clasped tightly together. "He's just a boy," she said. "My boy." "Your boy?" The priest spat out the word as if it were rotten. "Your boy is the child of sin. Born of fornication and lies. Even his breath is blasphemy."

Merlin remained silent. He looked at the priest. And as the crowd murmured, he felt something swelling within him. Not anger, not hatred—more like a wave, growing larger and larger until it engulfed everything. He saw the man, and behind him, he saw something else: shadows curling around his figure, like tendrils of smoke. They whispered. Not for the crowd, not for the mother—only for him.

"He's lying." The voice was cold and sharp as ice. "He fears you because he doesn't understand you."

Merlin raised his head. "You're afraid," he said. His voice wasn't loud, but it cut through the murmuring like a knife through bread. The priest blinked. "What?" "You're dreaming," Merlin continued. "You dream of fire devouring you. Of a hand grabbing you. Every night you scream, but no one hears you. You wake up and pretend nothing is wrong. But your heart beats as if it wants to escape you."

Silence. No breathing, no rustling. Only the wind blowing over the stones. The priest stared at him as if someone had opened his throat.

"Where…" he began, then stopped. His hands trembled. He made the sign of the cross, hastily, as if it might be a net that would keep him from falling. "Witchcraft!" he finally cried. "He's possessed! Don't you see?"

The crowd began to whisper. But the whispering was no longer clear. Some voices sounded fearful, others doubtful. And that was worse than fear. Doubt is a hole in the dam through which the flood will eventually burst.

The priest didn't let up. The next day, he came to the hut. He brought holy water, candles, and a cross so large it looked as if he were trying to banish an entire forest. "The child must be purified," he said. The mother stood at the door. "He is pure. Purer than you will ever be." The words fell like stones. You could see them hitting him. But he didn't flinch. "You'll regret it, woman. If you don't give him up, he'll drag you down with him."

She didn't answer. She knew words would only add fuel to the fire. But Merlin stood behind her, hearing every word, and something burned inside him. Not anger—more clarity. Like when you suddenly realize a game is already decided long before it's even begun.

That night, he had another dream. He saw the priest, kneeling, his face to the sky, his hands covered in blood. He saw flames rising from his eyes and heard screams—not his own, but screams that resonated through him. And then he saw himself, a child with eyes older than mountains, and a voice that said, "You are between worlds. You are neither hers nor his."

He woke up, his heart pounding. The fog lay thick, and he swore he saw movement in it—as if figures were moving just outside his field of vision. He heard whispers. "Soon." "The circle is complete." "Choose."

In the morning, the priest was there again. This time he had brought people with him—men with sticks, women with stony faces. "We must banish him," he said. "Otherwise, he will destroy us all." The mother held the boy's hand. "You don't understand." "No," said the priest. "You don't understand."

They crowded into the hut. They lit candles, murmured prayers. The smoke from the incense crept over the walls like a second skin. The boy sat still, feeling the words rain down on him like arrows. But they didn't penetrate. They bounced off. And the more they bounced, the more he felt the other side—the voices calling him.

"You are not a prisoner," they whispered. "You are the door."

He closed his eyes. The villagers' voices faded, the smoke grew thicker, and suddenly he was somewhere else. Not in the hut, but in a room without a floor, without a ceiling, only fog.

Figures stood before him—some with faces, some without. One spoke: "You are the first and the last. The child and the old man. The bridge."

Then a scream pulled him back. His mother had pushed the priest, who had come too close. "Enough!" she cried. "You're only making him stronger!"

The people stepped back. Some muttered the sign of the cross, others stared at him as if he were a fire about to leap over them. The priest gasped for air. "He's a tool," he gasped. "A tool of darkness."

Merlin opened his eyes. They were black, some later said. Others swore they were golden. Perhaps they were both. He looked at the priest and spoke quietly: "No. I am a tool. But not yours."

The crowd left the hut, confused, afraid, murmuring. The priest left last, the cross clutched more tightly than ever in his fist. He would return, they all knew that. But for this evening, the battle was over.

The mother took her son in her arms, trembling as if she herself had seen a demon. "Why did you say that?" He looked at her. "Because it's true." "And what kind of tool are you?" "I don't know yet," he whispered. "But they don't know either. And that scares them."

Outside, the fog thickened, and in the gray, he heard the crow cawing. It sounded like laughter.

Spring didn't really come; it merely stumbled into the village like a drunk who can't find his way. The fields were still wet, the grain refused to grow, and the people became thinner-skinned, as if winter had peeled off their skin and left them naked.

Merlin often sat at the edge of the village square, on the overturned cart wheel that no one repaired. He watched the people: the blacksmith hammering as if he could slay poverty with it; the women pulling their shawls tighter as if they were a shield; the children playing as if they didn't yet know that their games would soon be forbidden.

There was unrest that day. A farmer had reported that the sky had looked strange—greenish, with a twitching, as if it were bleeding. People spoke of omens, of punishments, of plague. The priest immediately seized the opportunity. "This is the boy's work!" he cried. "As long as he is among us, the sky will send signs that will destroy us."

The crowd nodded. Fear always nods.

Merlin stood up. He didn't know why. His legs carried him into the square, into the middle of the crowd. He felt their gazes like stones on his skin. The priest took a step back, surprised that the child had the courage to face him.

Merlin raised his hand. "It is not heaven that punishes you." His voice was clear, surprisingly calm for a boy. "It is the fire you ignite."

People laughed uncertainly. "What does he know?" someone murmured.

Merlin closed his eyes. He saw images so fast they were like flashes of lightning: smoke, flames, screams. He opened his eyes again. "Tonight a house will burn. A house near the river. A man will die inside. No one will save him."

Silence. Words falling like stones. A few laughed again, harder this time, because laughter is a cheap excuse. "Such nonsense," one said. "Why would a house burn? It's been raining for weeks."

But in their faces one could see something else: doubt, fear, the question of whether they should dare to wait until night.

His mother grabbed his arm and pulled him away. "Why did you say that?" "Because it's true." "And if it isn't true?" "Then I'm a fool. But I'm not."

She stared at him as if he had passed judgment on himself.

Night came. The rain stopped, the wind shifted. The village lay silent, like an animal hiding under the blanket. Then, shortly after midnight, a scream. Then a second. Then the smoke.

A house by the river was ablaze. People ran, carried water, shouted, screamed, and cried. But it was no use. The fire consumed the wood, bit into the beams, and licked at the roofs. One of the men couldn't get out. They found his body in the morning, black as scorched earth.

And everyone remembered the boy's words.

The next day, the village was no longer the same. They looked at him as if he himself had been the fire. Some shrank back when he came, as if they feared his gaze might set them on fire. Others stared at him as if they wanted to squeeze answers out of him.

The priest had his explanation ready. "You see? He knew because he did it! A demon in child's skin. He brought the fire."

Merlin's mother screamed at him. "You know that's not true!" But her voice sounded weak, lost against the murmur of the crowd.

Merlin himself remained silent. He simply stood there, among the people, his eyes dark. Finally, he said quietly, "I didn't do it. I saw it." "That's the same thing!" cried the priest. "No," replied Merlin. "If you get wet in the rain, are you the rain?"

The words hung heavy in the air. Some nodded uncertainly. Others grimaced as if he had whispered something poisonous in their ears.

Later, when he was alone, the crow came. It perched next to him on the fence post and croaked once, as if laughing. "I saw it before it happened," he murmured. "Why me?" The crow was silent. Silence was its specialty.

He put his head in his hands. For the first time, he truly felt the weight of what he knew. It wasn't a gift. It was a stone. And he carried it alone.

The villagers began to seek him out secretly. A man asked, "When will I die?" A woman asked, "Will I have another child?" A boy asked, "Will I ever carry a sword?"

Merlin gave answers that weren't answers at all. "You die when your breath runs out." - "Your womb is a door, but whether anyone passes through it, I don't know." - "A sword will find you, whether you want it or not."

They walked away, disturbed, scared, hungry for more.

But the priest swore to get rid of him. "We must drive him out before he burns us all." He spoke of banishments, exorcisms, and stoning. His words became harsher the more people secretly went to Merlin.

Merlin knew things couldn't go on like this forever. He felt the fog around him growing thicker, heavier, full of voices. Sometimes he heard them whisper: "You are ours." – "No, you are free." – "You will make the king." – "You will destroy the king."

He didn't know which voice was right. Maybe they all were.

And so the boy from the mist began to understand that he not only stood between two worlds—but that both worlds were pulling at him. And that every prophecy he uttered was not only a mirror, but also a knife.

Death in the River House was like a crack in the wood: small at first, but growing deeper and deeper. People could no longer ignore the crack, and everyone knew that it would eventually blow through the entire structure. It wasn't long before the priest took up his axe.

"The child is a curse," he thundered in the church. "We must cleanse him, or we will all rot from his sin." His voice echoed from the stones as if they had heard the same sentence too many times.

The people nodded. Fear always nods, even if it doesn't understand why. One murmured, "He knew beforehand." Another, "Maybe he did it." And just like that, it was decided: on the next full moon, they would banish the boy.

The mother learned about it from a neighbor who pretended to feel pity for what she revealed. "It's for your own good," she said in a tone that was worse than outright hatred. "If he's cleaned up, he might have a future."

The mother didn't cry. She had cried too many times before. Instead, she grabbed Merlin's arm. "You can't go." He looked at her. "If I don't go, they'll get me." "Then run!" "Where to?" He smiled crookedly. "The fog doesn't run. It stays."

On the evening of the full moon, torches burned in the village square. The flames cast shadows on the houses that were taller than the people themselves. It looked as if the huts had finally cast their inner demons outward.

Merlin stood in the center. Barefoot, his shirt too thin, the fog around his legs. The priest held the cross aloft, his lips full of prayer. "In the name of the Most High, leave this body!" he cried.

The crowd murmured along. Some spoke seriously, others with half-tongues, because you have to join in if you don't want to attract attention.

Merlin felt the smoke of the torches, the whispering of voices, the weight of gazes. And then he felt something else: the fog closing in around him, thicker, warmer, almost alive. He heard him breathing.

"Leave him!" cried the priest. He sprinkled holy water in his direction. The drops prickled on his skin as if they were burning. Merlin squeezed his eyes shut. Behind his eyelids, he saw the other realm: figures made of smoke, hands reaching out toward him.

"You are ours," they said. "Let go."

He shook his head. "I don't belong to anyone."

“Then you will perish.”

He opened his eyes. The crowd stared at him. A man stepped forward, raising his stick. "If that doesn't work, we'll beat the demon out of him!"

The stick came whizzing down.

At that moment, it happened. The fog moved. Not as usual, not like a storm. It shot up, thick, white, and yanked the man back as if he'd hit a wall. The crowd screamed. Torches flickered as if a wind were blowing that no one felt—except Merlin.

He stood there, raising his hand. The fog obeyed. It formed into clouds that mimicked faces, eyes without pupils, mouths without words. People stumbled back.

"You see?" shrieked the priest. "Witchcraft!" But his voice trembled.

Merlin felt the power. It was raw, untamed, dangerous—like an animal breaking free from its leash for the first time. He knew he couldn't lose it. He spoke, quietly, but everyone heard: "If you hurt me, you hurt yourselves. The mist sees everything. It forgets nothing."

The crowd retreated. Fear suddenly had legs.

Only the priest remained, his cross raised, his lips bitten bloodily. "You are a deception. A tool of hell." Merlin looked at him. "And you are a man who has used God too often like a hammer. You strike because you're afraid someone will break you."

The priest staggered back. The words hit him harder than any fist.

The mother ran to Merlin and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Enough!" she cried. "That's enough!" Her eyes were filled with fear—not of the village, but of her own son.

Merlin let his hand fall. The fog lifted, hissing back like water into a gutter. The faces disappeared, the shadows smoothed away. Only the silence remained, heavy, sticky, full of questions.

The crowd fled. First a few, then all of them. The square emptied as if someone had opened an invisible gate. Only the priest remained, panting, staring at the boy as if he were the answer to a question he never wanted to ask.

"This isn't over," he whispered. "It's just beginning." Then he turned away and disappeared into the darkness.

Merlin stood there, his legs shaking. He felt like he was about to collapse. But he didn't. He looked up at the sky, where the moon hung, pale, cold, indifferent. And he thought: I am not hers. I am not his. I am something in between.

His mother took him in her arms. She was cold, yet her closeness burned. "My boy," she said, "what are you?" He laid his forehead on her shoulder. "I don't know," he whispered. "But they will never forget me."

And somewhere, high above the square, the crow cawed. Loud, sharp, like a laugh—or like a judgment.

Since that night when the fog had faces, nothing was the same. People hardly spoke to him anymore, but they talked about him—always. In the fields, at the well, in church. He was the name on everyone's lips, whether as a curse or as hope.

During the day, people avoided him. They crossed the street when he came. Mothers pulled their children behind them, as if his gaze could corrupt them. The men spat, not directly in front of him, but close enough for him to see the phlegm. And the priest preached louder than ever, as if noise could mask fear.

But at night, when the shadows were longer and the fear of their own dreams was greater than the fear of the boy, they came to his hut. Quietly, crouching, like thieves.

A woman arrived first. Her child had been coughing for weeks; the doctors called it lung weakness. "Can you help him?" she asked, her hands shaking. "Just tell me if he lives or dies." Merlin looked at the boy. He was breathing shallowly, his lips blue, but there was still fire in his eyes. "He's still alive," Merlin said. "But he'll always cough." The woman sobbed. "So he's dying?" "Everyone dies," Merlin replied calmly. "But not yet."

She left, confused, dissatisfied, grateful, all at once.

Then a farmer came. "Tell me how the harvest will be." Merlin smelled the man, of sweat, earth, fear. He closed his eyes, heard the fog rustling. "The grain will kneel before it's ripe. The stalks will fall, but the turnips will survive." The farmer nodded slowly. "Then I'll dig turnips." "Dig deep," Merlin murmured. "Sometimes there's more underground than you think."

So it went on. An old man came, already carrying death in his bones. "When will I last breathe?" Merlin shook his head. "When the rain comes into your house and never leaves." The old man nodded, even smiled, as if he'd finally received an invitation.

Some left feeling reassured, others frightened. But no one forgot his words. They burned into their memory like embers beneath ashes.

The priest got wind of it. He raged. "You're feeding the demon!" he screamed. "You're bringing death into your house if you let its voice reach your ears." But his words no longer had the same effect. For people had realized: The boy wasn't always wrong. And fear is great, but hunger is greater, illness louder, despair more urgent.

Merlin himself felt empty. Every visit took something out of him. He saw images, heard voices, tasted blood on his tongue without knowing whose blood it was. Afterward, his hands trembled, and he had to lie down on the floor to keep the room from shaking.

His mother saw it. "They're eating you up," she whispered. "They're taking you piece by piece." "Maybe that's what I'm here for." "No," she said harshly. "You're my child. Not a tool, not a victim." He looked at her, smiled wearily. "I am both."

One night, a man no one would have expected came: the blacksmith. Tall, heavy, with a face like hammered iron. He had never had a kind word for the boy. But now he stood there, cap in hand. "My brother is gone," he said. "For three days. No one has seen him. Tell me where he is."

Merlin remained silent. He didn't want to. But the blacksmith's eyes were like holes, burning with despair. So he closed his own.

The fog was there immediately. Thick, heavy, cold. He heard footsteps, saw a forest, heard a cracking sound as wood broke. Then blood, dark, heavy blood. And a figure, motionless on the ground.

He opened his eyes. "Your brother is lying in the forest, near the big oak tree. A branch killed him."

The blacksmith stared at him. "You're lying." "Then go and see."

The next morning, the brother was found. Exactly where Merlin had said.

From that day on, the village whispered even more. Some called him a seer, others a sorcerer. Some wanted to stone him, others worshipped him. But no one could pretend he was just a child anymore.

The following night, Merlin sat outside. The fog hung low, heavy, like a blanket suffocating the world. He felt it enveloping him, like a friend, like an enemy, like something that was neither one nor the other.

"Why me?" he asked into the gray. "Why always me?"

The crow responded with a croaking sound that sounded like a cough. Then it fluttered away.

And in the fog, he heard voices again. "Because you stand between us. Because you are the rift. Because without you, the two worlds don't speak."

He closed his eyes. "And what if I don't want to talk?" "Then you'll have to scream."

He shivered even though it wasn't cold.

In the morning, he stood in the square, and people avoided him as usual. But a woman stepped forward, her hands shaking. "Tell me, boy, will my husband return? He's at war."

Merlin looked at her for a long moment. Then he nodded. "He's returning. But he's bringing the night with him." The woman wept. She knew it was an answer worse than no answer at all.

And so Merlin began not only to have visions, but also to use them as a weapon and a tool—sometimes to help people, sometimes to show them their own fears. He felt that every word was a stone he threw into the lake. And every stone made waves.

His first conscious prophecy for others had changed him forever. He was no longer a child. He was a mirror. And no one liked what they saw in it.

The morning everything collapsed smelled of wet straw and burnt fat. A smell that speaks of work, but also of failure. The chickens pecked nervously at the mud, as if they knew something the rest of us didn't. The fog hung deeper than usual, so deep that you'd think someone had pushed the world down a notch so it wouldn't be as visible.

Merlin woke before his mother. During the night, he had dreamed that the sky was torn open, not by light, but by silence. From the silence fell a single drop. He heard it before he saw it. Tick. On stone. And everyone knew: When the silence drips, something comes to an end. He stood up, set his feet in the cold darkness, and was suddenly awake, as if from a shock.

A group had gathered at the well. They were standing closer than usual, as if they had to hold on to each other to avoid falling into a hole no one wanted to see. In their midst lay a small bundle of cloth. The mother stood in front of it. She wasn't holding the bundle, but the air. That's what it looked like. As if she were trying to stop the world from breathing.

The child of the woman who had arrived first in the night had died. Not loudly, not dramatically. It had simply stopped trying. Sometimes death doesn't hurt; it's more like a waiter placing his hand on your shoulder to gently remind you that others are waiting for your table.

"He said he's still alive," someone hissed. "He's still alive," another corrected. "He said the 'still'." "He lied," said a third voice, tired with anger. Anger is tiring, if it's honest.

The priest stepped forward. He carried the cross like a judgment. "I warned you. The demon rubbed our hope with honey to make it stick better. And now it sticks to our throats and we're choking on it."

Merlin just stood there. He didn't look at the woman; he knew that looks can cut. His mother tried to pull him back, but he stayed. A small, hard cog was working inside him, one that had been turning all night. If I remain silent, I am guilty. If I speak, too.

The priest pointed at him. "It ends today. We're sending him back to where he came from." "And where is that?" Merlin asked. His voice calm, exhausted from being calm. "To hell," said the priest. "Or into the fog. It's the same thing."

Merlin laughed. Not a pleasant laugh. A short, dry one, like breaking stale bread. "You know neither hell nor fog. You only know your fear." A murmur. Murmurs are the small earthquakes before the big one.

The blacksmith stepped next to the priest. Strange, thought Merlin, the same man who stood outside my hut with bowed head. Now his forehead was bare like a shield. "Enough talk," he said. "We are a village. We protect our own." He didn't look at Merlin. He looked right through him, as if he were mist. Perhaps he was.

The stones didn't come flying; they came hesitantly, like apologies. One bounced off the ground, another hit him on the shoulder. Pain is honest, he thought. It always tastes the same. Iron, salt, time.

"Stop it," said the mother. Her voice was hoarse from all the nights she'd spent defending herself against silence. "He's your child, whether you like it or not. Your mirror." "We don't want to," a woman answered. It couldn't have been said more honestly.

Merlin raised his hand. Not to beg. To measure. The mist came to him like a dog, not knowing whether to play or bite. "No," he whispered. He meant the mist. He meant himself, too. No, not today.

The priest noticed the twitching of the air. "Look! He's calling his spirits." "I'm not calling anything," said Merlin. "I'm listening." "Then hear this," cried the priest, and the words came like nails: "You are not of us. You are leaving."

The village made way, as if the direction of exile had already been decided. But directions are deceptive when the fog consumes them. Merlin felt a dizziness, as if standing on a thin plank between two ditches. In one lay the village with its bread, its dirt, its noise. In the other lay something that had no bread, no dirt, and no noise—only the weight of possibilities.

He went to the bundle by the well. He crouched down, placing his hand next to the cloth rather than on it. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. The woman didn't nod. There are sentences that find no place to land. They hang in the air and become weather.

"Tell us why," someone snarled. "Because lungs are small," Merlin answered, "and the world is big. Because water is heavy. Because some doors don't open. Because this isn't a court, it's a rule." "You're speaking in riddles!" "Because there are no answers." He looked up. "Only costs and ways."

The blacksmith raised his arm. "Go," he said. Not brutally. More like someone hammering in a nail that was already there.

Merlin's mother stood before him. "He's not going alone." He placed his hand on her shoulder. "Yes," he said. "I'm going alone." The words tasted of blood. "If I stay, I'll tear you apart. And if I tear you apart, I'll tear myself apart."

She shook her head, but in her eyes there was that resigned wisdom that mothers sometimes have: that you don't keep children, you just hold on to them for a while so they don't fall for too long later. "Where to?" she whispered. "To where the voices don't whisper, but speak. To where the stones answer." "Stones don't answer." "These do."

He stepped back, looked across the square one last time. The houses stood there as if they had frowned during the night and forgotten to smooth them in the morning. The priest made a sign in the air, so practiced that it no longer meant anything. The blacksmith let his arm drop. The crow sat on the gable of the forge, looking like a bad omen that took its job too seriously.

"When I leave," said Merlin, "take your torches to bed with you. Otherwise you'll kill yourselves." "Are you threatening us?" "I remind you. That fire is warm until it burns."

He turned and left. No one stopped him. There are goodbyes you don't interrupt, because you suspect that every hand that reaches out will receive less in return than it stretches out. The mother followed him to the edge of the village. There she stopped. "If you need anything," she began. "I need you to live," he said. "And that you don't make yourself smaller than you are." She nodded. It was a nod that cost her bones. She placed a bundle in his hand—bread, a knife, a piece of cloth. Love, compressed into things. "And..." She paused. "And don't forget who called you by name." "Who was that?" "Me," she said. "The first time you screamed."

He smiled. A smile that thanked more than it showed. Then he went into the forest.

The fog absorbed him, not like a mouth devouring, but like a space making way. Trees approached and receded, as if collectively considering whether this was a good idea. Somewhere ahead, water clattered over stones. A stream, he thought. Streams speak more quietly than rivers, but more honestly.

Every step became both easier and harder. Easier because the gazes behind him disappeared. Harder because every tree was a promise waiting to be fulfilled. You walk, therefore you become. So whispered the trunks.

He stopped at a clearing where the fog thinned and the moss absorbed the sounds. He sat down on a stone, placed his hand in the damp green. It pulsed. Maybe he imagined it. Maybe not. A wind blew through the treetops, and the world made the sound it makes when it stretches.

"All right," he said into the air. "I am the crack. Come. Speak."

It took a moment. Then it answered. Not with one voice, but with many, twisting into a single pattern, like threads that suddenly become rope. He saw images: a circle of stones swallowing the moon; a sword that refuses to be drawn until it must; a woman whose gaze is a wound; a king great only in falling.

"There," it whispered. Not as a command. As an invitation. There.

He stood up. Straightened the bundle. He felt something click into place inside him, like an axe in a notch. No plan. Just direction. Sometimes that's enough.

When he cast his last glance back, the village was nothing but structure: roofs, smoke, a small movement at the edge that could be his mother, or an animal, or the shadow of a decision. He raised his hand. Not in greeting. As a vow. "I'm not coming back," he said. "I'm just arriving."

The crow flew over him, letting out a call that sounded like a laugh, undecided whether it was friendly. He nodded to it. "You're coming with us?" It perched on a branch as if answering: I was already here before you left.

He stepped deeper into the forest. The fog opened a passage, closed it again, opened it again, like a breath. And with that breath, the boy walked out of the fog—away from the village, away from his names, into a world that didn't want him and yet waited for him.

As night fell, the few stars sparkled like nails in a very large, very old tablet. And somewhere, far away, a circle of stones stood, holding the moon in place. The path there was long. But the crack was already there. In him. Between everything. And he suddenly knew: It is not the fog that hides me. I am the one who holds him.

Voices of the Forests

The forest didn't take him in as if he were a prodigal son. It swallowed him like a stone. It wasn't warm and it wasn't friendly; it was simply big. Big enough to make you feel small, and small enough that you bumped your shoulder into something you couldn't name. The moss was wet, the bark rough, the air smelled of earth and iron. There was a cracking sound somewhere, always something cracking somewhere. The forest is a master at fragmenting sounds. It never gives you the whole picture, only splinters. And you cut yourself from splinters.

Merlin didn't walk fast. Quick steps are for people who know where they're going. He knew only one direction—away—and that wasn't a map. The crow flew ahead, circled a few times, and dropped a note somewhere between mockery and advice. "I know," he murmured, "I watch where I step." Then he stepped into a hidden stream and was ankle-deep in water. Cold is more honest than any sermon.

He found a hollow beneath a fallen tree, where the wood lay like a frozen wave, its roots reaching for the sky. The hollow beneath was dry enough to pretend it was a home. He unpacked the bundle: bread, knife, cloth. Love in three objects, as his mother had taught. He ate little, chewed long, because otherwise his stomach would be offended, and the forest didn't like that. You don't make demands of the forest. You ask it, and when it doesn't answer, you pretend silence is an acceptance.

The first night was cold, like a question without an answer. He counted his breaths until the numbers dissolved and became fog, creeping from his mouth. A fox passed him silently, betrayed only by its eyes, two tiny lights that said, "I know you're pretending to stay here. You're not." Merlin blinked back. He didn't stay out of pride, he stayed out of tiredness. That's a bad reason, and sometimes the best.

The voices – if you could call them voices – didn't come like singing. They came like weather. At first there was just a pressure in the ears, a buzzing in the teeth, as if someone had stretched their skull on a string. Then shapes emerged from the darkness: not faces, more like weights. Ideas hung down from the trees like wet cloths; when the wind tugged on them, sentences dripped. Not clear sentences, just hunches. "Don't step," whispered a root. "Don't pull," murmured a branch. "Don't stare too long," warned a fern. These were rules that had no law book and yet were older than the stones in the villages.

He slept when the forest allowed it. He woke when the forest nudged him. The crow turned on the trunk lying across the ground and acted as if everything had been planned. "You act as if you know the way," said Merlin. The crow cawed. Birds have the luxury of always pretending that every mistake is intentional.

On the second day, he found a patch of light between the trunks. It dropped like a rope ladder, and on the ground grew a circle of small, pale mushrooms. "Don't eat," said the mushrooms in a voice that sounded like sweet milk. "We look friendly, but we're not." He nodded. The forest is honest in its way, but honesty here means: I'll give you one warning. After that, you belong to yourself.

He carved himself an unsightly staff from a fallen branch. Nothing fancy, just wood with a notch where his hand should go, and a second notch that told him where the ground began. The staff wasn't a spell; it was a third footpad. But when he laid it beside him at night, he felt less alone, as if he had hired a watchman who didn't sleep but still listened.

Hunger made his own songs. They consist of belly and shadow and the memory of bread. He found berries—those that tasted as if they had kissed the sun, and the others that acted as if they were the same, but were bitter. He learned that shine in the forest rarely tastes good. Everything that reveals itself wants something. Everything that hides usually has more to say.

He stopped at the edge of a small depression. The ground was dark, soft, dripping, as if someone had poured the night out here. He poked it with his staff. The earth responded with a bubbling sound that came from a throat beyond his speech. "Not here," said the ground. "I carry secrets, and they are heavy." He backed away, and the depression drew its breath back to itself, offended but not malicious. It was like old men in taverns: you don't sit on their chairs.

He encountered a stag at dusk. The animal stood between two beech trees, so still that it became a statement. The antlers weren't jewelry, they were a map. The eyes said, "You're new." Its own eyes answered, "I'm old." They were both lying, and both knew it. The stag turned its head, showing him a path that looked like a random path, but wasn't. Merlin followed it. You never follow someone in the forest because they're more beautiful; you follow because otherwise you'd go in circles.

The voices grew clearer, without choosing words. When he put his hand to the bark, he felt a current. Not sap, more like time. The trees are thick clocks without hands. They are never wrong, and yet you can't read them when you're young. He was young. And he read. In doing so, he stumbled upon a truth that refused to hide: the forest remembered footsteps. Not his. Of many. Some walked in lines, some blind, some armed. The ground bears war as it bears rain. It seeps through, and eventually mushrooms grow from it that no one should eat.

In the afternoon, rain began to fall, the heavy kind that doesn't ask for permission. He crept deeper under the fallen trunk, pulled the shawl over his shoulders, and imagined it was fur. It wasn't fur. The crow moved closer, brazen as always when it gets cold. "Sharing is not a virtue," he told it, "it's survival." It pecked at his hair as if nodding.

When the rain subsided, the world smelled freshly washed and still of sweat. He stepped outside, and the air had that sharpness that lingers in your nose like a memory. A branch snapped. Not where he was looking, but where the world set a shoulder note: Attention, here. He lowered the staff, letting his fingers glide gently from the notch to the tip. The wood hummed—not acoustically, but in his skin. A wolf stood there, gray, wet, with a gaze that didn't question things, but took stock. The wolf smelled of wet stone and decisions. He stood as if he had been standing there for a long time. He wasn't hungry, he wasn't full. He was present.

"I want nothing from you," said Merlin, "except that you move on." That was the truth, and the truth is a poor talisman. The wolf blinked slowly. He didn't show his teeth because he didn't need to. Then he turned and disappeared in a movement that had more to do with mist than flesh. Merlin breathed, long, steady, and his breath misted the cold until, for a moment, it looked like glass.

He sat down as twilight lingered between the trunks. There is an hour in the forest that has no color. It is neither day nor night; it is the decision in between. In that hour, the forest spoke to him, as clearly as the forest is willing to speak. He didn't hear "Merlin." The forest doesn't use names; it uses weights. A pressure on the temple, warm. A coolness between the shoulder blades. A faint pulling under the breastbone. Together, they formed a direction one only understands if one doesn't contradict.

"Very well," he said. "I won't argue." And because disagreement is a bad reflex, he practiced keeping it in his throat. He went where the pressure pushed him: a narrow ledge between two old oaks, their arms held high as if they were supporting a sky no one noticed anymore. Nothing grew beneath them. Emptiness is a special feature here. In the emptiness lay a circle of stones, small, overgrown, so modest it was almost a whim. He knelt. Placed the staff across it. The wood vibrated briefly and was silent.

"Is this a gate?" he asked, unsure to whom. The crow hopped onto the edge, peering into the center as if looking into a pan with nothing currently simmering. The forest answered with a smell that was old: burnt herbs, cold smoke, metal that doesn't cut anything. He didn't know how to read smells, and yet he read them: Here were words. They were spoken and eaten. Say new ones, but not the same ones.

He didn't say a word. He placed his hand on the ground of the small curve and did something else: He listened. Not to voices, to pauses. Between the roots, there were silent spaces that drew him to where things begin. An image slipped beneath his eyelids: a much larger circle, stone not moss, moon not rain, people not crows. The moon lay within it like a coin in a bowl. And somewhere in that bowl stood a figure whose shadow was longer than the rest of the night. He didn't know who it was. Yet he knew.

He pulled his hand back. The skin was dirty, but beneath the dirt, something burned that wasn't fire. "I'm coming," he said, not aloud. "But I'm still waiting. I don't want to arrive as hunger, but as a knife." Knives cut bread. And throats. His mother was right: gifts are both.

Night finally fell. The stars hung sparsely, like nails too strong to hold up a wall. He crawled under the trunk, laid his staff at his side, the crow on his knees. "You're heavy," he said, and meant, "Stay." The forest answered as it always answered when it was merciful: It softened the sounds that kept him awake and let the waking sounds louder, the ones that didn't frighten him. Somewhere a wild boar snorted. Somewhere water dripped. Somewhere a beetle crunched with the name of the world.

He dreamed of roots running underground like writing. Every time he traced a line, a stone intervened and said, "Slow down." When he awoke, it was early, and the cold had stiffened his back. He straightened up, rubbed his shoulders, and ate the last bit of bread. The taste was persistent and boring. Good. Boredom is nourishment when you stop hating it.

"On," he said to the crow, to the staff, to the corner of the air that remained darker above him than the rest. The forest opened a narrow passage of ferns and shadows. It didn't look like a

path. It was one. Paths in the forest are agreements, not roads. He set foot inside and felt something grow closed behind him. It wasn't betrayal. It was courtesy. The forest closed doors so the cold wouldn't escape.

The voices came again, this time just above his hearing, like flies. "Not rushing," they said. "Not afraid." It sounded as if they had practiced those two words for a long time. He nodded. He wasn't rushing. He wasn't afraid. He was an edge. And edges cut when you push them.

He stopped at the edge of a swampy tunnel of willows. Where the water refused to be bright, stood a figure. Not a wolf, not a stag, not a priest. A man. A cloak that had seen too much, a sword that grew heavy under the wetness, and eyes that questioned before the mouth was ready. The stranger raised two fingers as if greeting a man he didn't yet know. The crow fluttered its wings. The staff vibrated briefly.

"There you are," said the stranger, as if an agreement Merlin had made in his sleep had been kept. And the forest held its breath, as far as a forest can breathe.

The stranger stood there like a statue that had forgotten that it was made of flesh. Rain ran down his coat, dripped from the hilt of his sword, and collected in a puddle at his feet. He didn't move, and yet everything about him was moving: his fingers restlessly playing with the hilt; his eyes groping; his breath drawing steam into the cold air.

Merlin didn't know whether to run or stay. Running would mean betraying the forest. Staying would mean perhaps betraying himself. He leaned on the staff, feeling the wood hum—quiet but distinct, like a mosquito biting bone. The crow on his shoulder jerked its head, first to the left, then to the right, as if to say, "If you wait, you're dead. If you leave, so are you."

"You are young," the stranger finally said. His voice was deeper than Merlin had expected, rough with smoke or silence. "And yet... the eyes... they are not young." Merlin remained silent. Words are debts not to be incurred too soon.

The man took a step closer. The water sloshed beneath his boots, as if the ground were trying to hold him back. "I've been looking for you." "Many are looking for me," Merlin replied dryly. "Most want me to leave." A twitch around the man's mouth, almost a smile, but too heavy. "I want you to stay. Because the land will need you."

That was one of those sentences that sits like a stone in your stomach. The country will need you. Sounds big. Usually means: someone else wants to use you. Merlin felt the fog between them thicken, as if he wanted to have his say. "What do you know about me?" "Enough," the man said. "That you stand between worlds. That you see things before they happen. That you're not from here, and yet you're the only one who belongs here."

Merlin laughed, short, hard, like a boy who's learned that laughter is better than crying, even when it burns. "That's a lot of words for someone who just met me." "I've been having dreams," the stranger replied. "For months. Always the same boy. With mist in his eyes and a bird on his shoulder. You're him."

The crow cawed loudly, so suddenly that the echo ran between the tree trunks. Merlin felt goosebumps on his arms. He didn't want to admit that the man might be right.

They still stood facing each other, like two figures in a game whose rules no one has written down. The forest wasn't silent; it was listening. Every drop, every rustle was a sign of attention.

"What's your name?" Merlin asked. The man hesitated. "Cathan." The name tasted of iron, of blood, of something that doesn't wash easily. Merlin nodded. "And why are you here, Cathan?" "Because the land is dying. Because wars are coming. Because kings are falling. And because a child in the mist showed me the way."

Merlin felt the voices in the forest grow louder. They were no longer murmuring, they were whispering. Like market women who knew something was about to be sold that no one could afford.

"I am no king," said Merlin. "Not yet," murmured Cathan. "But you will make kings. And break them."

This was too much. Merlin raised his staff without meaning to. The fog reacted immediately, creeping in streaks across the ground, pulling at his feet as if it were a magnet. "I've had enough of people telling me what I am." Cathan raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Then don't listen to me. Listen to the forest."

Merlin blinked. "The forest doesn't speak in complete sentences." "Yes, it does," Cathan said calmly. "You just have to be willing to fill in the ending yourself."

The sun slowly set, a bloody stain between the branches. Cathan set up camp a few feet away. No word of invitation, but also no sign that Merlin should leave. He stayed. Not out of trust, but out of weariness.

In the night, the voices came again. This time, louder. They didn't sound like the roots admonishing, nor like the mushrooms warning. They sounded like choirs expecting something. "The Circle. The Stone. The King." The same words over and over again, until Merlin woke, his heart like a drum.

The crow fluttered up and perched on Cathan's sword, which lay beside him. The man wasn't asleep. His eyes were open, staring into the darkness. "You hear them too?" Merlin asked. "No," Cathan replied. "But I see that you do."

Merlin was silent. Enough was enough. The forest was speaking to him. Cathan wanted him to listen. And somewhere in this mix lay a truth that was worse than any lie: He wasn't alone. And that was precisely what made it more dangerous.

The morning began gray, like an old bone sticking out of the earth. No bird sang. Even the crow was silent, and when a crow is silent, something is wrong. Cathan packed his few belongings, as silently as if he had already left long ago. Merlin stood there, his staff in his hand, waiting for the forest to take the first step. He did. The forest always takes the first step.

A wind blew up, cold and damp, and opened a path that hadn't been there yesterday. "That way," murmured Cathan. "Do you feel it?" Merlin nodded. He didn't just feel it. He heard it. It wasn't a wind, it was a sentence without words. Coming. But not both.

They walked. The ground was soft, almost yielding, like a belly. Each step sucked them deeper, until Cathan's boots gleamed brown and Merlin's feet went numb. But he didn't complain. He knew: the forest doesn't test with sword and blood, but with perseverance. Those who scream immediately will receive no answer.

After an hour, there was a creaking sound above them. Branches bent as if trying to catch them. The fog hung lower, swelling like a lung from a cough. Cathan reached for his sword. Merlin placed his hand on his arm. "Don't pull. Not here." "Why?" "Because everything you pull against them will recoil."

Cathan twisted his mouth, but let go. A step later, there was a crack to their right. A tree fell—not like a tree falls, but like something that decides to change sides. It tumbled across the path they were about to take, tearing up earth, moss, and roots. The crow fluttered up.

"A warning," Merlin murmured. "Or an invitation." "And what do we do?" "We decide what it was."

They took the detour, deeper into the thicket. The forest was unkind: branches tore at their skin, thorns caught on their clothes, the ground slipped away like a lie. But there was a pattern in all this. Merlin noticed it first. "Do you see that?" he asked, pointing at the trees.

Cathan shook his head. "I just see trees." "Do you see the distances? Three here, three there. A circle. Again and again."

And indeed: the trunks stood as if deliberately placed, as if someone had drawn an invisible wheel into the forest. Cathan cursed quietly. "A sacred place." Merlin nodded. "Or a dangerous one."

They entered a clearing. Nothing grew there. No plants, no moss. Only bare ground, black and damp. In the middle stood a stone, tall, smooth, with markings that could not be read with the eyes, only with the hands. Merlin placed his fingers on it. It was as if he were reaching into water.

A vision struck him. First dark, then light, then voices. Not the quiet ones he knew, but a chorus. "Wanderers between the worlds. Key. Gate. Sacrifice."

He gasped and snatched his hand back. Cathan grabbed his arm. "What did you see?" "Me," Merlin whispered. "And something eating me."

Suddenly, the ground shook. Not like an earthquake. More like a breath. The stone vibrated, the air tightened. Mist shot upward, forming faces he already knew. The crow cawed, harsh, warning.

"What do they want?" Cathan gasped. Merlin listened closely. "They want... me to stay." "And if you stay?" "Then you go on alone."

Cathan drew his sword, too late this time. A figure emerged from the fog. Not human, not animal. Something in between. Eyes that weren't eyes, a mouth without lips. It came straight toward Merlin.

He raised his staff. "I am not your tool," he said. "I am not your victim."

The thing stopped. From its mouth came a sound that was like three sentences at once: "You are us. You are not us. You become us."

The forest closed in. Cathan stood beside him, sword raised, even though he knew steel was worthless here. "What do we do?" Merlin swallowed. He heard the trees, the roots, the moss. They were all saying the same thing: Decide.

He raised the staff and rammed it into the ground. The sound was dull, deep, vibrating. The fog receded, not much, but enough. "I'll go on," he said. "But not as your prisoner. If you want me, you must follow me."

The figure disintegrated, dissolved, and turned into smoke, disappearing among the trees. The stone was silent.

Cathan breathed heavily. "That was a test." "No," Merlin replied. "That was a reminder. That I'm no longer a child."

Night fell upon them. They camped at the edge of the clearing, both awake, both silent. The forest hummed softly, contentedly or angrily—hard to say.

"You're stronger than you look," Cathan finally said. "No," Merlin murmured. "I'm just weaker than they hope."

The crow laughed its dry laugh. The forest didn't respond. Sometimes that's enough.

The night was long, so long that you could feel it in layers. First came the layer where the fire was small and the shadows large. Then the layer where the shadows shrank as tiredness made your eyes twitch. And finally, the layer where the fire was almost out, and you realized you weren't just fighting against darkness, but also against yourself.

Merlin lay awake. Cathan wasn't snoring, but he wasn't asleep either. He lay there with his eyes open, his sword beside him, as if he were still dreaming of fighting. Merlin knew the sword wouldn't help against what was here. You can drive steel into a body, but not into a mind.

When morning came, gray-pale and heavy, they set out. They didn't say a word. The forest spoke enough for everyone. It spoke in the cracking branches, in the drops falling from the leaves, in the tracks left by animals that told more than any book.

After hours, Cathan stopped. "We need to talk," he said. His voice was ragged but calm. "I haven't told you everything." Merlin leaned on the staff. "That doesn't surprise me." Cathan nodded, as if accepting the blow. "The land I come from is not far away. Men who call themselves kings rule there. But none of them deserve it. They fight each other, tear down villages, rob, burn. The people are starving."

Merlin remained silent. Words like these smacked of politics, and politics was just another word for greed.

"In my dreams," Cathan continued, "I saw not only you. I also saw a king. One who came not by blood, but by right. One whom you would guide. Without you, he cannot find his way."

Merlin laughed dryly. "A king who needs to be led is no king. He's a child in the wrong clothes." "Perhaps," said Cathan. "Or perhaps every realm needs someone to hear the voices others don't."

The crow cawed as if it had heard enough. Merlin looked at it. "And if your dreams are false?"
Cathan shook his head. "Then they're still true. Because the people believe in signs. And you are one of them."

The forest answered. Suddenly, a branch snapped, without a breath. A deep roar, not like water, more like breathing. A hollow opened before them, where trees stood so old their trunks looked like walls. Between them lay a ring of stones, half-collapsed, half-swallowed by moss.

"Another circle," murmured Cathan. Merlin nodded. "The world likes to speak in circles. They remind us that there is no escape, only return."

They entered the ring. It was silent. No birds, no wind. Only a humming in the earth. Merlin knelt down and placed his hand on a stone. He felt something deeper than words. Images crowded into his mind: a sword, shining and heavy; a hand drawing it; blood soaking the ground; a child crying in the mist.

He gasped and pulled his hand back. "It's always the same images," he murmured. "Which ones?" asked Cathan. "War. Blood. Kings. And me, in between."

Cathan placed his hand on his shoulder. "Perhaps this is your destiny." Merlin looked at him coldly. "Perhaps it's just the threat of the forest. Perhaps he wants to see if I'll submit."

They rested at the edge of the ring. Cathan chopped wood and built a small fire. Merlin stared into the flames. The voices of the forests were louder, clearer today. "Grow. Become. Lead." The same three words, over and over again, like a drum.

"They're talking to you again, aren't they?" Cathan asked. Merlin nodded. "Yes." "And what are they saying?" "That I should be someone I don't want to be." Cathan was silent for a long time. Then he said, "Perhaps no one is what they want to be. We are what is needed."

Merlin smiled crookedly. "That's what men who want war say. Always. 'We do it because we're needed.' In the end, they do it because they want to."

The flames crackled. Sparks rose, like little souls briefly free and then immediately vanish. Merlin reached out, caught a spark, and let it extinguish on his skin. "What if I don't want to?" "Then someone else will take your place," Cathan said. "But then someone who isn't you will make the decision."

Merlin remained silent. It wasn't an answer, but a blow. And sometimes blows are more honest than answers.

As night came, fog settled over the Ring. It was thicker than usual, and this time it wasn't silent. Voices rushed through it, so clear that Cathan sat up, sword in hand. "Do you hear that?" he asked. "Yes," said Merlin. "But this time you hear it too."

The voices spoke in unison: "A king. A circle. A betrayal. And a child who will never remain a child."

Cathan stepped back. "That's…" "A threat," Merlin murmured. "Or a reminder of something that hasn't happened yet."

The voices swelled, echoing from stone to stone. Merlin stood, staff in hand, crow on his shoulder. "Enough!" he shouted into the mist. "If you want me to hear, then speak clearly. I'm not a dog who responds to half-sentences."

The fog trembled. For a moment, he saw something: an empty throne; a broken crown; a sword driven into the ground. And above it, a hand—not his, not Cathan's. Someone else's.

Then it was over. The fog fell back, like a sheet being dropped.

Cathan stood still, his sword lowered. "You are the one I've been looking for," he said. "Whether you like it or not." Merlin shook his head. "I am not your tool. And I am not their tool either." "No," said Cathan. "You are the tool of the land. And that is worse."

The fifth night in the forest was no ordinary one. It was a labyrinth, constructed of sounds, shadows, and illusions. By dusk, the forest had already changed. The air was heavier, the fog thicker, the silence filled with anticipation. Cathan sharpened his sword on a stone, so mechanically it seemed like a prayer. Merlin sat beside him, his staff between his knees, listening. Not to Cathan. To what was to come.

It began quietly. A whisper that settled like smoke between the trees. At first, he thought it was the wind. But the wind doesn't whisper in his native language. "Merlin..." it said. "Merlin..." A voice, soft, almost familiar. He felt his chest tighten. "Mother?" he whispered back.

Cathan looked up. "What are you saying?" "Can't you hear them?" "I only hear the night."

The whispering grew louder. He heard his mother calling him, just as she did when he hid in the fog as a child. He stood up and took two steps. The crow cawed shrilly, fluttering in front of him as if trying to hold him back. But he kept going.

The trees suddenly formed a picture. Between the trunks stood his mother, her face in the moonlight, her arms outstretched. "Come, my son."
Merlin stopped. "You're not here," he said. "You can't be here." The figure smiled. "You're alone. You need me. Come."

Cathan grabbed his arm. "This is an illusion." Merlin pulled away. "It doesn't feel like an illusion." "That's exactly why it is."

They walked deeper into the night, and with every step the forest became stranger. The trees stood closer together, the shadows moved, even though there was no wind. Once, Merlin saw a child sitting on a branch, laughing. Another time, a group of men in armor marched past them without a word. Cathan wanted to draw his sword, but Merlin held him back. "Swords are no use against illusions." "And if they aren't?" "Then we're lost anyway."

The voices grew louder, multi-voiced, like a choir. Some called his name, others whispered words he didn't understand. "Blood... Stone... King... Sacrifice..." He covered his ears, but it was no use. The voices weren't in the forest. They were inside him.

Suddenly, a light burst forth. Before them lay a clearing, illuminated as day. In the center stood a throne made of roots and bones. Upon it sat a man in golden armor, his face hidden. Beside the throne lay a sword, large and shining.

"That's him," whispered Cathan. "The king. The one I saw." Merlin stepped closer. The image was so real he could smell the metal in the air. "No," he said. "That's not him. That's what they want us to see."

The man on the throne slowly raised his head. Two eyes, as black as nothingness, stared at him. "Come," he said. "Sit down. You are not the seer. You are the master."

Merlin stumbled back. The ground was soft, like a swamp. Cathan drew his sword and stood before him. "Back!" he cried. "Whatever you are, back!"

The man laughed. Not a human laugh. It was a crack, like wood breaking. Then he stood up. The sword beside him rose on its own, floated into the air, and slowly rotated.

Merlin felt panic tugging at him. But he forced himself to raise the staff. "You're playing with pictures," he cried. "But pictures don't have teeth."

He rammed the staff into the ground. A sound spread out, deep, vibrating, like thunder that dwells beneath the earth. The throne crumbled, the man dissolved into smoke, the sword clattered to the ground—but when he picked it up, there was nothing. Only earth.

They stood in darkness again. No throne, no king, no sword. Only the forest, silent, watching. Cathan breathed heavily. "That was a test." "No," whispered Merlin. "That was a threat."

The crow perched on his staff and croaked once. "Or an invitation," Merlin murmured.

They camped without a fire. The forest was too dense, too awake. Merlin lay with his eyes open, and the voices continued to whisper. But this time he understood one sentence clearly: "You cannot flee. You can only choose."

He closed his eyes. Sleep didn't come. Only the knowledge that he was in the middle of a game bigger than himself, and that he had already drawn without realizing it.

The morning didn't come like a morning. It came like a remnant of the night, tired of hiding. The light was pale, the trees gray, the ground a patchwork of mud and dead leaves. Cathan was quieter than usual, and that was saying something. The man was already a sparing sort of person—with words, with facial expressions, with hope.

Merlin crouched by an old tree trunk, his hands on the bark. It vibrated. Not like wood, but like a drum. He knew: the forest wasn't finished with him yet. The night had asked questions. Now it was his turn to throw them back.

"You're playing with me," he murmured, quietly, almost as if confessing. "But games are cheap. If you want me to hear you, then you have to answer."

Cathan raised his head. "Who are you talking to?" "Them." "Who?" Merlin smiled crookedly. "The roots. The fog. Whatever sleeps between the bark."

Cathan looked at him as if considering whether to believe him or be worried. In the end, he remained silent. Perhaps both.

Merlin rested his forehead against the trunk. Closed his eyes. Breathed deeply. He felt the cold of the earth creeping into him. First into his fingers, then into his chest, then into his head. The voices came immediately. But this time he was ready.

"You've shown me pictures," he said to himself. "Kings, swords, sacrifices. Now I tell you: I want to know why. Why me? Why not someone else?"

It remained silent. A silence so heavy it was oppressive. Then, slowly, something seeped through. Not a word. An image.

He saw a river, black and wide, flowing in two directions at once. On one side stood people, armed, bloody. On the other, animals: wolves, deer, crows. In the middle—himself. Not as a boy, not as a man. More like a shadow. And the current pulled at him, from both sides.

"You are the bridge," the voices whispered. "And bridges hold until they break."

Merlin tore his forehead from the trunk. Blood. A small cut that couldn't have happened on its own. He wiped his face, smelling iron. "You want me to carry," he murmured. "But I'm not a beam."

The voices answered: “Then you are the water.”

He staggered back, almost falling. Cathan grabbed his arm. "What did you see?" "A river." His voice trembled. "And me, in the middle of it. I'm not the king. I'm not the sword. I'm what they're walking on. Until I break."

Cathan nodded slowly, as if he'd expected exactly that. "Then you mustn't break." Merlin laughed bitterly. "So easy." "No," said Cathan. "So hard."

The rest of the day felt heavy as lead. Merlin could barely eat. His head was buzzing, his heart stuttering. But he also felt something new: a connection. The forest was no longer just a place. It was a language. And he had begun to understand it.

That evening, as they rested, he dared again. He sat down in the circle their footsteps had left in the leaves and whispered: "What do you want from me?"

This time the voices answered immediately. They were louder, clearer. "We want you to say what we can't say."

“And what is that?” he asked.
“What the world doesn’t want to hear.”

Merlin felt himself nauseous. He sensed that every answer he gave could change not only his life, but also the lives of others.

That night, no dream came. No image. Only darkness. But in the darkness lay a weight he hadn't known before. When he awoke, he felt as if he'd swallowed a stone.

Cathan looked at him. "You've talked to them." "Yes." "And?" "They want me to talk." "To whom?" "To everyone. To kings. To beggars. To you."

Cathan nodded. "Then start with me."

Merlin looked at him for a long time. Then he said, "You will fall before you reach your goal. But your fall is necessary for me to continue."

Cathan froze. "Are you sure?" Merlin swallowed. "As sure as bread, which will mold if left for too long."

Cathan lowered his head. He remained silent. But his silence was heavier than any words.

Merlin knew: He had paid the price. If you want answers, you have to give them. And answers are swords. They don't just cut others, they cut back.

Night fell as if someone had placed a sack over the world. No moon, no stars, only the dull weight of darkness. Merlin sensed from his first breath: the forest was up to something.

Cathan sat with his back against a tree, his sword beside him, and wasn't sleeping. Men like him never sleep; they only rest between battles. Merlin laid his staff beside him and stroked the crow dozing on his shoulder. For a moment, everything seemed quiet. Too quiet.

Then came the cracking. Not from one branch, but from all the branches. All around. As if the forest had decided in one breath that nothing could stay in its place.

"Something's coming," said Merlin. Cathan stood up immediately, sword in hand. "From where?" "From everywhere."

The fog crept in, fast, restless, like an animal bursting out of its cage. Within heartbeats, the clearing was swallowed up. Cathan reached for Merlin, but his hand fell into thin air.

“Merlin!” he cried. “Here!” answered the boy – but the next moment he was alone.

The fog formed walls, corridors, doors that weren't doors. Merlin stumbled, searched for the staff, found it, and held it like a weapon, even though it wasn't one. The voices came, not whispering this time, but roaring, a chorus of a thousand mouths. "Alone. Alone. Alone."

"I know," he snarled. "I know!"

Figures emerged from the fog. Some bore faces from his village: the butcher, the woman with the dead child, the priest. They stared at him, silently accusing him. Others were strangers: kings with crowns, warriors with swords, women with eyes like mirrors. They all looked at him.

"You're not real," he said. "You're just the voices trying to show me what I'm going to lose." But when his mother stepped out of the fog, he couldn't speak. She was just as he knew her—tired, strong, full of love, and full of guilt. "Come home," she said. "Everything else is a lie."

He trembled. "You're not her." "And if you were?" "Then you'd let me go."

The figure disappeared, disintegrating into smoke.

He ran. But the fog ran with him. Every step took him deeper. Suddenly, a new clearing opened. In the center stood a mirror, tall, without a frame. It didn't reflect him. It showed an elderly face, a man with a long beard, eyes full of tiredness, his staff still in his hand.

"That's me," whispered Merlin. The mirror figure spoke: "You will know much. And yet possess nothing. You will make kings and lose them. And in the end, you will remain here, between us."

"No," said Merlin. "I'm going on." "Where to?" "Wherever I want to go."

The mirror shattered. Shards fell, but none touched the ground. They turned into stars and disappeared.

Then he heard Cathan again. "Merlin!" A scream, full of fear and rage. He ran, stumbled, called back. And finally, after endless corridors of fog, he saw him: Cathan, kneeling, his sword in the ground, surrounded by shadows.

Merlin raised his staff. "Leave him alone!" he cried.

The shadows turned their heads and looked at him. "He will fall," they said. "You said it yourself."

Merlin felt the truth like a fist. "Yes," he whispered. "But not today."

He rammed the staff into the earth. A deep, long sound reverberated through the ground. The fog receded, the shadows warped, screamed silently, and dissolved.

Cathan fell forward, panting, sweating. "What was that?" Merlin sat down next to him, breathing heavily. "A memory. A test. A threat." "And you drove them away." "No," said Merlin. "I just put them off."

The fog slowly receded. The forest breathed again. But Merlin knew: Something had changed. He was no longer just the boy who heard voices. He had answered. And answers bind.

Cathan placed his hand on his shoulder. "You're not alone." Merlin shook his head. "Yes. I am. Even when you're standing next to me. Even when the world is full of people. I am the bridge. And bridges are always alone."

The crow landed on his staff, croaking as if to object. Merlin smiled weakly. "Perhaps not entirely alone," he murmured. "But enough."

The night wasn't over yet, but he knew the chapter was over. He hadn't conquered the forest. No one conquers the forest. But he had understood that it was both his tool and his stage. And that loneliness was not a state, but a fate.

The Secret of the Stars

The forest didn't end suddenly. It crumbled. First, the trees grew smaller, the branches thinner, the shadows less frequent. Then came the slope, full of stones that protruded from the earth like old bones. And finally, Merlin stood on a rise that gave a clear view of a land that rolled out beneath him like a rough cloth.

For the first time in days, he saw the sky without a roof of leaves. And it wasn't friendly. The sky wasn't a friend. It was a black expanse, riddled with sparks that neither warmed nor shone, but merely stared. Stars. Humans like to call them the "eyes of the gods." To Merlin, they were more like holes in the cloak of night through which something even greater, even more indifferent, peered down at him.

Cathan sat down on a stone and laid his sword beside him. "A beautiful sight," he murmured. Merlin laughed bitterly. "Beautiful? Those are scars, not stars." "Scars?" "Each one is a cut in the darkness. And the darkness bleeds light."

Cathan looked at him as if he were about to respond, but then let it go. Sometimes answers are just band-aids on wounds no one wants to treat.

The wind was sharp. It brought with it the smell of smoke, far away, somewhere in the south. Merlin pulled the shawl tighter around his shoulders and stared upwards. The longer he looked, the more patterns he recognized. Not the ones the ancients spoke of—hunters, dragons, heroes. No. He saw other images. Bloodier ones.

There, above the horizon on the left, the stars formed a line that looked like a sword. Next to it, a circle, broken, like a crown. And in between, drops of light fell. Blood. He closed his eyes, but the image continued to burn within them.

"What do you see?" asked Cathan. "Something that hasn't happened yet." "Then it's just fantasy." Merlin opened his eyes and stared at him. "Or a threat."

The stars didn't speak like trees. No whispering words, no roots that pressed into his ear. But they had a kind of rhythm, a pulsation. He felt it in his stomach, not in his ears. And from this pulse, images grew.

He saw men in irons running against each other like waves breaking. He saw a banner falling. And beneath it, faces he didn't know, but would know.

"You're pale," said Cathan. "Because the sky screams louder than the forest." "The sky is silent." "For you."

The crow fluttered up, perched on a rock, and stretched its head. It looked up, just as he did. For a moment, Merlin swore it understood. Perhaps it always understood more than he did.

"Do you hear that?" he murmured. Cathan sighed. "Voices again?" "No," said Merlin. "This time they're lights. But they're no less lying."

Later, as the wind grew colder and fatigue gnawed at his bones, Merlin lay on his back, his eyes still fixed on the stars. Cathan slept with half-open eyelids, his sword hilt firmly in his hand.

But Merlin heard. Not voices this time. More like a kind of music. Not beautiful music, more like the rubbing of metal on stone. It was as if the stars were tapping on the sky from outside, trying to break through.

"You want to tell me something," he whispered. "Then say it."

The image came immediately: a crown melting in the fire. An empty throne. A child sitting on the rubble, barefoot, trembling, with eyes like mirrors. Him.

Merlin rolled to the side and pressed his forehead into the grass. "Enough," he gasped. "I don't want to see anymore." But the stars weren't silent. They showed him another image: a man, tall, strong, his face in shadow, a sword in his hand. Behind him stood Merlin himself—older, with a beard, with eyes that knew everything and endured nothing.

“Why always me?” he whispered.

The stars didn't answer. Stars never answer. They only point.

Cathan tossed and turned in his sleep, muttering something unintelligible. Merlin sat up and stared at him. "You will fall," he had said. And the sky nodded at him, as if confirming it.

The crow cawed softly, a sound that sounded like pity.

Merlin placed his hand on the staff. "If you want to force me," he murmured to the sky, "then we force each other. I see what you're showing. But I only say what I want."

The stars sparkled. Indifferently. Threateningly. Expectantly.

The morning dawned pale, as if the sun had forgotten its color. Merlin was already awake before the first rays broke through the fog. He had barely slept, only lain there, the sky above him, never silent even in his dreams. Cathan stoked the fire, throwing dry twigs into it, which crackled like old bones.

"You stayed awake," murmured the warrior. "I've learned that heaven knows no rest," replied Merlin. Cathan grinned crookedly. "Then get used to it. Warriors don't sleep when they fight either." "I'm no warrior," said Merlin. "I'm a mirror." "Mirrors break," grumbled Cathan. "Steel holds."

Merlin remained silent. He had seen steel break during the night. The stars had shown it.

They continued on, across flat land that was more stone than earth. The wind blew in their faces, sharp and impatient, as if trying to drive them away. On the horizon, Merlin saw a figure: small, bent, carrying a bundle on its back.

Cathan placed his hand on his sword. "A beggar. Or a thief." "Or both," murmured Merlin.

The figure approached. He was an old man, so old that his skin looked like dried leather. He leaned on a staff full of notches, as if he had counted wars with it. Around his neck hung a chain of bone fragments that clinked in the light. His eyes were milky, almost blind—and yet they stared straight into Merlin's face.

"There you are," said the old man, before he was close enough to see him clearly. "I've been expecting you."

Cathan tensed. "Nonsense. You don't know him." The old man laughed, a croaking sound more suited to the forest than the steppe. "I know the stars. And they know him."

Merlin froze. "You read the sky?" "No," replied the old man. "The sky reads me. I'm just copying."

They sat down by a boulder. The old man took out a small bundle containing strange stones, smooth and carved with a symbol. He threw them to the ground, and they fell in such a way that a pattern was created.

"Do you see?" he asked Merlin. Merlin saw lines, circles, fractures. They reminded him of the images of the stars. "Yes," he whispered. Cathan frowned. "I only see stones." "Of course," said the old man. "Because you only see with your eyes. He sees with the crack in his chest."

Merlin felt his heart beat faster. "What do you mean, rift?" "You are not whole," the old man replied. "You are a bridge. One foot in the fire, one in the fog. And the stars..." He raised his gaze. "The stars are tearing at you. They want you to be their mouth."

Merlin shook his head. "I don't want to be a mouthpiece. I don't want to speak for them." The old man smiled sadly. "That's what everyone says in the beginning. But the stars don't choose who they use. They take. And they took you, even before you knew you existed."

Cathan snorted. "Old fairy tales. Stars are dots in the sky. Beautiful to look at, useless to interpret." The old man turned to him, his blind eyes suddenly clear. "And yet you march into wars because men in crowns tell you it's your destiny. Is that any less foolish?"

Cathan pressed his lips together and remained silent.

The old man leaned forward and placed a hand on Merlin's forehead. It was light, bony, yet heavy as stone. Images flashed through his mind: a star falling from the sky; a sea of blood; a crown shattering; and himself, on a hill, arms outstretched, while the people cheered him—and stoned him the next moment.

Merlin gasped, jerking his head back. "Enough!" The old man nodded. "You see. You can't deny it. But you must choose which stories you speak. For every word from your mouth is a seed. And every seed grows."

Merlin stared at him, his hands shaking. "And if I remain silent?" "Then the weeds will grow."

The crow landed on the ground and pecked at one of the stones. The old man smiled. "Your bird knows the truth. It flies between heaven and earth, just as you walk between worlds." "It's just a crow," murmured Cathan. "No," said the old man. "It's your shadow."

Merlin felt the air grow heavy. The old man grabbed his stones and tied the bundle. "Listen to me, boy: The stars are not friends. They give no gifts. They lay burdens. And the more clearly you see them, the deeper they cut you."

Then he rose, so suddenly it seemed as if he'd never actually sat down. "Keep going. The stars will find you, whether you want them to or not. But remember one thing: not every vision needs to be spoken aloud. Some kill when shared."

He walked, crooked, slowly but surely, as if following a path only he could see. Soon he disappeared into the fog.

Merlin and Cathan stayed behind. The warrior shook his head. "An old fool." Merlin looked up at the sky. The stars flashed cold, hard, like needles. "No," he said quietly. "An old mirror."

The night came clear, like glass raised against the light. No cloud, no fog, only the sky, open like a wound. Merlin lay on his back, his hands beneath his head, staring into the darkness punctured with holes. Cathan slept heavily, his arm around his sword, as if afraid someone would snatch it from him.

Merlin couldn't sleep. The old man's words still burned within him: "Not every vision needs to be spoken aloud. Some kill when shared." But the sky wasn't silent. Stars never stop. They hummed. Not like music, but like the grinding of metal on metal, sparks dancing in the darkness.

He tried not to look. But his gaze kept falling upwards. And then he saw it: an image so clear it couldn't be a coincidence.

The stars formed a sword. Not just any sword—long, straight, shining, as if someone had struck it into the sky. Above it lay a crown, delicate, almost brittle, a circle of faint lights. The sword sank. Pierced the crown. And the crown shattered.

Merlin gasped. His heart raced. He closed his eyes, but the image continued to burn on his eyelids, hot like a brand.

"No," he murmured. "Not again."

He sat up and reached for the staff. The crow fluttered onto his shoulder and cawed once, so sharp it sounded like a cut. "You see it too," he whispered. It didn't answer. Crows never answer.

Cathan woke up. "What's wrong?" "The sky," Merlin said hoarsely. "It's screaming." Cathan sat up, blinked. "I only see stars." "And I see blood," Merlin replied.

The night passed slowly, agonizingly. Merlin remained silent, holding the vision tightly within himself, as one holds a knife in one's hand: not too tight, or it will cut, not too loose, or it will fall.

When morning came, gray and leaden, they heard the first sound: hoofbeats, distant but fast. A rider.

Cathan jumped up and grabbed his sword. "Hide," he ordered. "Why?" "Some news brings death faster than arrows."

But the rider came, rushing, sweating, his horse foaming. He didn't stop until he almost collided with her. Then he jerked the reins and stared at her, his eyes full of terror.

"Did you hear?" he gasped. "What?" asked Cathan. "The king is dead! Murdered in the night. A dagger, straight to the heart. The crown—" His voice broke. "The crown is broken."

Merlin felt the air choking him. He saw the image again: the sword, the crown, the fracture.

Cathan cursed and slammed his fist against the rock. "Damn it! The empire is falling."

The rider drank hastily from a skin, staring at Merlin. "And who is the child?" Cathan placed his hand on Merlin's shoulder. "No one," he said sharply. "Just a traveler."

But the rider didn't take his eyes off him. "He sees more than he should," he muttered. Then he urged his horse on and disappeared, leaving a trail of dust in his wake.

Cathan turned to Merlin. "You saw it." Merlin nodded silently. "When?" "Last night." "And you didn't say anything?" "The old man was right. Some words kill."

Cathan stared at him for a long moment. "Perhaps. But silence can kill just as much."

Merlin remained silent. Because he knew both were right. And that made it worse.

He lay back down in the grass, his eyes fixed on the sky. The stars were still there, innocent, cold. He hated them for using him.

"You show me things," he murmured quietly. "But I decide whether I tell them. Do you understand? I'm not your dog."

The stars twinkled. Indifferent. As if he were nothing more than a speck of dust that believed it could command the wind.

The first village beyond the forest smelled of fear. Not of smoke, not of dung, but of that mixture of sweat and silence that always hangs in the air when people know more than they want to share. The houses leaned as if they were trying to run away, their doors half-closed, their gazes half-hidden.

Cathan led Merlin down the narrow street, his sword visible at his side as if it were a pass. Children stared at them before their mothers pulled them back, as if the two were a ghost and its shadow.

"You heard," murmured Cathan. "The king's death?" "Yes. News travels faster than horses when they carry terror."

A man stood in front of the tavern, coarse, with arms like beams. He looked them over, spat, and nodded for them to come in. Inside, it was stuffy, full of voices trying to drown each other out.

"Stabbed," said one. "In his sleep," said another. "By whom?" "By everyone," murmured a third.

Merlin felt the stares. He sat down in a corner, the crow perched on the back of his chair. Cathan ordered beer and bread, as calmly as if this were just another rest stop. But the atmosphere in the room was like a rope about to snap.

An old man at the table next to them leaned toward Cathan. "Did you see it? The stars announced it." Cathan laughed harshly. "Stars don't kill kings. Knives do." "Knives are just hands," the old man replied. "But the stars guide the hands."

Merlin's heart stumbled. He stared at the tabletop.

Suddenly, a woman rose, her face narrow, her eyes bright as cold water. "You!" she cried, pointing at Merlin. "You are the one I saw in my dream. You stood beneath the sky, and the crown fell."

All heads turned toward him. Cathan reached for the sword, slowly, not threateningly, but ready.

"Me?" Merlin asked. His voice was quieter than he intended. "Yes," the woman said. "You are a sign. The stars sent you."

A murmur went through the room. Signs are dangerous—they bring hope or panic, and sometimes both at the same time.

The innkeeper slammed his fist on the table. "Enough dreams! We need bread, not talk." But the people didn't listen. They pressed closer, asking questions in confusion. "Who will be the next king?" - "Will there be war?" - "Will we all die?"

Merlin felt the voices pressing on him. He wanted to scream that he knew nothing. But the stars whispered within him: "Say it. Say it. Say it."

He squeezed his eyes shut. He saw the image again: the sword, the crown, the blood. And then, behind it, a second circle of stars, smaller but brighter, like a new crown.

He opened his eyes. "A king has fallen," he said. "But a new one will come. From the south. He bears not blood, but justice."

Silence. Then a murmur. Hope. Fear. Both.

Cathan grabbed him by the arm, pulled him out of the crowd, and out onto the street. "Are you crazy? Why did you say that?" "Because they wanted to hear it." "Because they need it," Merlin growled. "People can't stand silence. They fill it with something. I only gave words." "Words are swords," Cathan snarled. "And you just threw one without aiming."

Merlin remained silent. But deep down, he knew: He hadn't just thrown. He had hit.

Later, in a barn they rented for the night, they sat alone. Cathan rubbed his forehead. "Don't you understand? Your mouth makes you the plaything of kings. They will seek you out, use you, kill you."

"And if I remain silent?" asked Merlin. "Then you're useless. And they kill useless people, too."

Merlin leaned back, staring at the sky through the cracks in the planks. The stars glowed faintly. He whispered, "You threw me into this fight. But I decide how I fight."

The stars twinkled. Indifferently. Perhaps approvingly. Perhaps mockingly.

The morning smelled of rain that hadn't yet fallen. A silence hung over the village that wasn't peace—more like the tense holding of breath before a blow. Merlin and Cathan wanted to leave discreetly, but even as they walked out onto the street, Merlin felt the gazes. Eyes that demanded more than they dared to ask.

A rider stood in front of the tavern. Unlike the villagers, he wore not a patchwork cloak, but a coat of dark wool, clean, heavy, too neat for a traveler. His boots gleamed despite the dust, and at his side hung not an axe or peasant sword, but a finely crafted blade. The horse beneath him was powerful, its mane braided.

"There he is," said the rider bluntly, pointing at Merlin. "The boy who spoke of a new king in the tavern yesterday."

Cathan tensed. "And who asks?" The rider regarded him with cool indifference. "My lord. A prince who knows his place in the order. And who wants to know what the stars are telling him."

Merlin felt his stomach tighten. They're starting, he thought. They're already trying to draw me into their games.

They were led into the tavern, which was now almost empty. Only the rider and two silent companions with spears stood with them. The rider sat down as if the table were a throne.

“Tell me, boy,” he began, “is it true that you foresaw the king’s death?”

Merlin remained silent. Cathan placed his hand on his arm, a silent warning. But silence was more dangerous than any words here.

“I have seen,” he said quietly, “that a sword would break a crown.”

The rider's eyes flashed. "And a crown is broken. So your word is true. Then tell me what else you saw."

Merlin felt the stars above him laughing—cold, mocking. "I've seen that a new king is coming from the south. But his path will be bloody."

The rider leaned back. "From the South, you say." He smiled thinly. "My master is a Southerner. He'll be pleased to hear that."

Cathan snorted. "And if he only hears it because he wants to hear what he needs?" The rider turned to him, his smile still intact. "Then that's the point of prophecies. They're knives. Everyone reaches for them, even if they cut themselves."

Merlin felt guilty, even though he knew he had spoken the truth. But truth is a double-edged sword: it kills the one who hears it or the one who speaks it.

"My lord will want to see you," said the rider. "This very day. Come with us. He offers protection, food, shelter. And influence."

Cathan immediately stood up. "He is no plaything for princes." The rider laughed softly. "No one escapes the games of princes. Not even warriors who think they are free."

Merlin raised his hand. "I won't go," he said. The rider raised his eyebrows. "Then my lord will have you brought. Today with kind words. Tomorrow with chains."

The companions took a step closer. Spearheads gleamed.

Merlin closed his eyes. He heard the voices of the stars, louder this time, more urgent. "Say. Say. Say." But he resisted. He would not speak on command. Instead, he placed his hand on the staff and murmured a single word: "Enough."

A gust of wind blew through the tavern, even though the doors were closed. The spears trembled in the men's hands, the fire in the hearth flickered as if about to go out. The rider blinked, startled, if only for a moment.

"He's dangerous," hissed one of the spearmen. The rider rose. "So much the better. My lord loves dangerous men."

He turned away, placing his hand on his sword. "We will return. Prepare yourselves."

Then they left the tavern, the clinking of armor echoing in the silence.

Cathan grabbed Merlin by the shoulders. "What did you think?" "That I'm not a dog to be kept on a leash." "But now they've seen you. They'll hunt you." Merlin nodded. "Perhaps. But better hunted than bought."

The crow fluttered through the open window, sat on the stick and croaked loudly as if to say: The game has begun.

Merlin sighed. "Yes," he murmured. "And I'm already in the middle of it."

The village was different the next morning. No smoke rose from the chimneys, no children's laughter, no arguments in the streets. Instead, voices whispered behind doors, and every glance Merlin caught was too sharp or too reverent.

They had heard him. Everyone. What he had said in the tavern had spread through the alleys like a fire growing on its own. A new king is coming. From the south. For some, that was hope. For others, a threat.

The first woman who spoke to him did so at the well. She was young, her eyes sunken with fatigue, a child on her hip. "Is it true?" she asked softly, almost pleadingly. "Is someone really coming to protect us?" Merlin wanted to say: I don't know. But the words stuck. He just

nodded. The child smiled at him, toothless, unsuspecting. Hope was dangerous, but he didn't have the heart to crush it.

No sooner had the woman left than a man approached him, rude, with arms covered in scars. "You're a liar," he hissed. "No king will save us. Princes take, they never give. Your words are poison." Merlin looked him in the eyes. "Perhaps," he said calmly. "But sometimes poison is needed when wounds are rotting." The man spat. "Then we'll die from your medicine."

It went on like this all day. Some sought him out, begging for more words, wanting to know if their fields would survive, if their children would grow up, if the land would find peace. Others pushed him away, giving him looks that were like knives.

Cathan watched all this with a dark gaze. "You see it, don't you?" "What?" "Your words are splitting them. One clings to them, the other clings to them." Merlin remained silent. But he knew: Cathan was right. His voice wasn't healing. It was an axe. It split, no matter where it fell.

That evening, the village elder called him to him. A man with a gray beard, his hands covered in calluses, who nevertheless had the tone of a judge. He sat in his hut, which smelled of dry straw, and looked at Merlin for a long time before he spoke.

"Boy," he said, "I've heard a lot. Some call you a sign, others a curse. I tell you, both are the same. A sign brings hope or terror, but never rest. And we need rest."

Merlin held his gaze. "I didn't ask for their questions." "No," the old man murmured. "But you answered."

Silence filled the hut. Outside, a dog barked briefly and hoarsely, then silence again.

"Go," the old man finally said. "Not because I hate you. Because I know your mouth is fire. And we already have enough ashes."

They left the hut as night fell. Two torches burned in the village square. A small crowd had gathered. Some looked at Merlin as if he were a prophet. Others as if he were a demon.

A young man stepped forward, his eyes sparkling. "Tell us, Seer! Who will lead us? Who will be our king?" Merlin felt the pressure choking him. The stars above him glittered, demanding, formless. "A king from the south," he said, "but he brings no bread. He brings war."

Murmurs. Fear. Anger. An old farmer shouted: "Then get rid of him! He only brings trouble!" But a woman cried: "No! He is our hope!"

The murmuring grew louder, turning into an argument. Hands clenched, voices screamed. The village square became a market of prophecies, everyone buying the piece they wanted to hear.

Merlin stood in the middle, his staff heavy in his hand. The crow fluttered up, circled overhead, and cawed loudly.

Cathan pressed to his side, pulling him back. "They'll tear each other apart. Because of your words." "Not because of my words," Merlin whispered. "Because of what they see in them."

That same night, they fled the village. No goodbye, no word. Only the feeling that something remained behind them that would never be healed.

As they stood on a hill and the village lights faded, Merlin looked up at the sky. The stars sparkled coldly, as if they had won a game.

"I've learned," he murmured, "that I can't speak without causing wounds." Cathan nodded. "Then speak only when necessary." Merlin shook his head. "The stars leave me no choice."

The crow perched on his staff and cawed. It sounded like a mocking laugh. Or like approval.

The road was nothing more than a rutted path, rutted by wheels and hooves, washed out by rain. It led them away from the village, which sank into the darkness behind them but never left their backs. Merlin felt it like a cold gaze still resting on him. He had destroyed it without drawing a sword. Just with a leap.

Cathan trudged beside him, silent. The silence was heavier than his armor. Only when night fell did he break it. "You know they'll say you cursed the village." Merlin shrugged. "Perhaps I did." "Nonsense." "Or truth," Merlin replied quietly. "Sometimes they're the same thing."

They camped by the roadside, beneath an old oak tree whose crown draped itself over them like a ruffled cloak. The fire burned low, afraid of prying eyes. The crow perched on a branch, staring at them as if it had long known where this would all lead.

Merlin lay back, his eyes raised. The sky again. The stars again. He tried to ignore them, but they were like a roar in his bones. The longer he stared, the more clearly they formed a pattern: a closed circle, within which stood a sword, standing vertically. Above it, a second crown, brighter, stronger.

"A new king," he whispered. "One who stands on the blood of the old one."

Cathan looked at him sideways. "Visions again?" "Not a vision. An order." "From whom?" Merlin remained silent. Words would only have made it worse.

The next morning, they came to a larger encampment. A few huts, tents, banners fluttering in the wind—the forecourt of a prince's court. Men in arms stood around, sharpening blades, laughing too loudly. But behind the noise, one could sense the tension. News of the king's death had taken root here, too.

A banner bore the crest of a lion, gold on a black background. Cathan stopped, his jaw tense. "I know the sign. A prince from the south. Cruel, ambitious. If he smells the crown, he'll walk over dead bodies."

Merlin nodded. "Then I'm exactly the one he wants to see."

They tried to pass unnoticed, but after just a few steps they were stopped. Two soldiers stood in their way, spears pointing across. "Where to?" "Further," said Cathan tersely. "Not without permission," replied one. His gaze slid to Merlin. "You're the boy who reads the stars, aren't you?"

Merlin felt his stomach tighten. Words that sounded like chains.

"Come," commanded the soldier. "The prince wants to see you."

Even before they left, Merlin raised his head. The sky was blue, clear, innocent. But inside him, the stars continued to flicker as if it were night. They formed the image he already knew: the sword, the crown, the blood. This time, however, a new figure appeared—a man in a cloak, with eyes that burned like fire.

Merlin knew: This was the prince who was waiting for him.

He lowered his gaze and looked at Cathan. "It begins." Cathan nodded, his hand on his sword. "Then we hold our breath until it's over." "It won't be over," Merlin murmured. "Never again."

The soldiers urged them forward, toward the courtyard, toward power. And above them, invisible to all but Merlin, the stars laughed.

Child of a demon, child of the earth

He called it a memory, though it felt like a splinter slipping into the same wound over and over again. It didn't begin with light, not with a pious tale of fate. It began with a door that creaked and breath that didn't smell human. His mother had never had many words when it came to that night—the night a man who wasn't one came to her. She only said things like, "It was getting cold, but I was sweating," or, "The candle burned backward," or, "I prayed, and the prayers hung in the room like smoke that doesn't know where to go."

When she spoke of it, she did so as if she were walking barefoot on glass. Slowly, with pauses, and each word left blood behind. He was still small then, too small to understand the shape of a demon, but old enough to know that there are words adults hold like knives. Demon. Sin. Bastard. He learned early: Some words cut not because they're sharp, but because they're used over and over again.

His mother described the figure as a memory of heat passing through a door. No face, she said, just the suggestion of one, as if someone had poured a shadow into a bowl of water and stirred it briefly. The shoulders were human, the hands too—too human. But between the fingers, she said, there was something that didn't like light. A trembling, perhaps, a flickering, a humming. "He didn't pronounce my name properly," she once murmured, "as if his mouth was full of stars." And then she fell silent, as if the sentence itself were a sin.

At one point, Merlin asked, "Were you glad?" She pulled her hand back as if he'd bitten her. Glad is a word that doesn't dwell in nights when the walls are fogged up. Later, he asked, "Did you say yes?" She looked at him for a long time, until silence stood like a third entity in the hut. "I said nothing," she whispered. "Sometimes your words are taken away before you can say your own name." He didn't understand everything. But he understood enough to know that his name was written on a crooked staircase.

The people of the village added their version, as they always do when truth wears a dress that fits no one. They said a stranger had been seen at the monastery gate—a figure in the mist, leaving no footprints. Some swore he passed through the wall like warm breath. Others claimed that as he walked, he made the dogs howl and the fountain mirror. There was an old

woman who said she saw stars falling that night, all in the direction of his mother's cell; a man replied that stars were always falling, you only noticed them when you needed a reason to notice them.

Merlin grew up under gazes that judged him like a commodity. Too big for his age, some said. Too quiet, others said. Too much fog in his eyes, too little fear of the dark. Once, a child pushed a burning torch toward him, just to see if he would eat fire. He didn't. He had no tricks, just that annoying way of knowing things before they happened, and even that wasn't a talent, but a rope that many pulled.

When he asked about "Father," his mother evaded the question, as if she were dodging a flood coming through cracks. "Some men are night," she said, "and some nights are men. I can't give more than that." He sensed that this wasn't a lie, but self-protection: One word too many, and the ground becomes swamp. One word too few, and the sky becomes deep.

There were days when he withdrew to the hill behind the village, where the earth breathed. He placed his hand in the grass, in the clay, on the stone. The earth didn't respond with sentences, but it remained friendly and silent. It had time, outrageous amounts of it, and time is a healer if you don't offend it. He felt the weight of the world in his fingertips, that patient pushing of roots, that slow yielding of the ground when water comes. Then he thought: If part of me is from the night, the other part is from this one. Earth doesn't make promises. It only makes room.

The priests recounted the ancient teachings: Demon children's teeth grow early, one said, they have no reflections, another said, and cats meow before they can walk. Merlin examined himself: teeth normal, reflection present, cats unimpressed. It was ridiculous and yet not ridiculous, for lies remain sticky, even when you laugh. Once, he stood by the well in the moonlight and looked for something that wasn't a body—a shadow in the shadow, a flickering that didn't come from the wind. He saw only his face and the night behind it, and he knew: That's enough. One person is shadow enough. He doesn't need another.

He wore the rumors like a second shirt, one that never dried. When he went into the woods with other boys, they stayed a few steps behind, and when he turned around, they acted as if they'd lost something. Once, one said, "Show us the horns." Merlin laughed, bobbed his head at him, and as the boy was about to grin, a branch fell from the tree and hit him just next to the ear. The others ran. Merlin stopped. He looked at the branch as if you could read intent in wood. Maybe you could. Maybe intent is just a way of saying pattern.

He asked the crow, which was already around him at that time, like black humor with wings. "What if I'm really from there?" It tilted its head, as if to say: There is everywhere. Later in the forest, as the roots talked and the fog breathed, he tried to hear the difference between demon and tree. The tree demanded time. The demon demanded stories. Both suck, he thought, both want you.

One night, long after he had left the village and the forest had tested him, he dreamed of a figure standing at the threshold. Not in the cottage doorway, not in the cloister—at the threshold of the world, where the mist thins and the light cannot decide. The figure wore a face that could be his if you looked at it too long in the water. "My son," it said, not loudly or lovingly, more like a fact too heavy to bear kindly.

He felt anger coming from old cellars, and something that wasn't anger—a curiosity that disgusted him. "If you're my father," he said, "where were you when they spat me out? When they said I ate fire, I brought bad luck, I was an oracle who could be beaten?"

The figure approached. The room around it smelled of iron and a kind of cold that you can't drink. "I was there," it said. "I am there when you breathe. I am the part of you that never tires. The part that stirs even after the final blow. I am the irrationality within you that propels you forward when you should have stayed down long ago."

He laughed, harshly. "Then you're just the excuse for men who break others." "I am what you want me to be," the figure replied. "You give me names. I am just movement."

When he awoke, earth lay beneath his hand—that simple, honest, moist earth. He smelled his fingers and tasted salt. The crow perched on his staff, looking at him as if it had overheard. "I don't need movement stealing my face," he murmured. "I need weight."

He dug his fingers deeper into the ground until his nails turned black. "If I am the son of a demon," he said to the earth, "then be my mother. Pin me down. Hold me when the voices come." The ground answered as ground answers: It gave way a little, took the trembling from his hand, and gave it somewhere where trembling can be recycled.

Later, when the sun had sunk lower and the world pretended to be fed up with light, he spoke with Cathan. The warrior didn't like the rumors—rumors are arrows without feathers, they fly, but no one knows where. "They say you're from the other side," Cathan began, as if speaking with a knife already in the wound.

Merlin nodded. "That's what they say." "What do you say?" He looked at his palms. Lines like small rivers that never lead you where you think. "I say I am two things that don't get along. Darkness learning to walk. Earth wanting to think. If that's called a demon, fine. If that's called a human, fine too."

Cathan was silent for a while. Then he placed a hand on his shoulder, heavy and reliable. "For the war, it doesn't matter whose son you are," he grumbled. "For the men, all that matters is whether you hold when it breaks." "And if I break?" "Then you'll learn how to march with cracks."

At night, the images returned—the door, the breath, the flickering between fingers. But this time, before they grew, he placed both hands in the earth until his mouth tasted of clay. "Child of a demon, child of the earth," he said into the ground. "If that's so, then I'm the one who decides when which part speaks." The wind rustled through the grass, and for a moment he heard the two sides within him like two dogs pulling a rope. It didn't break. Not yet. And that was enough to keep going.

The day began with rain. Not the fast, loud kind that turns into torrents and makes children laugh, but the persistent, cold kind that seeps into your skin drop by drop and makes everything heavy. Merlin and Cathan walked in silence, the water running from their shoulders, and the crow fluttered impatiently above them, because even birds hate rain.

Merlin liked the rain. Not because it was pleasant—it was cold, naked, incorruptible. But because it made everything equal. Rain doesn't ask for names. It falls on princes and bastards

alike, on fields and swamps. In moments like these, Merlin almost believed he was no different. Almost.

But the silence of the people changed his mind again. On their way south, they passed through a small village, barely more than ten huts, a well, and a stable. Men squatted under the eaves of the smithy, women tied shawls around their heads, children ran barefoot in the mud. When they saw Merlin, the talking stopped. Their eyes were fixed on him, not on Cathan, not on the sword, not on the rain. Only on him.

A woman made the sign of the cross, an old man spat into the mud. "Devil's spawn," he muttered, not loudly, but loud enough.

Cathan turned around. "Shut your mouth." The old man laughed harshly. "Your charge has horns growing under his skin. Wait until they come."

Merlin stood still, staff in hand, crow on his shoulder. He said nothing. Argument only adds fuel to the fire. He looked at the old man until he lowered his eyes. Then he moved on. Words are sometimes weakness, silence sometimes a weapon.

They found shelter in a barn. The farmer who owned it took her silver, but not her company—he immediately disappeared again, as if afraid the boy's breath might spoil the grain.

Cathan snorted. "Always the same." "They see what they want to see," Merlin replied. "And if they don't find demons, they make some."

The crow hopped to the ground, pecked at the grains, and cawed loudly. It sounded like approval, but also like mockery.

The dream came at night. Not a dream of stars this time, but of roots. They grew out of the earth, crawling over his body, entwining his arms, legs, chest. At first he remained still, thinking: They want to hold me tight. But then he realized they weren't binding him, but carrying him. They were lifting him as a mother lifts her child, slowly, carefully.

Then the other figure appeared: the shadow that sometimes said "my son," sometimes nothing. Half human, half smoke, with eyes that saw too much. "You are my blood," he whispered. "Never forget that."

The roots pulled harder, as if they wanted to pull him back. "And you are my weight," they whispered, "don't forget that either."

Merlin hung in the middle, between shadow and root, between breath and earth. He screamed, but the screams stuck in his throat. In the end, he woke up drenched in sweat, his hands covered in straw, his fingernails covered in dirt.

Cathan stared at him. "Visions again?" "Not vision," Merlin whispered. "Memory."

The next morning, they sat in the wet grass. Cathan looked at him for a long time. "I heard them talking. That your father was a demon. That you were a bastard, sired by shadows." Merlin nodded. "That's what they say." "And?" "And maybe they're right."

Cathan frowned. "You really believe that?" "I know he wasn't like you. Not like them." He looked back at the huts. "He was... different. And so am I. Demon or not, it doesn't matter."

Cathan remained silent, chewing on his beard. Then he said, "Maybe you're from a demon. Maybe not. But you're here. You're bleeding like me. You're freezing like me. And if you fall, you'll lie in the ground just like everyone else. That's enough for me."

Merlin smiled bitterly. "Maybe it's enough for you. But not for the world."

They moved on. The road was muddy, the air cold. But Merlin felt something clear within him. If he hung between demon and earth, then he didn't have to choose whose son he was. He could be both. Or neither. Perhaps that was his true power: that he never had to commit, that he always remained in between.

As they crested the next hill, he placed his hand on the ground, pressing his fingers into the clay. "If you are my mother," he murmured, "then teach me patience. For my father inherited haste."

The earth was silent. But it yielded, taking the shape of his hand. And for a moment, he felt not cursed, but rooted.

The rain eased, but the world remained wet, as if it had decided never to let go of the smell of wet earth and rotten wood. Cathan and Merlin continued on, the road narrow, filled with puddles that looked like dark eyes. The crow fluttered restlessly above them, as if it knew that questions hung in the air that were heavier than the weather.

Cathan was silent for a while, then it burst out of him. "Tell me, boy... these powers, the voices, the images—are they from your father?" Merlin flinched. "I don't know who my father is." "You know enough." Cathan looked at him sharply, as if trying to beat the silence out of him. "Everyone whispers. Demon, devil, shadow man. And you yourself admit it. So tell me: does your power come from him?"

Merlin remained silent, and his silence contained more than a hundred words. He knew that every "yes" or "no" would put him on one side—a side that would swallow him whole.

"I want to know," Cathan pressed. "When I turn my back on you, when I hear your words in battle—do I hear the boy? Or the demon?"

Merlin stopped and leaned on his staff. The earth was soft beneath his feet, cold, heavy. He took a deep breath, the scent of mud, grass, and roots. Then he knelt down and placed both hands in the ground.

"If he's my father," he murmured, "then I want to know what that means."

He waited. The earth didn't answer with words, never. But it answered with patience. First a pressure in his fingers, then a humming in his palms. He felt something coming from below—a current that didn't burn, but carried him. It wasn't fire, not hissing, not haste. It was weight. Heaviness. Constancy.

And in this stream lay a message, not spoken, but understood: "You are not just blood. You are soil. If it drives you forward, we hold you. If it tears you down, we carry you."

Merlin closed his eyes, a tremor running through him, but not a tremor of fear. Rather, a feeling that his body had received an answer greater than language.

Cathan watched him, his brow furrowed. "And?" Merlin raised his head, dirt on his fingers, clay on his nails. "If he is my father, then the earth is my mother. He may have given me movement. But she gives me weight."

Cathan blinked, confused. "Movement. Weight. What does that mean?" Merlin smiled weakly. "That he pushes me, but she holds me. Without her, I would be just a shadow. Without him, I would be just dust."

Cathan was silent for a long time. Finally, he snorted. "So you are both." "Yes," said Merlin. "And that is my curse. And my strength."

Later, as they rested in a small grove, Merlin placed his staff beside him, his hands once more in the ground. He wanted to feel it again, even more clearly. This time it was deeper: He heard something like voices, but not like those in the forest, not like the stars. They were dull, heavy sounds, more like a rumbling, as if the earth itself were speaking.

"We were here before he came. We'll stay when he leaves. You belong to us as much as you do to him. Never forget that."

Tears streamed down his face, not from sadness, but from overwhelm. He was not a bastard, not a mistake. He was two stories that bore each other.

Cathan placed a hand on his shoulder. "So?" Merlin looked at him, his face dirty, but his eyes clearer. "If you turn your back on me, you won't hear the demon. You'll hear the one who carries both. And who will decide when which part speaks."

Cathan nodded slowly. "That's enough for me."

Merlin smiled bitterly. "To you, perhaps. But not to the world."

The crow cawed loudly, as if it had heard enough. Merlin looked at it. "What are you, exactly? His messenger or theirs?" The crow fluttered up, circled, and dropped a black feather. It landed in his hand. He pocketed it. "Then both," he murmured.

The night was so still that even the rain was silent. Merlin lay on his back, his eyes closed, his staff beside him, the crow's feather in his hand. Cathan slept deeply, like one who keeps watch in his sleep. But for Merlin, the real struggle only began when his eyes closed.

The dream came quickly, too quickly, as if someone had simply turned off the light. There was no transition, no slow sinking—it simply stood there. In a hall of fog, without walls, without a roof. A space that didn't know itself. And in the middle of it, the figure waited.

Tall, thin, made of shadows, but with contours that made him both familiar and strange. His face was an echo of his own, older, sharper, emptier. Eyes that sparkled, but not with light—more with hunger.

"My son," the figure said. It didn't sound like love, it sounded like an affirmation. Like a judge writing the name in a report.

Merlin clenched his fists. "Stop saying that." "But you are." "Perhaps in the blood. But not in the will." The shadow laughed softly, a sound like wood breaking under pressure. "Will? Will is merely the facade that supports weakness. Blood is stronger. And yours is mine."

Merlin approached. "If you are my father, then tell me: why did you choose her? Why my mother? A woman who couldn't even close a door because the abbot could summon her at any time."

The figure bowed its head. "Because it believed. Because it prayed. Because it thought a god was listening. Someone had to answer."

"And it was you." "I was closer."

Anger shot through him. "Then you were just a thief." "Perhaps," said the figure. "But from the theft came something that will not die. You."

Merlin wanted to scream, wanted to hit, wanted to tear something apart. But the fog absorbed everything, rendered every movement powerless. "And what do you want now?" "To recognize whose voice is loudest within you." "It's not yours." "Not yet."

Then the ground trembled in his dream. Roots pushed out of the fog, thick, heavy, black with earth. They wrapped themselves around Merlin's legs, not tightly, not threateningly—but firmly, holding him. They crept higher, over his chest, wrapping themselves around him like arms.

The shadow growled. "Always her. Always interfering." Merlin understood. "The Earth."

The roots pulled harder, pulling him back, away from the figure. "You are ours," they boomed. "Don't forget whose weight carries you."

The shadow extended a hand, long, thin, filled with smoke. "And you are mine. Don't forget whose blood drives you."

Merlin felt torn, between heaviness and hunger, between roots and smoke. He wanted to break. But then he remembered his own words: I am both.

"Stop!" he cried. "You're both inside me, but I don't belong to either of you. You created me, yes. But I decide what to do with myself."

The shadow laughed, the roots rumbled. And then the dream shattered.

He awoke with a gasp. The ground was wet beneath his hands, dirt clinging to his fingers as if he had dug it in his sleep. The crow sat on his chest, staring at him, crooked, black, patient.

"I've seen him," whispered Merlin. "He says I'm his. But the earth held me. She says I'm hers."

The crow cawed, a sound that was both mockery and consolation.

Cathan woke up and looked at him. "Again?" Merlin nodded. "This time both of them. Father and Mother. Shadow and Earth." "And?" "And I am the one who stands between them. I am not them. I am me."

He closed his hand, still holding the feather. It was warm, even though it should have been cold.

He looked up at the sky. The stars sparkled, indifferent as always. But he felt that he had understood something: His origin was not a chain, but a crack. And in this crack there was space—for him, for what he himself was shaping.

"Child of a demon," he murmured, "Child of the earth. And eventually, just Merlin."

The crow cawed as if to say: We'll see.

The morning was cold and bright, as if the clouds had forgotten to close again. Merlin sat by the fire, rubbing earth between his fingers until it crumbled dryly. Cathan watched him for a while, his sword across his knees, then spoke in that ragged voice that asked more questions than it could bear.

“Are you afraid of your blood?”

Merlin raised his head. "Why do you ask?" "Because it's written all over your face. You talk about earth, about weight, about support. But when you think of him—that shadow, that... whatever you call him—something trembles inside you. So tell me: Are you afraid you'll become like him?"

Merlin stared into the fire. The flames flickered as if they had ears. "Sometimes," he admitted. "Sometimes, when I'm angry, when I see too much, when I hear too much... then it feels as if the voice isn't coming from me. As if he's speaking through me."

Cathan nodded, as if that were the answer he'd expected. "Then you must bind him." Merlin laughed bitterly. "How do you bind blood? How do you bind a shadow that flows in your veins?" "With will." "Will?" Merlin snorted. "Will is just an oar. The boat stays the same."

The crow fluttered from branch to branch, croaking as if it were adding fuel to the fire. Merlin glanced at it, then continued: "Perhaps I can't tie him up. Perhaps I can only learn to use him. But that is the most dangerous path of all."

Cathan leaned forward. "Then tell me one thing, boy. When he speaks through you—what does he sound like?"

Merlin remained silent. He knew if he answered, he would open a door that would be difficult to close again. But the words came naturally, like water seeping through a leak. "He sounds... like an echo of myself. As if I'd already decided before I thought it. As if he knew where I was going before I even took the first step."

And then it happened. Unintentionally, unsearched. His lips formed words that didn't come from him—and yet flowed from him.

"You will fall, Cathan. But not in war. Not by the sword. But by the weight of your guilt."

The words hung in the air, heavy, harsh, final. Cathan stared at him as if he'd been punched in the face. "What did you say?"

Merlin trembled. "I... I don't know." "Yes, you do." Cathan's voice was cold, dangerous. "That wasn't a vision, that was a judgment."

Merlin shook his head vigorously. "It just happened. I didn't mean for it to."

Cathan stood up and stepped back from the fire. His gaze was that of a man wondering whether he has a friend or a knife at his side. "So that's your gift? Or the demon within you? Words that kill?"

Merlin jumped up. "No! They weren't my words." "And yet you said them."

The crow cawed loudly, fluttering between them as if trying to prevent the tension from turning into a blow.

Merlin gasped. "Cathan, listen to me. I don't know if it was him or me or the stars or the Earth. But I do know one thing: it was true. You will fall. But not in the way you think."

Cathan pressed his lips together, the sword still in his hand. Finally, he sheathed it. "So be it. But remember one thing, boy: If you ever speak to me with that voice again, I'll test whether your blood is truly demon. With steel."

He sat back down by the fire, his back as hard as stone.

Merlin stood there, staff in hand, his heart filled with guilt. He hadn't lied. But he hadn't chosen to tell the truth either. It had happened. And that made it worse.

He looked up at the sky. Stars faded in the morning light, indifferent as always. He whispered, "If this is your game, then you're playing with my blood. But don't think I'll remain your mouth."

The earth beneath his feet vibrated slightly, as if to say: We hold you. But we won't take your burden away.

Merlin knelt down, pressing his hands into the ground until his nails ached. "Then hold me when he comes back. Because I don't know if I can do it alone."

The crow fluttered onto his shoulder. Its weight was light, but it felt like comfort.

The day dragged on. Cathan barely spoke a word, and when he did, his voice sounded like stone grinding against stone. Merlin walked beside him, staff in hand, the weight of the unwanted prophecy at his back. Every time he saw Cathan's silhouette in the corner of his eye, he heard the words again: "You will fall... by the weight of your guilt." He hated himself for saying them. But he knew he had no choice.

In the evening, they set up camp on a hill where the earth was dark and the grass glistened with dampness. Cathan lay down early, his back to Merlin, as if to pass judgment: I will not hear your voice.

But Merlin couldn't sleep. Something burned inside him. Not anger. Not fear. More like a hole that needed to be filled. He put the staff aside, knelt down, and pressed both hands deep into the earth, until his fingers ached.

"You've given me answers," he whispered. "But they're like knives. I want to know: Does my voice belong to him, or does it belong to you?"

At first, there was nothing. Just cold earth, damp, silent. But then came the vibration, deep, like distant thunder. It crept from his fingers into his arms, from his arms into his chest. A rumbling that wasn't a sound, but a weight.

*"Your voice is yours,"*spoke the earth within him. "But it carries two echoes. He gives you hunger. We give you support. Between the two, the word forms."

Merlin gasped. "So it wasn't just him?"
"No. Your prophecy was your own echo. You spoke what lay dormant within him—his guilt. We gave you the weight to bear it. He gave you the urge to speak it."

Merlin pressed his forehead to the ground. "What if I don't want to talk?"
"Then you remain silent. But silence is also a word. And sometimes it's more deadly."

Tears streamed down his cheeks, mingling with the clay. "I don't want to be a tool. Not for him. Not for you. I want... I want to be me."

The earth was silent for a moment, then roared again: "Child, you are what lives in between. Tools have only one blade. You have two. You can cut or carry. The decision is not whose son you are, but whose echo you repeat."

Merlin breathed heavily. He understood the words, and yet he didn't. Perhaps one wasn't meant to fully understand them. Perhaps understanding was a luxury Earth children didn't have.

Suddenly he felt the earth warm beneath his fingers. Not burning, more like a heartbeat. Images emerged, not sharp, but blurry: himself, older, his hands in the ground, while warriors fought around him. Cathan, bloodied, kneeling, his eyes full of remorse. A throne, empty. A river, red.

Merlin tore his hands from the earth, gasping, swaying. His whole body trembled.

The crow fluttered up, landed on his staff and cawed once, short and sharp.

"I know," Merlin whispered. "It's not over yet."

When he returned to the camp, he saw Cathan asleep, clutching his sword. Merlin sat down beside him and looked at him for a long time. You will fall, he thought. But perhaps I can hold you as the earth holds me.

Then he lay down. He knew sleep wouldn't bring rest. But perhaps it would bring weight. And sometimes weight was better than peace.

The night was heavy, as if heaven itself had decided to test him. Merlin lay on his back, hands clasped, eyes half-closed, and even as he fell asleep, he sensed that he wasn't alone. The dream came like a blow: no soft footsteps, no slow descent, but a fall into an abyss that awaited him.

He stood again in the foggy space that wasn't one. And there—as always—was the figure. The Shadow Father. Larger than before, firmer, clearer, as if the day's confession had made him stronger. His eyes glowed, not like fire, but like metal too hot to touch.

"You know," said the shadow. "You know you are my son."

Merlin raised his chin. "I know you are my blood. But that's not all." "Blood is enough." "Blood is the beginning," Merlin replied. "Not the end."

The shadow approached. "Come to me. You will never be weak again. Never doubt again. Never hesitate again. Your word will become law. Your gaze will become a weapon. Your breath will become a storm. I will give you everything if you only accept who you are."

Merlin felt the words pulling at him. A part of him wanted to say yes, wanted to be strong, wanted to stop trembling at the sound of voices, wanted to stop being hunted by peasants and princes. But then the ground shook.

Roots grew out of the dream mist. Heavy, dark, full of earth. They crept around his legs, his arms, wrapping themselves around him like a mother around her child. And from the depths, a voice boomed: "You are ours. We hold you. You are ours too."

The shadow hissed. "It's always her! It's always clinging to you, the earth. A block, a burden that prevents you from flying."

Merlin gasped. "She's holding me. You're driving me. You're both inside me. But you belong to me—not the other way around."

The shadow laughed, louder, colder. "Then say it, son. Say it out loud."

Merlin closed his eyes, the roots tight around him, the shadow close before him. He took a deep breath, then said: "I am both. Demon and earth. Shadow and weight. But I am not your tool. And I am not their tool. I am Merlin. And I determine whose voice is louder within me."

A tremor shook the dream. The shadow recoiled, not struck, but struck. The roots loosened, as if they had understood that holding on doesn't mean tying down.

"You'll have to choose," growled the shadow. "Sooner or later. And if you don't, it'll tear you apart." Merlin opened his eyes. "Then I'll tear. But I'll tear as me."

He awoke with a scream. Sweat ran down his forehead, his hands full of earth as if he had dug it in his sleep. Beside him, Cathan still slept, his face hardened, his sword in his arm. The crow perched on his staff, staring at him as if it had seen everything.

Merlin sat up, breathing heavily. "Child of a demon," he murmured. "Child of the earth. But someday... only me."

The crow cawed once, sharply, approvingly or warningly—perhaps both.

The School of the Druids

The path to the grove wasn't one. It was a promise that constantly changed its mind. The paths disappeared, reappeared, and ran in circles, as if the forest had a sense of humor. Cathan cursed softly, the crow pretended to have brought it there, and Merlin let the staff slide with its tip over the earth until the wood sang softly. It was late afternoon, a tired, yellow one, and the air smelled of damp leaves and goats. Goats are honest animals: they stink, and they mean it.

"Are you sure it's here?" Cathan growled. "No," said Merlin. "That's why it's right."

Then they saw it—not as a gate, but as a gap in the ordinary. Three yew trees stood there, closer together than the other trees, and between their trunks the air lay differently, a little heavier, a little more attentive. On the ground, a spiral of whitish stones. Not large chunks—pebbles that someone had laid with a patience that hurt. In the center was a sheep bone, on which someone had carved a symbol: a circle with three notches. It looked like a mouth about to speak.

“Druids,” murmured Cathan, his voice losing half an inch of width.

Merlin lifted the crow's feather from the hem of his robe, twisted it once, and tucked it back in. "If this is school," he said, "we'll ring the bell."

He didn't do it with his hand. He placed the staff in the center of the spiral and let it fall from the palm of his hand. The staff touched stone, went 'tok'—not a loud one, but the right 'tok'. The air held its breath. Then they stepped out of the trees.

There weren't many. A dozen, maybe fifteen. Men and women, as old as roots, as young as knife-tips. No robes of gold, no crowns. Wool, leather, dirt. And those eyes that didn't see you, but examined you as one examines wood before making it into a bow.

The first was small and tough, with a face that had more wrinkles than space. His hair was white and short, like snow that had no time for romance. In his hand he held a blackthorn staff with three small teeth hanging from the tip. "He who knocks," he said, "knocks on his own forehead." His voice sounded like gravel on iron.

"Merlin," Merlin replied. "A student when you need one. A mistake when you don't want one." The old man twisted his mouth into what might have been the memory of a smile. "We don't need one. But we collect mistakes. They're the only things that learn." He tapped the spiral with his staff. "Call me Bran. Some say Archidruid. I don't listen well to long words."

Behind Bran stood a woman, tall, sinewy, her hair in gray braids, her hands covered in scars. Her apron smelled of mint, smoke, and blood. "Gwynna," she said before anyone else asked. "I keep those who stay alive, and those who leave dying." Her eyes examined Merlin's hands as if they were tools that needed sharpening. "Are you trembling?"

"Always," said Merlin. "But not where you can see it."

Further back, one grinned so broadly that his face was more mouth than human. He wore a flute on his belt and had the look of someone who steals stories when they don't run away. "Taliesin," he didn't introduce himself, but bowed anyway. "I talk too much. It's my job."

“Your job,” Bran grumbled, “is to remain silent until someone asks you.”

“Then someone will ask me,” Taliesin replied, grinning even wider.

Cathan crossed his arms. "And what is my role?" "Silence," said Bran. "Or leave."

Cathan blinked slowly. "I can do both."

Gwynna snapped her fingers. "Enough. The boy stinks of travel. And of…" She sucked in her breath, frowning. "…two forces that don't want to talk to each other." Her gaze was sharp as a bone needle. "Demon and earth. Hmm."

"He introduced himself," Taliesin murmured. "He's bringing his parents."

Bran thrust the staff into the ground. "Ask him the first question."

Gwynna stepped closer and placed two fingers on Merlin's pulses. One on his wrist, one on his neck. Her skin was dry and warm. "What do you want to learn for, child? For power? For glory? For revenge? Answer well, I'll prepare the medicine appropriately."

Merlin thought of stars, of mists, of the priest, of the village he had sawed through with words. "For weight," he said. "So I don't fall when I walk."

A brief, genuine smile flitted across Gwynna's face. "That's rare. Most people want to fly." "Anyone who falls far enough can fly," Taliesin said. "Landing is the art."

Bran raised his hand, and the voices fell like birds from a branch. "Second question." His gaze turned into an axe. "What do you let go of when you learn?"

Merlin didn't have to look far. "Of being right. Of the first word. Of the comfortable lie that the world is waiting for me."

"Hmm," said Bran. "Enough not to throw you out right away."

It wasn't an admission. It wasn't a non-expulsion. It's often the same thing in schools.

They led the two into the grove. It was no classical temple, no zigzag of stones, no sacred bronze bowls. It was a circle of soft earth, a few pits over which hazel racks hung, bundles of herbs that smelled like childhood and pain. In the center, a flat stone, worn smooth, with circles carved into it within circles. At the edge, three graves, half open, half closed, as if they were in the mood for conversation.

"School," Taliesin said, as if you didn't notice. "Here you learn three things: silence, endurance, and interpretation. If you can't keep silent, you'll hate endurance. If you do interpretation too soon, you'll shoot yourself in the foot." He winked. "Most fall nicely."

Gwynna brought a bowl, dark and steaming. "Drink."

“What is it?” asked Merlin.

"Yes," she said, holding out the bowl. It smelled of roots, metal, rain, and the bitter name of a herb you only know after crying too much. He drank. It didn't burn. It decided to burn deeper. His tongue became blunt, his fingers light, his stomach heavy. The world shifted half a notch.

"Silence," said Bran. "Sit in the circle. You will not be fed until the crows laugh three times. You will not sleep until the shadow no longer knows where the east is. You will not speak until your tongue begins to seek meaningful work. Cathan, you wait outside."

Cathan raised his eyebrow. "How long?"

“Long,” said Bran.

Merlin sat down. The ground was cool and honest. The spirals in the stone looked as if they had something to say, but had learned to be well-mannered. The crow perched on a post, pretending to be supervising.

The first few hours were nothing. Silence, breathing, the wise glances of the elders who pretended to do nothing. Gwenna passed by him like the scent of thyme and time. At some point, Taliesin sat down next to him, laid his flute across his knees, and said: nothing. It was the best he could do.

When the second hour arrived, the potion began to work like an ambitious apprentice. Merlin's heart beat to a rhythm he hadn't subscribed to. Images rose behind his eyelids: constellations carrying knives; roots weaving a cloak; the hand of a child holding his fingers—his own, sooner or later? He didn't know.

Bran's voice came from somewhere, without distance: "Don't name the images. Not yet. Names are nets. Today, you don't catch."

So he let her go. That was hard. Grasping nothing is harder than holding everything. Time turned its head and pretended to be someone else. The crow laughed for the first time. A dry 'hrra', nudging itself against a branch.

Gwynna approached him again and pressed wax into his ears. It smelled of honey and stables. "So you can hear the voices that don't ring," she said. "And so the ones that do ring leave you alone for a while."

As the wax muffled the world, it grew deeper. He heard the earth, not as sound, but more as pressure, a distant pounding that had begun before him and would continue after him. He placed his hand against the stone, and the carved circles became paths beneath his skin. Something inside him—the part that wanted to walk—grew quieter. The part that could sit grew heavier.

A shadow fell over him. Bran stood there, staring into his forehead as if looking at a silent book. "What don't you want to learn?" he asked, and his tone was so casual that the question became a blow.

Merlin opened his mouth, closed it again, and let his tongue search for something to do. The words came slowly, like water from a dry wall. "How to... use people... to be right."

Bran nodded. "Good. Then it will be the first thing that tempts you." He sat down opposite him, placing the blackthorn staff across his knees. "Listen: We don't teach magic tricks. We teach how to sort through the noise. The rest are hands. Yours are still raw." A glance at Merlin's fingernails, blackened by the floor. "Good. Raw is malleable."

The sun set behind the yew trees. The shadows forgot the east. Once he heard Cathan's footsteps outside, heavy, patient. Once he heard Taliesin's breath, which almost wanted to become a melody and then was ashamed. Gwynna's herbs did what herbs do when no one is looking: They decided whether to stay.

In the darkness, when the spirals in the stone felt like wrinkled hands that one couldn't shake off, the first thing one could call a teaching came—not as a sentence, but as an agreement. The Earth said: If you can sit while everything calls, you may stand when nothing shortens. The stars said nothing. For once.

Bran raised his staff. "Enough for today. Tomorrow, grave." "Pardon?" asked Merlin, his tongue now a useful tool.
"You sleep in the ground," Gwynna explained gently, as if offering soup. "Flat. Three handbreadths of earth on you. So you learn that darkness doesn't just take. It also keeps." Taliesin grinned. "And when you get up, you'll either be wiser or proven dead. Either will get us further."

Cathan stepped out of the twilight. His gaze sought Merlin's, found it, and lingered. Not a smile, but something that relaxed his teeth. "Are you alive?" "Still," said Merlin. "Good. See you tomorrow."

As night closed on the grove, a calm settled over everything, not friendly, but just. Merlin stretched his fingers, looked at the grooves in the stone that trailed beneath his flesh, and thought: Perhaps learning is nothing more than allowing the world to carve into you what it already knows. The crow moved closer to him as the temperature dropped. Bran snorted softly, as if he'd added another sack of mistakes to the pantry.

Merlin closed his eyes. The wax in his ears kept the false voices out. The true one remained: weight. And somewhere above, very far and small, blinked a patience called the stars. Tomorrow, grave, he thought. Today, breathe. And he breathed, until his breath no longer belonged to him, but to the grove.

The morning smelled of cold earth and smoke. Gwynna didn't let him have breakfast, not even a sip of water. Instead, she led him to one of the three half-open graves at the edge of the grove. Cathan ran alongside, his hand on his sword, as if he were about to fight the ground itself.

"Lie down," Gwynna commanded, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Merlin stared at the pit. It was barely deeper than a man's belly, the ground damp, the walls crisscrossed with roots that stuck out like fingers. He swallowed. "And if I don't get up?" "Then you belong to the roots," she replied curtly.

Taliesin appeared behind her, grinning broadly, as if he'd been waiting for this moment. "No one dies down here. Not on the first day. Only the thin-skinned die—of themselves. But hey," he winked, "sometimes it's a relief."

Bran arrived last. He tapped the edge of the pit with his staff. "The grave is the first teacher. Those who don't learn to breathe silently with darkness become loud when it's light. And loud wizards are dead wizards."

Merlin climbed inside. The earth was cool, smelling of iron, rain, and old animals that had long since become bones. He lay on his back. Above him were the faces: Bran serious, Gwynna scrutinizing, Taliesin grinning, Cathan tense.

“Three handbreadths,” said Bran.

Gwynna shoveled dirt over him, not roughly, but firmly. The layer grew heavier, darker. He breathed deeply until the weight on his chest and arms held him still. Then it fell silent.

Cathan bent down. "How long?" "Until he gets up," Bran answered. "Or until he stays."

In the darkness, time began to trickle down. First, Merlin heard his own heartbeat, loud, fast, like a frightened child. Then came the tightness. The earth pressed down on him, taking his breath away, and demanding that he give it back. He fought, swallowed, wanted to call out—but the wax in his ears kept his voice contained.

Then he felt it. A trembling. Not his trembling. A pulse that ran through the earth, through the roots, through him. Slow, heavy, unstoppable.

*"We hold you,"*murmured the earth. "Fear not. We take, but we give. Die within us, and we will give birth to you again."

Merlin closed his eyes and caught his breath. For a moment, he felt as if he were disintegrating—not dying, but being divided: one part blood, one part stone, one part shadow.

And in the midst of it all, he heard another voice, warm as smoke, sharp as a knife: "Look at yourself, my son. Even if you let yourself be buried, you belong to me. I am the fire that continues to burn beneath the earth."

Merlin wanted to scream, but he didn't. Instead, he whispered, "If you are fire, then she is ash. And ash extinguishes you."

The earth hummed in agreement. The fire laughed. And Merlin sweated coldly.

How long he had lain there, he didn't know. Perhaps hours, perhaps only heartbeats. But at some point, he felt his body change. The first breath had been panic, the second compulsion, the third habit. Now he was calm. Each layer of earth felt less like a burden, more like a blanket. Not a prison, but a womb.

He heard his blood rushing, and mingled with this rushing was an image: a circle of men and women, their hands clasped together, a stone table in the center. No crown, no throne—a circle. He didn't understand where it came from. But he sensed: This was a future that awaited him.

The crow screamed outside, loudly, three times.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed him, rough and strong. Earth flew, light rushed in. Cathan pulled him out as if ripping a friend from a river. Merlin coughed, gasped, and swatted the earth from his face and chest.

"Are you crazy?" Cathan snarled at Gwynna. "He would have suffocated!" Gwynna shrugged. "Then he wouldn't have learned."

Bran tapped Merlin's forehead with the blackthorn staff. "And? What does the grave say?"

Merlin gasped, trembling. "It says... that death is also a mother. And that fire, even beneath her, is not extinguished."

Bran's eyes narrowed, as if he'd heard an answer that was more than he expected. "Good. Then you're not useless yet."

Taliesin grinned. "And he's alive. That's a bonus."

Cathan led him away, wrapping a blanket around him. "You're crazy," he murmured. Merlin closed his eyes, still feeling the ground against his skin. "No," he whispered. "I was born."

The day after the grave didn't begin with breakfast. No bread, no water, just a look from Bran that said: Hunger is a teacher. Merlin felt his stomach growling, but he decided not to give the growling a name. Names make things stronger.

They placed him on the circle of stones, in the center where the flat sacrificial stone lay. Gwynna smeared more wax into his ears, this time until it almost hurt. "You can't hear anything but yourself," she said. "And believe me: that's the worst."

Taliesin crouched down next to him, grinning as if he were about to start a bad story. "Silence is not an absence of speech. Silence is speaking, only with fewer listeners. If you remain silent long enough, you'll hear things that would have been better left unspoken. Enjoy."

Merlin sat down, crossed his legs, and placed his hands on his knees. His staff beside him, the crow perched on the post. The druids spread out in a circle, each with a face that conveyed more mystery than friendship.

"Three days," said Bran. "Not a word, not a bite, not a drop. If you fall, you fall. If you stay, you stay. In three days we'll see if you're an apprentice or dirt."

The first few hours were easy. The body still remembered bread and meat, sips of water. But at some point, the inside began to rumble. First, the heart, loud as drums. Then the breathing, too fast, too little. Then the head, which began to form voices.

"You're too weak."
"You are hungry because you are nothing."
"You sit here and the world passes by and you become nothing but bones."

Merlin gritted his teeth and pressed his hands more firmly onto his knees. He remembered the grave, the weight of the earth that had supported him. He whispered to himself, "I'm not falling. I'm sitting."

But then the other voice came, rough, sharp, like smoke in the throat: "Son, why are you silent? Speak. Speak, and they will kneel. Speak, and you won't have to go hungry. Speak, and they will eat from your hand."

Merlin shook his head slightly. "I'll keep quiet."
“You remain silent because you are weak.”
*"No,"*Merlin thought. "I remain silent because words are knives. And you've already stuck too many knives into me."

The sun wandered, fell, and disappeared. The night was cold, and hunger gnawed like a hungry dog. But then the symbols began.

The carved circles on the sacrificial stone began to shimmer. At first, Merlin thought it was just tiredness. But then lines formed that he didn't recognize, but understood. Spirals that opened, circles that broke, runes that stood like bones.

He didn't hear them, he didn't see them—he felt them. Every circle was a story, every break a warning, every spiral a question.

The stars mingled with it, even though he couldn't see them. They were there, above him, gnawing, demanding. But the runes on the stone spoke a different language. Not a command, but a hint. Not hunger, but weight.

He began to understand: The symbols weren't rigid signs. They were paths one could follow. Some led to light, some to blood, some to silence.

On the second day, doubt came. It was so strong that Merlin almost stood up. His throat was dry as stone, his head throbbed, his legs cramped.

"He's too weak," murmured a voice from the sidelines. One of the younger druids, a man with a narrow face and hard eyes. "His blood is no good. It's contaminated."

Cathan, standing like a shadow behind the circle, placed his hand on his sword. But Bran simply raised his staff. "He's in place. We don't need any more judgment."

The young druid snorted and turned away. But Merlin had heard it, even through the wax. The words found him.

“Soiled.”

He felt the shadow voice laugh. "See? They know. They recognize you. So stand up, tear the tongue out of the mocker's mouth. Show them who your father is."

Merlin gritted his teeth. "No. I'll show them who I am."

He placed his hands back in the earth, feeling it cool and still. "If they call me filthy, then hold me tight. I won't fall."

The earth responded with a dull pulse. An echo that slowed his heart.

On the third day, he saw images. No more hunger, no more voices. Only images. A woman with black hair, her face half in shadow. A battle, red, full of screams. A sword flashing in the sun. A circle of men and women, this time clearer, more distinct, their voices quiet but firm.

And again that sentence, this time not from the stars, not from the roots, but from somewhere between the two: "You are both. But both are needed."

When Bran finally picked him up, three nights later, Merlin was as weak as water, but his eyes burned. He swayed, but he didn't fall. Gwynna gave him a sip of bitter brew that tasted worse than hunger. Taliesin grinned and helped him up.

"He's alive," said Bran. "And he's silent. So he's an apprentice."

The younger druids grumbled, but no one objected.

Cathan stepped forward and placed his hand on his shoulder. "You're crazier than anyone I've ever known," he murmured. "But maybe that's why I still trust you."

Merlin nodded weakly. "Perhaps."

The crow fluttered onto the sacrificial stone and cawed twice. For a moment, it seemed to nod to Bran.

On the fourth day, they finally gave him water. Just a pitcher, stale, with a hint of iron in it, but it tasted like a whole feast. Merlin drank slowly while Bran drew circles in the earth with the blackthorn staff.

“Now,” said the old man, “your eyes will learn to see what has been there for a long time.”

Taliesin squatted beside it, grinning and tapping the carved lines in the sacrificial stone. "It's like a bad story: everyone thinks they understand it, and in the end, it just laughs at you."

"Hush," Bran grumbled. Then he pointed to the circles. "Runes are not words. They are directions. Whoever reads them doesn't read what was. They read where they can go. Difference: big."

Gwynna placed a bundle of herbs on the stone and lit it. White smoke rose, swirling in the wind as if it were writing signs itself. "Don't look into the flame," she warned. "Look into the smoke. Flames lie. Smoke doesn't forget."

Merlin looked into the smoke, and there they were: lines, spirals, circles, knots. They flowed into each other like rivers without a map. He didn't understand every one, but he sensed they knew him. Some symbols burned as if they belonged to him. Others were cold, strange, sharp.

Bran tapped a spiral with his staff. "That's the way back." "Back to where?" Merlin asked. "Always to where you were afraid."

Then on a circle with a break. "That's the blade." "A sword?" "A decision."

Then on a line that curved twice. "That is the lie." "Why on the sacrificial stone?" "Because every truth lies where the lie sleeps."

Taliesin grabbed a pebble and tossed it into the smoke. "Symbols are like women," he grinned. "The more you think you know them, the faster they throw you out." Gwynna backhanded him on the shoulder without looking.

Merlin, however, remained serious. He felt the runes singing within him, softly, like voices he'd always heard but could never identify. "They're talking to me," he murmured. Bran nodded. "Of course. They talk to everyone. It's just that most people prefer to hear their own thoughts."

Merlin placed his hand on the spiral. In his mind, he saw the grave he lay in. Back to where you were afraid. Yes, that fit. He placed his hand on the broken circle – immediately he saw the image of the star sword splitting the crown. A decision. And by the lie – there he saw himself, in a village, the people before him, and he heard the words he spoke without wanting to choose them.

He pulled his hand back. "They're inside me." "No," Bran corrected. "You're inside them. Ever since you had breath."

In the evening, they led him into a grove behind the yew trees. There hung leather star charts, painted with lines and dots. Circles and strings connected them, geometrically, strictly, like scaffolding of light.

"The sky is a stone too," said Bran. "Only bigger. Read it as you read the stone. It's not above. It's within you."

Gwynna raised her finger. "But be careful. If you stare at the sky for too long, you'll forget where you're standing."

Merlin approached. The dots on the leather shimmered as if moving. He placed his fingers on a constellation, feeling the same current as with the sacrificial stone. And again images came: the sword, the crown, the blood. But also new ones – a circle of men around a long table, a fire that didn't burn, but remained.

"I see... more," he whispered. "Of course," said Bran. "Because you've seen before. We only give you names. Names are tools. But never mistake them for the thing itself."

Some of the druids watched him, suspicion in their eyes. The hard-featured young man, who had criticized him earlier, hissed: "Don't you see? He reads too fast. As if he already has everything in him. That's not talent. That's a curse."

Taliesin laughed. "Or both. Curses are just talents wearing the wrong shoes." "Shut up," the younger man snarled. "He will lead us to ruin."

Bran slammed his staff against the ground. "He will be led or not—that is not what your mouth decides. The earth will judge, not you."

Merlin felt the stares, the mistrust, the fear. And he knew: even here, even among teachers, he wasn't free. He was always between admiration and condemnation.

When night came, he sat alone in the grove, the star map before him. The crow landed beside him, pecking at the lines as if it were a student pretending to learn.

Merlin whispered, "If the knowledge was already within me, why did I have to find it here?"

The crow tilted its head. It didn't answer. But above him the stars sparkled, and the roots hummed in the ground. He heard both voices at once. For the first time, he understood: the runes, the stars, the earth—they weren't three teachers. It was a school. And he was the blackboard.

The fifth day in the grove began with a sheep. A young animal, white, with eyes that saw everything and understood nothing. Two druids led it into the circle and tied it to the sacrificial stone. Merlin saw the animal tremble, and he immediately sensed: This wasn't a lesson for the sheep. It was one for him.

Bran stepped forward, blackthorn staff in hand. "All knowledge has a price," he said. "Words, breath, sleep—everything has a price. But sometimes that's not enough. Sometimes the earth wants blood. Sometimes the sky wants smoke. Both are doors, and they don't open on their own."

Gwynna held a knife ready, shiny, narrow, and old. She placed it in Merlin's hand. "Your test," she said. "You must make the sacrifice."

Merlin stared at the knife. His fingers grew cold, even though the blade was warm from Gwynna's hand. He saw the sheep breathing, fast, shallow, full of fear. And at the same time, he saw something else: an image, flickering, like a dream slipping through his skin—himself, no longer a child, but a man, sword in hand, blood on the stones.

“No,” he whispered.

Bran stepped closer, his eyes hard. "If you don't give the blood, you give yourself. Sacrifice is not a question. Sacrifice is the law."

Cathan took a step forward, his hand on his sword. "He's a boy. You want to make him a butcher." "Be quiet," Bran hissed. "Or leave."

Merlin felt the blade in his hand, heavy, heavier than any sword. He heard the shadowy voice whisper: "Do it. Feel the blood flow. Feel how easy everything becomes once you wield the knife. This is my gift."

And at the same time, the earth hummed, dully, warmly, comfortingly: "Stop. Blood flows on its own. You don't have to get it."

Merlin trembled. His arm was a balance between heaven and earth. Then he dropped the knife.

"No," he said aloud. "I don't kill to learn. If my power demands blood, then it's worthless."

Silence. Only the sheep breathed.

The young druid, who hated him, laughed scornfully. "See? He's too soft. He carries the shadow in his blood, but the earth has turned him into a coward."

Bran raised his hand, silencing him. "No," the old man said slowly. "He understood. Sacrifice is not a knife. Sacrifice is a choice. He refused blood—that is also a sacrifice."

Gwynna nodded. "And the sheep is alive. So he's alive too."

But that night the dream came. The sheep was there again, but this time it lay dead on the stone, blood flowing like a river. And behind the stone stood the shadow—the father.

"You can't refuse forever," he said. "Blood will come. Whether you give it or not. If you don't take it, it will be taken from you. And if it is taken from you, you are only a victim, never a master."

Merlin wanted to object, but the earth settled around him again, heavy and firm. "Blood is coming," she hummed. "But not all blood is murder. Some sacrifices are choice. And choice is power."

Merlin stood between the two voices, breathing heavily. He understood: blood sacrifice didn't always mean a knife. But it always meant loss.

In the morning, he approached Bran. "I dreamed," he said. "Blood will come. But I will choose when it is mine and when it is not."

Bran studied him as if trying to peer into his bones. Then he nodded. "Good. You're not a sheep. And not a butcher either. You're something in between. And in between is where druids grow."

Taliesin grinned, put the flute to his lips, and breathed a note, off-key but full of joy. "He's alive. And he's not bleeding. That's enough for today."

The quarrel broke out not at night, but in broad daylight. The fire in the grove had barely been lit when the young druid with the hard features—Caradoc, as Merlin now learned—rose and spat out the words like bile.

"Enough! This bastard is not a student, he is a curse. We let him sleep in tombs, we let him remain silent in circles, and what do we learn? Nothing except that he disobeys. He refuses the sacrifice, he mocks the symbols. He doesn't belong here."

Others nodded, quietly at first, then louder. "He carries shadows in his blood." - "He's dangerous." - "He'll betray us all."

Cathan instinctively reached for the sword. Bran raised his staff and struck the stone hard. "Silence!" The echo reverberated through the grove. "Caradoc, your tongue is swift, but swift is not wise. You call him a curse? Then look at him. Is he alive? Is he breathing? Has the earth kept him? Yes. So he belongs here."

“The earth also absorbs poison,” Caradoc snarled.

“And it makes fertilizer,” Gwynna replied coolly.

Merlin stood in the center of the circle, his shoulders heavy, his heart like a stone, not knowing which way to roll. He wanted to speak, but Bran placed his finger on his lips. "Let their voices be heard. The earth hears better when you are silent."

But Merlin's mind wasn't quiet. The shadowy voice whispered: "Defend yourself. Scream. Take the staff, strike him down. Show them whose son you are."

The earth hummed, warm and patient: "Wait. Those with weight don't have to jump. They'll fall into their own words."

And indeed—Caradoc fumed, talking himself into a frenzy, while Bran stood silent, Gwynna remained calm, and Taliesin grinned like a man enjoying a play. In the end, the others fell silent. Unconvinced, but exhausted.

Bran nodded. "So. Whoever would cast him out, let him smite him. Whoever would not smite him, let him tolerate him. Whoever tolerates him, let him teach him. The end."

Caradoc clenched his fists, but he didn't strike. Not yet.

That night, Merlin remained alone in the circle. No hunger, no wax in his ears, no grave—only the stone, the runes, and the sky above him.

Then the vision came. Clearer than before.

A table. Round, made of stone. Men and women sat around it, all the same height, all the same depth. No crown, no throne. In the center, a fire that didn't consume, but sustained.

He heard voices, many, jumbled together, but all at the same level. "We are not masters. We are not servants. We are a circle."

Merlin felt his heart racing. He didn't quite understand the meaning, but he sensed that there lay an answer here—an answer to the strife, to blood, to sacrifice. Not superiority or inferiority. A togetherness.

"The board," he whispered. "The circle."

The stars sparkled coldly. The earth hummed deeply. And the shadow's voice fell silent.

In the morning, he approached Bran. "I saw something," he said. "A tablet. Round. Men and women, all equal. No crown. No throne."

Bran looked at him for a long moment. "Then you saw more than we wanted to show you."

"What does it mean?" "It means you're already learning before we teach." Bran placed the staff on his shoulder. "But that's dangerous. Those who see too soon are often burned too soon."

Caradoc heard it. And his gaze promised that he wouldn't wait for the stars to decide.

It wasn't an official ritual, nor an announced course of instruction. Caradoc chose the hour just before dawn, when the embers in the fire were almost extinguished and the human was at his weakest. He stepped into the circle and roused Merlin from his sleep with a kick.

"Get up, bastard," he growled. "Today we'll see if you're dirt or just smoke."

Merlin staggered to his feet, his staff still at his side, his eyes tired but not empty. The other druids awoke, one by one, and gathered around the circle. No one intervened. This was no longer a school—it was a test by force.

Cathan tried to intervene, but Bran held him back. "If he wants to be an apprentice, he must stand up for himself."

Caradoc approached, his muscles tense, his gaze filled with hatred. "You see images that are not yours. You call vision what others fear. You dare to call forth the earth and the stars in one breath. That is presumption. Today I will tear the lie from your breast."

Merlin raised his staff. "I'm not lying. I see." "Then look now," Caradoc snarled, lunging forward.

The blow hit hard, making Merlin stagger back. The circle didn't cheer, but remained silent. Gwynna bit her lips, Taliesin grinned nervously.

Merlin caught himself, felt blood on his lip. The shadowy voice whispered, "Strike back. Drop him. Show him whose son you are."

The earth hummed deeper: "Stand. Hold. Your weight is enough."

Caradoc came again, his staff like a spear. Merlin didn't dodge. Instead, he rammed his staff into the ground, feeling the earth vibrate beneath his feet. Caradoc's thrust rebounded as if he had struck a root.

The audience whispered.

Caradoc growled and struck again. This time he hit Merlin in the shoulder, exploding with pain, but the boy held firm. He took a deep breath and pressed his feet harder into the ground.

And then it happened: For a moment, he didn't see Caradoc, the Druids, or the circle. He saw the tablet again. Round, made of stone, men and women alike, their hands clasped together. And he saw himself standing there, no higher, no lower—part of a whole.

A sentence formed within him, not from the stars, not from the shadow, not even from the earth—but from him: "Power is not a throne. Power is a circle."

He raised his staff, not to strike, but into the air. "I stand," he cried. "Because I have weight. Not because I shed blood."

Caradoc charged forward, blind with rage. But before he reached Merlin, Bran slammed his staff to the ground. A blow echoed through the grove, heavy as thunder.

"Enough!"

The air vibrated, Caradoc paused.

Bran stepped into the circle, looked first at Merlin, then at Caradoc. "He stood. You only struck. A student is someone who stands when they fall. Not someone who falls when they strike."

Caradoc trembled, his anger still within him, but he remained silent.

Later, when the crowd had dispersed, Gwynna approached Merlin and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You are neither a demon nor a savior. You are simply persistent. That's enough."

Taliesin grinned broadly and blew a crooked note into his flute. "And besides, you tell good stories. Whoever lay in the grave, endured three days in silence, spared a sheep, and resisted Caradoc—that's material for songs. Even if you die tomorrow, you're already more than most."

Cathan just nodded. A silent nod, heavy, but full of recognition.

But Merlin looked up at the sky, where the stars still glowed dimly. The earth beneath his feet vibrated with the echo of the roots. And within him, the image of the tablet reverberated—round, equal, strong.

“One day,” he whispered, “this circle will become reality.”

The crow cawed as if it were its laughter.

First prophecies

There was no feast, no fire, no cloth adorning the sky. It was only the circle, the same stones, the same sacrificial stone, the same earth. But Bran stepped into it, tapped the blackthorn staff, and the way the air vibrated made it clear: something was beginning that would never be taken back.

"Merlin," he said, "you have been a student. You have borne the grave and hunger, you have learned symbol and silence. Now you must speak. Not to yourself, not to us alone. You speak into the grove. And the grove will decide whether your voice carries weight."

Merlin felt his stomach tighten. Words had never come easily to him—not his own, and certainly not those that came from anywhere else. He remembered Cathan, the prophecy that had escaped him like a curse: "You will fall." Words that were stronger than intention.

"And if I see nothing?" he asked. Bran looked at him dryly. "Then you remain silent. Silence is also prophecy."

The druids gathered. Gwynna brought smoke, sharp, acrid, made of herbs that tasted of iron. Taliesin grinned, blowing notes into his flute, off-key as always, but today they sounded like a warning. Caradoc stood at the edge, his arms crossed, and his eyes said: If you fall, I'll dance on your back.

Merlin stepped in front of the stone. The crow perched on the post as if it were a judge with a black feather collar.

"Sit down," Bran commanded. "Breathe. Listen. Speak when it speaks."

Merlin sat down, placed his hands on the stone, the runes cold beneath his fingers. He closed his eyes.

He waited. At first, nothing came, just breathing, heartbeat, the same old pounding. Then the flickering began, as always. Stars that weren't sky. Spirals that turned. Voices that weren't voices.

And then – a crack. An image.

A man, tall, with a helmet shaped like a dragon's head. His eyes burned, his sword was long, heavy, and wet with blood. Behind him was a banner, red, with a black snake. Around him burned a throne, not made of gold, but of bodies.

Merlin gasped, his body convulsing. He tried to open his eyes, but the stone held him back.

“Speak!” cried Bran.

Merlin opened his mouth. And the words came, not from him, but through him:

"I see a king of blood. His name is not born, but his banner bears the dragon. He rises from battle, and he builds the throne on bones. Whoever follows him follows fire. Whoever opposes him falls. And the land will tremble beneath his weight."

Silence. Only the crackling of smoke.

Then laughter—not friendly. Caradoc. "Do you hear? A dragon king! Blood and bones! Any fool can talk like that. Vague words for empty minds."

“Hush,” growled Bran.

But others murmured. Some with awe, others with fear. "A king of blood..." - "The Dragon Banner..." - "Perhaps it's true..."

Merlin sank to his knees, trembling. Blood dripped from his nose. Gwynna knelt beside him, wiping it away with a cloth. "His body is paying," she said. "This is real."

Bran placed the staff on Merlin's shoulder. "That was your first voice. You are no longer a student. You are a Speaker."

At night, Merlin sat alone. A crow on his shoulder, his hands dirty from the stone, his chest heavy.

"I said it," he whispered. "But what if it was wrong?"

The shadow voice laughed. "It wasn't wrong. It was useful. That's all that matters. Words are weapons. True or not, they cut."

The earth hummed. "Truth is not a sword. Truth is weight. It presses, it holds, it buries. You gave weight."

Merlin laid his head in his hands. He felt torn between sword and weight, between lies and truth. But he knew: something had been born. And it would never leave him again.

They left the grove two days later. Not because Bran ordered it, but because Gwynna said Merlin's blood needed fresh air, and Cathan was leaving anyway before he stared down all the druids. Taliesin pressed a dried root into Merlin's hand as he left. "Chew if the images get too loud," he grinned. "Tastes horrible, but horribleness is sometimes medicine."

They followed a path westward, running between hills where the grass lay like old fur. The crow fluttered above them as if it had long since become part of their equipment. Merlin didn't speak much. His mind was still full of the dragon banner, the blood, the burning throne. It was one thing to see. Another to speak it, in front of everyone. Words had weight; he felt that now in his bones, like frost.

On the third evening, they came to a village. No more than twelve huts, a well, a wooden chapel. The people looked at them as if they were ghosts, then a whisper spread. "The seer... the boy from the grove."

A woman stepped forward, thin, her hands covered in calluses. "Are you the one who sees pictures?" Merlin nodded hesitantly.

Then they rushed to him—not with weapons, but with pleas. A farmer with torn hands, an old woman with tearful eyes, a child pulling at her leg. "Will the harvest be sufficient?" - "Will my husband return home?" - "Will I bear a child?"

Merlin felt panic. These weren't princes, they weren't druids, but simple folk. Their questions were small, but heavy, heavier than battles. For they didn't want stars. They wanted answers that would put them to sleep.

Cathan tried to fend her off. "Leave him alone. He's just a boy." But Merlin raised his hand. "No," he said quietly. "I must."

He looked into the eyes of the woman who had spoken first. He didn't see her, but the ground beneath her. Dark, damp, full of roots. An image rose—grain, tall, golden, but then the wind, too strong, stalks breaking. He saw too much rain, earth becoming too heavy.

"The harvest is coming," he said, "but it won't be enough. Gather wood, tend the goats. That's the only way you'll survive the winter."

The woman nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Thank you."

The farmer pushed forward. "And me? My son, he's gone to war. Will he come back?" Merlin didn't want to. He wanted to scream: I don't know. But then the image came. A field covered in blood, a helmet in the grass, a face, young, empty.

His throat ached. "No," he whispered. "He's not coming."

The farmer collapsed, pounding his fists on the ground. "No!" he cried. "Curse your mouth!"

Cathan reached for the sword, but Merlin held him back. "Leave it. He's right."

A child, maybe eight, stepped forward. "And me?" His voice was bright, shaky. "Will I grow up?" Merlin looked. He saw a house, old, smoky. He saw the boy, older, his hands on the plow, a girl beside him. A peaceful image, unprepossessing.

Merlin smiled weakly. "Yes," he said. "You'll grow up. And you'll love."

The child grinned and ran to his mother.

But the village was divided. Some kissed Merlin's hands, calling him savior. Others cursed him, shouting that he brought disaster. One threw a stone that narrowly missed. "He's from the devil!"

Cathan drew his sword, but Merlin shook his head. "No. Words are enough blood."

They left the village at night. Behind them, voices still echoed—curses and prayers, indistinguishable.

On the hill above the village, Merlin sat down in the grass, his hands over his face. "Now I know why Bran said words carry weight. Even the ones I don't want."

Cathan sat down next to him, silent. After a while, he said, "You spoke the truth." "Perhaps." Merlin looked up at the sky. "But truth also kills."

The crow cawed loudly, as if it had laughed.

The night was cold, the sky full of stars, but Merlin felt no rest. The village lay behind them, but the voices still rang in his ears: pleas, screams, curses, prayers. Words that clung to him like wet clay. He fell asleep restlessly, and the dream immediately took him.

Fog again. Always fog. A space without boundaries, and within it the figure. His "father." The shadow was clearer today, almost human, but the edges shimmered, as if it could never fully take shape. His eyes glowed like coals smoldering beneath ash.

“You’re finally beginning to speak,” he said.

Merlin clenched his fists. "I saw. I said what I saw. That's all." "That's not all," replied the shadow. "Every word you speak changes things. The woman you warned—she will gather wood. The farmer to whom you announced his son's death—he will turn against you. The child you gave hope—he will worship you. You are not a seer. You are a tool."

Merlin gasped. "No. I only wanted to tell the truth." The shadow laughed, dryly, coldly. "Truth? Truth is what people believe when you speak. Whether you lie or not doesn't matter. Words are power. And power is always manipulation. You are like me, son. You speak, and they follow. You speak, and they fall. That is all."

Merlin was about to object, but the ground shook. Roots rose from the mist, heavy and black with earth. They wrapped themselves around his legs, his chest, firm, warm, like arms.

And the earth hummed deeply: "No, child. Words are weight. When you give them, they sink. Some break, some stand. But weight is not just manipulation. Weight is memory. Weight remains."

Merlin groaned. "And if I remain silent? If I say nothing?" The earth vibrated. "Then silence fills the void. Silence is also a word. Sometimes more deadly."

The shadow grinned. "Do you see? Do you see how trapped you are? If you speak, you are a tool. If you remain silent, you are a tool. You will never be free."

Merlin gasped, tears in his eyes. "Then I choose. Then I decide when to speak and when to remain silent. Not you."

The shadow approached, its hand like smoke, trying to form. "You cannot choose. You are my echo. Your prophecies are my breath."

The earth rumbled louder, the roots pulled him back. "You are not Echo. You are Weight. Echo fades. Weight remains."

Merlin screamed, "I am neither Echo nor Weight! I am me!"

The fog tore away.

He awoke with a scream, the ground beneath him damp with sweat. Cathan opened his eyes wide and reached for his sword. "What?" Merlin shook his head, his hands shaking. "Just a dream. No—more than a dream."

The crow fluttered over and dropped a black feather onto his chest. He took it and pressed it tightly. "I will choose," he whispered. "Whether my words are knives or weight. That is not for him to decide. And not for the earth. Only me."

The stars above him sparkled coldly. But this time he didn't see them as judges. He saw them as listeners.

They returned to the grove, and Bran was already waiting. He stood in the circle, his staff firmly in his hand, as if he had known Merlin would return—with eyes that had seen too much.

"Once again," he said. "The stone demands a second vote. Once is chance. Twice is weight."

Caradoc spat into the dust. "Or two lies."

Bran ignored him. "Merlin, sit down."

Merlin felt his body hesitate. But he obeyed, placing his hands on the sacrificial stone. The runes felt warmer than usual, as if they had already learned of his dreams. Gwynna lit herbs, the smoke bitterly cutting into his throat. Taliesin hummed a sequence of notes so off-key it seemed almost round.

Merlin closed his eyes. The smoke crept into him, the earth beneath the stone vibrated, and the stars pierced his consciousness like needles. He sank deeper and deeper until the images came.

He saw a sky, black, ragged with red lines. A river so thick with blood that no fish could swim. A castle whose walls trembled while banners fluttered in the wind—banners with a dragon, curved, threatening, spewing fire.

And then: a name. Clear, loud, as if someone had shouted it directly into his ear.

Uther Pendragon.

Merlin twitched, his body bending as if it were about to break. But the voice forced him to say it out loud.

"I see war," he cried, "I see a banner with a dragon, blood red across the land. I see a king rising, and his name is Uther Pendragon! He will rule with sword and fire. Many will fall, many will follow. And the kingdom he builds will be strong—and fragile as glass."

He fell forward, gasping, blood on his lips, his fingers still on the runes. Gwynna grabbed him, held him tight.

Silence. Only the crackling of the herbs.

Caradoc laughed scornfully. "One name! Uther! Some peasant will be called that, and the bastard will be right." But Bran struck the ground with his staff. "Be still. He saw. The name came, not from him, but through him. That is no coincidence."

Some nodded in awe, others whispered in fear. "Pendragon... Dragonhead..."

Taliesin grinned crookedly. "If I didn't know better, I'd say: Finally, a hero for my songs."

Gwynna, however, looked serious. "Or a butcher we don't yet know."

Merlin slowly raised his head. "I didn't want to say it. But it came. The name, the image... everything came naturally."

Bran placed his hand on his shoulder. "That's the burden. You are not master of your words. But you are the one who carries them. Carry them well."

Cathan, who had been standing in the shadows until now, stepped closer and put his arm around Merlin's shoulders. "So it's decided. A king will come. And your mouth gave birth to him."

Merlin closed his eyes, his heart heavy. "If he is born, then he will also die. Perhaps because of my words. Perhaps despite them. But his name is now in the world. And nothing erases a name."

It took less than a week for the words to leave the grove. No messenger had been sent, no parchment written, but names are like sparks in dry grass: they fly faster than anyone can extinguish them.

"Uther Pendragon." The Druids had heard it. They whispered it around the fire, recounted it in the hills, and let it drip from their mouths in the intoxication of their herbs. A man heard it, carried it to the nearest village, a hunter took it to the castle, and soon the name lay like smoke over the land.

Merlin sensed it. Everywhere they went, people no longer addressed him as a boy, but as an instrument. "You are the seer?" - "You named the king?" - "Tell us how he conquers."

Cathan grumbled, his sword always at the ready. "You'll get flayed for talking too much." Merlin shook his head. "I didn't speak. The words passed through me. And now they speak on their own."

In a village on the edge of the woods, they invited him to sit by the fire. Men, women, and children crowded around him. One brought bread, another beer. But their faces weren't friendly—they were greedy.

"Tell us," a farmer urged. "Will this Uther be the king we need? Will he free us from the robbers? Will he give us land?" Another cried, "Or will he plunge us into wars? Will he drink our blood?"

Merlin remained silent. His silence became a mirror. Everyone read into it what they wanted. Some cheered, others snorted.

Finally, he raised his hand. "I saw he was coming. Nothing more, nothing less. Time will tell the rest."

But the crowd murmured. Silence can be louder than a lie.

Later, as they stood alone at the well, Cathan nudged him hard in the shoulder. "You give them too little. They want certainty." "I have none," Merlin replied. "Then lie!" "No," Merlin snarled. "A lie grows faster than any truth. And it kills harder."

The crow fluttered over, landed on the well ledge, and looked at them both as if listening.

That night, Merlin dreamed again. But this time there was no fog, no shadow. It was a throne room, large, made of stone. Men knelt, a banner with a dragon hanging heavy above them. On the throne sat a man, strong, his face determined, but in his eyes a hunger that even crowns could not quench.

And in his dream, Merlin heard his own whisper: “Uther Pendragon.”

He woke up drenched in sweat.

The next morning, riders appeared in the village. They bore the crest of a prince from the south. They demanded to know who the boy was who spoke of a dragon king. The village elder pointed to Merlin.

“That’s him.”

The riders examined him. One spat. "A boy. A bastard. And he speaks kings into the world?"

Merlin felt the words become heavier than steel. He was no longer just a seer for peasants; he was a danger to lords.

Cathan placed his hand on his shoulder. "From now on, you're part of their game, boy. Whether you like it or not."

Merlin nodded slowly. "I know. The prophecy no longer belongs to me. It belongs to the land."

The riders didn't capture them, but it was close. Cathan kept his hand on his sword, but they had to submit—three men in iron, spears like branches, horses with breath so warm it was like smoke. They rode to a castle of gray stone, not large, but hard, a tongue of rock thrusting into the land.

There, Prince Madog waited, a man with a beard like a broom and eyes that had scanned the sky too often, as if stars could grant him land. He had Merlin led into the hall, Cathan stayed by his side, the crow fluttering in the rafters above.

"So," said Madog, his voice a mixture of mockery and greed, "you're the one who saw the Dragon King."

Merlin was silent.

"Speak!" Madog commanded. "My men say you have spoken the name. Uther Pendragon. A king. A banner. Blood. So tell me: will he be my lord? Or my enemy?"

Merlin felt all eyes on him. He heard his heart beating faster than it should. He knew every word could be a knife—against Madog, against himself.

The shadow voice whispered, "Tell him to follow the dragon. Make him a servant of fire. Then you will have power over him."

The earth hummed: "Say nothing. Let your silence be weight. They will stumble upon it until they are tired."

Merlin raised his head. "I saw a king coming. His banner bears the dragon. His name is Uther Pendragon. I saw nothing more."

Madog's eyes flashed. "Are you lying to me, boy?"

"No," said Merlin. "I'm not lying. But the future isn't greedy. It only gives bits and pieces. I gave you mine."

Madog rose. "Broken pieces! I want bread, not a crumb! I want to know whether I will live or die, whether my house will fall or rise!"

Merlin closed his eyes, and then they came—images, sudden, harsh, like blows. A river red with blood. Men in the water, shields shattered. A castle burning, its gate like a mouth. And Madog himself, kneeling in the courtyard, his hands on his chest, blood between his fingers.

He gasped. "I see you, Madog. Not old. Not young. But dying. Your blood on your own farm. Not by Uther, but by the guilt you bear."

The hall froze.

Madog's face turned gray, then red, then gray again. "Shut up!" he roared. "Shut up, you bastard!" He hurled a cup, which shattered.

Cathan drew his sword, but Merlin raised his hand. "I only said what I saw."

The men grabbed her, but Madog stopped. He trembled, breathing heavily. Then he waved his hand. "Go. Go before I kill you. But know this: if your words are true, you are my curse. And if they are false, you are my enemy."

They were pushed out, back into the yard, the horses following.

Cathan glared at Merlin. "You're insane. Could you have kept quiet?" Merlin was still trembling. "I tried. But the images... they came. And if I don't say them, they'll eat me."

The crow flew ahead, croaking three times as if counting the dead yet to come.

That night, Merlin sat alone by the fire. "Every word I speak," he murmured, "puts a rope around my neck. And so does every silence. I am no king, no warrior. And yet the land will bind me in chains."

The earth hummed beneath him: "Chains are also weight. Some carry you, some hold you. Decide which one to take."

Merlin closed his eyes. He knew now: his prophecies were no longer a secret. They were ammunition, and princes would fire them whether he wanted them or not.

The night after Madog's Hall burned like a fever. Merlin lay on the ground, his cloak pulled over him, but his body was too heavy to sleep. Every breath was a stone, every thought a weight. The crow sat beside him, unmoving, as if it knew that more than dreams were about to happen.

And then the vision came. Not slowly, not hesitantly—it swept him away as if he were being drawn into a whirlpool.

He stood on a hill, the grass scorched, the sky red. Before him surged an army, shields raised, swords drawn. Banners fluttered—the dragon, black on red, hissing like a living thing. In the center of the battle stood a man, tall, with a dragon-shaped helmet. His gaze was hard, his sword like lightning.

Uther Pendragon.

The land bent beneath his footsteps. Battles were won or lost depending on how he raised his sword. But every time he raised it, blood flowed in streams. The sword itself began to glow, as if drinking the lives it took.

Then the picture changed. The Dragon King sat at a round table—but not alone. Men and women surrounded him, all equal, all heavy in weight. The table was stone, hard, but it held them together.

Merlin felt hope. But then the floor shook, the table cracked, shattering into pieces. Voices rose, angry, confused. The dragon on the banner hissed as if it would devour the group itself.

And Merlin heard a voice, this time not from the shadow, not from the earth, but from within himself: "What is built will fall. But from the fall, something new will grow."

He screamed and woke up. Sweat clung to his skin, the floor damp beneath his hands. Cathan knelt beside him, his eyes wide. "Another one? What did you see?"

Merlin breathed heavily, hardly daring to speak. "A king. Uther Pendragon. A sword that drinks blood. A tablet of stone, round, strong—but it breaks. Everything falls. And yet... it grows again."

Cathan looked at him, long and seriously. "Then your life is tied to him."

Merlin nodded. "Yes. To him. To the sword. To the circle."

The crow cawed loudly, sharply, as if it wanted to set the seal.

In the morning, the sky seemed brighter, but for Merlin, it had taken on weight. He knew: his gift was no longer a secret. The future he had seen was too big to remain within him alone. It was now part of the world—and the world would not let him go.

The Battle of the River

The river smelled of metal even before blood found it. It was that cold, gray smell that comes from stones when the sky is set for rain and the world pretends to be clean. Cathan smelled it first. He raised his head, like a dog hearing the storm before the thunder cracks. "Water," he said, "and men."

He was right. At the edge of the plain lay a camp, nailed together from tents, poles, and wet banners flapping in the wind. Men in irons walked around, talking too loudly, as if trying to drum out their fear. The smell of grease, wet leather, and cold porridge hung over the entire place. It was afternoon, the sky leaden, the sun a bad memory.

"We should go around the outside," murmured Cathan. "We shouldn't even be here," said Merlin. "Too late."

A scout saw them, waved, and suddenly they stood in the middle of the camp: a boy with a staff, a man with a sword, and a crow that acted as if it were all theirs. Questions fell on them like rain. Who are you? Where are you going? What do you know? Cathan showed his sword, Merlin showed his weariness. Weariness is also a crest.

A captain stepped forward, a gray bearded man who couldn't decide whether to look proud or exhausted. His helmet hung from a leather strap, his eyes red from lack of sleep. "You don't look like traders," he said. "We don't sell anything," Merlin replied. "Then you buy something: protection, against stories." The captain grinned thinly. "They say a boy walks around who sees things."

Cathan took a step, but Merlin stayed. "I see enough," he said. "More than is good." "Then see what I can do," grumbled the captain. "See if I still raise my hands tomorrow. See if my son milks the goat when I'm gone."

Merlin looked at him. In the wrinkles of his face lay roads never traveled. In his hands lay a weariness that only men who have given orders too often and slept too rarely have. An image came, brief, like a blink: a row of shields, water on his shins, an arrow noticed too late.

"Keep your head down," said Merlin. "And if you think you must prove once more the courage you've already demonstrated a hundred times, don't." The captain nodded slowly, as if he'd been given a burden he knew well. "My name is Owain," he said. "If you lie, I curse you. If you're right, I drink to you. Perhaps both."

They gave them a piece of ground at the edge of the camp. Cathan sat down, sharpening his sword as if steel were listening. Merlin stood, looking at the river. It was wide, slow, and acted as if harmless. The water was dark, the banks muddy, and in the middle, individual leaves floated, as if practicing dying.

"It will happen here," said Merlin. Cathan nodded. "Rivers make good battlefields. They take those you don't want to count."

The crow flew low, almost touching the water, circled, and returned. Merlin followed it with his eyes. The air was heavy, as if filled with invisible hands. Men laughed in the distance, that too-loud laughter that is really crying. One sang off-key. Another choked behind a tent, over and over, as if he could vomit the fear from his stomach.

In the evening, fires blazed. Flesh burned that was barely flesh. Someone spoke of a lord on the far shore, of banners bearing a black beast, wolf or boar, no one was sure. "They'll attack at low tide," said Owain. "Or when they think we're asleep. Men always attack when they think the others are stupider."

Merlin nodded, but his thoughts were already in the water. He heard it. Rivers don't speak in words, but they tell in directions. Come, go, sink, carry. This river said: I take. I take well.

When night came, the camp didn't rest; it engaged in a wager. Some prayed, some polished blades, some wrote names in the dust with their fingers, names no wind would erase. Merlin sat at the edge, his feet in the grass, his staff across his knees. The crow didn't sleep.

"You want to know," murmured Cathan. "I don't want to know," said Merlin. "But the images are like dogs who have learned that my head is an open door."

Cathan pulled the blanket higher. "Then close the door." "It's not a door. It's a hole."

He closed his eyes. Not to sleep. To sink. The river was there, just beyond his eyelids. It glided by, carrying the reflection of the sky, and in this mirror, the stars began to tremble.

First one, then many. They tore threads from the water: red thread, silver thread, dark thread. The threads became lines, the lines, images.

He saw shields floating in the water like loaves of bread. Faces floating on their backs, mouths open, as if about to say another word. He saw hands grasping at nothing. He saw the river doing what rivers do: carrying without asking who was in the stream.

Then the water changed. It was no longer dark. It was red. Not like color, but like warmth. Blood has a warmth that water doesn't. He felt it on his ankles, even though he was sitting on the bank.

Images flickered through his mind: A man with a banner, slipping as if the ground itself were saying, "Not you." A boy, barely a beard, laughing in the river before a spear found him. Laughter, spear, silence. Owain, the captain, obeying, obeying—and then not obeying, at just the right moment. The arrow whistled as if bored, yet still doing its job.

Merlin's eyes widened, his breath heavy. "You saw something," Cathan said, not questioning. "I saw the water count," Merlin whispered. "It counts those who fall. And it doesn't count wrong."

Cathan nodded. "What else?" Merlin hesitated. The name was on the tip of his tongue like a burning ember. Uther. But he saw no dragon banner, not today, not here. Instead, he saw a shield with a black beast, its mouth open. He saw a hand holding the sword, calm, unhurried, the kind of calm that makes men kill because they trust it.

"A man is coming," he said. "Not the one with the dragon. But one who knows him. He carries an animal on his shield. He won't be victorious, but he will open a door." "For whom?" "For the dragon."

Cathan looked toward the river. "So, your king again." Merlin snorted. "He's not my king. He's just the one the land calls." "And who gave the land a voice?" "Not me," said Merlin. "I only heard it cry."

The night dragged on. A wind blew that smelled of rain, yet brought no rain with it. In the camp, the fires grew smaller, the voices quieter, and the clanking of equipment sounded like teeth grinding together at night. The crow flew into the dark sky, a black dot disappearing into the darkness.

Merlin closed his eyes once more, deeper this time. The river entered him. He saw the bank from within. Roots held the land, but they already knew they had to let go. Lines were outlined in the current, paths where men become dead. No anger in them, no morals. Only direction. Here you fall. There you swim. There you get stuck.

He tried to memorize the pattern, the way one tries to remember the way through a city one has only visited in a dream. A low stone near a clump of willows; a hollow where water stood still; a spot where the bottom became unexpectedly deep. He opened his eyes, stood up, and began to walk. Cathan followed, wordlessly.

Merlin stopped on the bank. "Here," he said, "they'll think they'll get across easily. The ground is treacherous. Whoever sends the first row there will lose the second." Cathan knelt,

reached into the water, and felt the pull. "True. The undertow is crooked. You're seeing too much, as always." "Enough," said Merlin. "Tomorrow will be enough."

They returned to camp. Owain stood there as if he'd been waiting. "Well?" Merlin looked him in the eye. "If you stick to your second line and don't play the hero, you'll still be breathing when the sun is up again." Owain nodded slowly. "I was never much of a hero." "Today is a good day not to be."

Later, when the stars ceased to matter and were only cold, Merlin lay down beside the fading fire. The crow crept to his side, a warm, black knot. Cathan wasn't sleeping, he was waiting. Men like him only sleep when war takes over the snoring.

Merlin heard the river speak, and for the first time in all the long nights, there was no shadow whispering "son." Only the earth, saying: Hold your foot. Tomorrow the pulling will come. And the stars, saying: nothing. Sometimes their silence is a mercy.

He fell asleep with the taste of metal on his tongue and the knowledge that the morning would count men—and that, whether he wanted to or not, he would have to take notes.

Morning came without trumpets. No heroic shouts, no proud parade. It came with fog, damp and heavy, settling over the meadows like a blanket no one wanted. Men coughed as if yesterday's smoke still filled their lungs, others stumbled over their own shields. Horses snorted restlessly, their eyes rolling white.

Merlin stood at the edge of the camp, his feet in the dew, and looked at the river. The mist hung low over the water, making it invisible but not silent. It murmured, softly, as if already absorbing voices that had not yet fallen.

Cathan stepped beside him, sword at his belt, eyes alert, hands firm. "Today." "Yes," said Merlin. "You stay out of it, do you hear?" Merlin laughed bitterly. "If I stay out of it, the water itself will pull me in."

The army gathered, ponderously like an old man who stands up too quickly. Armor clanged, banners fluttered, orders were shouted and immediately forgotten. Owain moved through the ranks, giving instructions with a calmness possessed only by men who know that calm protects more than iron.

"The river is low," Merlin heard a warrior say. "We can cross before they see us." "No," another objected. "They're already waiting."

Merlin wanted to shout, wanted to warn, but he remained silent. Words in the wrong ear are like sparks in the straw—and he had already ignited too many.

The first arrows came before the men reached the water. A hiss in the fog, a dull thud against shields and flesh. One screamed, clutching his throat, blood spurting between his fingers. The fog darkened.

“Line! Line!” shouted Owain, and the men gathered together, shields up, swords out.

Cathan stepped forward, his gaze hard. "I'm leaving." "And me?" asked Merlin. "You're staying." Merlin shook his head. "They already told me that in the grove. It didn't work."

The fog parted, and there was the other army. Black shields, a beast on them, their mouths open as if they were about to bite into flesh. The river between them, a breath wide that would soon be suffocated.

And then it happened. One of the banner bearers slipped, exactly on the spot Merlin had seen in the night—the wrong ground, the deceptive footing. The banner fell, the cloth soaked with water, heavy, and the front line staggered. Men fell, the second line pushed from behind, stumbling over bodies. Chaos before the battle even began.

Merlin gritted his teeth. I saw it, he thought. But no one listens if you scream in time.

Then the lines clashed. No noble crash, no clean clang of steel on steel. It was dull, muddy, tough. Men shouted, horses neighed, arrows whistled. The river took the first ones, carried them, turned them, made them disappear.

Merlin stood on the shore, his heart in his throat, his staff in his hands. He saw Caradoc's words in the grove come true: He will lead us to ruin. But it wasn't he who led them—it was the land itself, demanding his due.

Cathan plunged into the fray, his sword a line in the mist, his body a wall. Merlin saw him fight, saw him not fall—not yet. But the prophecy was already knocking, like a stone that knows it will roll.

Owain, the captain, held his men together. He shouted, commanded, kicked, and they obeyed. But then the arrow came, bored, as in the vision. It pierced his shoulder, making him stagger. Owain stopped, growled, and ripped the arrow out as if it were only a thorn. For a moment, he held high the banner, the other one already drowned in the river.

Merlin knew: He had seen that too. That too was written.

And there, in the midst of the chaos, he saw him. A warrior, taller than most, the shield before him, black, the beast on it—a wolf, baring its teeth. He moved neither hastily nor greedily. He walked, step by step, as if the river, the ground, the blood belonged to him. Men evaded him, others fell before him.

Merlin felt the blow in his chest, as if recognizing the trace of the dragon in this man. Not Uther himself—but one who paved his way.

"The harbinger," Merlin murmured. "The door."

He gripped the staff tighter, felt the earth tremble beneath his feet. He could have screamed, spoken magic, hurled words. But he did nothing. Only watched. Only carried.

The river roared louder. The battle truly began.

The fog had been swept away, as if the river itself had swallowed it. Now everything was exposed: the horror, the scream, the stench. Metal struck metal, but more often, metal struck flesh, dull, wet, unheroic. Men fell, crawled, screamed, died like animals who had never asked if they wanted to be heroes.

Merlin stood on the bank, his feet in the mud, and watched as the river grew greedy. It took bodies, let them drift, pushed them against stones, swallowed them as if they had never been there. Every wave said: More. More.

Cathan was in the thick of it. His sword flashed, his shield clanged, his voice deep as iron screaming in fire. He wasn't a man who fell easily. But even iron breaks when enough pressure is applied.

Merlin saw it coming. Three men on Cathan, one from behind, the blade already at the level of his neck. Now, the voice in his head screamed, now he'll fall.

Something tore inside Merlin. He didn't want to just see again. He didn't want to be the one standing on the sidelines, collecting images like dead birds. His fingers clenched around the staff, and without thinking, he slammed it into the ground.

The earth answered.

It wasn't a firework, no divine lightning. Just a tremor, dull, heavy, as if a heart beneath the earth had skipped a beat. The ground cracked slightly, and muddy water splashed up, right between Cathan and the men rushing at him. They stumbled, fell, and slipped in the mud. Cathan spun, his sword flashing, and two of them lay still.

Merlin gasped, sweat running down his forehead. The earth still vibrated, a warning hum. You may once, it whispered, but not often. Weight bears until it breaks.

Cathan glanced at him, amidst the chaos. Short, sharp, full of questions. Merlin just nodded. Words would have betrayed them both.

But the war took no notice. Arrows whizzed, one struck Cathan's shield, burying itself. Another narrowly missed Merlin's face. Men roared, one laughed maniacally as he died. Blood mingled with the river, and the water turned darker, thicker.

And again, Merlin saw more than just a fight. He saw patterns. Lines that ran like runes in a river: Here one falls, there the next kicks. He could almost predict which blow would land and which would slip. It was as if the river itself had written the script.

Then he saw the man with the wolf shield. Still calm, still moving step by step. He didn't slash wildly, he struck with precision. Whoever hit him died. Whoever dodged him was still hit. One soldier without haste – that was worse than ten furious men.

Merlin sensed the connection. The wolf wasn't a king, but he smelled of a throne. Of dragons. Of the future.

The shadow voice whispered: Help him. Turn the earth beneath his enemies. Let him triumph. He is the door, and through him comes my son.

The earth hummed heavily: Do nothing. Let the weight fall as it falls.

Merlin stood, trembling, the staff shaking in his hands. Between vision and decision, between intervention and silence.

Then he saw Cathan again. His friend stumbled, his knees in the water, his sword still raised. A spear aimed at him, sharp and swift.

Merlin screamed. He rammed the staff into the ground, harder this time. The earth shook more violently, water shot up like a fist, the spear slipped, bounced to the side. Cathan roared, jumped up, and struck.

Merlin gasped, almost sinking to his knees. The trembling subsided, but his body felt empty, drained.

The crow fluttered over him, croaking loudly three times.

The battle raged on, men died, banners fell. But something had changed. Merlin hadn't just seen—he had acted. And the weight of that action now lay within him, heavier than any vision.

He knew: This was just the beginning.

The river began to sing. Not as water sings when it leaps over stones. It sang with voices, raw, full of blood and death. Every scream that ended in the water became part of that song. Men fell in, eyes wide open, and the water took them, floated them, twisted them until they were still. The song was heavy, dull, a melody of guilt.

Merlin stood on the bank, his staff deep in the ground. His breath was short, his legs wobbly. But the earth still held him. He heard the river louder, clearer. And the clearer he heard, the more he saw.

He saw patterns in the water. Bloodstreams forming like runes. Every body that sank was a line. Every wave that broke, a circle. And together, they formed a script that no human should be able to read—but he read it.

"What's coming is bigger than this river. This is just the beginning."

The images hit him hard.

– A sword that burned brighter than the fire in the sun.– A child born in the shadow of a castle, its cry louder than trumpets.– A woman, her hair black as night, her eyes full of hate and desire.– A circle of men, large, heavy, but the circle broke, again and again.

Merlin screamed, grabbed his head, but the images didn't stop.

Amid the roar of battle, he staggered. Men ran past him, bumping into each other, falling, dying. One, covered in blood, clutched his arm, gasping: "Seer... tell me... if I shall return home." Then he collapsed before Merlin could answer.

The crow cawed above him as if it wanted to laugh at the dead man.

Cathan continued to fight, but Merlin's vision was blurred. The image of his friend was overlaid by another scene: Cathan kneeling, blood on his hands, his eyes filled with guilt. The echo of his own prophecy: "You will fall through guilt."

Merlin trembled. He wanted to scream, to beg the river, the earth, the stars—anyone. But only the song of the water answered.

And then he came. The man with the wolf shield. No longer just one warrior among many. He stepped into the water, slowly, inexorably. Blood stained his legs, but he didn't retreat. He raised his sword, and the sun fell on the blade as if it were fire.

Merlin saw him—and behind him the dragon. Not in the flesh, but in symbol. The wolf was merely the gateway. Behind it, the dragon waited, black and red, as tall as the sky.

“Uther,” whispered Merlin, “your path begins here.”

The ground beneath his feet shook. Not because he struck the staff, but because the earth itself shook. She spoke heavily: "You see? This is not your war. But you are its witness. Bearing weight, nothing more."

Merlin fell to his knees, his face in the mud. His body was empty, his eyes full of images. He no longer knew whether he was alive or merely seeing.

The battle raged on. The river grew, the sky remained gray. Men died, banners fell, horses brayed. Merlin was in the midst of it all, and yet he was somewhere else: in a future greater than today's blood.

And the song of the river did not stop.

The ground vibrated as if the river itself had decided to swallow the battle. Merlin knelt in the mud, panting, his fingers deep in the earth, trying to hold on as if the world were a horse trying to shake him off. He could no longer see clearly, neither the sky nor the men, only blurred images slipping into one another: blood, banners, faces falling, voices drowning in the water.

Cathan was still there. Merlin saw him, fighting, but heavier now. Not like a warrior seeking victory, but like one who realizes he's dancing to the wrong tune. He had blood on his hands, too much, too fresh, and in his gaze was something Merlin recognized: guilt.

"Cathan!" he cried, his voice hoarse. But his friend didn't hear. He continued to strike, parry, and thrust – until he suddenly stopped. A young man lay before him, barely a beard on his face, his eyes wide, his spear fallen from his hand. Cathan's sword was embedded deep in his chest.

The boy wheezed, blood running from his mouth. "I... just wanted to... go home..." Then he fell silent.

Cathan stared at him, frozen. The sword slipped from his hand, falling into the mud. "No..." he muttered. "No."

Merlin knew: This is the beginning. This is the guilt.

The prophecy he had uttered in another moment, in another breath, now stood before him, vivid, heavy. "You will fall through guilt."

"Cathan!" he cried again, tried to stand up, stumbled, and fell again. His legs barely obeyed. He grabbed the staff as if he could pull his friend out like a fish out of water.

But Cathan didn't move. He knelt beside the dead man, his hands bloody, his face blank. Arrows whistled over him, men fell, but he didn't move.

Then the man with the wolf shield approached. He slashed through the chaos, calmly, deadly, like a stone that doesn't hurry, yet still crushes everything in its path. His gaze fell on Cathan, kneeling, defenseless. He raised his sword.

Merlin felt everything inside him screaming. Earth, river, shadows, stars—they screamed together. "Intervene!" - "Let it happen!" - "That's weight!" - "That's your brother!"

His fingers clenched around the staff, the earth trembled beneath him. He knew: If he did nothing now, Cathan would fall. Not by age, not by chance, but by guilt and steel.

“No!” Merlin yelled and rammed the staff into the ground.

This time it was different. Not a small tremor, not a splash of mud. The ground itself ripped open, roots tore through, black, wet, tugging upward like hands. They grabbed the feet of the man with the wolf shield, held him tight, for a heartbeat, for a breath.

Cathan looked up as if waking up. He reached for his sword, ripped it from the mud, and struck.

The sword struck the man with full force in the side. Blood spurted, and a sound escaped him—not a scream, more a growl, like a wolf finally struck. But he didn't fall immediately. He raised his shield, parried, and staggered back.

The roots sank again, slowly, as if they had never existed.

Merlin almost collapsed. His body trembled, his eyes burned, blood dripped from his nose. Cathan ran to him, gasping, his face filled with horror. "What have you done?"

"I... held you," Merlin whispered.

Cathan shook his head. "No. I killed. The boy. Him..." His voice broke.

Merlin grabbed his arm. "This is war. Guilt lies in every blow." "But you said…" Cathan pressed his lips together, his eyes full of fire. "You said I fall because of guilt. And I felt it. Today."

Merlin remained silent. He could not deny, could not appease. The prophecy had already been written in the dust of the earth.

The battle raged on, banners fell, the river carried more bodies. But for Merlin, it had become quieter. Only Cathan knelt before him, breathing heavily, with eyes that knew they had taken a step on a path from which there was no turning back.

And the man with the wolf shield? He was still standing. Wounded, bloody, but not fallen. He looked at Merlin as if he recognized him, then turned away, continuing to fight, step by step.

Merlin trembled. "The harbinger lives."

The day didn't split in half, it just grew heavier. The fog was gone, the sky leaden, and the battlefield was nothing but a vast pile of mud, soaked with blood, tears, and iron. The river no longer murmured softly; it roared—it had already swallowed so many bodies that it sounded like an animal that has finally reached its full yet continues to feed.

Men no longer fought in lines, but in knots, small islands of screams. Shields were broken, banners in the mud, swords blunted by too much flesh. The fight was now purely a matter of will.

Cathan was back on his feet, his face covered in blood, not all of it. He punched, kicked, and screamed, like someone running against his own prophecy. Merlin saw him, and every time his friend's blade fell, he heard the earth hum: Guilt. Guilt. Guilt.

On the bank, where the water was deepest, men crowded into the riverbed. The ground sucked them in, the water pulled them in, their armor made them heavier. One by one they were pulled under, the current took them, left them reeling. The river itself seemed to take sides, not for the victors, not for the vanquished—but for itself.

Merlin felt it. The water was more than just water. It was a mirror. He staggered closer, stumbled, and almost knelt in it. When he looked into the water, he didn't just see blood. He saw images.

He saw the dragon. Large, black, red, its scales like flames, its eyes like torches. It rose from the water, not made of flesh, but of symbols. Every corpse was a scale, every banner a wing.

The dragon screamed, and the scream echoed across an entire empire.

Then Merlin saw the sword. Not just any sword, but the one brighter than the sun. It hung over the dragon as if it were both its crown and its downfall. The dragon reared, the sword flashed, blood flowed in streams—and from the blood rose a child. A scream, louder than the dragon, louder than the river, louder than anything.

Merlin gasped, his heart racing. He tried to look away, but the water held him fast. He saw more.

He saw the round table, more clearly this time. Men and women, swords laid down, hands clasped together. But the dragon crawled across the table, bit, and broke the stone. And again he heard the voice—not shadows, not earth, not stars, but his own:

"Everything that is built will fall. But falling does not mean the end."

A blow sent him reeling, back to the present. A man threw himself at him, bloodied, mad, sword raised. Merlin raised his staff, struck, and the man fell into the water. The river took him, immediately pulling him down, as if it had been waiting just for him.

Merlin gasped, saw the bodies drifting, the current full of faces that still questioned as they died. He knew: This was no longer a battle. This was a sacrifice. The river itself was an altar, and the men merely offerings.

Cathan rushed to him, snorting, half alive, half dead. "We must go!" he roared. "No," Merlin said hoarsely. "We must see." "See? We're dying here!" Merlin grabbed him by the arm, his eyes glowing. "Don't you hear it? The river is speaking! It's screaming! This is not victory or defeat—this is the beginning!"

Cathan stared at him as if he himself had gone mad. "If this is the beginning, then I don't want to see the end."

Then Merlin saw him again: the man with the wolf shield. Wounded, bloody, but standing. He continued to fight, step by step, shield raised, sword held steady. Everything around him fell, but he remained standing.

And behind him – in the mirror of the river – Merlin saw the figure of the dragon, large, mighty, like a hand that wanted to grasp the land.

Merlin whispered, “The way is open.”

In the end, it didn't sound like victory. It sounded like silence. No trumpets, no hymns. Only the gasps of the wounded, the slurping of the river chewing its dead, and the quiet groans of men who didn't yet know they were going to die.

The fog returned, as if to cover the carnage, shamefully, like a shroud over a corpse. The ground was black and red at once, iron lay scattered, banners in the water, shields broken. The river was full, overflowing, yet insatiable.

Merlin stood, staggering, his fingers clammy on the staff. His body felt empty, burned out like a fire that knows only ash. He felt the cry of the earth, the whisper of the river, the silence of the stars. Everything was heavy, but not silent.

Cathan came to him, bloody, exhausted, but alive. His face was gray, his eyes hollow. "It's over," he said, his voice like a stone falling into water. "No," Merlin murmured. "It's only just begun."

Cathan glared at him. "That wasn't a beginning, Merlin. That was just dying." "And yet," Merlin replied, "there's something in that dying. Don't you see? The land drinks. It calls. It wants a king, just as the river wants its bodies."

In the distance, the banner with the wolf rose again, faint, torn, but visible. The man with the wolf shield still stood. Wounded, kneeling, but not fallen. He looked toward the shore, saw Merlin, and for a brief moment their eyes met.

Merlin felt it in his bones: Here was the trail. The wolf would not rule, but he was the door through which the dragon would pass.

“Uther,” whispered Merlin, “your kingdom is born in this blood.”

The river flowed on, calmer now, as if it had drunk enough. The bodies floated, carried away by the current. Some remained suspended, as if keeping watch. Others disappeared, as if they had never lived.

Merlin closed his eyes. In the darkness, he saw the sword once more, brighter than the sun. He saw the tablet, round, strong—and breaking again. He saw a child whose cry was louder than the battle. And he knew: This was not just a vision. This was the future that had risen from that river.

He fell to his knees, his hands in the mud. The earth vibrated faintly, as if trying to comfort him. The crow landed beside him, cawed once, sharply, as if it were its amen.

Cathan put his hand on his shoulder. "Come. If we stay here, we'll die like the others."

Merlin nodded slowly, rose, and swayed. He looked back at the river, at the blood, at the banners floating in the water. "Everything that is built will fall," he murmured. "But here... here something has been built."

They walked, while behind them the water swallowed the last scream.

Encounter with Uther Pendragon

The Battle of the River was over, but the stench remained. It clung to everything—the tents, the horses' breath, the men's hair, even the mist that was once again settling over the land. It was the stench of iron, sweat, and blood, mixed with the smoke of half-burned banners. Merlin and Cathan had thought they could disappear, go into the forest like two stray dogs. But the victors had other plans.

They were found, half in the mud, half on their feet. Two riders with faces as blank as their helmets led them to the camp. No one spoke much. What could one say when there was still blood under their fingernails and the echo of their screams hung over the river?

The camp itself was no place of celebration. No singing, no feasting. Men sat in silence, drinking from skins, staring into the fire as if hoping it would extinguish their faces. Others were too drunk to mourn or too tired to live.

In the middle stood a larger tent, crudely nailed together from leather and poles. In front of it hung a banner—a dragon, red on a black background, its mouth wide open.

Cathan growled softly. "There he is."

Merlin nodded. His heart was beating too fast, not with fear, but with something more serious: recognition. The dragon was no coincidence, no mere sign. It was the face from his vision, painted, stitched, born of the river's blood.

They were pushed inside. The tent was dark, only a fire in the center provided light. The smoke drifted slowly upward, and in the clouds danced the dragon. Not clear, not tangible, but enough to make Merlin hold his breath.

Then something moved behind the smoke. A man stepped forward. Tall, broad-shouldered, his chain mail open, sweat glistening on his skin. His hair was sticky, his beard matted, blood

still clung to his hands. And his eyes – gray, cold, as if they didn't see you, but what stood behind you.

“So,” he said, “you are the seer.”

His voice was rough, deep, from too much shouting and drinking. Not a voice that preaches, but one that commands.

Merlin felt the air grow heavier. Yes—that was him. The man he had seen. The name he had spoken, unaware that in doing so, he had bound fate.

Uther Pendragon.

Cathan took a step forward, half-positioning himself in front of Merlin, his hand on his sword. "If you want to hurt him—"

"Quiet," Uther interrupted, without even looking. "I only hurt when I have to. Today I want to listen."

His gaze remained on Merlin. "They say you spoke my name before I wore it myself. They say you saw my banner before it was sewn. They say you made me king."

He came closer, so close that Merlin could smell the scent: iron, horse, smoke, wine. No smell of gold, no hint of court—only war.

“So,” growled Uther, “what do you really know?”

Merlin swallowed. Words were now more dangerous than any sword. He knew: one false sentence, and he would be ash. One sentence too true – and he would be chain.

"I have seen," he began quietly, "a man with the dragon above him. He will rule, stronger than many. But his kingdom will cost blood, more than this river can ever drink."

Uther laughed. Not a happy laugh, but a short bark. "Blood! Everything costs blood. Land, women, power—everything has the same price. And I'm willing to pay it."

He reached for Merlin's shoulder, hard, as if testing whether he was truly flesh. "Tell me, seer: Will I be king? Not 'a man,' not 'a banner'—I."

Merlin looked at him. Those eyes, cold yet burning, were not those of a man asking questions. They were the eyes of a man who had already decided and only wanted confirmation.

The shadow voice whispered: Say yes. Then you'll be his. Then you'll be safe. The earth hummed: Say nothing. Silence is also weighty.

But Merlin's own mouth spoke before he decided: "Yes. You will be king. But your kingdom will collapse, like everything that grows too big."

Silence. The fire crackled, the smoke drifted, the men around held their breath.

Then Uther grinned. Broad, hard, like a wolf tasting blood. "Good. King is enough. We'll see about the rest."

He let go of Merlin's shoulder, turned away, picked up a cup, and drank deeply. "From now on, you will not leave. A king does not let his voice wander in the forest. You are my seer. My dragon mouth."

Merlin felt the chain, invisible, heavy, cold. No iron, no rope—words. His own words had bound him.

Cathan whispered next to him, barely audibly: “What have you done?”

Merlin looked into the fire. The smoke drifted upward, and the dragon grinned in the cloud. "I only said what I saw," he murmured. "But now I'm part of it."

The fire continued to crackle, as if the flames themselves were enjoying devouring the silence. Uther drank, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and his men—half a dozen rugged faces—stood like stones at the edge of the tent. Only their eyes moved, staring at Merlin as if he were an animal to be fed or slaughtered.

"So," Uther began, his voice raspy, "you saw me before I even knew what I was. Some would say this is witchcraft. Others would say this is God's work. I say it is useful. And I use what is useful."

He leaned closer, so close that Merlin could smell his breath—wine, blood, smoke. "But hear me, boy: If you lie, if you make a fool of me, I'll hang you on your own staff until your heart bursts."

Merlin held his gaze. "I'm not lying. I see. Whether you like it or not."

A murmur went through the men. One whispered, "A demon speaks through him." Another, "An instrument of the gods." Uther slammed his fist on the table, shattering the cups. "Hush! He is what I say he is. And I say: He is my seer."

Thunder crashed. Suddenly, without rain, without lightning. Just a single crack that shook the tent. The fire flickered, the smoke rose faster, thicker. For a moment, it took shape—a dragon, writhing, opening its jaws as if to swallow the entire roof.

The men stepped back, one made the sign of the cross, another stared silently.

But Uther laughed. Deeply, harshly, as if he had called forth that thunder himself. "See? Even the heavens know. I am the Dragon's Head. I am Pendragon!"

He grabbed Merlin's chin roughly and turned his face toward the smoke. "You saw that, right? Tell me! Tell me it's mine!"

Merlin's heart raced. The shadowy voice whispered: Say yes. Give him everything. He is my tool. The earth hummed heavily: Hold on. Words are weight. Too much weight crushes.

Merlin whispered, "The dragon doesn't belong to you. You belong to him."

The tent froze. Even the fire crackled more quietly.

Uther stared at him, his eyes gray as stone. Then he broke into a grin, wild and dangerous. "So be it. If the dragon wants me, he'll have me. I'd rather ride a beast than eat grass."

He let go of Merlin's chin, stepped back, and raised his cup. "To the dragon! To Uther Pendragon!" His men raised their voices, some jubilant, some hesitant. The name echoed through the tent, through the camp, out into the night.

Merlin stood there, his heart heavy. He knew: With this toast, the king was born, not by crown, not by election, but by the echo of his own prophecy.

Cathan placed his hand on his arm. Quietly, almost inaudibly, he whispered: "You brought him into the world. Now you can't bring him back."

Merlin looked silently into the smoke where the dragon still lurked. "I know," he murmured. "Now it begins."

The drinking didn't stop. Men emptied skins as if trying to drink the river that had almost swallowed them. Wine dripped over beards, blood mingled with grease, laughter cracked like iron. But behind all the noise lurked a silence that everyone sensed: They knew the name had been spoken. Pendragon.

Uther now sat at the table, cup in his fist, gaze like an axe. He drank, spat on the ground, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Men," he cried, "we have drunk the river, and it has not drowned us. We have broken the enemy, and he now knows: The dragon reigns. I am not a shadow, not a rumor. I am Uther Pendragon!"

A cheer rippled through the hall, raw, half-genuine, half-forced. Some thrust swords into the air, others just watched silently, as if more afraid of their own reputation than of Uther.

Merlin stood at the edge, his hands around his staff, and watched. He saw Uther eating—greedily, without measure, morsels of meat like prey. He saw him speaking to men—not words of counsel, but commands, threats, promises of plunder and women.

Then Uther pulled a woman into the tent. Not a noblewoman, just one who helped around the camp. She resisted, not much, perhaps too tired to fight. Uther laughed, pulled her onto his lap, and held her tight. His men roared as if it were a game. Merlin looked into the woman's eyes—and there was nothing but fear.

He turned his gaze away, but the images burned into his memory. The Dragon King he had seen in visions was no longer a myth, but flesh. Flesh that ate, drank, and took.

Cathan came beside him, his voice quiet, barely audible in the noise. "Do you see what you've done?"

Merlin nodded weakly. "I only said what I saw." "And what you say will come true. You crowned him without him earning it." "It wasn't my choice," Merlin whispered. Cathan grabbed his arm roughly. "Yes, Merlin. Every vision is a choice when spoken. If you had remained silent, he might have only drunk, only killed. Now he believes the land itself wants him."

Merlin looked into the smoke that still depicted the dragon. "Perhaps it really did want him." Cathan snorted. "Then the land is as cursed as he is."

Suddenly, a cup crashed to the floor. Uther had let go of the woman and approached the men who had been arguing. One of them—young, nervous—had muttered something too loudly. Uther grabbed him by the neck and lifted him up like a child.

“What did you say?” he growled.

The boy gasped, his feet kicking. "Nothing... Lord..." "Don't lie," Uther growled, pressing harder. The boy's face turned blue.

Merlin wanted to take a step, but Cathan held him back. "Not. Not yet."

Then Uther dropped the boy. The body slumped, wheezing, still alive. Uther stepped back, grinned, and looked around. "This is how you die when you whisper into a dragon's mouth. Do you hear? I am king because even the heavens say so. Anyone who disagrees will not breathe."

His men nodded, some out of fear, some out of genuine faith.

Merlin felt the blow in his chest. Yes, that was him: the Dragon King. But not a king of justice. A king of blood, just like in his first vision. And he himself, Merlin, had given birth to him by speaking the name.

Cathan whispered again, "We have to leave. He will use you until you are nothing. And when he realizes your words won't save him, he will kill you."

Merlin saw the dragon in the smoke, saw Uther laughing, drinking, taking, ruling. "Perhaps," he murmured. "But perhaps I'm here because the land wills it. And the land is heavier than both of us."

Night crept deeper into the tent, but Uther drank as if time were an enemy to be defeated if only enough wine was slain. Men dozed against the walls, some snoring, others staring into the fire, unable to sleep. The roar of the camp outside had faded, reduced to only isolated voices, the snorting of horses, the crackling of the fire.

Uther put down the cup, stood up, and walked toward Merlin. Each step was heavy, not from the alcohol alone, but from the weight he himself projected into the room. He stopped so close that Merlin could smell the smoke in his beard.

"You said," he growled, "that I would be king. That's good. But that's not enough for me. A king wants more than crowns and titles. A king wants to know how he dies."

He grabbed Merlin by the collar and pulled him halfway up. "So, seer—tell me my death."

The men in the tent raised their heads. One whispered, "He's crazy." Another, "No, he's smart. Those who know death live longer."

Merlin gasped, the collar pressing on his throat. His vision blurred, but the images came. Uninvited, unwilling—they swept him away like the river that had swallowed him once before.

He saw a hill full of bodies, a sun setting red. Uther, older, broader, still with eyes of stone. A sword in his chest, blood running from his mouth. His banner, the dragon, hung in tatters, half in the mud. And all around there was no cheering, no crown—only silence.

Merlin gasped. "I see you fall... in battle. Not today, not tomorrow. But by steel. Your dragon will fly, but it will be torn apart. You will not die in bed. You will die in blood."

Silence. Even the fire seemed to shrink.

Uther let go of him, slowly, as if testing whether he could taste the truth. Then he laughed. Hard, cold. "Die in blood? Ha! Better that than in the silence of a chamber. Good. I don't want to be an old beast that rots. A dragon dies in fire. So be it."

He patted Merlin on the shoulder so hard he almost fell. "I like you, Seer. You don't give me peace, but you give me images. I can live with that."

Cathan whispered beside him, barely audibly: "You fool. You painted him his own execution, and he takes it as praise."

Merlin stared into the fire. The smoke formed the dragon again, its mouth open, its teeth bared. "He thinks this is glory. But glory is just another word for blood that hasn't been spilled yet."

Uther returned to the table, picked up the cup again, and drank as if nothing had happened. But there was something new in his eyes now. No doubt, no anger—but a kind of strange peace. As if he had decided that even his end would be part of his kingdom.

Merlin felt the chain grow heavier. He had given Uther his death, and Uther had accepted it—not as a curse, but as a promise.

And Merlin knew: From now on, he was not just a king's seer. He was the mirror in which Uther saw himself.

The morning smelled of ash. Not only from the fire that had burned in the tent all night, but also from what still glowed in the ground outside: burnt wagons, armor, meat. Merlin didn't really wake up—he was just less tired than during the night. His eyes burned, and his head was heavy with images that wouldn't go away.

Uther was already up, standing in the entrance of the tent, the dragon on the banner behind him, the cup in his hand. He didn't look like someone who had drunk, but rather like someone who was commanding the intoxication himself. Men were gathering outside, their voices filled with unrest.

"Seer," Uther called without turning around. "Come."

Merlin stepped beside him. The morning was gray, the river lay still, as if it had forgotten the murder. But the earth stank, and the wind still carried remnants of the scream.

"These men," said Uther, "are alive because the dragon wills it. Because I will. But they need more than victory. They need an image. A belief. And you will give it to them."

Cathan growled behind Merlin. "He wants to make you his banner."

Uther heard this and laughed without turning around. "A flag that speaks—better than a banner of cloth. What is a warrior without a prophet? Nothing but flesh and a sword. But a king with a seer... that is a realm."

He turned and grabbed Merlin by the shoulders, firmly, possessively. "From today on, you are in my circle. You will sit by my fire, participate in my battles, lead my men with your words. You will not remain silent when I ask. And you will not leave when you want to. You are mine."

The men outside stared. Some in awe, others suspiciously. One spat in the dust, another made the sign of the cross. But no one objected.

Merlin felt the weight in his chest. Words he had never freely spoken had drawn him into this web. He saw Uther's eyes—there was hunger, there was pride, and there was also fear. Not of death, not of war, but of insignificance.

"If I am your seer," Merlin said quietly, "then listen to me when I tell you that blood does not last forever."

Uther grinned. "Blood lasts until it runs dry. And until then, it's enough for an empire."

Cathan stepped forward, almost placing himself between them. "You bind him with words as if he were your dog. But words are harder than you think, Pendragon."

Uther looked at him coolly. "And swords are lighter than you think. Be careful yours doesn't land in your back."

A moment filled with blades hung in the air. But Uther laughed again, turned, and strode out into the camp. "Come, men! The dragon demands more land, more fire, more blood. And we will give it to him!"

The men cheered, some loudly, some just with their lips.

Merlin remained behind in the tent, his hands on his staff, his heart heavy. "Now I'm bound," he murmured. Cathan placed his hand on his shoulder. "You're not a dog, Merlin. But he thinks you are. And that makes him dangerous." Merlin nodded. "Dangerous enough to found an empire. Dangerous enough to destroy it."

Outside, Uther was already shouting orders, and the camp was moving like an animal with too many heads.

Merlin knew: From now on, he no longer belonged solely to himself. He belonged to the dragon. And the dragon ate everything.

The camp was a machine of noise and dust. Horses neighed, armor clanged, men shouted orders to one another, and the smell of iron, sweat, and old blood hung everywhere. Uther

moved through the center, like a knife cutting through everything in his path. Wherever he went, the men scattered—not just out of respect, but out of fear.

Merlin followed, staff in hand, Cathan close behind. He felt out of place—a foreign body in this world of steel and hunger. But the men's eyes were fixed on him. Some full of hope, others full of hatred. A few whispered, "The seer. The one who called the dragon."

Uther stopped at a fire pit where several captains were squatting. Their faces were hard, their hands covered with scars. They looked at him, then at Merlin, and remained silent.

"That's him," said Uther. "My seer. His mouth sees more than your eyes. So listen."

The captains exchanged glances. One spat into the embers. "A boy with a staff is supposed to lead us?"
Uther drew his sword and laid the blade loosely against the man's shoulder. "A king says who leads. Or will you take that from me?"

Silence. The captain lowered his head.

All eyes now turned to Merlin. His heart was pounding, sweat was running down his back. He hadn't asked for this stage. But it was waiting, and he knew: silence could be more deadly than words.

He breathed, closed his eyes briefly – and the images came. Not as vivid as in battle, but clear enough.

He saw a road, narrow, lined with trees. Men moving along it—too many, too fast. He saw a ford in the river, shallow, inconspicuous. And he saw a village burning because no one was there to hold it back.

Merlin opened his eyes. "If you go west, you'll lose men on the road. They're waiting there. Go south, take the ford. And leave a handful of men behind; the village will burn if you don't."

The captains stared at him. One wanted to laugh, but Uther was quicker. "You heard. South, across the ford. Men stay behind. Anyone who disagrees is not contradicting me, but the dragon."

A murmur went through the group, half in agreement, half in fear. The men nodded, reluctantly, but nodded they did.

Cathan leaned toward Merlin. "Do you know what you just did?" "Yes," Merlin whispered. "I moved an army."

Later, as the camp was preparing, a young warrior approached him. Barely older than Merlin himself, his face still soft, but his eyes full of brilliance. "Are you truly the seer?" he asked. Merlin nodded almost imperceptibly. "Then tell me," the boy begged, "will I find glory?"

Merlin looked into his eyes – and again the image came: the boy, in the water, the lance in his chest, his face turned upward, rigid, empty.

He hesitated. "You'll find your place," he finally said. "But glory is just another word for blood shed by someone else."

The boy smiled nonetheless, as if he had received a promise. He walked away, proud, helmet in hand.

Cathan looked at Merlin. "Sometimes half-truths are worse than whole truths." Merlin sighed. "Sometimes the whole truth is a knife. And not everyone wants to be cut."

That evening, as the sun was low, Uther called him back into his tent. He tossed him a piece of meat, drank, and grinned. "You see, Seer? Your words move men. You are no longer a spectator. You are part of the blade."

Merlin didn't bite into the flesh. He only saw the smoke, which again painted dragon shapes. "Perhaps I'm not part of the blade," he murmured. "Perhaps I'm the hilt. But even hilts break eventually."

Uther laughed, loudly, as if he had heard a joke that only he understood.

Night fell heavily over the camp. No more cheering, no more orders, only the crackling of isolated fires and the quiet groans of the wounded. The river roared as if it still hadn't digested the day.

Merlin sat at the edge of the camp, his feet in the dust, the crow perched on his staff. Cathan slept not far away, but he too was only pretending to rest. Men stood watch in the dark, their faces blank as masks in the glow of the embers.

He had spoken all day. Talked too much. Every syllable had become a weight that wouldn't fall off him. He had moved an army, confirmed a king, brought a name to life. But most of all, the feeling gnawed at him: it wasn't he who led the words, but the words who led him.

The wind shifted, bringing smoke from the great fire in the center. The smoke rose, curled, twisted—and formed the dragon again. Not clearly, not for everyone, but for him. Always for him.

The shadowy voice returned, piercing: You are his tool. Your mouth is my echo. Uther lives because you speak it. The earth hummed, deeply: You are not his. You are weight. Weight carries, it belongs to no one.

Merlin pressed his hands to his temples. "I am not an echo. I am not a weight. I am me." But the whisper in the smoke laughed.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around. It was Uther. No cloak, no helmet—just himself, his chainmail open, his gaze still like steel.

"What are you whispering, Seer?" he asked. Merlin swallowed. "Only to myself." Uther grinned. "Then get used to it. Soon you'll only talk to me. With the others you can drink, eat, and sleep. But words? You give me words. No one else."

He looked into his eyes, cold and sure. "You are mine. No man, no god, no demon can take you from me. The dragon gave you to me, and I keep what is given to me."

Merlin said nothing. But he knew: this wasn't a threat, this was a judgment. He was free enough to breathe, and trapped enough not to leave.

Cathan stepped out of the shadows, his hand on his sword. "And if he wants to leave?" Uther turned his head, looked at him, and grinned. "Then I'll bring him back. Or I'll kill him. But he won't leave. Not as long as the dragon breathes."

He turned away and walked back into the darkness without looking again.

Merlin remained seated, his hands tightly gripping the staff. The crow fluttered, croaking softly as if it had heard the oath.

He looked into the smoke as it dissipated into the air. "I am not free," he whispered. "Not anymore. I am his seer—and his prisoner."

And somewhere deep in the night the river answered with a sound that sounded like laughter.

The Stolen Throne

The news came not like thunder, but like a knife in the back. A messenger, filthy, his horse wet with sweat, almost fell from his saddle as he stumbled into the camp. He had no helmet, no armor, only the look of a man who knew too much and had too little air to breathe.

“The king…” he gasped, “the king is dead.”

The camp froze. Men stopped, the clang of weapons fell silent, even the horses stopped snorting. Only the fire continued to crackle, outrageously loud.

"Dead?" yelled one of the captains. "How?" "Poisoned," gasped the messenger, "or... or from fever. No one knows."

The men began to whisper. Poisoned, some said. Murdered by the Saxons, others said. An accident, only the fools said. But no one believed in coincidence.

Uther stood in the center, arms folded, his gaze fixed on the messenger. No tears, no shock, no scream. Just a slow, cold nod, as if he had long known this would happen.

"So the chair is empty," he said. Not "the throne," not "the crown." Just "the chair."

A murmur went through the men. Some grinned, others turned pale. Cathan nudged Merlin. "See? He knew."

Merlin remained silent. But deep within him, an image stirred that he had seen before: a stone seat, heavy, charged, more than just a chair. A symbol, a heart that drank blood.

Uther approached Merlin, his eyes gray as steel. "Seer," he growled, "did you see that?"

Merlin hesitated. Words were now sharper than swords. He could remain silent—and thereby fan the flames. He could speak—and thereby tighten the chain.

"I saw," he whispered, "a throne becoming empty. And a dragon sitting upon it."

Silence.

Then Uther grinned. Broadly, dangerously. "Good. Then I'm the dragon."

That same evening, he gathered the captains. They huddled in the tent, sweating, discussing. One muttered, "There are others with the right." Another, "The lords will not agree."

Uther laughed. "Right? Lords? I don't need parchment. I just need a sword. And a seer who says Heaven wills it."

All eyes turned to Merlin.

He felt it: the net closing in around him. He wasn't just a spectator—he was the proof. His voice was the seal that turned blood to stone.

Later, alone by the fire, Cathan spoke to him. "If you remain silent, he will break you. If you speak, he will bind you. What will you do?"

Merlin stared into the embers. He saw faces in them he didn't yet know, faces that would one day fall. "I don't know," he murmured. "But I do know: this throne will not be won. It will be stolen."

The crow cawed as if it had agreed.

In the morning, Uther arose, the dragon's banner behind him, his sword at his side. He spoke loudly so the whole camp could hear.

"The king is dead. The land is empty. I take what is empty. Whoever follows me lives. Whoever contradicts me dies."

The men cheered, some genuinely, some out of fear. The name echoed: Pendragon.

Merlin felt the ground tremble beneath his feet. Not with joy, but with weight.

The march began in the gray of dawn, when the mist still hung in the fields. No solemn procession, no fanfares. It was a band of men, heavy with battle, stinking of sweat and iron, but with hunger in their eyes that was greater than fatigue. Uther rode in front, the dragon banner fluttering behind him like a tongue of blood.

Merlin didn't walk; he was led. Two men kept an eye on him, as if he were a precious treasure that couldn't be lost, or a dangerous animal that might bite at any moment. Cathan never left his side.

"We march like robbers," murmured Cathan. "Because we are," answered Merlin quietly. "This is not the move of a king. This is the move of a thief."

But the men heard only the name called again and again: "Pendragon! Pendragon!" And the more often it fell, the more it became true.

The Throne Hall lay on a hill, an ancient fortress of stone darker than the morning. No decorations, no splendor, just walls so thick they had survived many winters. Guards stood nervously at the gate, spears raised, but hands trembling.

Uther rode closer, sword in hand. "Open up," he roared. "Your king is dead. A new one stands before you."

The guards hesitated. One began, "There are lords who—" But Uther interrupted him, raising his sword. "I did not come to ask."

The gate opened. Not out of obedience, but out of fear.

Inside, it smelled of old smoke, sweat, and blood embedded in the stones. The throne room wasn't a palace. Just a room, cold, large, with a bench against the wall and a stone chair, plain, heavy, older than any man there.

Merlin paused in the doorway. He saw the chair, and immediately the images came to mind: blood dripping from the steps, banners being torn to pieces, a king falling. The chair wasn't a seat. It was a stone that was consuming.

Uther marched toward it, the banner behind him. His men followed, shouting and stamping as if they were subduing the earth itself.

Some lords were already there. Men with beards, rings on their hands, eyes that knew more about politics than the battlefield. They rose, one after the other.

"Uther," said one, "this is not your right. The throne is not yours." "The throne belongs to the one who takes it," growled Uther.

The lords glanced at each other. One pointed at Merlin. "And this bastard seer? Is he the one who makes you great? Without him, you're just another robber."

Uther grabbed Merlin's arm and pulled him forward. "Tell them. Tell them what you saw."

All eyes stared at him. Heavy, expectant, hungry. Merlin felt his heart beating, hard, too fast. Words. Always words. He knew: If he remained silent, he would fall. If he spoke, he would raise Uther.

He closed his eyes. The images returned: Uther on the throne, blood on the steps, the sword in his chest. And the dragon laughing.

Merlin opened his eyes and spoke. "I saw the dragon. He sits on the chair. And the dragon's name is Uther."

A murmur went through the hall. Some lords stepped back, others turned pale. But Uther grinned broadly, as if he had devoured the world itself. "You heard it. The seer says it. The heavens say it. The dragon is perched."

He walked to the throne, didn't turn around. He sat down. It was heavy and firm. The stone didn't creak, but it felt as if the earth itself had twitched.

And at that moment, the sky also twitched. Thunder rumbled far away. The dragon's banner fluttered as if it were alive.

The men shouted: “Pendragon! King! Pendragon!”

Merlin stood there, his heart heavy. He knew: This was not a victory. This was a robbery. The throne had been stolen, and stolen things demand their price.

The hall held its breath. Uther sat on the throne, broad and heavy, as if he had always owned it. The men around him shouted his name, stamped their feet, and raised swords in the air. But not all of them. In the corners of their eyes, something else gathered: resistance.

One of the lords, an old man with a gray beard, stepped forward. His cloak was simple, but his voice was harsh. "Uther," he cried, "this chair is not yours. You are not the king's son, not chosen by the council. You are a robber, nothing more."

The cheering died down.

Uther slowly rose, sword in hand. "A robber, you say?" He descended the steps until he stood directly before the old man. "Then tell me: Who does the chair belong to? You? Or a dead man?"

"By right," replied the lord. "And right is older than you, older than I. It belongs not to the stronger, but to the more worthy."

Uther laughed, loudly, rudely. "Right? Dignity? That's just a cloak you hang over fear. But fear is mine." And without further ado, he plunged his sword into the old man's stomach.

A scream rippled through the hall. Blood dripped onto the steps, just as Merlin had seen. The old lord slumped, gasping, his face pale. Uther drew his blade, shook off the blood, and looked out at the crowd.

"That's my right," he growled. "That's my dignity. Anyone who still doubts it, come and take the chair."

The other lords hesitated. One reached for his dagger, another for his sword. But before they could act, Uther's men leaped forward, steel against steel. The hall exploded in chaos.

Merlin stood to the side, his heart pounding. The throne room was now not a place of council, but a battlefield. Sword against sword, scream against scream. Blood splashed on the stone walls, men slipped, banners were torn to shreds.

Cathan drew his sword and stood before Merlin, ready to defend. "Stay behind me!" he roared as an enemy charged at them. Steel crashed, the man fell, blood trickled down the steps.

Merlin saw the stone drink it. The throne sucked the blood like a sacrifice. His mind hummed: This is how it always was. This is how it always will be. A throne is not a seat—a throne is an altar.

Uther fought amidst chaos. Not a king, not a prince—a beast. His sword slashed, his shield clanged, his voice roared. He seemed born of blood, and the more he shed, the stronger he seemed to become.

One of the lords fell under his blow, another ran. The few who survived knelt or fled. In the end, the throne room was red, filled with groans and corpses.

Uther stomped back onto the steps, his sword dripping, his face covered in sweat and blood. He sat down, breathing heavily, and raised the banner.

"Look!" he cried. "The throne belongs to the dragon, and I am the dragon!"

A clap of thunder echoed, closer this time. The roof shook, dust fell from the beams. A crack ran through the stone floor, small but distinct. The men stared, some crossing themselves, others screaming in awe.

Merlin knew: It was an omen. Or they would make it one.

Uther laughed and raised his sword. "Even the heavens bow! I am Pendragon! King!"

The men cheered, blood dripped down the steps, the dragon in the banner hissed in the wind.

Merlin stood there, his staff gripped tightly. He had seen it. A throne not won, but stolen. A king not born, but forced. And in this theft lay the seeds of ruin.

The crow cawed above him, harshly, three times, as if it were a judgment.

The hall stank of blood, sweat, and cheap wine. Men stumbled among corpses, laughing too loudly, raising cups as if they'd just given birth to a god. But they hadn't given birth to a god. They'd only placed a man on a chair, and the chair was already old, much older than they were, much greedier than their little lives.

Uther squatted on the throne, legs wide apart, sword across his knees. His beard was still dripping with blood, and he grinned like a man who'd just won everything without realizing he was already losing. The men yelled his name, stamped, and slammed their weapons against shields until the whole damned hall shook. "Pendragon! Pendragon!"—as if the word alone would erase all the dead faces on the floor.

Merlin stood by the wall, staff in hand, feeling like a joke no one laughed at. Everything he had ever seen, ever felt, had now become flesh, blood, and stone. He had said it, and because he had said it, they believed it. Words are worse than swords—swords kill men, words give birth to kings. And kings kill kingdoms.

He stared at the ground. Blood ran down the steps like wine from a bad barrel. He heard the sobs of a wounded man who didn't want to die, heard two soldiers laughing as they dragged him aside. No one cared about justice. No one cared about dignity. All that mattered was that one man was strong enough to take, and that another was foolish enough to follow.

Cathan came beside him, his face gray, his hands still red. "So this is it," he murmured. "An empire born of filth." Merlin nodded. "An empire stolen from the belly of the earth. And I severed the umbilical cord." Cathan looked at him, angry, sad. "You could have remained

silent." "I could have," Merlin replied, "but silence would have been a word too. Everything is a damned word."

Uther roared, drank, and pulled a woman onto his lap who had been dragged in. He kissed her, bit her neck, while the men roared. Blood and wine mingled on his lips, and he laughed like one who knows nothing else.

"You see!" he cried. "The throne belongs to me because I took it! And whoever tries to take it from me will lie dead in its shadow!"

The men raged. The hall shook. Merlin felt the earth hum beneath him. Not in agreement, not in disapproval. Just heavily. So heavily that he could barely breathe.

He closed his eyes and saw it again: the throne shattering, the sword in the king's chest, the kingdom in the dust. Everything born here was already doomed to die.

But nobody wanted to hear that. They just wanted to drink, scream, fuck, and kill. And in the end, they'd wonder why everything was falling apart.

Merlin opened his eyes, staring at Uther, the dragon in the banner behind him, the sweat on his face, the smile that was more blood than joy.

"King," he murmured. "A king of filth and theft."

The crow cawed from the rafters, and for a moment the hall fell silent. Only Merlin heard the laughter in the flapping of its wings.

The morning after was worse than the battle. No more cheering, no more shouting. Only groaning, vomit, the smell of blood that had eaten into every crevice of the stone. Men lay across the benches, snoring, half-eaten plates, spilled wine, one even pissing in his sleep. A kingdom born of drunkenness—what a farce.

Uther still sat on the throne as if he'd spent the entire night there. His eyes were red, his beard was matted, but his hands were still firmly on his sword, as if he were killing in his sleep. He didn't look like a king. He looked like a butcher who'd forgotten to leave the stable. But that was enough, because the others had nothing better to do.

Merlin walked through the hall, step by step, his feet in the mud of blood and beer. Every breath tasted of iron, every glance fell on a face barely distinguishable from sleep or death. Some looked peaceful, as if they had only been drinking, others stared open-eyed at the ceiling, their mouths full of flies.

He stopped and looked at the throne. The stone was not clean, not noble. It was stained, the steps dark with blood that no one had wiped away. No one cleans a kingdom that has been stolen.

Cathan came to him, his hair disheveled, his eyes red. He held a piece of bread in his hand, chewing it as if it were dust. "Do you see what you've done?" he asked hoarsely. Merlin nodded. "Yes. I see it everywhere. In the dirt. In people's faces." "This will never last," said Cathan. "It's born too dirty." "Everything is born dirty," replied Merlin. "But very few live long enough to grow into it."

Cathan laughed bitterly and coughed. "Then I bet this one will die before it can walk."

A man on the ground choked, spitting bile. Another woke up, pulled up his pants, as if nothing had happened. This is what the kingdom looked like on day one: drunk, dirty, empty. No crown, no priest, no holy ceremony. Just a bunch of men who had celebrated too loudly that they had survived – and one man who called himself king because no one was strong enough to take it away from him.

Merlin sat down on a bench, the crow fluttering onto the armrest. He rubbed his eyes, feeling the weight in his skull. Everything he had said now hung like smoke over the room. He had summoned the dragon, and now the beast sat on the chair, grinning, breathing heavily.

"Perhaps," he murmured, "I should have kept quiet." The crow cawed sharply, as if to say: Too late, boy. Too late.

Uther suddenly raised his head and wiped his face with his hand. His voice was scratchy, but it cut through the room. "Get up! Enough sleep, enough drinking! We have land to take!"

The men stirred, groaned, and scrambled to their feet. Their bodies were heavy, their eyes tired, but they obeyed. For he had the sword. And he had the chair.

Merlin watched as they forced life back into their limbs, as the noise returned. He knew: This wasn't a realm. This was a hangover. And a hangover always gets worse before it goes away.

They came on the second day. Not as friends, not as enemies—as emissaries. Fine coats, but dusty from riding, rings on their fingers, but sweat under their armpits. Faces that had seen more intrigue than swords. Lords, emissaries, sycophants—whatever you called them, they came to test whether this bloody bastard in the throne should truly be king.

The hall still stank of the carnage. They pretended not to smell it, but their noses twitched, their eyes darting to the stains no one had cleaned up. Blood still glistened in the cracks in the steps. One of the piles of corpses had been roughly shoved into a corner, like bulky waste that no one wanted to pick up.

And there sat Uther. On the throne, legs wide apart, cup in fist, sword held loosely beside him. He grinned as if the walls themselves were witnesses to his triumph.

"Pendragon," began one of the emissaries, an old fox with a voice like a rusty knife, "you're quickly sitting on a chair that won't be given away easily."

Uther laughed. "I didn't 'give' it to him. I took it. Whoever wants it can rip it out of my hands."

A murmur went through the emissaries. One whispered, "He's crazy." Another, "He's strong." And in this country, it was the same.

Merlin stood to the side, staff in hand, silent, but every eye kept wandering back to him. He knew what they wanted. Not Uther's words. His. The seer. The bastard who had summoned dragons.

The old fox nodded at Merlin. "And you? What do you say? Is he king?"

Merlin felt his throat go dry. Words. Words again. Words that weighed more than swords. He remembered the visions: blood, an empire shattering. But here, in this hall, they didn't want the truth. They wanted a weapon.

“The dragon sits,” he said quietly, “and the dragon bears Uther’s name.”

The emissaries nodded. Some with relief, some with shock. But no one objected.

Uther laughed again, slamming his cup against the armrest, splashing wine. "Do you hear that? Even the shadows say so. I am Pendragon, I am king!"

Then he fell silent, his gaze sharp as a knife. "And if any of you think you can challenge me, let them try. But try it with steel, not with tongues. I've had enough talk."

The emissaries bowed, grinding their teeth, reluctantly. They weren't warriors, just rats who recognized the strongest dog. They would return home, report that the throne was occupied. That blood had been shed. That the dragon had risen.

And with that, it was sealed. Not by law. Not by advice. Only by fear.

Later, when the hall was emptier, Merlin sat alone, the crow perched on the beam above him. He stared at the throne, the stone, the steps, the dark stains.

"Stolen," he muttered. "And every theft comes at a price."

The crow cawed. A short, harsh sound. He didn't need any more approval.

Night fell over the hall like a filthy blanket. The blood on the steps had dried, but the smell still hung in the air. The men had drunk again, shouted again, as if they could cover the stench with noise. But no matter how much wine flowed, the walls smelled of death.

Uther still sat on the throne. His cup never empty, his sword never far from his grasp. He grinned, laughed, and shouted orders into the room as if he were already master of all the land had to offer. And the men followed because they knew nothing else. A king was just a man who roared louder and struck harder than all the others.

Merlin stood aside, staff in hand, tired to the bone. He saw them drinking, how they shouted, how they pounded their fists on the tables. And he knew: This was no realm. This was a pub after midnight, where one person had the biggest knife and the others pretended it was all right.

Cathan stepped beside him, his face dark. "You know what you did, don't you?" "Yes," murmured Merlin. "I made the bastard king." "No," said Cathan, "he made himself king. You only gave him the vote."
Merlin laughed bitterly. "And what's worse? The knife in the hand—or the tongue that says the knife is right?"

Cathan remained silent. There was no answer.

The men in the hall cried again, "Pendragon! Pendragon!" Their voices echoed off the walls until they sounded more like a curse than a cheer. Uther rose, broad, heavy, blood and wine in his beard, and raised the banner.

"I am the dragon!" he roared. "And the dragon rules!"

The hall shook, swords clanged, men stamped as if they wanted to break the stone itself.

Merlin looked up at the roof where the crow sat, silent, black, unmoving. It stared at him, its eyes like two holes. His mind buzzed: You gave birth to him. You are the midwife of this realm.

He closed his eyes, saw blood again, saw the throne break, saw a sword in a king's chest. And he knew: everything that was being celebrated today was already dead. Only no one knew it yet.

He opened his eyes again, staring at Uther, grinning, drinking, shouting. A king made of theft, a king made of filth. And Merlin himself was part of it.

"Pendragon," he murmured. "A name that consumes everything. Including me."

The Night of Transformation

The feast was more of a roar than a celebration. The throne room was crammed with stinking bodies, the floor sticky with spilled wine, blood, and grease. Men lay half-unconscious on the benches, women flitted through the hall like shadows, snatches of music came from a bard who was more arguing with his lute than playing it. Everything was loud, dirty, raw—and that was exactly how Uther loved it.

He sat broadly on the throne, his sword at his side, his cup never empty. He roared again and again for more wine, more meat, more women, and his men ran as if their lives depended on it. Everyone laughed too loudly because no one wanted to be the first to fall silent.

Merlin sat off to the side, staff in hand. He didn't drink, didn't eat. He watched. The men shouted, but beneath all the noise lay a silence that only he heard—the humming of the earth, the whispering of the shadows. And within it, a pressure, a weight that had been growing heavier for days.

"Seer!" Uther's voice crashed across the hall, rough, heavy, already half-drunk. "Come here!"

All heads turned. The men grinned, curious, greedy. Merlin slowly rose and walked forward, feeling the stares stabbing like knives in his back.

Uther grinned broadly, wine running down his beard. "You sit here, talking of dragons, talking of kings, talking of blood. Words, words, words! But a king wants more than words. He wants to see."

He leaned forward, his eyes gray and sharp. "Show us your power, Seer. Let us see what makes you more than a man with a stick."

A murmur went through the hall. Men nudged each other, laughing, shouting, "Yes! Show us what you can do!" One yelled, "Turn yourself into a pig, then we'll have more meat!" Another, "Or into a woman, then the king can have you!" The laughter was dirty, hoarse, but underneath it lay fear.

Cathan stepped out of the shadows, half-standing in front of Merlin. "He's no buffoon. You have his word—isn't that enough for you?"

Uther growled. "Nothing is enough for me. A king doesn't trust in shadows, he trusts in evidence." He rose and descended the steps until he stood directly before Merlin. "So, seer—show us the dragon. Or show us nothing at all and die a fool."

Merlin felt his heart racing. The hall shook with cries of "Wonder! Wonder! Wonder!" Swords hammered on shields, the wood of the tables vibrated. It was a chorus that wanted to devour him.

The shadow voice whispered: Now. Show them what you are. Drop the mask. The earth hummed heavily: Don't. Every spell is guilt. Weight. Once cast, forever borne.

Merlin closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He felt the warmth of the fire, the hum of the earth, the whisper of the shadows. He remembered the river, the voices, the dragon in the smoke. Everything was there, everything waiting.

He opened his eyes. "You want to see?" His voice was calm, but it cut through the noise. "Then see."

He rammed the staff into the ground. A dull tremor rippled through the hall. Cups tipped, men stumbled, one fell sprawled. The laughter died down.

But Uther just grinned wider. "More."

Merlin gasped. He knew it would hurt. It would tear him apart. But the moment demanded it. He reached deeper, deeper into what had been calling him for so long. And it answered.

Pain shot through him, as if bones were breaking, muscles tearing, skin burning. He screamed and fell to his knees. His fingers cramped, his back arched. Sweat dripped, blood ran from his nose.

The hall stared, silent, the fire flickered.

And then it began.

The pain struck like a blow to the marrow. No clean spell, no luminous glitter, no divine gift. It was a breaking, a crashing, a tearing apart of everything human. Merlin screamed so loudly that the hall fell silent.

His fingers twisted, nails lengthened into claws, his skin stretched, cracked, turned gray, and darkened. His spine cracked as if someone were re-bending it piece by piece. He fell forward, his hands on the ground, his face contorted, his eyes burning.

The men stepped back, cups tipped, swords were drawn, but no one dared to come closer. One whispered, "He's becoming an animal." Another, "He already is one."

Merlin's body trembled, heaved, his shoulders grew, his voice was a growl. His breath steamed, the embers of the fire reflected in eyes that were no longer human—yellow, glowing, cold.

Cathan stared, his sword half-drawn, but he did nothing. He didn't just see magic—he saw his friend being torn apart. Pain was everywhere: in Merlin's scream, in the bending bones, in the trembling flesh.

The transformation wasn't a gift. It was a curse, a compulsion. A weight that crushed him until he no longer knew whether he was human, animal, or shadow.

And then he stood there. No longer a man. Something else. Taller, broader, his skin dark as earth, his limbs unnatural, his eyes a dazzling yellow. A direwolf, a beast of nightmares.

A scream rippled through the hall. Some fled, overturning benches, falling over one another. Others raised swords, the blades trembling. One screamed, "Kill him!" – and was immediately met with Uther's fist in the face.

Uther laughed. Loudly, raggedly, enthusiastically. "Behold him! My dragon! My wizard! Look what he is!"

His voice rose above the chaos. "No one kills him. No one touches him. He's mine!"

Merlin stood in the middle, his breath steaming, his muscles trembling. He heard everything twice – with ears that now heard too much, and with a heart beating too fast. He smelled fear, he tasted sweat, he saw every twitch, every movement.

The hall was a cage, full of men who didn't know whether to cheer or flee. Some fell to their knees, murmuring prayers, others stared at him as if he were death itself.

He wanted to scream, to shout that he was still himself. But his voice was no longer a word, just a growl, deep, rumbling. The echo rolled through the hall, freezing men.

And in that moment he knew: There was no turning back. The step had been taken. He was no longer just a seer. He was a magician. A being between worlds.

Uther stepped forward, no trace of fear, only that flickering glint in his eyes. "You are my miracle," he cried. "You are my victory. With you beside me, no one can take my throne!"

Merlin growled, his teeth bared, and felt the ground vibrate beneath him, as if the earth itself were turning away from him.

The hall was a cauldron of activity. Some men screamed, running to the door as if they could escape the night. Others knelt, their foreheads pressed to the floor, as if they had suddenly

realized they were serving a demon. And still others stared silently, their swords half-raised, caught between battle and prayer.

Merlin stood in the middle, his chest heaving. Every breath was a rumble. Sweat and blood dripped from him, his muscles trembled, his skin still not quite human, not quite animal. He felt everything twice—the dust beneath his claws, the smell of fear, the taste of iron in the air.

And he felt the weight. Every fiber of his being screamed that he shouldn't have done that. The earth hummed dully, as if warning him: What you were today, you are forever.

Uther approached, his grin wide as a slash across his face. No fear, just hunger. He raised his hands and cried out loudly: "Behold him! My wizard! My dragon in the flesh!"

His men stared at him, then back at Merlin. And because they were too cowardly to shout against their king, they did the only thing left: They cheered. Falsely, uncertainly, but loud enough that it sounded like the truth.

"Wizard! Wizard! Pendragon!" it echoed, a sickening echo, half fear, half enthusiasm.

Cathan stood at the edge, his hand on his sword, but he didn't move. His gaze was filled with pain. "Merlin... what have you done to yourself?" he murmured, barely audible over the noise.

Merlin heard it nonetheless. It cut deeper than the others' screams. He wanted to answer, wanted to say he had no choice. But his throat could no longer form words. Only a growl that sounded like both a no and a yes.

The bard in the corner dropped his lute and began to sing something, a song that sounded like an ancient incantation, but the words were wrong, twisted, ridiculous. The men laughed, cheered, stamped their feet. And above it all stood Uther, proud, broad, his cup held high.

"This is my kingdom!" he roared. "And it is proof that the gods have chosen me! No man, no lord, no shadow can take this from me!"

He grabbed Merlin's shoulder—or what was left of it. "You are mine, wizard. My tool, my weapon, my dragon."

Merlin felt the grip, hard, possessive. And deep inside, he felt something break. A part of him that had still believed he was free dissolved, falling into the shadows.

And there, in that darkness, he saw something: not Uther, not the men, not the throne. He saw himself, older, in chains, his eyes empty, the magic within him like a fire that had burned everything.

He closed his eyes, and for a moment he swayed. He could have torn Uther apart, here, now, in front of everyone. But he didn't. Instead, he let his breath hiss, his claws slide back, his skin become human again.

The men cheered as he stood upright again, half-man, half-shadow. Uther raised his arm like a victor's. "See, he is my wizard! And as long as he is with me, no one will take my throne!"

The hall shook with voices.

But Merlin knew: what he had shown today could not be taken back. He was no longer a seer. He was something else. Something he never wanted to be.

And the price would come.

The cheers died down slowly, like a fire that doesn't burn but smolders because no one wants to extinguish it. Men fell back onto their benches, tipped their cups, and shouted a few final curses into the darkness until, one by one, they drowned in the wine. Uther remained upright, drinking, grinning as if he had just devoured the world.

But Merlin staggered. The staff was the only thing holding him up. Every muscle trembled, every bone felt as if it had been ripped open. His breathing was shallow, his skin burned, his eyes burned even more. He wanted to scream, wanted to vomit, wanted to sleep—but instead, he stood there until the floor slipped away.

He fell, hitting the rocks hard. Everything went dark.

He didn't fall into nothingness, but into images. First blurry, then clearer than the hall itself. He saw a bed, covered in silk, candles flickering. A woman, beautiful, strong, her hair dark, her eyes full of fear and yet full of fire. She was screaming. Labor pains. Blood between her legs.

Beside her stood Uther. Younger, harder, even more cruel in his gaze. There was no pity in his eyes, only possession. He placed his hand on the child, barely born, who cried, louder than the woman, louder than anything else.

Merlin saw the child's face—not clear, not complete, just eyes, large, shining, full of destiny.

A name echoed in his mind: Arthur.

The vision tore, shifted. He saw a sword, half in stone, half in light. Hands, many hands, tried to grasp it, but all failed. Until the same eyes he had just seen touched it—and the sword flowed into his hand like water.

Then a round table, men and women, swords laid down, faces full of hope. But behind them: the dragon, large, roaring, shattering the circle with a single breath.

Merlin gasped in his dream, trying to push the images away, but they grew ever closer. He saw Uther again, this time older, heavier, his face hard, the sword in his chest. He saw the empire falling. And amidst it all, he himself stood, older, more tired, with chains around his hands, the magic like fire in his veins, consuming him.

A voice whispered—not earth, not shadows, not stars, but something new: "You are the watcher. You are the witness. And you will pay."

He screamed and woke up gasping for breath. Sweat clung to him, blood trickled from his nose. Cathan knelt beside him, holding him tight. "Merlin! Can you hear me?"

Merlin blinked, saw the hall again, men snoring, Uther laughing in raptures. Everything was there, everything real. And yet the name, the scream, the vision still vibrated in his skull.

“Arthur…” he whispered, barely audibly.

Cathan frowned. "What?" "He's coming," Merlin murmured. "A king greater than the one who now sits on the throne. But he comes from blood. And we will all pay."

The crow fluttered onto the beam, croaked once, sharply, as if putting the seal under Merlin's words.

He knew: The night had changed him. Not just his body, not just the way the men looked at him. His fate had also changed. He had seen what was coming. And he knew he couldn't stop it.

The morning came harsh and gray. No singing, no trumpets—only the sound of men vomiting from having dug too deep into the barrel. The hall smelled of cold grease, vomit, and iron. The smoke still hung under the roof like an old, stinking carpet.

Merlin lay against the wall, his staff across his chest. Every bone ached as if it had been struck with a hammer. His skin felt strange, thin, taut, full of splinters. When he closed his eyes, he could still hear the cracking of his vertebrae, the creaking of his muscles. The transformation was still inside him like a poison that wouldn't go away.

Cathan sat beside him, his hand on his sword as if guarding him. "You should have refused," he murmured. Merlin slowly turned his head. "And then?" His voice was rough, brittle. "Then they would have hanged me, and Uther would have found someone else to tell him lies."

Uther had long been awake. The man slept like a dog: short, restless, but never without energy. He stood in the middle of the hall, broad, heavy, with the dragon banner behind him. His gaze immediately fell on Merlin.

"There he is," he roared, making everyone who was still half asleep jump. "The Dragon Mage!"

The men, hungover, grumbled, clapped weakly, some muttered "Wizard." It wasn't real cheering, more an echo of last night's intoxication. But it was enough.

Uther stomped over, grabbed Merlin by the arm, and pulled him up as if he weren't a man but a tool. "Behold him! He is the proof! No king sits without a sign, and I have the greatest of them all!"

He raised Merlin's arm as if he had defeated a fighter in the arena and wanted to show it to the people. "My wizard, my dragon. No one will take my throne as long as he is by my side!"

Merlin swayed, gasped, felt pain hammering through his body. He wanted to object, wanted to say that he wasn't Uther's property. But his voice failed. Only a whisper came out: "I belong to no one."

Uther didn't hear. Or he didn't want to hear. He laughed, shaking Merlin until his knees buckled. "He's mine!" he repeated, and the men cheered, louder this time, because they knew silence was dangerous.

Later, when the hall emptied and only the stench remained, Uther released him. Merlin sank onto the bench, panting, his face in his hands.

Cathan placed a hand on his shoulder. "You have to go, Merlin. If you stay, he'll eat you. You're no longer human; he's turned you into a tool."

Merlin raised his head. His eyes were red, tired, but there was something new in them: a gleam, hard, sharp. "Leave? Where to? I've seen what's coming. I've seen what this realm gives birth to. If I leave, it will still happen. If I stay, maybe... maybe I can steer."

Cathan shook his head. "It'll break you." Merlin smiled weakly. "Perhaps. But better me than all of them."

Above them, the crow cawed loudly, three times. It fluttered across the hall and settled on the throne, directly above Uther's seat.

The men who saw it froze. Some made the sign of the cross, others muttered prayers.

Merlin stared at the bird. "See? Even the shadows choose their place."

Cathan cursed quietly. "Then we're doomed."

The night that followed was quieter than the last. No cheering, no singing, only the crackling of the fires outside the camp. Men snored, horses snorted, somewhere a cup clinked to the ground. The sky was clear, the moon hung cold and enormous over the river.

Merlin sat alone on the bank, his staff in the mud, his feet in the cold water. He still felt the pain in every bone, as if his body refused to remember being human again. The beast, the shadow creature, still lived within him—breathing beneath his skin, whispering in his bones.

He grasped the earth, letting it run through his fingers. It was heavy, black, full of voices. The shadows crept closer, like dogs waiting for a piece of meat. And above him the stars sparkled, bright, vast, merciless.

He felt three forces pulling at him:

- the earth, deep, heavy, ancient.
- the shadows, greedy, hissing, wild.
- the stars, distant, cold, unapproachable.

And he – right in the middle.

"What do you want from me?" he whispered. His voice was weak, but the water carried it on, as if the river itself were listening.

The earth hummed: You are my weight. My voice. My memory. The shadows whispered: You are my flesh. My knife. My hunger. The stars sparkled silently, then a voice, quiet as ice: You are my witness. My eye. My betrayal.

Merlin pressed his hands to his temples. "I am not yours. I am me."

But the shadows' laughter echoed, deep and greedy. The earth rumbled, heavy and inescapable. The stars were silent, and the silence was worse than any words.

The water rippled in front of him. He looked into it—and saw not his face, but another: older, paler, with chains around his arms, his skin sunken, his eyes empty. Himself, but broken, wasted, a prisoner.

Then the picture changed. He saw fire over a city, banners falling, men dying. A sword stuck in a stone, abandoned, lonely. A child touching it, and an empire born from ashes.

And then – darkness. Only darkness.

He screamed, fell back, the water splashed. His chest heaved, he gasped for air. The river fell silent again, smooth, innocent, as if nothing had happened.

Cathan came running, sword in hand, breathing heavily. "Merlin! What's going on?"

Merlin was still staring into the water, his hands shaking. "I saw... myself. In chains. A realm in fire. And a boy... a boy carrying everything."

Cathan knelt beside him and placed his hand on his shoulder. "Then you have to stay strong. Otherwise, all this will consume you before the boy is even born."

Merlin laughed bitterly, quietly. "Perhaps that's the price. Perhaps it's meant to be: that I burn so he can shine."

The crow flew above them, its cawing piercing the night. It circled the river as if keeping watch.

Merlin lowered his gaze back into the water, but this time he saw only himself—young, tired, torn. For a moment, he was relieved. Then he realized: this face, too, would disappear someday.

The river had fallen silent, and the camp was asleep. Only Merlin remained awake. He sat in the mud, his knees drawn up, his staff beside him as if he could use it like a crutch to keep from falling over. His breathing was shallow, every breath a scratch in his chest.

Cathan had finally lain down, exhausted, his sword still within reach. Only the crow remained, perched high on a branch, its black body a single shadow against the moon. It stared at him, motionless, as if it itself were a statue of the night.

Merlin closed his eyes. The throbbing in his skull didn't subside. His body still vibrated, as if the transformation had left him half here, half here. He no longer felt human. Too much hunger in his bones, too much shadow beneath his skin.

He thought of the men in the hall who had cheered him on as if he were a juggler. He thought of Uther, who had held him up like a trophy. And he thought of the visions that haunted him: Arthur, the sword, the throne, the blood.

"I'm not the same anymore," he murmured into the night. "No longer a seer. No longer a human. But not a god either. Something in between. And that's exactly where I'll rot."

The earth hummed, deeply, like an answer: Between the worlds. The shadows giggle: That's where you belong. The stars flickered silently, but he felt their cold eye.

He put his hands over his face and groaned. "I never wanted to be that. I just wanted to... understand."

But the night gave him no mercy.

Slowly, with effort, he stood up. His body swayed, his legs felt like wood. He took the staff, leaned on it, and looked into the river.

"If I leave now," he whispered, "everything would be easier. I could disappear, and no one would find me. But I've seen what's coming. And if I don't stay, it will be worse. Uther will burn, the realm will burn, and Arthur... Arthur will die before he lives."

The crow cawed loudly as if it had confirmed him.

Merlin took a deep breath. "Then I'll stay. But I know now: I no longer belong to myself. I am that which walks between the worlds. And I will never return."

He turned away from the river and walked back to camp, step by step, heavy as stone. Behind him, the water rippled softly, as if it had heard everything and would one day recount it.

The crow circled above him.

Arthur's birth

The rain fell like nails from the sky, hard, slanting, merciless. It cut through the fortress courtyard, ran in grooves down the steps, and carried with it the filth of the men who had pretended all day that there was some kind of order. The night smelled of horses, wet leather, and honest greed.

Uther stood beneath the eave like an animal that had been chained too long. His hands opened and closed as if trying to grasp a neck they didn't yet have. "She's mine," he said, his voice just slightly deeper than thunder.

Merlin remained silent. He felt the rain in his bones, felt the earth humming beneath the stones—not in agreement, not in disagreement, just heavy. The crow sat above them in the rafters, its head tilted, as if writing everything in an invisible book: Place: Tintagel Fortress. Time: bad. Intent: even worse.

"Igraine," Uther pressed. "She is another man's wife, yes. And?" He stepped closer, wine and iron on his breath. "You are the wizard. You make doors where there are walls. Make me a door."

Cathan stood in the shadows, one hand on his sword, the other around his anger. "She is the wife of Gorlois," he said quietly. "If you take her, you won't just take a bed. You'll start a war."

"I start wars at breakfast," Uther growled. "I need a queen tonight."

The word remained in the rain, heavy as a stone. Merlin raised his eyes. "You don't want a queen," he said, "you want her. And what you're asking for isn't a request. It's theft by another name."

Uther smiled crookedly, his lips too hard to soften. "Tell me, wizard: Will a king be born of her?"

Merlin could have lied. He could have remained silent. But the night had already sunk its teeth into him, and the images came, whether he wanted them or not: A bed, silk, candle smoke. A woman with eyes like winter water. A scream, not pleasure, not pain—destiny. And later: a child cutting through the air with its first breath.

"Yes," he said tonelessly. "From it comes what you want. And something greater than you. But it begins in lies. What begins in lies demands double interest."

Uther grabbed his arm, not tenderly, but as a man grasps a hammer. "Then lie for me."

Merlin tore himself away. "You want me to turn you into someone else." "Into her husband," said Uther. "That's how you walk through doors that other men lock."

Cathan cursed quietly. "That's blasphemy." "Blasphemy is a word of the weak," Uther snarled. "Wizard—you can do it. Do it."

The rain pelted harder, as if the sky itself wanted to drown out the conversation. Merlin closed his eyes, and the voices came:

The earth: Weight remains. Even on a bed. The shadows: Light work. A face is only clay when the night is soft. The stars – cold, distant: Witness. Not judge.

He opened his eyes. "If I do, there are conditions." Uther laughed. "You give me conditions?" "I give them to him who holds the world for himself," said Merlin. "First: you go alone. No man, no guard. Second: you do not take it like a robber. You go like one who asks for what is not his. Third: if a child comes, it is not yours. It belongs to the land."

Uther narrowed his eyes. "The land?" "That which is greater than your hunger," said Merlin. "Say yes, or go out into the rain and bang your head against the wall. Both are like you."

A long breath, then another. Uther's jaw clenched as if he were trying to bite a stone into bread. "Yes. All three."

"I don't believe you," said Cathan. "Nor I," said Merlin. "But the night is short."

He led Uther into the empty storeroom, where the roof was lower and the rain trickled through the cracks in drops. He placed him in the middle of the wet dust. "Stand."

Uther stood. He was all body, all will, all "I take." Merlin looked at him and sensed the effort that lay before him: not to shape a face, but to bend a destiny without breaking it.

He took the staff and inserted the tip into the mud brick. "Give me its measurements," he whispered to the earth. "Give me its smoke," he whispered to the fire in the pit. "Give me its echo," he said to the shadows licking beneath the door.

The air became heavier, as if it were turning into bread. The rain outside suddenly sounded distant, like a memory. Merlin sucked in his breath, felt the runes in his teeth, which no one saw but everyone was gnawing on. He raised his left hand—open—and drew four lines in the damp dust: north, south, east, west. Then the fifth: between.

"Speak his name," he said. Uther spat. "Gorlois."

The name rolled like a stone. Merlin placed his right hand on Uther's forehead. Cold. Hard. A forehead that had passed through walls too many times.

"What you want," murmured Merlin, "shall carry you today. Not as a right, not as a blessing—as a mask. And masks are heavy."

The smoke in the room grew thicker. It crept into Uther's hair, his beard, his eyes. The shadows stretched and settled on his shoulders. The earth beneath his feet made a shallow sound, like an animal being prodded with a stick.

Uther's face twitched. Not like wax, not like water—like skin remembering what it once might have been. His nose narrowed, his mouth harder, his eyes took on that glazed look that belongs to men who have said "mine" too often. Another man stood there. Not quite, not completely—but enough that a candle would light wrong, enough that a woman might believe on a wrong night.

"It'll last until dawn," Merlin said. Sweat ran down his spine. "After that, it'll fall off you like wet ash. And if you try to keep the mask on, it'll eat your face."

Uther felt his cheeks, his forehead, his chin. His fingers didn't tremble. "I'll take what I need before morning comes."

Cathan stepped forward, his hand on the hilt. "Listen to the one part of your promise you might be able to salvage: Go like a supplicant."

Uther looked at him—through the strange face. "I walk like a man. Nothing more, nothing less."

Merlin stepped between them. "One more thing: You may say her name. Not mine. Not the dragon's. Hers."

For a single breath, a single breath, there was something in Uther's eyes that almost seemed like hesitation. "Igraine," he said softly. And in the word lay the storm of the night, the throbbing beneath his skin, the hunger that had made him great and small at once.

Merlin nodded. "Then go."

Uther turned toward the door. The rain greeted him like applause, cold, indifferent.

When he was gone, Merlin slumped down against the wall, crouching. The air in the room tasted of metal and earth. The crow jumped from the beam, landed on the barrel, and tilted its head.

"Say it," Cathan murmured. "Tell me that was a mistake."

Merlin laughed toothlessly. "Mistakes are the only certainty." He rubbed his eyes. "But the child will come one way or another. Tonight was just the key."

“A key dipped in blood,” Cathan growled.

Outside, thunder ripped open the sky. For a blinking moment, the fortress stood as if carved from bone against the light. Merlin felt the stars move—not much, but enough to make a seer sick.

He raised his staff, stood, swayed, but still stood. "Come," he said. "We're keeping watch. Not at the woman's door—at the door of destiny. When it opens, I want to be the first to see what comes in."

They stepped out into the rain. The courtyard was empty except for the wind. From somewhere came the sound of a guard, half singing, half shivering.

Merlin stopped and placed his hand on the stone of the wall. Warm, despite the cold. "Do you hear?" he asked.

Cathan listened. "Just water." "More than water," said Merlin. "It's the beat of a heart not yet born."

The crow let out a short sound, as if counting. One. Two. Three.

"Until dawn," whispered Merlin. "Then everything falls from their faces. Even the night."

The rain didn't answer. But the earth hummed, very softly, as if remembering how to hum lullabies when no one is worthy to sing them.

Night tightened like a noose around the walls of Tintagel. Rain and storm beat against the battlements as if the sky itself wanted to tear apart the lie that had just entered the gate. Uther, now bearing the face of Gorlois, moved like a man who knew everything was against him—except the magic that sustained him.

Candles still burned in the hall; the servants ran, uncertain because they didn't see the death of their master, but felt the emptiness he had left behind. Some glanced as Uther passed them. They saw Gorlois—and yet they didn't. Something in his step, in his gaze, in his smell was wrong. But the night and the wine had numbed their senses, and no one dared to put their unease into words.

Igraine sat in her chambers, her hands wrapped around her stomach, the fire small, the candles almost extinguished. She felt the world changing, even if she didn't know how. Her eyes were tired, full of questions no one answered. She heard footsteps in the hall, heavy, determined, and her heart clenched.

The door opened. And there he stood. Gorlois. Or what she thought he was.

"You?" she whispered, her voice wavering between relief and disbelief. Uther—Gorlois—stepped closer, his hand outstretched toward her. "I," he said simply. Not another word.

Something in his gaze was different, harder, greedier, but she wasn't looking for doubts. She was looking for support in a night that had taken everything. And she let him be.

Outside, in the courtyard, Merlin stood with Cathan under the rain. He saw the candles flickering, felt the stream of shadows moving like dogs scenting meat. His hands trembled, not from the weather, but from knowledge.

"It's happening," he murmured. Cathan spat into the mud. "And you allow it." "I hold the scales," Merlin replied. "The child must come. But the price... the price will find us all."

Cathan snorted. "This isn't a scale. This is a deal. And every deal with lies ends in blood."

Merlin was silent. He could hear the cry, not yet in the air, but already in time—the first cry of a child not yet conceived, but already destined.

Inside, it wasn't an act of love. It was hunger, possession, destiny formed in flesh. Uther took, Igraine gave, unaware that she was deceived. And the night itself seemed to close in around them, heavy, thick, as if it were both witness and judge.

Merlin turned his face away, as if he himself had been watching. "Born in lies," he whispered. "Conceived in lies. And yet... he comes."

The crow fluttered up, perched on the battlements, and cawed harshly three times. The sound echoed through the fortress like a judgment.

As the candles in Igraine's chambers went out, Merlin knew: the seed had been sown. Not in peace, not in purity—but in deception. And everything that would grow from it would carry that root within it.

He looked at Cathan, whose face was as gray as the sky. "Hold on tight," he said. "For in nine moons, a scream will come that will tear this realm apart and rebuild it."

Cathan shook his head. "Or a scream that will finally shatter everything."

The night passed, the storm only slowly abating. Uther returned at dawn, his face still that of Gorlois—until the sun crept over the battlements. Then the mask fell away like a dirty rag. His own face returned, hard, victorious, without remorse.

Merlin saw him and knew: the realm had been conceived not by honor, but by deception. And a child born of this night would forever carry the shadow within.

The moons came and went. The storms subsided, then returned, and with each change, Igraine's belly grew. What had begun as a secret soon became a visible weight that no one could ignore.

In Tintagel, the servants, the domestics, the guards whispered. "Too fast," said some. "Too strange," others. Some claimed the child was not Gorlois's blood, but sent by the gods. Others swore it was sired by the devil himself. Everyone knew something, and no one knew the truth.

Igraine remained silent. Her eyes had become emptier since that night, emptier yet full of radiance. She didn't speak about it, didn't ask where this child came from. But she sensed it was more than flesh. When she placed her hands on her stomach at night, something trembled beneath her skin, as if the child already had a voice.

Merlin watched her from afar. He never entered her chambers, never spoke to her. But he felt every stirring, as if her body were a part of his own. Sometimes in the night he heard the child's breathing, even though it was far away. And sometimes in dreams he saw eyes looking at him—wide, clear, full of light.

Cathan often found him by the river, ramming his staff into the ground and staring into the water. "You're getting sick of it," he said. "I'm already sick," Merlin muttered. "Sick of knowledge." "Then let it go," Cathan snarled. "Let fate be fate." Merlin shook his head. "There's no 'letting go' anymore. I'm already trapped in it."

The fortress itself began to bear signs. Crows gathered on the battlements, more than usual. The women tending the fire swore that the flames sometimes glowed green, as if something else were peering through them. The dogs howled at night, for no reason, for long, plaintive pauses.

And again and again the whisper: This child will not be ordinary.

Once, Igraine stood on the balcony, her belly heavy, and above her, a star ripped through the sky. A streak of light, swift but so bright that the entire household cried out. One of the old servants fell to his knees, murmuring prayers. But Igraine placed her hand on her belly and whispered, "I know."

Uther came and went, a man more interested in wars than children. He boasted, spoke loudly of an heir, a king who would carry on his blood. But in his eyes there was no wonder, no doubt. Only possession.

Merlin watched him. He knew that Uther believed his future son would consolidate his kingdom. But Merlin had seen something different. He had seen a sword that did not belong to Uther. A name greater than Pendragon.

With each month, Merlin became more silent. He heard the earth humming, deeper, slower, heavier. The shadows laughed more often, hissing, greedily. But the stars remained silent. This silence was the worst—as if they were holding their breath, waiting for the scream that was bound to come.

Cathan once asked him, "And if the child dies at birth? If it never takes its first breath?" Merlin looked at him, his eyes tired. "Then the kingdom dies with it. Because it has already begun to revolve around him."

In the ninth month, the air over Tintagel was taut like a taut rope. Every footstep echoed louder, every glance lingered too long. Even the servants no longer whispered. It was as if everything—stone, water, animal, human—was waiting for the same sound.

And one night, when the moon was half hidden, the screams began.

The night began with a scream that silenced even the dogs. Not a scream of terror, but that raw, deep sound only a woman emits when new life surges through her body. Igraine writhed in the sheets, sweat and tears on her forehead, her hair wet, her hands gripping the bedposts.

The midwives hurried around, carrying sheets, bowls, hot water, and prayers, murmuring more for themselves than for the woman in labor. Some wept even before the child was born, afraid of what would be said about it.

"Press!" cried the eldest. "Breathe, Mistress, breathe!" Igraine screamed again, her voice echoing through the stone corridors of the fortress. Servants paused, guards looked at each other, some made the sign of the cross. A child born on a night filled with whispers could not be ordinary.

Merlin stood outside in the courtyard. He heard the scream not only with his ears, but with the earth itself. The ground vibrated as if the castle had acquired a heart. He leaned heavily on the staff, sweat on his brow, his eyes closed.

“It begins,” he murmured.

Beside him, Cathan stared up at the tower, his jaw clenched. "Listen to that. Sounds like war." "Every birth is war," Merlin replied. "War between flesh and destiny."

In the birthing chamber, candle wax dripped onto the stones, the fire burned unsteadily. A midwife exclaimed, "Lord in heaven!" as the water flowed—reddish, heavy, as if the blood itself had decided to play along.

"More wipes!" another screamed. "The baby is coming!"

Igraine clenched her teeth, her face a single, soundless scream. Then, with a jolt, the silence broke—the child's cry, bright, sharp, piercing, as if it had the lungs of a king in its first breath.

The women paused, their children wrapped in cloths, their hands trembling. Some fell to their knees, others turned their faces away.

Outside, the wind howled. Crows circled above the battlements, their cries mingling with the wind until it sounded like a choir. In the sky, a star burst into flames, tracing a line of fire across the night.

Merlin opened his eyes, his face pale. "He's here."

Cathan saw the star, saw the crows. "And that's supposed to be a blessing?" Merlin shook his head. "Blessing, curse—both are the same if it's too big for humans."

Uther entered the courtyard, his face shining with wine and triumph. He heard the shouting and raised his arms in the air. "My son!" he roared. "My heir!"

Merlin turned slowly to him, his eyes dark. "Not your son," he said softly, "but the son of the land." Uther laughed at him, loudly, harshly. "The land is mine! So the boy is mine too!"

Merlin remained silent. He knew that Uther had already lost the child because he wanted to possess it.

Up in the tower, the midwife cradled the newborn, bloody, screaming, but alive. She held it out to Igraine, who smiled faintly, her hands trembling.

The child calmed down when she touched him. His eyes opened for the first time—large, bright, strangely clear. For a moment, it seemed as if he weren't looking at his mother, but far, far through the walls, through the rain, straight out into the night—and when his eyes found Merlin standing in the courtyard below, it stabbed him like a dagger.

He almost fell to his knees, the staff trembling in his hand. "Arthur," he whispered. "You're here."

The child's cry had barely died away when Uther was already trudging up the stairs, wine on his breath, bloodlust in his eyes, as if he himself had gone through labor. The guards who stood in his way backed away like dogs who know—or fear—their master.

He pushed open the door to Igraine's chamber, and the smell of blood, sweat, and hot iron hit him. The midwives froze, one almost dropping the child. Igraine lay exhausted in bed, pale, but with a faint smile, clutching the small body against her chest.

"My son!" thundered Uther. He grabbed the child, roughly, demandingly, as if it were prey. Igraine clung for a moment, her fingers weak but full of instinct. "He is mine," she gasped, "I bore him."

Uther snatched the child high above his head, as if to show it to the heavens. "Look! Arthur Pendragon, heir of the dragon!"

Merlin had followed him, quietly, leaning heavily on his staff. As Uther held the child, Merlin saw for a moment not an infant, but a sword—bloody, bright, unbroken. And behind it, the image: battle, scream, river. Arthur dying, as he had already seen him.

His stomach tightened. He whispered, barely audibly, "You call him Pendragon... but the name will break him."

Beside him, Cathan pressed his lips together. "Everything Uther touches corrupts."

The child began to scream, loudly, shrilly, as if it sensed it was in the wrong hands. Uther laughed and roared over the screaming: "Do you hear that? A king who gives orders with his very first breath!"

He pressed the infant back into the midwife's arms, almost carelessly, as if it were a trophy to be treasured. "He will grow, he will rule, he will secure my kingdom. And no one, do you hear? No one will take him away from me!"

Merlin's gaze darkened. "No one can possess a human, Uther. Especially not one greater than you."

Uther turned around, his face red. "You dare?" "No," Merlin replied calmly. "I'll say it. Whether you listen or not is all the same."

Igraine closed her eyes and pulled the child to her again as the midwife returned it. Tears streamed down her cheeks, not knowing whether they were tears of joy or sorrow. "Arthur," she whispered, and in her voice there was a truth that no king, no wizard could change.

Merlin heard that whisper, and it cut deeper than Uther's shout. Arthur. Not Pendragon, not heir, not possession. Just a name, pure, uncorrupted.

The crows outside cried louder, as if picking up on the name. A gust of wind blew through the chamber, making the candles flicker. For a moment, the light was such that Uther's shadow on the wall looked like a dragon—open-mouthed, devouring the child.

Merlin shuddered. "The dragon will eat him if we don't protect him."

Cathan placed a hand on his shoulder. "Then we'll protect him." Merlin nodded, his eyes on Arthur. If I can, he thought, if I'm strong enough.

The fortress had fallen silent. Only the soft wailing of the newborn penetrated the corridors, a thin, trembling sound that carried more weight than the drums of a thousand battles. Men snored in the halls, exhausted by wine and excitement. Igraine finally slept, the child clutched to her breast, tears dried on her cheeks.

Merlin sat down in the courtyard, his back against the cold stone. The night was clear, the storm gone, the sky full of stars, as if heaven itself had held a coronation. The crow sat on the well's edge, its head buried deep in its feathers, but awake—always awake.

Merlin breathed heavily. His body felt emptier than ever, as if birth itself had emptied him as well. But within this emptiness, something else grew: a vision that pressed itself like a wedge between his temples.

He saw Arthur, older, strong, his hands gripping a sword that burned brighter than fire. Men around him, women, children—all looked at him as if he were the morning itself. The hope of an entire realm lay on his shoulders, and he carried it, not with ease, but with a heaviness that bent him.

Then he saw Camelot. Towers, bright, shining in the light, voices of joy, music, feasting. A realm that, for a moment, seemed so perfect that Merlin could hardly breathe. He felt warmth, light, unity—a dream of stone and flesh.

But dreams don't last.

The image tilted. The sky darkened, the walls of Camelot crumbled, smoke and fire rose. Voices screamed, swords clashed. The Round Table shattered, the men who were once brothers raised blades against each other. Blood ran across the round table, so red it looked like a circle of flames.

Arthur stood in the middle, older, more tired, his crown crooked, his eyes filled with despair. In his hands was Excalibur—not raised, but heavy, as if he were about to drop it.

And then: the final battle. By the River Camlann. Blood in the water, bodies in the mud. Arthur on the ground, sword through his side, his breath gasping. Merlin knelt beside him, older, more torn, his hands useless.

Merlin's eyes widened. Sweat beaded on his forehead, his heart racing. The courtyard was still silent, the sky clear, the crow motionless. But the images echoed within him as if they were burned into his bones.

"He brings hope," he whispered. "And he brings doom. Both. Always both."

Cathan stepped out of the shadows, his face tired but alert. "You saw again." Merlin nodded slowly. "I saw the realm. Beautiful. Strong. Bright. And I saw it fall."

Cathan sat down next to him, pulling his cloak tighter. "Then tell me, wizard—why protect him at all if he's only going to lose everything?"

Merlin closed his eyes, heard the child's distant cry, thin, clear, like a knife. "Because he'll give everything first. And sometimes a dream is enough, even if he dies. Maybe that's all people have—a dream before they shatter."

The crow raised its head and looked at him, its eyes gleaming in the starlight. A sound, rough and deep, echoed across the yard.

Merlin nodded slowly. "Yes. I understand. He's not just a curse or a blessing. He's both. And both will come, whether we like it or not."

The sky was already beginning to pale, a gray glow behind the walls heralded the dawn. The night had been long, full of screams, blood, and omens—and Merlin knew that at its end, he would no longer be the same.

He slowly stood up, his staff heavy in his hand, his bones stiff as if after a battle. Before him lay Tintagel, wet with rain, silent with sleep. Only the soft whimpering of the newborn still emerged from the chambers. This sound cut through stone and darkness as if it were more powerful than anything men could build.

Merlin closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Images rushed back: Camelot, bright as a dream; Camelot, burning like hell. Arthur, shining like the sun; Arthur, dying in the mud. Everything lay on top of each other like shards in his mind.

Cathan stepped beside him, wordless, his face hard but his eyes questioning. "And?"

"He will be great," murmured Merlin. "He will raise the realm like no one before him. But he will also tear it down—or it will tear him down. Both are the same."

"Then let him die while he's still a child," Cathan said quietly, bitterly, wearily. "End his fate before it begins."

Merlin turned his head, his eyes as dark as the earth itself. "No. He is more than Uther's lie, more than my magic. He is the bond that holds the island together, even if it tears it apart. I will protect him. Until the end. Even if it breaks me."

The crow fluttered from the battlements, circling the courtyard as if it had heard every word. Its cawing echoed like a seal.

Merlin leaned on the staff, looking up at the sky. "I swear it," he whispered. "I will guide him, I will protect him. And when the day comes that he falls—it will be me who bears the weight. I, not he."

The wind blew across the courtyard, cool and sharp. It felt like an answer.

When the sun finally kissed the walls of Tintagel, Arthur lay asleep in Igraine's arms, tiny, warm, unsuspecting. He suckled milk, not fate. He was only a child—and yet already more than all the men around him.

Merlin looked at him one last time before leaving the room. "Arthur," he murmured, "you are hope. And you are doom. And I am your witness until the last stone falls."

Then he turned away and walked out, staff in hand, shoulders heavy.

The night of birth was over. But the king's journey had begun.

The Sword in the Stone

The death of the Dragon King was not an end, but a departure into the abyss. No sooner had Uther Pendragon breathed his last than the lords pounced like dogs on a carcass. Each bellowed that he was the true heir. Each raised his banner, as if a piece of cloth could fill the emptiness left behind by the dead king.

The streets were filled with blood. Villages changed hands three times in one week. Men died, not for an empire, but for the hunger of every petty prince who wanted to be "king." Women burned down houses just so no enemy could sleep in them. Children starved because the granaries were emptied before they could even get a bowl.

A kingdom without a king was not a kingdom. It was a slaughterhouse.

Merlin wandered through this chaos, his cloak heavy with rain and mud. He saw men with spears in their hands, more hungry than brave. He heard priests preaching that God had left the throne free to test souls. And he saw lords entrenched in castles while outside, the earth itself wept.

Cathan walked by his side, taciturn, his hand on his sword, as if he knew every shadow could be a robber. "This is the end," he said one evening by the fire. "Uther has torn a hole, and it will never be filled."

Merlin shook his head. "Every hole will be filled. The only question is with what. With blood—or with a sign."

"A sign?" Cathan laughed bitterly. "Words don't save a kingdom." "No," Merlin murmured, "but they bind it. Words and symbols are chains stronger than steel."

He began to listen—not to the men, but to the forces that lay deeper. The earth rumbled restlessly, discontentedly. The shadows whispered louder, greedily; they smelled the blood and wanted more. And the stars... they stood still, cold, as if holding their breath.

Merlin knew: a new king must come. But none of the lords was worthy. Not the strongest, not the richest, not the loudest. If they were allowed to do as they pleased, they would tear the island to pieces until only ash remained.

So he had to intervene. Not as a fighter, not as a ruler. But as a magician.

One night, when the moon was barely more than a shard in the sky, Merlin rode alone into the ancient forest. Cathan wanted to accompany him, but Merlin just shook his head. "This is no place for two."

The forest absorbed him like a belly, dark, damp, full of breath. He rode to a clearing where an old stone stood, half sunk into the ground, covered in moss, but older than any castle, perhaps older than any memory.

Merlin dismounted and placed his hand on the stone. Cold. Heavy. Full of history. "You will be my altar," he whispered. "Not for gods. For the realm."

He took his sword, a simple thing, not magnificent, not regal. But he knew it wasn't about the metal. It was about what he put into it.

He knelt before the stone, carved runes into the earth—lines for the four winds, a circle for the sun, a cross for the weight of the earth. Then he spoke the words the shadows had taught him, the stars had forced to whisper.

The earth trembled softly, as if holding its breath. The shadows retreated, suspicious. And a star, far above, flickered briefly—a sign that they, too, were watching.

Merlin took the sword, raised it high, and rammed it into the stone with all his might. A crunch, a crack, a sound like broken bones. The metal disappeared, deep down, until only the hilt was visible.

He leaned heavily on the staff, sweat running down his forehead. "No one will pull it," he muttered. "No one—except the one it's intended for."

He stayed in the clearing for a long time, until dawn. Then he rode back, silent, tired, and empty. But there was something new in his eyes: the certainty that the realm now had a touchstone. No lord could call himself king until he drew his sword.

It was a game with time. A game with fate. And Merlin knew: The boy—Arthur—wasn't ready yet. But the world would wait.

News of the sword spread faster than fire through dry straw. First a whisper from lumberjacks who found the clearing. Then a murmur in the taverns that the beer was making them stronger. Finally, a cry in the halls of the lords: A sword that no one can pull from the stone!

The men smelled of power like dogs smell of blood. Each saw the sword as his own throne.

So they came. One by one, banners fluttering, swords at their hips, faces full of pride. The clearing became a vanity fair. Bonfires burned, horses neighed, servants polished armor as if the gleam impressed fate.

Merlin stood off to the side, his staff driven into the ground, his hood pulled low over his face. Cathan beside him simply growled. "They come like flies to a piece of meat." "That's the idea," Merlin replied. "Let them try. Let them fail. Every blow that doesn't move the stone makes the mark bigger."

The first was Lord Argan, a bear of a man. He laughed, rubbed his hands, and reached for his sword. With a grunt, he drew, his tendons swelling, sweat dripping. The sword didn't move a bit. After a while, he gasped and stepped back, furious, his fingers sore.

The crowd laughed, first quietly, then loudly. Argan cursed the stone, spat, and stomped away.

Next was Lord Mabon, thin, with eyes like a fox. He tried his hand at cunning: twisting, wiggling, and tugging at an angle. But the sword remained cold, unmoving. His smile faded, and he drew his hand back as if he had been burned.

"It's enchanted!" he cried. "Of course," murmured Cathan. "And you're a fool who thought cunning could break a spell."

Several knights arrived, all resplendent, with coats of arms and trumpets. They knelt dramatically, recited prayers, kissed the hilt, and pulled—until their arms trembled, their faces turned red. Nothing. One almost broke his shoulder when he pulled too hard.

The crowd, which had now gathered, laughed louder. "The strongest can't do it! The most cunning can't either!" They began to make bets about who would be next.

Merlin watched, unmoved. But inside him, the earth hummed contentedly. Every failed attempt was another nail driven into the grave of the false kings.

Then a priest came, haughty, his chest covered with crosses. "If it is God's will," he cried, "then he will give it to me!" He grasped the sword, prayed aloud, and drew it with a trembling voice. Nothing.

When he gave up, someone from the crowd shouted, "Perhaps God wants someone else!" The laughter was piercing. The priest walked away, pale.

The days passed. More and more men tried: princes, warriors, robbers, priests. Each failed. And the more failed, the more the myth grew. The sword in the stone became the focal point.

Merlin stood by, watching as the hunger in the men's eyes grew, not less. "They don't understand," he murmured. "They think it's about strength. But the sword doesn't ask for muscle. It asks for truth."

Cathan snorted. "Then it'll be a long wait."

And so the sword waited. And Merlin knew: The right one wasn't here yet. But he would come.

The clearing had transformed. What had once been a quiet place, surrounded by trees and old stones, was now a market, a festival, a grotesque spectacle. Merchants set up stalls, selling wine and meat, amulets and cheap holy images. Jugglers performed, beggars begged, children ran among the knights' feet.

The sword in the stone stood in the center, like an altar around which a people gathered, not praying but gawking. Everyone who came wanted to have their hand on the handle, wanted to say, "I tried." The glory of failure was better than no glory at all.

Some tried it laughing, red-faced, with wine in their bellies. Others prayed earnestly before laying their fingers. All failed. The sword remained as it was: motionless, cold, unyielding.

Merlin stood at the edge, his hood pulled low over his face. Cathan beside him, arms crossed, spat on the ground. "A fair. They're turning your sign into a drinking game." "Let them," said Merlin. "Every attempt makes the miracle greater." "Miracle?" Cathan growled. "I see only fools and traders." Merlin smiled thinly. "And soon we'll see a king."

The lords argued, almost fighting, over whose turn it was. Sometimes they even drew lots, as if it were a bet, not a kingdom. Once, one of them pulled on his sword so hard that he fell backward, hit his head, and lay unconscious. The people laughed uproariously, as if it were a game.

But amidst the laughter, something else was heard: a whisper that grew quietly. Perhaps the sword wasn't meant for her. Perhaps it was waiting for someone else.

One morning, when the fog hung thick and the merchants were just setting up their wares, a boy arrived. Not finely dressed, not in armor. A simple boy, barely more than a boy, thin, with alert eyes. He carried a bundle of wood on his back, trudging barefoot across the wet ground.

No one paid any attention to him. He was too inconspicuous. But Merlin saw him immediately. His eyes burned when he heard the footsteps, felt the breath.

"There," he whispered. Cathan frowned. "Just a boy." "Exactly," said Merlin. "Just a boy."

Arthur—for that was his name for a long time, even though most people just called him "the boy"—stepped close to the stone. He stood there, his head tilted, as if he were contemplating not a miracle, but a tool someone had forgotten.

He put down the bundle of wood and approached cautiously. The people laughed and nudged each other. "Now that kid wants to try!" someone shouted. "Get the levers, we'll pull him out right away!"

Arthur barely heard. His eyes were fixed on the sword, and something in his face was so serious that even the laughter subsided.

Merlin held his breath. The earth hummed, the shadows whispered, and the stars—the stars sparkled brighter.

“It begins,” he said.

Arthur stood before the stone, laughter at his back, the mist on his face. For him, this was no sanctuary, no test, no divine riddle. It was simply a sword. And he needed one because his had become blunt, an old iron sword that could barely split a branch.

He placed his hand on the handle. Not reverently, not with a prayer—simply the way a boy places his hand on a tool he's about to use. The people roared: "Come on, pull it out, little hero!" One whistled shrilly, another yelled: "If you can do it, you'll have my horse!" Laughter rippled across the clearing.

Arthur pulled.

And the sword slid out. No jerking, no wrestling, no blood in the veins. It was like lifting a twig from water. The steel gleamed, bright, clear, free.

Silence.

The laughter stopped as if someone had ripped out their tongues. Men with broad shoulders, priests with fat bellies, lords with golden chains – everyone stared. Only the mist still moved, hovering between them like a breath.

Arthur held the sword in his hand, turning it as if testing its authenticity. His face was astonished, but not proud. It was the look of a boy who had found something that suited him without even looking for it.

“I…” he began, but the words stuck.

Merlin stood at the edge, his hand gripping the staff tighter. Within him, the earth, shadows, and stars hummed—louder, brighter, deeper than ever before. Everything sang, everything pointed toward this moment.

"Yes," he murmured. "It's you."

Cathan stared as if he couldn't believe it. "A boy. A damned boy." "A king," said Merlin. "Whether he likes it or not."

Then the commotion erupted. Some shouted "Miracle!" others "Deception!" A lord rushed forward, yelling, "He pulled it off! It was a trick!" A priest screamed, "Sorcery! Witchcraft!"

But Arthur just stood there, sword in hand, confused, unsure, not knowing why everyone was looking at him.

“I just wanted a sword,” he said quietly.

The sentence was lost in the chaos. Men wrestled, shouted, and brandished their arms. Some wanted to celebrate Arthur, others wanted to kill him. The people wavered between amazement and fear.

And Merlin knew: This is where it began. Not with a coronation robe, not with a battle, not with a crown. But with a boy who drew a sword because he needed one.

It began with screams. "King! King!" cried some, their faces red with ecstasy because they saw a miracle and wanted to jump on the train immediately. "Fraud! Witchcraft!" cried the others, lords with puffy cheeks who had already calculated that the kingdom was in their pockets.

The square toppled in seconds. Fists flew, swords were drawn, the people pushed, stamped, and shoved. Merchants abandoned their wares, goats ran through the crowd, a cart overturned, barrels rolled. It wasn't a coronation, it was a tumult, raw and sharp, like a flock of crows suddenly tearing each other apart.

Arthur still stood by the stone, sword in hand, rigid, pale. He didn't understand why they were shouting at him, why men were beating each other because of him. He held the blade, but his gaze was that of a child who had found a toy.

A lord, tall, heavy, with veins like ropes around his neck, rushed forward. "Give me the sword!" he roared. "It's mine!" He lunged at Arthur, his fist already raised to strike.

Merlin was there. The staff struck the ground, a sound like thunder echoed through the clearing. The earth vibrated, the man stumbled, and fell into the dirt.

"No one touches him!" Merlin's voice wasn't a scream, but a cut that split the air. "No one!"

The crowd paused for a moment. Those shouting "King!" looked to him; those yelling "Witchcraft!" fell silent. Everyone knew that the bastard wizard wasn't speaking to beg.

Arthur turned slowly, sword still in hand. His lips trembled, his voice barely above a whisper: "I didn't mean this."

Merlin looked at him, and in that gaze there was pain, pride, and fear all at once. "No one wants this. But you do."

Cathan pushed through the crowd, his sword drawn, his eyes hard. He stood beside Arthur, his chin raised. "Whoever raises a hand against him raises it against me."

Some knights paused, as if they had suddenly realized that here stood not just a boy, but a wedge that would divide the country. Some even knelt, hesitantly, ashamed, as if they themselves didn't know why. Others hissed, spat, and swore it was just a magic trick.

Merlin raised his staff and scanned the clearing. "Hear me! You all saw that no one could move the sword. You all saw that he drew it as if it were his own flesh. That is the sign. Not from me, not from you, not from the gods. From the land itself."

A murmur went through the crowd. Some nodded, others shook their heads. But no one could deny the moment.

Arthur looked at him, his fingers white around the hilt. "What does this mean?" Merlin took a deep breath, his eyes dark. "It means your life no longer belongs to you. It belongs to everyone."

The chaos didn't subside; it only burned more quietly, more deeply, like embers beneath ashes. But Merlin knew: the spark had been lit. Whether they wanted it or not, they had seen the king.

And the island would demand it.

Night fell over the clearing like a black cloak. The traders were gone, the crowd scattered—some with sparks in their eyes, others with poison on their tongues. Only the bonfire Cathan had lit flickered. Arthur sat near the fire, his sword beside him in the grass, his hands tightly wrapped around his knees. He looked like a boy lost in a story not meant for him.

Merlin stood a little way off, his hood pulled low over his face, his staff in his hand. He watched as the boy stared at the blade as if it were an animal about to bite him.

Finally, Arthur raised his head. "It was a mistake." His voice was thin, rough with fatigue. "I should never have touched it."

Merlin was silent.

"I'll give it back," Arthur continued, sudden defiance in his voice. He grabbed the sword, rose, and walked to the stone. "It wasn't for me. It... it was for someone else. For a man. A king. Not for me."

He raised the blade, placed it, and intended to push it back into the slot from which it had come.

"Stop." Merlin's voice wasn't loud, but it cut like steel. Arthur froze.

"You can't give it back," said the wizard. "The stone doesn't reabsorb anything it has once released."

Arthur turned, his eyes gleaming in the firelight. "But I don't want this!" He shook his sword, almost angrily. "I'm not a king. I'm not even a knight. I just wanted a sword, you understand? Just a sword!"

Merlin approached, slowly, as if circling a wounded man. "And that's exactly why it came to you. Because you didn't want it. Because you're not like the others, who want to stuff the throne into their mouths like a piece of meat."

Arthur snorted, tears in his eyes. "Then it's a cruel joke. A bad spell. I want to go back to my life. To the woods. To horses, to bows, to anything—but not that."

Merlin stopped before him, placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, over Arthur's fingers. "Listen, boy. This sword is not a gift. It is a burden. It will lift you higher than you can dream, and it will plunge you further than you ever believed. But it is yours. Not because you chose it. But because the land chose you."

Arthur sobbed quietly, shaking his head. "Why me?"

Merlin looked at him for a long moment, and for a moment something like pain flashed in his eyes. "Because you're the only one who doesn't ask 'Why me?' to get more—but to carry less."

Arthur slumped to his knees, sword in his lap. "I'm scared."

Merlin knelt beside him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Good. He who isn't afraid when he's supposed to carry a kingdom is a fool. Fear is honest. Hold onto it."

Arthur nodded weakly, his shoulders trembling. The fire crackled, the night rustled in the trees.

Cathan looked over from across the fire, his gaze hard but not without compassion. "Then it begins," he murmured. "The boy who drew a sword."

Merlin heard him and nodded, but his gaze remained on Arthur. "Yes. It begins. And it ends here, too. Everything."

The morning came gray and cool, the fog hung heavy over the clearing. Merchants set up their stalls again, their faces tired, their eyes red from the wine. The lords gathered in groups, suspicious, their plans whispering. But amidst all the voices stood the sword—no, no longer in the stone, but in the hand of a boy.

Arthur stepped out of the shadows of the forest, his sword gripped tightly. He had barely slept, his eyes still dark from the night. But something had changed. He held the blade not like a toy, not like prey—but like something that held him, more than he held it himself.

The crowd fell silent. One by one, heads turned. The laughter from yesterday didn't return. Only a murmur, deep, hesitant, as if everyone was afraid to breathe too loudly.

Arthur stopped at the edge of the stone where he had drawn it yesterday. He raised the blade slightly so that the dim morning light touched it. No pose, no pride—just the simple gesture of a boy who had understood that there was no way back.

Merlin watched him, his hands resting on his staff. His heart was heavy, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. Yes, he thought, that's how a king begins: not with jubilation, but with silence.

Cathan stepped closer, standing beside Arthur, his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Look at him," he called harshly. "Not tall. Not rich. Not strong. But he pulled what no one could lift. This is the king the land wants."

Some lords protested, shouting "Sorcery!" "Trick!" But their voices seemed faint in the silence. Others, ashamed or perhaps moved, lowered their gaze, some even knelt. A priest murmured a prayer, his fingers trembling.

Arthur himself remained silent. He didn't see the men, the women, or the children. He saw only the sword in his hand and knew it was heavier than stone.

The sun broke through the fog, a beam falling directly on him. For a moment, he seemed not a boy, but a shadow of a king yet to be born.

The crowd breathed in, collectively, as one body.

And Merlin whispered, barely audibly: "Arthur. Your kingdom begins."

The boy and his fate

The morning after the miracle smelled of cold smoke and horse dung. The clearing, which had been full of voices the night before, was shrouded in fog. But the silence was deceptive—there was something bubbling beneath it. Lords, knights, priests, peasants, merchants: none of them had slept the night before, but had whispered, plotted, and dreamed.

Arthur stood in the middle, his sword still at his side, looking like a boy lost in a court game. The hilt was too heavy for his hands, the blade too large for his shoulders. And yet no one had the courage to attack him directly—not after what everyone had seen.

The lords gathered in small groups, like crows in a field. They whispered in rapid voices, sometimes angry, sometimes mocking, sometimes fearful.

"A boy! A bastard!" "Just a magician's trick." "But... I saw it myself..." "Then you were deceived."

No one spoke loudly enough for Arthur to hear, but he felt their gazes like needles.

Merlin stood beside him, his staff in the ground, his hood low over his face. Cathan kept his back bare, his hand on the hilt of his sword, his gaze hard as stone.

"They're waiting," murmured Cathan. "For what?" Arthur asked quietly. "For you to stumble," answered Merlin. "They don't want to believe you're king. They want to see you fall—so they can continue playing their old games."

Arthur swallowed, his fingers damp on the hilt of his sword. "But I am not a king." Merlin looked at him, his eyes dark. "No. Not yet. But you are the one the land has chosen. And that is more than they ever were."

A lord, tall and wearing a golden chain, stepped forward. His voice was loud, his smile smooth. "Boy," he cried, "you hold the sword none of us has been able to draw. But a sword does not make a king."

A murmur went through the crowd in agreement.

"Prove yourself," he continued. "Show us you're more than a fluke. Show us you can fight, you can lead. Or give back the sword before we force you to surrender it."

Arthur blushed, his hands shaking. He didn't know what to say. The crowd waited, eager for a sign, for a mistake.

Merlin stepped forward, striking his staff hard against the ground. A dull thud echoed through the clearing, vibrating the mist. "He owes you nothing," he said coldly. "Not you, not your titles, not your pockets. He owes only the land. And the land has already spoken."

The lord snarled. "You dare, wizard, to lecture us?" "I'll do more than that," said Merlin. "I'll stop you from tearing apart the only one who can still save this realm."

Another lord roared, "He's a child!" "Yes," Merlin shouted back. "And that's precisely why he's uncorrupted. He's not like you—full of greed and lies. He's young. Pure. And the land chose him, not you."

The crowd swayed. Some nodded, others cursed. But no one dared to claim the sword. They had all seen it glide from the stone—and no one wanted to risk tempting fate again.

Arthur stood beside it, his face pale, his eyes wide. He felt like a stone around which waves broke.

As the lords retreated, murmuring, the priests making signs, Merlin placed a hand on his shoulder. "That was your first day as king, Arthur. No cheers, no throne. Only poison in the eyes of men. And so it will continue."

Arthur nodded silently. He didn't know whether to cry or scream. Instead, he bowed his head and walked away from the clearing beside Merlin, his sword heavy in his hand.

Merlin led Arthur away from the clearing, far out, until the voices of the lords were only a distant hum on the wind. They rode in silence, Arthur on a small, nervous horse that had little more poise than he did, Merlin on his old black horse, which knew the way even if the wizard didn't show it.

Only when they reached a hollow in the forest did Merlin stop. There stood an abandoned hut, half-ruined, its roof overgrown with moss, its walls crooked like an old spine. Cathan had found it earlier, a place no one noticed because it had long been forgotten.

"Here," said Merlin as he dismounted. "Here you will stay until the lords' anger subsides. Or until they forget you."

Arthur stared at the hut. "And if they don't forget me?" Merlin looked at him dryly. "Then you'll learn not to be forgotten—but stronger."

The days in the hut were hard, raw. No golden courtyard, no servants. Just chopping firewood, carrying water from the stream, and chewing bread so dry it hurt your teeth.

Merlin began to teach Arthur. Not with books, not with writings, but with words that stuck in his mind like splinters.

"Look at the birds," he said one morning as Arthur wearily gathered wood. "The crow eats the carcass left by the eagle. Who rules here?" Arthur frowned. "The eagle." Merlin shook his head. "No. The one who lives when both are full."

Or at night, when the stars flickered above them: "Don't look at the brightest ones. Look at the dark ones in between. Therein lies the pattern. Kings who see only the obvious die young."

Arthur listened, often remained silent, sometimes asked. "But why me? Why not one of those with castles and men?"

Merlin didn't answer immediately. Then: "Because castles fall. Men die. But sometimes the land doesn't choose one with power, but one with heart."

Arthur lowered his gaze, his hands around his sword hilt. "But my heart is afraid." "Then it's even better," said Merlin. "A heart without fear is blind."

While Arthur studied, the lords listened. Spies came into the forest, peasants told of a boy with a sword who lived in a hut. In the halls of the lords, plans were made: "We'll take him before he grows up. We'll break him before he takes root."

Merlin knew it. He saw it in the shadows that crept closer. He heard it in the crows' cries that grew louder. He saw it in Arthur's dreams, which grew more restless, full of blood and voices.

One evening, he placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. "They're coming soon. You must be ready." Arthur swallowed. "Ready for what?" Merlin looked at him for a long moment. "Ready to accept your destiny—whether you like it or not."

It wasn't long before the lords reached out to Arthur. Not openly—no, he was too surrounded by rumors for that. But they wanted to see if the boy was truly more than just a coincidence.

One morning they sent messengers. Peasants, unassuming, with stooped backs. "Sir," they said to Arthur, "a village is plagued by robbers. Come, help us, show us that you are our king."

Arthur was young, foolish enough to believe. His eyes shone as he came to Merlin. "They need me. I can help." Merlin looked at him for a long time, staff in hand, crow on his shoulder. "And if it's a trap?" Arthur shook his head. "Then I'll fight. Or I'll die. But I won't remain a boy hiding in a hut."

Merlin remained silent. Then he nodded slowly. "Good. Go. But don't forget: a king is not the one who wields the sword. A king is the one who decides when to wield it."

They rode out, Arthur in front, Cathan beside him, Merlin in the shadow. The path led through forests that were too quiet, through meadows that seemed too empty. The farmers showed them the way, but their gaze was unsteady, their steps too hasty.

Cathan whispered, "It stinks of betrayal." Merlin nodded barely visibly. "Let him learn. Sometimes you have to feel the knife before you know how deep it can cut."

It happened at the edge of a grove. Men leaped out of the bushes—not robbers, but knights in shabby coats of arms, with the faces of lords selling themselves in the dark. They held swords, shields, and spears.

"There he is!" someone shouted. "The bastard with the sword!"

Arthur snatched the blade, trembling, but he stood his ground. His hands were damp, his heart pounding. "Get out of my way," he cried, his voice shaky. "I don't want to fight."

The laughter was raw, harsh. "Not fight?" One rushed forward, sword raised.

Arthur raised his blade—and the next moment a sound echoed across the clearing, so bright that even the crows took flight. Metal struck metal, and the knight staggered back, his eyes wide as if he had struck stone.

Arthur stared at his own hand, as if he didn't know how he'd done it. Cathan roared, striking the next one down, blood spurting.

The men hesitated. One whispered, "The sword... it protects him." Another growled, "No, it's magic!" But no one dared to attack the boy directly.

Then Merlin stepped forward, staff in hand, his voice quiet but like thunder. "That was your test. You failed it."

The earth trembled beneath their feet, the fog thickened, shadows crept between the trees. The men fled, stumbling and screaming, like children fleeing a dream they couldn't hold on to.

Arthur stood there, trembling, sword in hand. "I didn't mean to kill her," he murmured. Merlin placed his hand on his shoulder. "And yet you survived. That's the difference."

Cathan wiped the blood from his blade. "They'll come back. And stronger." "Let them," Merlin said quietly. "Every trial makes him more of a king."

Arthur closed his eyes, breathing heavily. For the first time, he understood that the sword didn't just shine—it also bled.

The night after the ambush was long and full of unrest. Arthur lay on the hard floor of the hut, his sword beside him. He tossed and turned, still hearing the blood rushing in his ears. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the knight's face before him—surprised, frightened, almost childlike in the moment Excalibur threw him back.

He woke up drenched in sweat, sat up straight, and pressed his face into his hands. "I didn't mean for this," he murmured. "I didn't want anyone to die because of me."

Merlin, sitting by the fire, barely moved. Only his eyes glowed in the light. "Then get used to it," he said harshly. "A king cannot live without others dying for him. Whether he wants to or not."

Arthur shook his head, tears in his eyes. "Then I don't want to be king."

Merlin stood up, took his staff, and stepped out into the night. "Come."

They went deep into the forest, until the trees were so dense that barely any light penetrated. The air was heavy, the ground damp. Merlin stopped and placed his staff on the ground. "Here," he said. "Here you will learn what it means to be a king."

Arthur looked around uncertainly. "There's nothing here." "Exactly," Merlin replied. "And yet everything is here."

He pointed to the trees. "Do you see them? Each one strong, tall, and mature. But when one falls, it takes others with it. This is a kingdom. No one stands alone."

Then he bent down, picked up dirt, and let it run through his fingers. "Do you see that? The earth holds them all. But it also takes everything back. Flesh, blood, bones. A king is not stronger than the earth. He is only the one who disappears into it first."

Arthur was silent, not quite understanding, but his eyes followed every word, every gesture.

Merlin continued walking until they came to an old tree stump. A crow sat on it, its feathers glossy black. It stared at Arthur, unmoved.

"That's your shadow," said Merlin. "Always with you, always hungry. A king has more shadows than friends. Never forget that."

Arthur stepped closer; the crow cawed loudly and sharply. He recoiled. "She hates me." Merlin shook his head. "No. She recognizes you."

Then he led him to a stream that rippled softly in the darkness. "Do you see the water?" Arthur nodded. "It flows. Always. It doesn't ask where it's going. It takes everything with it—blood, dirt, tears. A king must learn to be like water. It carries everything, even what it doesn't want."

Arthur stared into the water, saw his face in it, young, exhausted, strange. "And if I drown?" "Then someone else will flow," said Merlin. "But until then, you are the water. You."

They returned in silence. Arthur felt heavier, but also more awake. Merlin's words echoed in his head like hammers.

Before they reached the hut, Merlin stopped. "Do you understand now?" Arthur nodded hesitantly. "A king... does not stand alone. But he bears the burden first." Merlin smiled weakly. "Good. It's enough that you understand that. Everything else comes later."

That night, Arthur slept more deeply. But in his dreams, he saw a table—round, wooden, men and women in a circle, voices raised, swords on the table. And in the shadows behind them, something lurking: betrayal.

He woke up with a scream. Merlin just looked at him as if he had known.

The next morning, Cathan led Arthur to the nearest village, a small patch of crooked huts, smoke rising from thatched roofs, and faces that were more hungry than flesh. It was not a place for kings, but for people who made do with little—and who, precisely because of that, carried more weight than all the lords combined.

Arthur rode slowly, his sword at his side, his gaze uncertain. He was afraid the people would laugh at him, as the knights had mocked him. But they didn't laugh. They stopped, placed their hands on their foreheads, some even bent their knees.

"Sir," whispered an old woman, "are you the one who drew the sword?" Arthur swallowed, his voice small. "Yes."

Then she grabbed his hand, dirty, rough, and full of cracks. "Then you're the one who will save us."

The word spread like a spark. "It's him!" cried a boy, barely older than Arthur himself. "The king!" Others joined in, not loudly, not like a cheer, but quietly, fragilely, like a prayer one dares not yet utter.

Arthur saw the faces. Gaunt, scarred by years of plunder, but now full of hope. They didn't see the boy. They saw the king they needed.

His heart pounded. He wanted to say: I'm not one. I'm just a boy. But the words stuck in his throat. He couldn't take away their hope.

Merlin stood in the shade of a hut, his arms crossed. Cathan beside him murmured, "They see what they want to see." Merlin nodded slowly. "Exactly. The people don't want a hero of gold. They want someone to bear their burden. And now they see him."

"But he's a child," Cathan snarled. "Yes," said Merlin. "And children grow. With the right load, faster than you think."

Arthur dismounted and knelt beside a girl whose leg was wrapped in rags. She looked at him, fearful but also curious. "Will you be our king?" she asked quietly.

Arthur opened his mouth, closed it again. Then he said, "I'll do what I can."

The girl smiled, small, fragile – but it was the first smile Arthur had ever received for his words.

As they left the village again, Arthur was silent, his hands firmly on the reins. After a while, he said quietly, "They believe in me." Merlin nodded. "And that's harder to bear than any sword." Arthur looked at him, frowning. "But maybe... maybe I can."

Merlin placed a hand on his shoulder, short and heavy. "Then you're closer to a king than your father ever was."

While Arthur took his first steps as "king" in the village, the lords gathered in a hall that smelled more of smoke and sweat than of power. The wine flowed, the voices were loud, and yet the air was heavy as a grave. Everyone knew that the boy with the sword was a threat—and everyone knew that the people were already beginning to believe in him.

Lord Argan, the bear, slammed his fist on the table, making the cups crack. "He's a child! We can't allow a brat to rule the kingdom!" Lord Mabon, thin, his eyes cold as knives, smiled thinly. "But we can't deny it anymore. Every farmer, every maid speaks his name. The more we deny it, the stronger his image grows."

"Then we kill him," growled Argan. "And then what?" a third interjected. "Then the people will say we murdered the Chosen One. They will hunt us down, every one of them. We wouldn't hold the empire for a day."

A priest, pale and sweating, raised his hands. "God alone chooses kings. Perhaps he really is the chosen one..." Argan laughed harshly. "God? No, that's the sorcerer. Merlin is playing with us all!"

As they argued, spies listened in the shadows. Merlin had long known they were conferring. He sat with Cathan by the fire, the crow above them, and spoke quietly.

"They're planning," he said. Cathan snorted. "Of course they're planning. It's all they can do." "No," Merlin murmured, "this time they're planning bigger. They'll call an assembly. A council of all the lords, priests, knights. There they'll test him—or overthrow him."

Arthur, who was sitting at the edge adding wood to the fire, looked up. "And if I fall?" Merlin looked at him for a long moment. "Then the kingdom falls with you."

Arthur swallowed, his hands black with soot. "Then I mustn't fall." "No," said Merlin, "but you mustn't think you're alone either."

In the Hall of Lords, they finally clinked their cups together, with wine that tasted more like blood. "We summon him," said Mabon. "Before us all. Let him show himself. Let him prove whether he is a king—or just a child."

A murmur, a nod of approval. Some eager, some fearful. But no one objected.

The decision had been made: a large assembly would examine Arthur – and perhaps break him.

That same night, Merlin felt the earth grow heavier, the shadows shift. The stars, cold and distant, seemed to tremble for a moment. He raised his head and whispered, "The test is coming."

Arthur heard him and felt the weight of these words deeper than the sword at his side.

The night was heavy. No wind, no sound, only the crackling of the fire in the hut. Arthur lay awake on the straw bed, the blanket pulled around his shoulders, his sword beside him like a second body he couldn't shake.

His eyes were open, staring into the darkness that settled over him like a weight. He heard Cathan's breathing, deep, ragged, the sleep of a man who had learned to awaken at any moment. He heard the quiet scratching of a mouse in the straw. But louder than all that were the voices within him.

A boy.
A king.
A bastard.
The Chosen One.

The words buzzed, stung, and ate at him. He pulled the blanket tighter, whispering into the silence: "All I wanted to do was live. To hunt, ride, laugh. Why are you taking that away from me?"

Merlin sat outside the hut, the crow perched on his shoulder, his gaze fixed on the stars. He heard the words, even though they were faint. Perhaps because the night itself carried them to him.

He entered slowly, staff in hand, and sat down next to Arthur. He remained silent for a while, until only the crackling of the fire remained between them.

"You think you can go back," Merlin finally said quietly. "Back to your old life. Back to bow and horse, to nights without weight. But that's no longer possible."

Arthur turned his head, his eyes glistening with moisture. "Why?"

Merlin sighed. "Because the sword chose you. Not me, not the lords, not even you. The land took you. And once the land takes hold, it doesn't let go."

Arthur pressed his lips together. "Then I hate the land." Merlin nodded slowly. "Good. Hate is more honest than lies. But even hate binds you. You'll see."

Arthur closed his eyes and whispered, "I'm scared." Merlin placed his hand on his shoulder. "Then go with fear. Fear keeps you awake, keeps you upright. It's hope that blinds you."

They sat like that for a long time, silent. Finally, Arthur fell asleep, restless, clutching his sword tightly.

Merlin stayed awake. He stared into the fire, the shadows dancing across his face. Voices rustled within him—earth, shadows, stars. And they all said the same thing: Soon. The test is coming.

He arranged a blanket for Arthur and looked at him for a moment. "You are a child," he murmured. "But soon you will be their king. And I will lead you—until it breaks me."

Outside the crow called, a sound, harsh, lonely, like a seal on the night.

Excalibur, the King's Blade

The morning smelled of damp ash and wet moss. The hut breathed silently, as if it had held the night to avoid waking anyone who had to face their fate too soon. Arthur sat on the threshold, his cloak around his shoulders, the Sword of the Stone—the people had long called it that—across his knees. He studied the blade as if it contained a riddle that had eaten into his flesh overnight.

"It's beautiful," he finally said, and the words sounded as if he were almost apologising for her. "Beautiful and... somehow light. As if it were happy to be with me."

"Beauty is a trick of iron," growled Cathan, who was fetching water from the stream. "It glitters so you forget it's trying to rip you open."

Merlin stood behind them, in the doorway, silent, as if listening for something not of this world. His eyes were dark in the shadow of his hood. "It's light because it was never meant to bear weight."

Arthur looked up. "What do you mean?"

Merlin stepped outside and placed his staff on the damp ground. The forest smelled of fungus and cold bark; somewhere far away, a woodpecker hammered into the trunk as if driving a message into the tree trunk. "This sword," Merlin said quietly, "is a key. Nothing more, nothing less. It has opened a door, Arthur—the door behind which your name waited for you. But it is not the blade with which you will hold the realm."

Arthur blinked as if a piece of the sky had been torn out of him. "But... people saw me with it. They called me king."

"People like to see what shines," Merlin replied. "And they quickly call what orders their fears king. But signs are not tools. You don't plow a field with a key, you don't cut bread with a banner. This sword has done what I asked it to do."

"You asked for it...?" Cathan put down the jug. "You talk about iron as if it were a dog."

"Iron is more obedient than dogs," said Merlin, placing two fingers on the back of the blade. "But only if the earth lets you hear it."

Arthur carefully ran his thumb along the edge. "If this isn't my sword... then which one is it?"

Merlin raised his gaze to the damp treetops. The morning was thin, milky, and somewhere between the branches the light hung like a lost breath. "It waits."

"Where?"

Merlin didn't point; he simply gazed into a distance that knew neither direction nor path. "There where time moves slower. There where the world reflects itself, revealing something different. In water so still that even the stars dare to walk on it."

Cathan grimaced. "Sounds like trouble."

"It is," said Merlin. "The right blade is never a gift. It's a trade."

Arthur was silent for a while, as if searching within himself for a door through which the next words would fit. "You mean... Excalibur."

The name sent a chill under her skin. The crow perched on the roof ridge cawed once, briefly, like a seal.

“How do you know the name?” asked Cathan.

Arthur shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe... I dreamed him."

Merlin nodded slowly. "That's how the other side betrays itself. Not with drums, but with a word that suddenly has always been there."

He sat down next to Arthur on the threshold, their shoulders almost touching. Up close, Arthur saw how old his eyes were, and how young his mouth sometimes seemed when he was silent. "Listen to me," said Merlin. "The Sword in the Stone was an oath of the land. Excalibur is an oath of the deep. The one has shown you. The other will hold you—and grind you apart if you wield it wrong."

Arthur looked again at the blade across his knees. "And if I say no?"

"Then the realm says no to itself," Merlin replied without anger. "A king can deny things: sleep, wine, love, peace. But not what the island has chosen to live by."

"The island," Arthur murmured, testing the word with his tongue. "As if it were a person."

"She's a person," said Merlin. "Only bigger, slower, older. She has desires. She has fears. And today, she has you."

Cathan sat down on the boards, the jug between his boots. "And this lake? Where is it? I like to see enemies before they eat me."

"You won't see him until he sees you," Merlin said gently, which wasn't a reassurance. "But you'll find you're already standing on his ground when you take the first step."

Arthur laughed quietly, without joy. "Wonderful. A lake that sees you before you get wet."

"Something like that," said Merlin. "Don't think of water as a thing. Think of it as a memory. It remembers every foot that ever touched it. And it remembers every king it ever carried."

“Did it carry many?”

Merlin remained silent. Silence was the kind of answer that weighs more heavily than any words.

"So," Cathan summarized, "we go to a water that already knows us, to a woman who isn't one, and fetch a sword that will hate us if we love it—and vice versa."

“Finally, you understand me,” said Merlin dryly.

Arthur rested the blade in his lap. "Why the lady? Why not earth, like with the stone?"

Merlin turned the staff in his hand, as if trying to find a thread in the grain. "The earth binds. The water gives. A king chosen by the earth alone remains stuck to the ground. One embraced by the water learns to flow. And flow is the only thing that keeps kingdoms alive."

"And the stars?" Arthur asked. He asked it as if he were afraid to like the answer.

"The stars... testify," Merlin said quietly. "They don't judge. But they never forget."

Arthur stood up. He did it slowly, as if someone were standing on his back. "So let's go."

"We're leaving," Merlin confirmed. "But hear me out before you leave the hut."

Arthur stopped.

"Excalibur will not belong to you," said Merlin. "Not really. Nothing great ever belongs to anyone. It borrows you—as long as you are strong enough to carry it without using it, and wise enough to use it without clinging to it. It is a blade and a judgment. It cuts into the enemy—and into you."

Arthur lowered his gaze. "I've already had enough cuts in me."

"Then you know what you're getting into," said Merlin. "That's more than most kings can ever say."

Cathan stood up and threw the jug out as if he were pouring the last remnants of a past life into the ground. "When do we leave?"

"As soon as the mist rises," said Merlin. "Not until he comes—with him. The lake likes men who don't go against it."

The crow fluttered from the ridge, circled the roof, and dropped a black feather. It landed at Arthur's feet. He picked it up; it felt warmer than a feather should ever feel.

“A good sign?” he asked.

Merlin didn't nod. "A sign. Good and bad are words for markets and beds. They're too small for lakes."

Arthur tied the feather to the strap of his sword hilt. A quiet gesture, almost childlike, and yet Merlin saw in it something that briefly pained him: the kind of hope you want to hold on to when you know it will one day be shattered.

"One more thing," said Merlin as Arthur closed the cabin door behind him. "When she comes—the woman in the water—look into her eyes and under no circumstances into her mouth."

"Why?"

"Because words buy you," said Merlin. "Eyes only look."

Cathan snorted. "I'm looking at their hands. He who gives a blade rarely has an empty one."

Merlin gave a short, crooked smile. "Then we're complete: one for eyes, one for hands, one for what lies between the two."

They stepped onto the path. The fog lifted from the hollows as if someone had blown on the world from below. The forest did not remain silent after them; it listened.

Arthur placed his hand on the hilt of the stone sword, and for the first time he clearly felt how light it really was—like a memory that one keeps even though one no longer needs it.

“I’ll take it with me,” he said.

"Yes," Merlin replied. "You don't throw away keys while the door still creaks behind you."

The fog came towards them. It tasted of metal and rain, of old names no one spoke aloud anymore.

"Forward," Merlin murmured, more to Earth than to the men. "Between the worlds, as always."

And they walked until the light turned into water.

The forest they entered was not the same one they left. It was denser, heavier, full of breath. Every step sounded muffled, as if the ground weren't yielding, but listening.

Arthur felt his skin tingle, as if the air itself were too close. The sounds became different: the cracking of a branch echoed too long, the rustling of leaves sounded more like voices than wind. Once, he swore he heard someone whisper his name—softly, sharply, right behind his ear.

"Merlin," he whispered, "who is calling?" "Everything," replied the wizard, "that ever was here and never disappeared."

Cathan growled, his hand on his sword. "I don't like it when forests talk." "Then just listen to the silence," said Merlin. "It's worse."

They continued walking. Time seemed to slip away. Sometimes it felt as if hours had passed, sometimes only breaths. The fog hung heavy, settling over their shoulders, making them look like ghosts.

A stag stepped out of the undergrowth, large, shimmering silver. It stood in the middle of the path, motionless, its eyes deep and black. Arthur was about to raise his hand, but Merlin whispered, "Don't touch. It's older than you and knows you better than you know yourself."

The deer tilted its head, turned, and disappeared. A silence remained that was almost like a trial.

After a while, which wasn't really a while, they heard water. Not the usual rippling, but a deep, calm breathing. The forest opened up, and there it was: the lake.

It wasn't big, nor small. But it seemed endless because its water was so smooth that it swallowed the sky. No waves, no shadows, just a mirror that held the stars, even though it was still day.

Arthur stopped on the bank, his breath catching. "He... is looking at me."

And indeed, the surface didn't move, but it was as if it had an eye fixed on him. Not a gaze you could return, but one in which you lost yourself.

Merlin stepped beside him, his staff pressed deep into the ground. "This is it. The place where your sword lies."

Arthur whispered, "It sees me." "Yes," said Merlin. "And it's already judging."

Cathan snorted and spat into the water. The drop disappeared without a trace, as if it had never been there. "I don't like eyes bigger than mine."

"Then don't blink," said Merlin. "They might mistake it for weakness."

The air was heavy, sweet, almost putrid, like flowers that had bloomed too long. A wind blew across the surface of the water, but it moved nothing.

Arthur knelt down and bent forward. In the mirror, he saw not only his own face, but others as well: men with crowns, women with blood in their mouths, children crying, warriors laughing. Images came and went, as if the lake were a memory that couldn't decide which image should remain.

"Merlin," whispered Arthur, "look." "I look," said Merlin. "But keep looking. They're only showing you what they want until the right one comes along."

And then it happened. The surface taut, contracted like skin. A sound, dull and deep, vibrated through the ground, through their bodies.

An arm rose from the water. White, shimmering, with drops that didn't fall, but hung like little moons. The hand held nothing, it simply stretched out.

Arthur stepped back, his eyes wide. "What is this?"

Merlin tilted his head seriously. "The invitation."

The arm remained alone for a moment, white as polished stone, hovering above the water. Then more emerged: shoulders, a neck, a face so smooth it had almost no features. Eyes like deep glass, within which something else lurked, too large, too old to be named.

Arthur stared, his fingers clenched around the hilt of his sword. "She is beautiful," he whispered. "And she is terrible."

"They're both the same," Merlin murmured. "Look into her eyes, not her mouth."

The figure continued to rise, now standing waist-deep out of the lake, but the water didn't flow from it. It clung to it as if it were part of its body. Its lips moved, but the voice Arthur heard didn't come from there. It was everywhere, in the water, in the wind, in the blood in his veins.

“You came,” she said.

Arthur wanted to answer, but his throat was dry. Merlin stepped beside him and placed his hand on his shoulder. "Answer."

"I... I'm here," Arthur managed to say.

The lady tilted her head slowly, like an animal examining its prey. "You carry a sword that doesn't carry you."

Arthur looked down at the sword made of stone. "It opened the door for me." "Yes," the voice breathed. "But it won't build you a roof."

She reached out, her fingers hovering just above the surface. The light on her skin flickered as if flames were dancing beneath the water. "What you seek lies deeper. But everything deeper demands a price."

Arthur raised his chin, his eyes filled with uncertainty. "What price?"

The lady smiled. It wasn't a human smile, more like a disintegration of features. "The one you only know when he's taken."

Cathan cursed quietly. "That doesn't sound like a deal, that sounds like theft."

The lady turned her gaze to him briefly, and he fell silent as if she had taken away his voice.

Arthur took a step closer to the shore, the ground wet and giving way beneath his boots. "If I take it... will I become king?"

"You already are," said the lady. "The sword is merely the mirror in which you recognize yourself. But be careful: mirrors also reveal what breaks."

Merlin raised his staff, leaning heavily on it. "Show him," he said in a voice that demanded, not begged.

The lady smiled again, this time darker. Then she raised both arms. The water trembled, began to swirl, as if stirred by invisible hands. A light rose from the depths, first faint, then bright, a beam that pierced the mists.

And there, slowly, majestically, a blade rose.

Excalibur.

It was longer than any sword Arthur had ever seen; the edge shimmered not like iron, but like water itself, clear and deadly. Runes flowed across the blade like breath coming and going. The hilt was dark, veined, with a simplicity greater than any jewelry.

Arthur stumbled back. "That... that's not a sword. That's..." He couldn't find the word.

“This is your end,” whispered Merlin.

The lady held the blade as if it were heavier than she was. But her eyes remained unmoved. "Take it, child. But know this: whoever carries Excalibur carries the land. Whoever loses it loses everything."

Arthur reached out, hesitant, his fingers trembling. He knew this grip would be colder than stone, sharper than fear.

Merlin leaned toward him, his voice only for him: "If you take her, you'll never be just you again. Are you ready?"

Arthur looked at the sword hanging in the air, shining like a piece of eternity. He thought of the village, of the girl with the bandaged leg, of the old hands that had held his.

“I’m ready,” he whispered – not knowing if it was true.

And he reached for Excalibur.

Arthur's fingers touched the handle – and immediately the coldness penetrated him, not like winter, not like ice, but like the freezing of his own blood. It was as if he had grasped a snake that didn't wriggle, but crawled into his skin.

He sucked in a sharp breath, trying to recoil, but the blade held him fast. It wasn't him reaching for Excalibur; Excalibur reached for him.

His heart raced. Images hit him faster than he could blink:

- Men in armor cheering him.
- Women who begged him not to abandon them.
- Battles where blood fell like rain.
- A table, round, full of faces, brothers who laughed, brothers who died.
- Morgana, her eyes like mirrors in which he drowned.
- Nimue, her lips like poison and salvation at the same time.
- A river red with blood, a scream that was his own.

Arthur gasped, stumbled, tried to let go – but his hand was as if nailed.

The Lady spoke, her voice like water lapping against rocks: "This is the King's Blade. It takes you as you take it. It gives you glory and steals your peace. It makes you a keeper and a prisoner."

Arthur groaned, his eyes wide, as if he saw more than just the world before him. "I... I can't..."

Merlin grabbed him by the shoulders from behind and held him tight. "Hold on! Let them see that you're not just a child!"

“She’s eating me!” cried Arthur, tears running down his face.

"Then eat back!" growled Cathan. "No sword is yours if you don't bite it!"

Arthur gritted his teeth and roared, a sound that carried more rage than fear. The blade vibrated, as if testing whether it would break. Then, suddenly, it calmed. The runes glowed softly, the hilt grew warm—and Excalibur lay in his hand as if it had always been there.

The lady smiled, a smile that had nothing human about it. "So be it. But hear my oath: Whoever wields Excalibur will lead the realm. Whoever loses her will lose the realm. And if your blood falls on her, the realm will die with you."

Arthur stood there, trembling, sword in hand, his heart a battlefield. He nodded, though he didn't know who he was actually agreeing with—the Lady, Merlin, the island, or the sword itself.

The lady sank back into the water, slowly, as if she had never existed. Only her gaze remained, long and deep, until the surface swallowed her.

The water smoothed out, still, reflective. It was just a lake again.

Arthur looked at the blade. "It feels heavy. Heavier than anything I've ever carried."

Merlin nodded. "So be it."

Cathan looked at the sword, his eyes hard. "And now? What do you do with a blade that's eating you?"

Merlin looked at him seriously. "You hold her until she's full."

Arthur stood silently on the shore for a long time, his fingers wrapped around Excalibur's hilt, his sword heavy as a chain. The lake had calmed down again, as if nothing had ever happened. Only the fog drifted deeper, thicker, as if it wanted to preserve him—or hide him.

"Lift it," Merlin finally said, his voice calm but firm. "Let yourself feel it."

Arthur raised the blade slowly, hesitantly. At first he thought it was too heavy, but then it guided his arms as if it had its own muscles. He swung it a bit, and the sound it made was no ordinary whoosh. It was a clear, high-pitched note, as if the air itself had screamed.

The birds in the trees fell silent. The forest held its breath.

Arthur gasped, his heart pounding. "She... she's moving with me. No—she's moving me. I don't know if I'm holding her or if she's holding me."

Merlin nodded seriously. "That's precisely the danger. Excalibur is not a tool. It is will. It knows you, and it will drive you. A weak king will become its servant. A strong king will become its prisoner."

Cathan stepped closer, his eyes fixed on the blade. "It's beautiful. But it smells of blood. As if it's been cut through flesh a thousand times."

"More than that," said Merlin. "Excalibur doesn't just cut bodies. She cuts stories. Anyone who fights her is forgotten. Anyone she strikes disappears from song."

Arthur swallowed. "So... whoever is killed by me won't even live on in memory?"

"So it is," said Merlin. "And that is worse than any death. It extinguishes not only life, but meaning. With every swing, you burn a name from the world. Be sure before you raise it."

Arthur looked in horror at the blade, which glowed like a star in the mist. "Then it's not a gift. It's a curse."

"Every crown is a curse," Merlin replied dryly. "Excalibur is just more honest about it."

Arthur raised the blade again, this time more firmly. He took a step, swung it against a tree trunk. Wood splintered, but not as usual: the trunk split smoothly, as if cut from water. No resistance, no sound, just the faint hiss of something moving too fast to be understood.

Arthur staggered back, staring at the work. "It feels... wrong. Like I didn't do anything."

Merlin stepped to his side, looking at the split trunk. "You'll feel like this often. You'll lift it—and the world will bend, not you. But every time you think it was nothing, in truth, a piece of you will be gone."

Arthur lowered his sword, breathing heavily. "How am I supposed to bear this?"

"By not forgetting," said Merlin. "By feeling every cut, even the slightest. He who strikes with Excalibur without feeling pain loses himself."

The crow fluttered onto a branch above them and cawed loudly. It sounded like a mocking laugh, but also like a warning.

Arthur looked up, then at the blade. "Then I must learn to wield it—before it wields me."

"Yes," said Merlin. "But never forget: even if you lead her, she will always eat you. Slowly, bit by bit. Until nothing remains but the king."

Arthur closed his eyes, feeling the weight in his hand. He knew Merlin was right. And yet, in that moment, he also felt something else—a current coursing through him, as if the land itself had pressed him to its chest.

He opened his eyes. "So be it. I'll hold on to her as long as I can."

The air around the lake was still heavy, but now it had something new: a tension, as if the water itself had held its breath. Arthur still held Excalibur in his hand, his gaze fixed on the blade, which shimmered in the mist like a light of its own.

There was movement across the surface. First small, little more than a tremor. Then larger. Bubbles rose, thick and black, bursting with a sound that came not from water, but from something deeper.

Arthur stepped back. "Merlin?" The wizard stood beside him, his staff pressed into the ground. "Of course. No sword comes without trial."

Cathan drew his sword, his eyes narrowed. "Whatever comes up now won't be for handshaking."

The water broke open. An arm—no, not like the Lady's. Black, bony, with skin like rotting algae. Then a second, then a head. A thing, half human, half fish, with teeth that were too long, with eyes that gleamed empty. It crawled out of the lake, smacking, gurgling, as if it were devouring the very air.

More followed. Three, four, five. Beings born of depth and hatred, drops like oil on the skin. They smelled of mold and blood, of things that should never see the light of day.

Arthur instinctively raised Excalibur. The blade sang—a sound, bright, clear, so sharp that even the mists receded. The creatures hesitated, as if blinded by the light.

"This is the test," said Merlin. "Not from me. From the Lake. He wants to know if you are worthy to bear what he gave you."

Arthur swallowed, the handle firmly in his hand. "And if I fall?" "Then it'll swallow you," Merlin said simply.

The first creature lunged forward, faster than it should have appeared. Claws like daggers, its mouth wide, as if it wanted to swallow Arthur in one bite.

Arthur screamed and swung Excalibur.

The blade struck—and didn't just cut flesh. It sliced the body in two, so cleanly that the thing fell apart, without blood, without a sound. It was as if it had never existed. Only a splash of black drops remained on the floor, which immediately evaporated.

Arthur gasped, staring at the spot. "It... it's gone."

Merlin nodded. "That's how Excalibur erases. Not just the body, but the trail. Nothing remains. No song, no memory. As if it had never lived."

But the other creatures didn't hesitate for long. They came in waves, gurgling, screaming. Cathan plunged into them, his sword flashing, he roared, slashed, blocked. But time and again, it was Excalibur that made the difference. Every creature that struck Arthur's blade vanished like smoke, extinguished as if it had never been born.

Arthur felt the sword guiding him, faster, harder. Every swing was too light, every blow too definitive. He felt no friction, no resistance—only disappearance. And the fear grew within him that with every blow, something within himself was also disappearing.

As the last creature disintegrated, Arthur sank to his knees, gasping. Excalibur still vibrated in his hand, as if it yearned for more.

"Enough," Merlin murmured, placing his hand on the blade. It calmed down, and the light went out.

Arthur raised his head, his eyes wide and empty. "I killed them... but it was as if they were never there. Is that... right?"

Merlin looked down at him seriously. "It's what Excalibur does. It erases. And if you're not careful, it erases you too. A little more each time."

Arthur closed his eyes, his breath shaky. "Then she's more powerful than I ever wanted." "And crueler," said Merlin. "But she's yours now. Never forget that."

The lake lay still again, as if nothing had happened. Only the fog still bore the trace of the screams, long since lost. Arthur stood on the shore, Excalibur in his hand, his fingers white with exertion. His breathing was shallow, as if the sword had broken him, not the creatures.

He looked at the blade. It shone flawlessly, without blood, without nicks, as if untouched by what had just happened. But Arthur knew: she had drunk, and he had tasted it.

He slowly lowered the sword and looked at Merlin. "If I continue like this... I won't be me anymore."

Merlin nodded, his eyes dark. "You are no longer you, Arthur. Since the moment you first drew your sword, you have not been yours. Excalibur will shape you—or consume you. It is up to you how long you hold out."

Cathan stepped closer, his face hard, but his voice quieter than usual. "You wiped them out. No grave, no song, nothing. It's as if they were never here. A weapon like that... it's more frightening than a hundred armies."

Arthur looked at the water that reflected him. He no longer saw the boy. He saw a face that seemed older, more marked, and behind him the blade that already towered over him in the mirror.

He knelt down and pressed the tip of Excalibur into the ground. "I swear," he whispered, "I will only lead you if necessary. Never for pride. Never for greed. Only when the realm demands it."

The crow cawed loudly, a sound that sounded like mockery. Merlin closed his eyes, heard the oath, and the bitter thought burned within him: And yet, boy, you will break. For no one bears such a thing without falling at some point.

He placed his hand on Arthur's shoulder. "The oath is good. Keep it as long as you can. But remember: the realm will force you to betray him."

Arthur raised his head, his eyes determined, though they shone. "Then the realm shall betray me first."

They left the lake. The forest opened up again, the sounds returned as if nothing had happened. Only Arthur knew that in his hand was something heavier than the sky.

Excalibur. The King's Blade. And His Downfall.

The Round Table is created

They returned like men stumbling from a dream: with mud on their boots, cold mist in their cloaks, and something invisible on their shoulders, heavier than the saddles. Excalibur hung at Arthur's side, inconspicuous as a freshly polished blade—and yet everyone who saw him saw that something lurked about him, a faint gleam in his eyes that couldn't be wiped away.

The news had preceded them. When they reached the clearing where the sword in the stone had once stood, traders, farmers, minstrels, and a few lords with faces like freshly sharpened knives were already gathered. It smelled of horse, falafel from a lost Middle Ages, wine that had never tasted like grapes, and fear.

"It's him," whispered an old woman. "The boy with the blade that sings." "A wizard's game," snarled a lord, his smile as polite as a gallows. "Let's see how long the song lasts."

Arthur dismounted. His hand rested loosely on the handle; loose, but never far away. He was pale from the journey, but a quiet fire flickered in his eyes—not triumph, but rather determination that still wondered why it was there.

Merlin planted the staff in the ground. No thunder, no magic trick. Just a look that cut through the crowd until the whispering became a hum. Cathan stood beside the boy, like a stubborn rook.

"Folks," Arthur began, and at first his voice was too small for the clearing. "I'm back." A few laughs, a few whistles. He took a breath, looked over heads, helmets, hats, searching for faces that didn't smell of gold. "I'm back—with a sword that quenches more than it cuts. And I know that won't feed you, keep you warm, or safe." He lowered his gaze, then raised it again. "But I promise you: I am not alone, and I don't want to be. A king who stands alone falls. So I won't stand alone."

A man with fur and eyes like two badly buried coins raised his voice. "Wise words, boy. Then give your sword to a man who knows how to lead men." Cathan laughed once, hoarse as a saw. Merlin smiled thinly, as if he had just been confirmed in something unpleasant.

"Leading men?" Arthur said calmly. "How to beat cattle to water? Or how to lure them with bread you've stolen from them?" Some peasants chuckled. The lord blushed as if someone had removed his armor.

Merlin took half a step forward. "Listen to him. He's young, yes—but young means not yet full of lies. And if you need proof that he wants to lead—he won't do it with chains. He'll do it with a circle."

"With a what?" someone shouted. "With a circle," Merlin repeated, and the crow on the branch above made a noise like a dot. "Not with a line. Lines have beginnings and ends. Circles only have space. A tablet without a head, without a point. Whoever sits there isn't better, just closer."

"A round table?" A knight laughed, and his belly laughed along with him. "Then no one knows where to sit, and everyone argues." "Exactly," said Merlin. "Arguing is good when everyone can speak. Death comes where only one person roars."

The wind snatched at coats. Someone shouted: "Fine words! But who's sitting at this... table?"

Arthur looked at the crowd as if searching not for names, but for wounds. "No dogs licking every man's coat," he said. "No priests selling heaven like bread. No knives stabbing back at night. I want people who swear to fall first before a peasant falls. Who can lay down their sword before they raise it. And who are ashamed when they're full and their neighbor is hungry."

It fell silent, so silent that one could hear the crack of a branch that wouldn't break. Then a figure emerged from the crowd, a man with scars like maps no one could read anymore. He knelt. "Name's Gaheris," he said harshly. "I can drink, fight, and keep my mouth shut when I have to. I'll fall first."

“I’ll remember that,” grumbled Cathan.

A second stepped forward: a woman holding her helmet under her arm, her hair short, her eyes like knives that would rather cut than hang. "Brangaine," she said. "I ride faster than you think, and I lie slower than you hope. If your circle makes room for one who isn't afraid to sit uncomfortably, I'll sit." A murmur, a few mocking whistles that died in their throats as she looked back.

A third man, thin, alert, with hands that looked like they'd held more bows than women. "Bedivere," he said simply. "I talk little. I see a lot. And I stand when things fall."

Arthur nodded to everyone, not regally, more fraternally, but with an earnestness that was contagious. "When you come, don't come for me. Come for the country. And when you leave, don't go secretly."

A lord with heavy gold around his neck stepped forward, a sharp smile. "Fine collection from the stables and streets. But a kingdom isn't held with sayings and round furniture. It's held with blades and tribute. Tell us, boy—where do you sit at your beautiful round table? In the middle, as is fitting?"

Arthur looked at him, and something unusual happened: He laughed softly. "The bowl sits in the middle, sir. Whoever is hungry takes first. Whoever is full passes on. I'll sit wherever there's a free seat."

The peasants' laughter was warmer this time. The lord pursed his lips. "Cheeky as ever." "Lively as necessary," said Merlin.

Cathan stepped forward, his hand on the knob. "Riffraff or not—I want to hear names that stick. Who'll sit at the circle and take responsibility when things get messy?"

Then the people did what people rarely do: They didn't remain silent. One called out the name of an archer who had driven back the robbers at the ford. A mother called out the name of her son, who was no hero but never stole when the supplies were empty. An old blacksmith stepped forward and raised his sooty hands: "I'll make you the nails that won't cut into your boots. I can do no more, I can do no less."

Arthur listened, and with each name, his back straightened. Not proudly, more as if someone was finally laying the burden on him properly, instead of throwing it at him.

"Good," he finally said. "Then we'll build it. Not tomorrow, not 'someday'—now. A tablet, round, made of wood old enough to support men. We don't swear by gods we can't see. We swear by bread, salt, water—and by blood, if necessary."

"And who's going to build this thing?" someone called, half mockingly, half curiously. "The one who can," said Merlin. "And the one who wants to. And the one who understands that a circle doesn't fall if one tips over."

He pointed to the old oaks at the edge of the clearing. "There stands what is old. Old reaches out to the young. Get boards. Get hands. Get courage."

The crowd began to move. Hesitantly at first, then more rapidly. Men fetched axes, women ropes, children carried sticks as if they were spears. The blacksmith snorted and rubbed his fingers. "I need coal and peace—I don't have enough of either. So bring them on."

The lords looked at each other like foxes whose dens had been rebuilt while they slept. One snorted and left. Another stayed, his frown like the new wrinkles of a country trying something it had never tried before.

Merlin approached Arthur. "You understand." "What?" "That a king is a hole," said Merlin. "One that fills the world when he's not acting like a stone."

Arthur grinned wearily. "I feel more like a bottomless bucket." "Fair enough," Merlin replied. "As long as you learn, what's going on inside you doesn't belong to you. You pass it on. That's how you rule."

Cathan nudged him gently with his elbow. "And what if the round is just a new word for chaos?" "Then at least it's our chaos," said Arthur. "And not the order of men who never get their fill."

The sun crept over the edge of the clouds, gently, as if it didn't want to hurt anyone. The first oak trunk fell, respectfully, not hastily. Chips flew. Someone sang off-key, someone laughed too loudly, someone argued about whether twelve seats were enough or whether space should be left for those who were still finding their courage.

Arthur stood in the middle of it, Excalibur at his side, his hands empty—finally. He helped where called, carried wood, held boards, remained silent when too many people were talking, spoke when the noise died down. No throne, no cloak. Only a circle that wasn't there yet, yet was already growing.

In a gust of wind that smelled of rain, something whispered across the clearing—not earth, not shadow, but rather that which breathes between the two: a beginning.

Merlin heard it, and the crow nodded, as if testing an invisible edge. "A beginning," he said quietly. "And every beginning is a knife cut."

Arthur gazed at the growing surface, rough, uneven, beautiful. "Let's eat when it's ready," he cried. "And swear before we're full."

"Why before?" asked the blacksmith without looking up. "Because oaths are truer on an empty stomach," Arthur replied. "And because a full belly likes to lie."

A laughter rippled around, this time warm. The boards were laid out in a circle, one chair, then two, then no one higher than the others. And beneath all the voices hummed something ancient and round, something that needed no language.

The boy with the blade stood in the midst of his first building. Not a palace. A tablet. And for a brief moment, the realm felt as if it could sit down before having to stand up again to bleed.

The work on the circle took days. No royal carpenters, no carved emblems, no gilded nails—just peasant hands, blacksmith's hammers, and blunt axes. The wood of the ancient oaks

creaked as if in protest, but in the end they gave way. The boards were uneven, the edges rough, but the circle grew, larger, stronger, more visible.

Arthur carried the load himself. He hauled logs, scraped bark, and sweated with the others. Some thought it was strange, a king who got his fingers full of splinters. Others said that was precisely why he could be a king.

"You'll ruin your hands," Cathan grumbled as Arthur tried to lift a beam on his own. "A lord doesn't need calluses." Arthur gasped, his forehead shining. "Then I'd rather not be a lord." Cathan snorted, taking the wood from him. "You're more stubborn than you're good for." "Then the sword suits me," Arthur retorted.

In the evenings, when work was at a halt, they sat around the fire. There were Gaheris, the scarred man, Brangaine with the sharp eyes, Bedivere, the silent archer, and a few others who had no place yet but already had a voice. They spoke rudely, laughed loudly, argued even louder.

One boasted of having killed ten men alone, until Brangaine dryly asked if he had numbered the bodies. Gaheris tipped the jug and sang a song without a melody, which everyone hummed along to nonetheless. Bedivere sat there, staring into the fire, and spoke only to utter a word at the end that weighed more heavily than all the songs.

Arthur heard more than he spoke. He felt a thread stretching out of the chaos, thin, invisible, but real.

One evening, when the circle was almost finished, an old blacksmith brought the iron rings that would hold the boards together. He laid them down, heavy and sooty. "This will last longer than you," he murmured.

Merlin stood in the shadows, watching everything. "A tablet is just wood," he said quietly. "But an oath turns it to stone."

Arthur nodded. "Then we swear when she stands." "And to what?" Brangaine asked, wiping the dirt from her hands. Arthur looked around, at faces that were tired, rough, and hurt. "Not to gods who don't listen to us. Not to lords who lie to us. We swear to ourselves. And to the land."

The words hung in the air. Simple words. But something glimmered in the eyes of the men and women—the sense that history could be born from planks and breath.

When the table was finally set—large, round, rough, but upright—they gathered around it. No golden chairs, just simple seats, all the same height, all the same distance from the center.

Arthur placed Excalibur on the raw wood, the blade glowing in the firelight. "This is the place where we see each other. None higher, none lower. Here we sit until the realm stands—or we fall."

The others placed their hands on the table. Heavy hands, rough hands, a slender hand with scars, a delicate hand that had seen more blood than it should have.

Merlin nodded, his eyes in shadow. "Thus begins a circle. Not completed, but closed."

Arthur took a deep breath and placed his right hand on the wood. "I swear," he said, "not for myself, but for us. For the country. For those who believe in us."

One after another, the others spoke. No solemn speeches, just short, harsh words, but each one sounded as if it were cutting a notch into the night.

In the end, the round wasn't just wood. It was a vow.

The first evening at the table wasn't a feast, but a mess of meat. A pig was roasting, the bread was hard as stone, and the wine tasted of grapes that had long since forgotten what sun was. But the circle was full, every seat taken: Gaheris, Brangaine, Bedivere, a few peasants, a blacksmith, two young men who had more courage than sense. Arthur sat in between, no higher, no lower, and that was an affront to many.

"So," began Gaheris, holding up the jug, "to the boy who is king whether he likes it or not." He drank, wiped his mouth, and placed the jug on the table with a bang.

“And to the pig,” shouted one of the farmers, “because it tastes better than our fate.” Laughter erupted, rough, honest, a little drunken.

Brangaine gnawed on a piece of meat, spat a piece of cartilage into the fire, and growled: "And here's to anyone who has the courage not to throw us women out. Otherwise, I'd break down his door."

Arthur laughed sheepishly and raised his cup. "Then we drink to everything that keeps us here."

But the longer the meal lasted, the clearer the cracks became.

A knight, sent by one of the lords, tapped his cup on the table. "How can we be equals when you carry the king's sword at your side? Your place is not like ours. You are more."

Silence. Some looked at Arthur, others at Excalibur, which lay on the table, glowing like an ember in the light.

Arthur slowly placed his hand on the handle, not like an owner, more like someone calming a dog. "I'm no more. I just have more burden. And you'll all bear it if I fall."

"Fine words," growled the knight. "But words don't make men equal."

Brangaine laughed coldly. "Then stand up, Sir Knight. And eat your pork alone. Let's see how even you are when no one covers your throat."

Laughter, sharper this time. The knight lowered his gaze, his hand tightening around the cup, but he didn't speak further.

Later, as the fire grew smaller and the wine thickened, the next argument broke out. Two young men, brothers, argued over who should sit next to Arthur. "He sees me more," one cried. "No, me!" roared the other. Fists flew, blood splashed on the wood.

Arthur stood up, his heart pounding. "Stop!" he shouted. But they continued to wrestle, staggering against the blackboard until cups tipped over.

Then Arthur struck Excalibur on the wood. No cut, no blood, just a sound—bright, clear, like a thunderclap of light. Everyone fell silent.

"This isn't my place," Arthur said, his voice firm. "This is our place. When you fight over a place, you forget why it exists. Not for proximity. For equality."

The brothers stared at him, their noses bleeding, and sat down again in silence.

Merlin, who had been standing in the shadows until now, gave a barely visible nod. "He's learning."

Cathan, beside him, grumbled, "Or he's playing king without realizing it." "That's the same thing," Merlin replied.

When the meal ended, the table was smeared with fat, wine, and blood. But it was still standing. And those who had sat at it stood up differently than they had sat down—heavier, but bound.

Arthur remained alone, his hand on Excalibur, his head bowed. "They're already arguing," he murmured. Merlin stepped up to him. "Everyone who breathes does. The important thing is that they do it in a circle—not outside with daggers."

Arthur nodded slowly. "Then this is just the beginning." "Yes," said Merlin. "And beginnings are always ugly. But without them, there is no end."

The next morning, the tablet was still there, raw and covered in traces: blood, grease, wine, burnt crumbs. An honest sight, Arthur thought—not pretty, but true. But Merlin insisted: "Today there will be swearing. Without an oath, it's just wood. With an oath, it's a circle."

They gathered again, this time more soberly, more seriously. No one brought meat, no one brought wine. Only a loaf of roughly baked bread and a bowl of clear, cold water.

Arthur stood, Excalibur on the table before him, his hands tightly gripping the hilt. "We don't swear because we fear gods," he began. "We swear because we need each other. The land needs us. The people need us. I need you. And you need me, even if you don't want to admit it."

A murmur, both approving and reluctant.

Brangaine broke the bread and placed the pieces in the middle. "Then we swear by hunger," she said. "That we will share before one of us is satisfied alone."

Gaheris filled the bowl with water and passed it around. "Then we swear by thirst. That neither will drink alone when the other is thirsty."

Bedivere took his knife, cut his hand, and let a few drops fall onto the wood. "Then we swear on our blood. That we will fall before we betray each other."

The drops sank into the grain of the tablet as if they had been absorbed. Arthur saw this and placed his hand over the marks. "I swear," he said, "that I will fall with you if I do not stand with you."

One after the other, each repeated his own version – rough, unpolished, but each word cut deeper than the knife.

When the last one fell silent, Merlin struck the staff on the ground. "Thus it is spoken. Thus it is bound. Not to Heaven, not to Hell. To you. And that is harder."

The crow cawed loudly as if it had set the seal.

Cathan stepped forward, his brow furrowed. "You talk a lot about oaths. But oaths are just words. Let's see how they sound when the knives come."

Arthur nodded. "They'll come. And then we'll see if we're a circle—or just planks."

There was silence for a moment. Then everyone placed their hands on the tablet, over the bread, water, and blood. No smiles, no cheers—just a silent knot tightening.

Merlin saw it, and there was no triumph in his eyes. Only concern. For he already sensed that within this circle lay not only loyalty, but also vanity, lust, and betrayal. The oath was strong—but it had also marked the first crack.

The days following the oath were pervaded by a strange silence. The land seemed to be listening to see if the circle would hold. But the calm was merely waiting before the first step. For a circle that only swears but does not act remains a game.

It was Brangaine who spoke first: "An oath is fine. But the people out there are starving because of robbers and lords who take more than they give. Shall we just sit at this table until it rots?"

Arthur looked at her for a long moment. Then he nodded. "We go. Not as an army, not as conquerors. As what we swore: together."

Cathan grumbled, "And if the lords are expecting us?" "Then they'll see us coming," Arthur said simply.

So they rode out: a strange troop, not yet an army, more a collection of scars, pride, and curiosity. Gaheris in front, like a battering ram on legs. Brangaine with a short sword and even shorter patience. Bedivere with a bow whose string vibrated like a taut vein. A blacksmith, two peasants, and Arthur himself, with Excalibur at his side.

They passed through villages where people stared as if they'd seen ghosts. Some laughed, some cried, some fell to their knees. "Kings come with splendor," murmured an old woman. "And this one comes with dust."

Arthur heard this and remained silent. But something grew within him that was not only pride, but also fear: the fear that they were too few, too small for the burden.

The first test came quickly. A riverside village, plundered by mercenaries working for a lord. Huts burned, children dirty, men bound. The robbers sat drinking by a fire, secure in the belief that no one would disturb them.

Arthur and his party rode into the smoke.

"We'll talk first," said Arthur. "If they listen, fine. If they don't, then the sword listens."

Gaheris grinned. "Talking is for those who still have teeth. But fine—your command, King."

Arthur rode forward, his hand raised. "Let them go," he shouted to the men. "Leave the village alone, and no one will bleed."

Laughter, rude, dirty. "Who are you, boy? Are you playing master?" One stood up, tall, with a chain of coins around his neck. "Go home before we hang you on the tree."

Arthur placed his hand on Excalibur. "I'm not leaving. And you're not leaving either. Not alive if you don't listen."

The laughter died down, slowly, as if they had suddenly realized the boy wasn't bluffing. But one of them spat into the fire. "Then come, little king."

The battle was raw, without strategy. Iron on iron, screams, dust. Gaheris plunged into the crowd, roaring; Brangaine cut precisely, coldly, like a blade itself. Bedivere covered from afar, his arrows striking with deadly calm.

Arthur raised Excalibur. And immediately he felt that pull again, that will that guided him. Every blow was too light, every enemy he struck was erased from the world as if they had never existed. No blood, no scream—only vanishing.

The villagers stared, disturbed but also awed. Some made the sign of the cross, others called his name.

As the last robbers fled, the village remained silent. Children crawled out of the smoke, women untied the men's bonds.

An old woman approached Arthur and took his hand, which still held Excalibur. "You are king," she whispered. "Not because you have the sword. But because you don't forget us."

Arthur swallowed and put Excalibur down. "I don't forget," he said quietly. "But don't forget either: we are only strong as long as we are a circle."

Merlin, standing at the edge, the crow above him, watched silently. Yes, he thought, a circle. But even circles break. And every oath already bears the seeds of its betrayal.

The riverside village celebrated because it had no other choice. They had nothing left but ashes and fear, and that was precisely what they built the festival from. Bread was baked from the last flour, beer barrels were broken open that were originally intended for the market. A fire blazed in the center, high enough to drown out the night.

Arthur sat to one side, cup in hand, Excalibur at his hip. He barely drank, his gaze slid over the faces: laughing, crying, staggering. People who, for the first time in months, felt free of shackles. He should have been happy. Instead, he felt the weight of the sword more strongly than ever.

But Gaheris drank as if he had to wash the entire battle away from himself. He soon stood, swaying, his voice booming: "Look! We are the Round Table! We strike, we save, we drink!" He raised the jug and poured it half over his beard, half over the ground.

Brangaine rolled her eyes. "You're a fool. Today they celebrate, tomorrow they'll fear you if you roar like those who plundered them."

Gaheris's face twisted. "And you? Always cold, always sharp as a blade. We need hearts, not knives!"

“We need heads, not bellies,” Brangaine snapped back.

Bedivere sat silently, barely touching the cup. But as Gaheris and Brangaine yelled at each other, he suddenly slammed his fist on the table. "Enough. We swore to be a Circle. You behave like the lords we despise."

Silence, short and sharp. Then Gaheris laughed, roaring, and slapped Bedivere on the shoulder. "You don't talk much, but when you do, you stab deeper than my knife."

The mood relaxed, somewhat. But the rift had become visible: pride against pride, loud against quiet.

Arthur rose, cup in hand. "Listen to me." His voice wasn't loud, but it cut through the night like a clear note. "You are strong, each in your own way. But we are only strong when none of us believes we are more important than the Circle. We fight not for glory, not for wine, not for power. We fight because the land needs us."

He raised the cup, not high, just a little. "And if we drink, then let us drink to what binds us: bread, water, and blood."

The villagers repeated it, timidly, then louder. "Bread. Water. Blood."

An echo went across the fields, rough, but like an oath that took hold.

Merlin stood in the shadow of the fire, the crow above him. He watched as the village cheered, as Arthur's words covered the cracks for an hour. But he saw deeper. He saw the vanity in Gaheris's breast, the coldness in Brangaine's gaze, the heaviness that would eventually break Bedivere.

He saw that circles not only create equality—they also reinforce everything within them. And in this circle sat not just heroes, but people.

The crow cawed. Merlin whispered, "Yes. They're still celebrating. But they're already stitching the wound that will one day reopen."

The night by the river passed, and with it the euphoria. In the morning, the village was quieter, but not broken. Children ran through the rubble again, women swept away ash, men repaired roofs that had long since been lost. It wasn't a victory that healed everything, but one that gave people back their hands.

Arthur stood in the first light, Excalibur at his side, and the villagers around him. They saw him not as a stranger, but as someone who had brought back something they had almost forgotten: hope.

An old woman stepped forward, her hands blackened by soot, her eyes filled with tears. "You are not like the masters," she said. "You are one of us." Arthur shook his head. "No. I am not like you. But I want to be your servant, not your master."

The words hung heavy in the air – and yet people received them as if they had been waiting for precisely this difference.

The group moved on, through fields and forests, and everywhere they went, people talked about them: the boy with the sword who erased things from the world; the woman who was as sharp as her blade; the man who sang when he was drunk and roared when he fought; the archer who saw what others couldn't.

They weren't yet a myth, not yet a song. But they were stories—and stories are faster than swords.

In the halls of the lords, however, the same story sounded different.

"He's gathering men," said one, his voice strained. "He sits at a table as if they were equals." "Equal?" scoffed another. "Equal to whom? With us?"

They laughed, but their laughter was hard. For they understood: A circle that doesn't bend is harder to break than a crown that sits on only one head.

"Then we break the circle," murmured Lord Mabon, his eyes cold. "Not with swords alone. With mockery, with greed, with betrayal. No circle remains closed forever."

Merlin had known this for a long time. He sensed it in the air, which smelled of rain and blood. He saw it in the look of the crow that didn't cheer when Arthur was celebrated in the village.

And he remained silent as Arthur smiled, all around him, and believed that something new had begun.

Because Merlin knew: every new thing is already the beginning of the end.

Rituals in the shadow of Stonehenge

The news came not like a messenger, but like a pressure in the air. Three crows flew over the Round Table that morning, circled three times, croaked hoarsely, and dropped feathers that didn't stay in the dust but rolled on in the wind like black knives.

Arthur watched them go and knew: It was no coincidence.

That same evening, a druid appeared by the fire. He was old, but not frail—more like a tree whose bark deepened while its roots only grew firmer. His eyes were as gray as the sky before a storm. He didn't speak immediately. He sat down, took bread, chewed, drank water, and only when silence had settled around him did he say:

"The stones call. The circle there is older than kings, older than sword and throne. No kingdom stands without the stones' recognition. Come to Stonehenge. Come with your men, come with your tablet. Otherwise your oath will remain only smoke."

Arthur looked at Excalibur lying next to him and asked, “What if we don’t come?”

The druid laughed, a sound that sounded more like the cracking of bones. "Then you rule until the fog consumes you. And the fog consumes quickly."

The next morning they rode off. Not in splendor, but in dust. The Round Table: Gaheris with scars, Brangaine with dagger-like eyes, Bedivere, who spoke little, Cathan, who always grumbled, and a dozen others who carried more courage than sleep.

The path led over hills, through forests, past villages where people stared as if they were seeing a procession of the living and the dead at once. Some knelt, some fled to their huts, as if afraid of being captivated.

Arthur rode in front, Excalibur at his side. The blade seemed heavier the closer they got to Stonehenge. It was as if it sensed that something was waiting.

Arthur lay awake that night. He wasn't dreaming—he was hearing. A pounding, deep, slow, like a heartbeat in the ground. He placed his hand in the earth and felt it there, regular, ancient.

Merlin sat by the fire, his eyes open, as if he had heard the same blow. "It's the stones," he said. "They remember. Blood, vows, everything ever spoken in their shadow. And soon they will remember you."

Arthur closed his eyes and whispered, "And if they don't like me?" "Then they'll eat you," Merlin said calmly. "And the kingdom will find a new name."

On the third day they reached the plain. There stood the stones.

Stonehenge.

Not like a building, but like a mouth that had always been open. Huge blocks, gray, weathered, heavier than mountains. They stood in a circle, as if gods themselves had placed

them to create a place where humans could only kneel. The sky hung low, clouds drifted like smoke, and the wind carried a sound that was neither a whistle nor a howl—more like a humming that came from everywhere.

The people had already gathered. Hundreds, perhaps more. Farmers, traders, lords with their guards, priests in white robes, druids in furs. Fires burned, drums beat, smoke rose. The smell of burnt resin and animal blood hung in the air.

Arthur stopped his horse and stared at the stones. They stared back at him—not like eyes, but like open wounds.

Brangaine whispered, "This is not a place for oaths. This is a place for sacrifice."

Merlin nodded slowly. "It's both. And that's exactly why you're here."

A priest stepped forward, his face painted with ash, his voice loud. "Arthur! Son of the land, son of the sword! You bore the blade, you built the circle. Now the land shall see you as the gods see it: beneath the stones that never fall."

The crowd roared, a sound like wind through cornfields. Some shouted Arthur's name, others spat.

Arthur took a deep breath and rode closer, the Round Table behind him. His heart beat faster, in time with the ground beneath him. He knew: This wasn't a celebration. This was a court of law.

They rode to the edge of the stones, and there Arthur dismounted. The ground was barren, hard, and yet he felt alive, as if veins were beating beneath it. Every step vibrated in his ankles, every movement seemed to be heard by something beneath the earth.

The Druids led the Round Table into the circle. Torches burned in iron bowls, the smoke thick and bitter, catching in their throats and making their voices hoarse. In the center of the ring burned a fire, around which men and women in white robes sang, deep and monotonous, like the roar of a never-ending flood.

Arthur led the way, Excalibur at his side. The blade vibrated softly, almost inaudibly, but he felt it in his hand. It was as if it were speaking—not to him, but to the stones. And the stones answered, silent, ancient, in a rhythm no man had invented.

The people crowded around the outer ring, hundreds of pairs of eyes. Some full of faith, others full of hatred. A lord called out, "Show us you are worthy, boy!" A peasant shouted, "Give us a sign!" A priest murmured, "Let the stones be set."

Merlin stood beside Arthur, his hood pulled low over his face. "Do you feel it?" he asked quietly. Arthur nodded, swallowing hard. "They're talking. But I don't understand them." "Understanding isn't necessary," Merlin said. "Just endure."

Cathan grumbled behind them. "I don't like stones that talk more than men. Is there beer here?"

Brangaine looked at him sharply. "Shut up, or they'll eat you first."

The chants grew louder, drums began to beat. Three druids led an animal forward—a black calf, its horns wrapped in red thread. It bleated as if it knew what was coming. A druid plunged a knife into its throat, and the blood flowed into a stone bowl. The crowd roared, some kneeling, some turning away.

Arthur stared at the blood as it was thrown into the flames. They hissed, high-pitched, greenish, as if they were burning something other than flesh.

"The realm lives on blood," said the chief druid, his voice hard as iron. "No king without sacrifice. No oath without blood."

Arthur clenched his fist. "If blood is needed, then mine."

The crowd gasped, a cry half in admiration, half in horror.

Merlin placed his hand on his arm. "Be quiet," he whispered. "They're testing you, not your courage. And sometimes silence is the only answer that remains."

The druids sprinkled ash over the stones, drew circles, furrowed brows, and called out ancient names that no one among the people understood. But Arthur sensed that Excalibur understood.

The blade began to glow faintly. Not a light like fire, but like water in the moonlight. The runes on it flowed as if they were alive, and each time the chant swelled, the sword answered.

Arthur sweated, even though the wind was cold. His heart pounded to the rhythm of the drums, and a thought nagged at him: Am I king here, or am I a victim?

A druid raised the bowl of blood and approached Arthur. "Place the blade inside. Let the stones drink. If they accept you, you are king. If not…" He smiled, thin as a cut. "Then you will be no more."

Arthur raised Excalibur. It vibrated so strongly that it shook his arms, as if the sword itself wanted to decide. He held it over the bowl, the blood steaming, the smell sharp and sweet at the same time.

The crowd held its breath. The drums fell silent. Only the pounding of the earth remained.

Arthur closed his eyes and lowered the blade.

When the tip of Excalibur touched the surface of the blood, it was as if someone had shot lightning into the bowl. The blood hissed, foamed, boiled, as if it were coming to life. A green light shot up, struck the stones, and each of them began to vibrate, deep, dull, a sound felt more in the body than in the ear.

Arthur held the hilt tighter, but the sword guided him. Excalibur plunged deeper until the entire blade was in the bowl. The blood didn't burn; it vanished—drinking, absorbing, until not a drop remained. The runes on the blade glowed, brighter, faster, as if they were breathing.

The crowd erupted into a murmur. Some screamed, some fell to their knees, others fled a few steps back.

"The stones recognize him!" cried the chief druid. "The oath is accepted!"

But at that moment, the sound changed. The humming turned into a cracking sound, as if the stones themselves were protesting. A shadow crept across the surface, small at first, then larger, longer, until it darkened the entire circle.

Merlin raised his head, his eyes flashing. "No... that is not the will of the stones."

Brangaine drew her sword. "What is this?"

Cathan growled, his back tense. "Smells of betrayal. Of man, not of God."

And indeed, a priest rose from among the spectators, his robe black, not white. He raised his arms, muttering words that sounded like poison. Dark smoke billowed from his throat, not from his mouth, but from himself.

"He's not king!" he cried. "He's a bastard, son of a demon! The stones lie!"

The crowd raged, divided: screams, prayers, curses. Some shouted Arthur's name, others threw stones.

Darkness crept across the ground, creeping up people's legs. Figures formed within it—distorted faces, claws, mouths that were never born.

Excalibur vibrated more strongly. Arthur reflexively lifted it from the bowl, and immediately a beam of light shot through the circle. The shadows receded, but they didn't disappear. They rose, bunched, as if trying to tear the ritual apart.

"The trial is disrupted!" cried a druid. "The stones are enraged!"

Merlin roared, "Arthur! Stop the circle!"

Arthur felt the sword burning in his hand, hotter than any fire. His knees almost buckled, but he plunged Excalibur into the earth, right in the middle of the circle.

A sound, both dazzling and piercing, ripped through the stones. An arc of light leaped from one monolith to the next until they were all connected—a net, a circle, a shackle.

The shadows shrieked, screamed, and writhed. Some burst, others melted back into the earth. The black priest fell to the ground, blood pouring from his mouth, but he was still laughing. "He will destroy you! He will destroy you all!"

Then he collapsed.

The light slowly faded. The stones fell silent, the drums were broken, and the crowd lay gasping on the ground.

Arthur stood in the middle, his hands around Excalibur, his body trembling, his eyes wide. "I... I held it."

Merlin stepped beside him and placed his hand on his shoulder. "You didn't hold it, Arthur. The circle held you. Remember that."

Arthur looked at the Round Table standing around him – Gaheris covered in blood, Brangaine with torn lips, Bedivere calm, but with eyes that saw more than words could ever say.

And he knew: This was only the first test.

The smoke still hung over the stones, heavy, sweet, like burnt flesh. The crowd slowly came to its senses—screams turned to murmurs, murmurs to shouts. Some called Arthur's name, others whispered as if they had just seen death itself and weren't sure if it was truly gone.

The chief druid stepped forward, his hands still red with sacrificial blood. "The land has spoken!" he cried in a hoarse voice. "The stones have recognized him! Arthur is king, not by crown, not by lordship, but by that which is older than all thrones!"

A murmur rolled through the crowd, this time louder, heavier. Many fell to their knees. Others stood, staring darkly, their jaws set. A few lords left the circle, wordless, their eyes cold as daggers.

Arthur stood in the middle, Excalibur still in the ground, his hands on the hilt. He wanted to triumph, but he felt no joy. Only exhaustion, and a whisper deep inside that wouldn't stop: You've opened something. You've opened something.

Merlin stepped beside him, leaning forward so only Arthur could hear him. "They see a victory. But I see a scar. The stones have acknowledged you, yes—but through the disturbance, something has awakened. Something that won't sleep until it finds blood."

Arthur turned his head, his eyes tired. "Does that mean we lost?" "No," Merlin said quietly. "But we invited something."

The crow fluttered from stone to stone, dropping a feather, black and shining. It landed on the Round Table, directly in front of Brangaine. She picked it up, examined it. "That wasn't a victory," she murmured. "That was a warning."

The druids raised their hands and chanted louder, as if trying to force the shadow out of the circle. "Thus the king is chosen!" they cried. "Thus be the kingdom bound!"

But in the background, Merlin saw a crack in the smoke remain, narrow, inconspicuous, but black as night. No one else seemed to notice it. Only he. And he knew: what came through the black priest hadn't disappeared. It had only been waiting.

Arthur pulled Excalibur from the earth. The sword was flawless, not a drop of blood, not a nick. It gleamed as if it hadn't touched the shadow. But Arthur felt the opposite in his hand: the trembling that wouldn't stop, as if the blade had absorbed something that didn't belong to it.

“What now?” he asked Merlin, quietly, barely audibly.

Merlin closed his eyes, inhaling the smoke that tasted of ash and bitterness. "Now the realm begins," he said. "And with it, the end."

They left the circle to a chorus of cheers and whispers. Some villagers threw flowers at Arthur's feet, others held up their children so they could see the new king. But between the chants, Arthur also heard other voices: suspicious murmurs, whispered curses, mockery creeping into the shadows.

Gaheris laughed and slapped a peasant on the shoulder, nearly knocking him over. "Look, boy! You're now king not only of swords, but also of mouths." Brangaine snorted. "Mouths are worse than swords. They cut longer." Bedivere remained silent, as always, but his eyes swept over the crowd as if he saw more daggers in their eyes than in their hands.

At the edge of the plain stood lords in furs, their faces rigid as masks. One leaned toward the other, whispering something Arthur couldn't hear. But he felt it like one feels a cold wind at one's back: plans were being forged here, not just vows.

Merlin walked beside him, his staff firmly in his grip. "You see, boy? Every cheer is a dagger just seeking the right back." Arthur smiled weakly. "And if I don't have a back?" "Then they stab your heart," said Merlin.

The Round Table gathered. Their faces were marked by smoke, blood, and dust. They looked like warriors, but also like pilgrims who had seen more than was good for them.

"Was that a victory?" asked one of the peasants, still young, his hands shaking. Arthur stopped and looked at him. "It was a step." "To where?" Arthur lowered his gaze to Excalibur, which still shone like a star no one could extinguish. "In a direction I can no longer leave."

As they left the plain behind, Arthur looked back. Stonehenge stood in the smoke, the stones unmoving, unwavering. But he knew they were watching him, even now. Not like eyes—worse. Like witnesses.

The sun briefly broke through the clouds, a ray of light fell on the stones, and Arthur shivered. It was as if the land itself had marked him.

Merlin stayed beside him. "You are king now," he said. "Not because they shout it, but because the stones know it. And that's worse."

Arthur pressed his lips together. "Why?" "Because from now on, you are no longer free," Merlin replied. "You are a prisoner of your own name."

The Round Table rode in silence. Behind them, some still cheered; ahead of them lay a path none of them knew.

Arthur felt the weight of Excalibur at his side. He knew it was no longer a sword. It was a key. And keys don't just unlock doors. They also lock the bearer.

Night fell quickly, as if the stones themselves had pushed the sun down. The Round Table set up camp in a grove, not far from the plain, where the silhouettes of Stonehenge still stood like dark teeth on the horizon. No one spoke much as they set up. Everyone was tired, but it wasn't

physical tiredness, rather the kind that comes from within, when too many eyes have looked into you for a day.

The fire crackled. Meat sizzled, but no one was hungry. They drank water, wine, and beer—each according to his own taste—but even intoxication never came.

Gaheris was the first to break the silence. "You are a king now, Arthur. But tell me: are you really one, or are you just a man with a sword and a pile of stones that nodded?"

Brangaine looked up. "The stones didn't nod. They screamed. And someone almost brought them down. What we saw wasn't recognition, but a crack."

Bedivere nodded, his voice quiet. "A crack can grow larger."

Arthur held Excalibur across his knees. The sword was still, no glow, no trembling. But he still felt it, like a breath in his palm. "Am I king?" He looked into the fire. "I don't know. I only know that I can't go back."

"That's the talk of someone who's already lost," Cathan growled. "A king must say: I am. Otherwise, the others won't believe it."

"And if I don't believe it myself?" asked Arthur. "Then drink," said Cathan, tossing him the jug. "Doubt will disappear from your throat. At least for a few hours."

Arthur smiled weakly, took a sip, and felt that the doubt remained.

Later, as the group sat silently in the glow of the embers, the murmuring began. Quiet at first, then more clearly. Some spoke of the lords who had withdrawn from Stonehenge. "They will not rest," said one. "They will work against us."

"It's not just the lords," Brangaine interjected. "There was a traitor among the priests. One of them summoned the shadow. That means the enemy isn't outside, but inside."

The word betrayal hung heavy over them. No one looked directly at anyone else, but everyone was thinking about it.

At some point, Arthur fell asleep, exhausted. And then the dreams began.

He stood among the stones again, alone. No people, no druids, no companions. Only the monoliths, black against the sky. They moved, slowly, like shoulders closing in. The circle shrank.

Excalibur in his hand began to flicker, but this time it wasn't bright, but black. The runes ran backward, disappearing.

"You are king," boomed a voice, not of one, but of all the stones at once. "But king of what? Of flesh that rots? Of land that bleeds? Of names that fade?"

Arthur shouted: “I am king of my people!”

The stones laughed, a sound like bursting. "Your people will love you until they hunger. Then they will hate you. Your people will swear you until they lust. Then they will betray you. Your sword will protect you until they are satisfied. Then they will devour you."

Arthur fell to his knees, Excalibur burning in his hand. The stones bent over him, and he knew: this was no dream. This was judgment.

He awoke, drenched in sweat, his hand still gripping the hilt of Excalibur. The fire had burned down, the Round Table slept restlessly, each in their own nightmare. Only Merlin sat awake, his eyes on Arthur.

"You saw?" Merlin asked quietly. Arthur nodded, his voice hoarse. "Yes. And they were right."

Merlin pulled his hood down. "The stones always do that. They just don't say when."

In the morning, the fog hung low over the plain, as if the stones refused to let her go. The grass was damp, heavy, and every sound sounded muffled, as if the world itself had become more cautious.

Arthur saddled his horse in silence. He seemed older, his eyes deep, as if he had fought a battle no one but him had seen. The Round Table watched him, some with respect, others with doubt.

Gaheris broke the silence. "We've won, haven't we? The druids called it, the people shouted it." Brangaine pulled the reins taut. "Won? We've shed blood, seen shadows, and barely held the circle. That's not a victory, that's a growing rift." Bedivere just nodded, his gaze sliding to Arthur. He said nothing, but his eyes posed a question no one could answer: How long will this king last before he himself breaks?

They rode off. Behind them, Stonehenge still loomed, motionless, but Arthur felt the gaze of the stones on his back, as if they were accompanying him. Every hoof print in the ground seemed to be a judgment that reached deeper than he could see.

The farmers in the fields knelt as he rode by. Some called his name, others made superstitious signs as if they needed to protect themselves against him.

Arthur raised his hand in greeting, but his heart was heavy. He felt that since Stonehenge, he hadn't been a human being they saw. He was a symbol. And symbols don't live—they eat and are eaten.

Merlin rode beside him, his gaze back over the plain. "You have the Stones' approval," he said quietly. "But you've also aroused their suspicions." Arthur snorted bitterly. "Then I should never have gone." "Wrong," Merlin replied. "You could have died without knowing. Now you know what's eating you. And knowledge is worse than death—but also more necessary."

The crow flew above them, croaking harshly as if it were laughing.

Behind them, the knights whispered, quietly, but not quietly enough. Some spoke of glory, others of fear. One murmured that the black priest had been right. Another swore he had seen a female figure in the smoke—perhaps Morgana, perhaps something older.

The word betrayal crept through the ranks again, this time not loudly, but more clearly.

Arthur heard nothing of this. He rode silently, the sword at his side, which weighed more than his own body. His thoughts were still caught up in the dreams of the night, in the voices of the stones that had already condemned him to his end.

But he rode on. Because that was all that remained: step by step, hoofbeat by hoofbeat, taking the path that could no longer be left.

Merlin looked at him, then at the rest of the group, and he knew: the enemy no longer stood before them. He had long since stood in their ranks, sat in their oaths, lurked in their blood.

And he also knew: From now on, it was only a matter of time before the circle cut itself apart.

Morgana – Sister in the Twilight

The news came not from a messenger, not from a lord, but from the lips of the peasants. First a rumor, then a whisper, then a name that grew louder with every mile: Morgana.

They spoke of a woman in the north who cured illnesses simply by touching the forehead. Of the same woman who cursed a man so that his teeth fell out one by one while he slept, until he was silent and bleeding. Of a woman who walked through mirrors as if through doors, who laughed at night when children cried, and who healed mothers' wounds in the morning.

"Witch," some said, full of fear. "Saint," others said, full of hope. But all said the name with a mixture of lust and fear: Morgana.

Arthur first heard of it when they were resting in a village. An old man, who had hardly any teeth left in his mouth, sat down next to him by the fire. "King," he said, spitting to the side, "up there in the north sits a woman who has more power than ten of your knights. If you don't go to her, she'll come to you. And when she comes, she'll bring you either heaven—or hell."

Arthur looked at him, his eyes tired. "And what do you think?" The old man grinned, his gaping teeth black. "That heaven and hell are the same thing. Only Morgana decides what name she bears."

Later, as they rode on, Arthur spoke to Merlin. "They're talking about a woman. A sorceress. One who heals and curses. They call her Morgana."

Merlin rode silently beside him, his eyes half-closed. "I know."

"You know?" "I've known about her since before you were born. I know about her because she's cut from the same flesh as you. Her blood is your blood."

Arthur pulled sharply on the reins. "What?"

Merlin nodded slowly. "Morgana is your sister. Not from the same mother, but from the same father—Uther Pendragon. He sowed many seeds, and not all of them grew in the light. She grew in the twilight."

Arthur stared at him, unable to speak. Sister. A witch. A power that was in his blood.

The table heard the word, and immediately the murmuring began.

Gaheris spat. "A witch for a sister? Then we'll have war in our own house." Brangaine snorted. "Or an ally who knows how to fight without wielding swords." Cathan growled. "We're cursed anyway. One more witch won't make a difference." Bedivere remained silent, his eyes fixed solely on Arthur.

Arthur felt the weight of their stares, but he didn't respond. He knew this wasn't just a rumor. It was a shadow already hanging over them.

He couldn't sleep that night. He looked into the embers and thought of the word "sister." He had never longed for a family. But now that he had her, she was not a comfort, but a threat.

Excalibur lay beside him, and in the glow of the embers, something flickered across the blade. For a moment, he thought he saw a face in it: a woman, young, with eyes that sparkled like cold glass. She smiled, not kindly, not cruelly—only knowingly.

Arthur opened his eyes wide and reached for his sword. The embers flickered. The face was gone.

Merlin sat opposite, motionless, his voice barely audible. "She's coming. Whether you want it or not. And when she comes, she'll show you that blood is not a bond, but a chain."

Arthur lay back, but sleep didn't come. He knew: Morgana wasn't a story. She was already on her way.

And somewhere in the north, in a tower of stone and shadow, a woman laughed softly, as if she had heard him.

The path north led them through forests denser than anything Arthur had ever seen. Here, the air smelled of iron and rain, of moss and rot, as if the earth itself were secretly hiding something. The farmers there spoke less, looking at them with suspicious eyes. But again and again, like a breath, like a spell, the name came up: Morgana.

"She helps the children," said a woman handing Arthur bread. "But sometimes... the children disappear."

“She heals men’s wounds,” said a blacksmith, “but the scars return in dreams, deeper, worse.”

And every word always ended with a shrug, a sign of the cross, a look that said: We don't know whether she is an angel or a devil.

On the third day, they saw the tower. It stood alone on a hill, black against the gray sky, no flags, no banners. No sign that a farm had been here—just stone, old, cold, like a finger still pointing to something long gone.

Arthur dismounted, leaving the Round Table at a distance. Only Merlin accompanied him, and even he seemed uneasy, as if the ground itself were unsteady.

The door opened before they could knock.

She stepped out.

Morgana.

Her hair was black, her face pale, her eyes dark green, as if someone had blended forest and sea. She didn't wear a dress that looked like a queen, but a garment made of fabric, simple, but with every movement it seemed to flow.

She stopped and looked at Arthur for a long moment. No smile, no greeting. Just this silence, which was more than words.

"You came," she finally said. Her voice was deep, soft, but with a cut in it that hurt.

Arthur cleared his throat. "People talk about you. They say you heal. And curse."

She raised an eyebrow. "And you? They say you have a sword that erases. A king who doesn't know if he wants to be king. So we both have a gift that destroys more than it saves."

Merlin stepped forward. "Morgana." He spoke her name not as a greeting, but as a warning.

She looked at him and smiled coldly. "Wizard. You've grown old. And still full of fear."

Arthur felt the air grow heavier. "They say you're my sister," he said.

Morgana stepped closer, and for a moment her face was close to his. He saw something in it that shocked him: a mirror. The same shape of forehead, the same hardness of gaze that he sometimes found frightening in himself.

"Yes," she whispered. "We share the same blood. But you were raised in the light, I in the shadows. Don't think that means we speak the same language."

Arthur took a step back. "If you're my sister, are you also my enemy?"

Morgana laughed, softly, like shattering glass. "Perhaps I am both. Sister and enemy. Like twilight: neither day nor night. And that's precisely why I'm stronger than both."

Merlin raised a warning hand, but Arthur shook his head. "Then why are you helping the people here? Why do you heal when you speak so venomously?"

Morgana looked at him for a long moment. "Because healing is just another word for control. Whoever heals you binds you. Whoever curses you sets you free. I give both—and both owe me something."

Arthur sensed that this was no ordinary encounter. She wasn't here to be begged, not to be persuaded. She was here to demonstrate: she was playing her own game, and he had long since been drawn into it.

And yet he felt something he couldn't deny—a closeness that wasn't just blood. A pull, a kinship that wasn't expressed in words, but in a dark warmth.

He lowered his gaze to Excalibur. Morgana followed his gaze and smiled. "The sword sings for you. But believe me, brother—one day it will sing for me too."

The tower's interior was different than Arthur had expected. No dark witch's hole, no cellar full of bones and blood. Instead, a room that seemed simple, almost empty: a few furs, a bowl of water, a fire burning quietly in a pit. But the air was heavy, charged, as if something invisible were vibrating in every wall.

Morgana led Arthur inside. "Without your men. Without your old wizard." She gave Merlin a look that was both mocking and threatening. "Only you. I don't want to hear your Round Table. I want to hear you."

Arthur hesitated, then nodded. Merlin clenched his fist as if to object, but Morgana closed the door, and he remained outside, with the crow staring at him with its green eyes.

She sat by the fire, the light playing on her face. "So, brother," she began, "who are you? The boy with the sword? The king with the circle? Or just a bastard who doesn't know who he belongs to?"

Arthur sat down opposite her. "I know who I belong to. My people."

She laughed softly, sounding as if she'd heard it a hundred times before. "They all say that. Until they realize that the people fuck, eat, and forget. Your people will call you today, hang you tomorrow."

Arthur clenched his fists. "Then I'd rather hang for her than live for nothing."

Morgana tilted her head, examining him. "Proud. Stupid. Both useful. But tell me: Have you never felt that there is something dark within you? Something that doesn't come from the light?"

Arthur was silent. He thought of the night at Stonehenge, of the voices of the stones that had prophesied his doom. He thought of the drawing of Excalibur, which sometimes guided him as if he were merely the arm of the blade.

"Yes," he finally whispered. "I feel it."

Morgana smiled, and for a moment, there was warmth in her smile. "Then you're like me. We're two sides of the same coin. You carry the day, I carry the night. Together we would be whole."

Arthur raised his gaze, searching her eyes to see if it was a lie. But he found only truth—and danger.

She stood up, stepped closer, so close he could feel her breath. "Your circle loves you. But they will betray you. Your wizard guides you, but he will chain you. Your sword protects you, but it will consume you. Only I—I am like you. Only I can understand you."

Arthur felt the pull of her words, of her presence. He wanted to back away, but he couldn't. A part of him even wanted her to be right—that he wasn't alone in this fate.

“And what do you want?” he asked hoarsely.

Morgana placed her hand on Excalibur, without fear, without hesitation. The blade glowed briefly, as if recognizing it. "I want you to know that you are not king, but a brother. And brothers share—or they tear each other apart."

The door burst open. Merlin stepped in, staff in hand, eyes hard. "Enough!"

Morgana withdrew her hand slowly, her smile lingering. "You're scared, old man."

"Not from you," Merlin said coldly. "From what he sees in you."

Arthur jumped up between the two. "Stop! She's my sister."

Merlin looked at him, full of bitterness. "And that's precisely why she will be your end."

Morgana smiled and sat back down by the fire as if nothing had happened. "Or my beginning. Who knows?"

The fire in the tower flickered as if it had belonged to Morgana. She rose, stretched out her hands, and the flames obeyed. They grew, danced, changed color—green, blue, then black. A smoke rose, heavy, sweet, and Arthur felt his heart beat faster, as if the fire had seized it.

"You wizards," said Morgana, looking at Merlin, "always talk of rules, of boundaries. But I say: The night has no rules. Look."

She ran her hand over the smoke, and images formed within it. First indistinct, then clear: Arthur on a throne, Excalibur in hand, surrounded by cheering people. But the cheers turned into screams, the people turned into shadows that rushed at him. Arthur raised his sword—and the image shattered.

A new image emerged: a circle of knights, the Round Table. They laughed, drank, and swore. Then the image rotated, and the same knights held knives, their faces cold, their eyes fixed on Arthur.

Arthur tore his gaze away. "Enough."

Morgana laughed softly. "That's not enough. This is just the beginning."

She stepped closer and placed her hand on his chest. "Do you want to see what's next?"

Arthur wanted to say no, but his lips remained silent. The flames flickered, and again the smoke revealed an image: a woman, beautiful, with eyes like water—Nimue. She stood beside him, her hand on Excalibur. But suddenly she drew her sword and plunged it into his chest. Arthur screamed, grabbed for the image, but it burst into smoke.

"Lies," he gasped. "They're lies."

Morgana inclined her head. "No. They are possibilities. I'm not showing you a future—I'm showing you all futures. And in each of them, you are alone."

Merlin stepped forward, his staff raised. "Stop, Morgana. You're feeding him poison."

She turned to him, her eyes cold. "And you in chains. Tell me, old man—what's worse? Being bound or poisoned?"

Arthur raised his hand, his voice trembling. "Stop! Both of you!"

Morgana smiled again, stepped back, and the flames returned to normal. The smoke cleared as if nothing had happened. But Arthur still felt the images in his veins, as if they had stung him.

"You see," said Morgana, "my power is not an illusion. I can show what you don't want to see. I can take what you can't hold. And I can give what you don't dare wish for."

Arthur looked at her, exhausted, confused, and a part of him wanted to believe. Not in the images, but in the fact that someone understood him.

But Merlin stepped between them, his eyes fixed on Morgana. "You are Twilight. And Twilight is the most beautiful light, but also the most deceptive. I will not allow you to break it."

Morgana laughed. "You won't stop it. Because he's already broken. I saw it—and so did he."

Arthur lowered his gaze, Excalibur firmly in his hand. For the first time, he felt that the sword was not just a burden, but a response—against her, against Merlin, against everyone. But he didn't know whether to raise it or whether to put it down.

And Morgana stood in the firelight, beautiful and dangerous, like a truth that cannot be endured but also cannot be forgotten.

The fire was small again, but what Morgana had shown him still burned in Arthur's chest. The images hung in his mind, heavy as chains: friends betraying him, women killing him, shadows devouring him. He wanted to scream that they were lies – but his heart had long since believed it.

Morgana stepped closer, her eyes fixed on him. "Brother," she said, her voice softer, almost gentle, "you are not alone. Don't you see? All of them—your knights, your people, your wizards—they will use you while you are strong, and abandon you when you become weak. But I... I am like you. I am the blood you cannot deny."

Arthur swallowed. "And what do you want?"

She smiled, not cold, but dangerously sweet. "An alliance. Not an oath sworn before stones, not a ring of knights who love themselves more than you. An oath of blood. Your blood and mine. We share what we are—and we rule like no one before. Light and shadow, brother and sister. Who can resist us then?"

Merlin slammed the staff to the floor, sparks flying. "No!" His voice cut through the room. "He shall not become your prisoner. You do not wish to strengthen him—you wish to bind him. Your blood is poison."

Morgana turned her head, looked at Merlin with that look that was like a knife without a blade. "You're talking poison, old man? You're the greatest poisoner. You feed him doubt, prophecies, fear. I give him clarity. I give him power."

Arthur stood between them, torn. He heard Merlin's warning, but he also felt the pull in Morgana's words. She wasn't just temptation, she was truth—a truth he had already seen in the faces of his companions: pride, vanity, hunger. Would they betray him? Would they eventually bring him down? Perhaps.

“And what do you demand for this alliance?” he asked hoarsely.

Morgana stepped even closer, so close that her breath was on his neck. "Nothing you aren't already. Your blood. Your yes. And the willingness to keep the realm not only in the light, but also in the shadows."

Merlin raised his staff warningly. "Arthur, hear me. Your bonds are not bonds. They are shackles. Whoever binds themselves to Morgana binds themselves to the twilight—and twilight consumes both day and night."

Arthur closed his eyes. His head was buzzing. He saw the Round Table, laughing and swearing. He saw Stonehenge, the stones that had already judged him. He saw Excalibur, vibrating as if it knew that a decision was being made for which it would soon have to bleed.

He opened his eyes and looked at Morgana. She was still smiling, but behind the smile lurked something deeper—a longing, perhaps, or an abyss.

Arthur raised his hand. "You are my sister. I recognize you. But I won't swear anything to you."

Morgana froze, just for a moment. Then she laughed, softly and darkly. "Good, brother. Then one day you'll swear to me—or you'll die from what I've shown you."

She turned away, the fire flickering higher, as if it had absorbed her laughter. "Go. But don't forget: your kingdom will not exist on light alone. Sooner or later, you will need me. And when you call me—I will come. But then I will determine the price."

Arthur stepped back, his hand tightening around Excalibur. Merlin urged him out, while the Round Table waited outside, restless, their eyes filled with questions.

"And?" asked Gaheris. "Is she friend or foe?"

Arthur didn't answer immediately. He looked back at the tower, where the fire flickered in its windows. Then he said, "She's... both."

Merlin looked at him, gloomy. "She's Twilight. And Twilight consumes everything. Remember, Arthur: once you let her in, you'll never get her out."

Arthur nodded. But deep down, he knew he had let her in long ago.

The air outside the tower was cool, but it didn't feel pure. It was as if something of Morgana had clung to them, a residue of smoke or gaze that couldn't be shaken off. The Round Table waited, and when Arthur and Merlin stepped out the door, questions immediately filled their faces.

"Well?" grumbled Cathan. "Are we talking about a witch, or a sister?"

Arthur opened his mouth, then closed it again. Brangaine laughed dryly. "His silence says enough."

Gaheris slammed her fist into her palm. "Witch or not—if she has power, she's useful. We have enemies in every valley. A woman like her can decide the battle without us drawing our swords."

"Or she'll decide the battle against us," Brangaine hissed. "You didn't see her look at him. That wasn't the look of a sister, that was the look of a hunter who's already marked her prey."

Bedivere spoke quietly but clearly: "Whether sister or witch, she will come back. The question is not if, but when."

The voices grew louder, each speaking against the other. One of the younger knights said, "If she shares blood, she's family." Another laughed sharply: "Blood doesn't make a circle, otherwise we'd be sitting at the table with every robber."

Arthur listened, his own inner conflict echoing in every word. The Round Table was still young, but it was already beginning to split—Morgana had done it without drawing a sword.

Merlin struck the staff into the ground, and the sound brought a moment of silence. "You talk of benefit, of danger, of blood ties. But you don't see that Morgana is not human like you. She is twilight. She is both fire that warms and fire that burns. Whoever calls her in must be prepared to burn."

"And you?" Brangaine asked sharply. "Have you never burned, Merlin? Or do you think your fire is purer?"

A shimmer passed over his face, which seemed older than in all the battles before. "I have burned. And I know what it smells like when flesh cries out in the fire. That's why I say: Beware."

Arthur raised his hand, silencing them all. "Enough. She is my sister. But she is not at our table. Not yet. We will move on—and if she follows us, it will not be as a queen, but as a shadow. I will decide when the shadow deserves light."

The words hung heavy in the air. Some nodded, others remained silent. But no one truly believed they could leave Morgana behind so easily.

That night, as they camped, Arthur still heard their voices. Gaheris: "We might need her." Brangaine: "We will break because of her." Bedivere: "She is a part of his blood. That's enough."

And Arthur lay awake, his eyes fixed on the stars, and knew: His Round Table was no longer a circle. It was already a crack.

The morning came gray, the light veiled, as if the sun itself were afraid to fully reveal itself. Mist lay over the fields, and the horses snorted restlessly. The group prepared to leave, but no laughter, no song accompanied them. Everyone carried the weight of the night with them.

Arthur sat still in the saddle, Excalibur at his belt, and his gaze wandered back to the tower, barely visible in the fog. He hoped it was gone—a shadow that would dissolve when the light came. But he knew better.

Morgana stood at the top of the tower, in the window frame, her hair black as the smoke she controlled. She watched him go. Her face was impassive, but her eyes glowed like glass blades.

"Brother," she whispered, and the mist carried the words as if they had wings, "you have rejected me. But your no is weaker than my yes. For blood knows no no."

She cut her hand with a dagger, letting the blood drip onto the stone. It flowed as if it would not stop, and with each trace, a pattern emerged that was older than both of them.

"I swear," she said, her voice both hard and soft, "I will be your destiny. Whether you place me at your table or curse me, whether you love me or hate me—I will sit in your crown, whisper in your sword, laugh in your dreams. You will never be rid of me."

Arthur rode on, his face forward, but his heart retreated. He felt it—like a cold thread wrapping itself around him, invisible, unbreakable. He sensed that she saw him, even now, even from afar.

Merlin rode beside him, his eyes dark. "She said something," he murmured, "I know it. A vow. Perhaps a curse."

Arthur nodded barely noticeably. "I know."

And a certainty grew within him that was worse than fear: It wasn't the sword, not the battles, not the stones that would challenge him most. But she—Morgana. Sister in the Twilight.

Behind him rode the Round Table, and already their ranks were no longer unified. Some stood by Merlin, some whispered of Morgana. The circle had a crack—and every crack is the beginning of a rupture.

Arthur closed his eyes for a moment, and there she was: her smile, soft and cruel at the same time. And he knew that the fight against her would not be a war with swords, but a war in his own heart.

And so he rode into the day, with sword, with crown, with shadow. And somewhere in the tower, between the mist and the fire, Morgana smiled—not because she had won, but because she knew the war had only just begun.

The first big test

The messenger came not on horseback, but on his knees. The reins trailed behind him like a dead snake, and the nag smelled of stale smoke. The man himself was black in the face, not like a smear of soot, but like a shadow that had decided to become skin. As he staggered from the path into the clearing, the Round Table held its breath as if someone had cracked the sky.

"South," he gasped, "the village... Brynwaith..." He coughed, a dry, nasty thing from which sparks seemed to emerge, although there were none. "It burns, but not like fire burns. It... eats the air, eats the voices. It leaves wood standing and takes flesh. The stones sweat. The water boils in the well, but the bucket freezes to his hand."

Brangaine caught him and tore open his burned tunic. The skin beneath wasn't bloated as after flames; it was smooth, as if someone had scraped the life from his body with a knife, without shedding blood. Bedivere crouched down, sniffed, and blinked. "This isn't smoke. This is... sand that was once light."

The messenger grabbed Arthur's wrist. "You are the king. You have the sword. If you don't come, it will come to you. It... breathes. It breathes in the houses, in the fields, in the children." His voice broke. "It breathes in my wife."

Arthur felt something cold creep up his spine and settle on the back of his neck. Dragon's breath, he thought, and the word tasted first like myth, then like metal. The pack of lords was familiar to him; their intrigues smelled of wine and lies. This smelled of something older, something that knew no words and took no prey, but simply—was.

Merlin stepped forward, knelt beside the man, and touched the ground. He closed his eyes, and Arthur knew what the old man was doing: He was listening to whether the earth was already speaking with another tongue. When Merlin opened his eyes again, there was nothing comforting in them. "It's coming from the south like an evil storm. No ordinary fire. A rift. Perhaps the first breath of what awoke at Stonehenge when the circle was torn."

"So Morgana," Gaheris growled reflexively. "Or ourselves," Merlin countered. "Call it what you will. It's old. And it's hungry."

Cathan pulled his shirt over his shoulders as if he were cold. "How do you put out something that isn't fire?" "You don't put it out," said Merlin. "You tie it up. Or you feed it until it's full. Both cost money."

Arthur looked around. He saw men who were willing to die as long as someone was watching; and people who preferred to live as long as no one reproached them. He saw the tablet—invisible here, but still round in their minds—and at the same time the fine cracks in it. Morgana had burned nothing, yet left embers behind.

He placed his hand on Excalibur. It didn't vibrate, not as usual, but lay still, as if the blade itself were listening. "We're leaving," he said. "Not tomorrow. Now."

"With how many?" asked Bedivere. "With all those who understand that fame doesn't satisfy here."

Brangaine tightened his belt. "Then few will go." "Then the right ones will go," said Arthur.

They prepared themselves. There was little metal clatter; most tied water skins to their saddles and fetched wet linen to wrap around their mouths and noses. The blacksmith dragged over a box containing iron that smelled different from iron—duller, as if it had already burned without ever being hot. "Slag from blind furnaces," he murmured. "Put it around the sleepers if you can. Sometimes such remnants keep things that mistake themselves for fire at bay."

The messenger, now wrapped in wet cloths, held Arthur's gaze. "When you come, don't listen to the crying. It's crying from the walls. It's not my wife. It's not your child. It's just... breath."

"What about priests?" asked a young knight who still believed in magic in robes. "They pray," said the messenger, his voice suddenly hollow, "but the prayer freezes on their lips."

Merlin plunged his staff deep into the earth. A dull sound echoed, like hitting a belly. "Hear me," he said, and he sounded as if he were speaking into a well. "Dragons are rare, dragon breath even rarer. If this is what I fear, it will not burn you like wood, but erase you like names. Hold onto each other. Speak your names aloud as you walk. Speak them until your throats burst. That which no longer has a name belongs to breath."

Gaheris grinned crookedly. "My name is Gaheris, and if anyone forgets me, I'll hammer my name back into their skull." "Do it," said Merlin. "And when you laugh, laugh loudly. Laughter is also a name."

Arthur turned to the circle. "We are not here to be heroes. We are here to save a village. Those who stay guard those who do not fight. Those who come come to stand, not to shine." He paused, his heart heavy, his tongue dry. "And listen, Circle: If one of you disappears in this breath, keep speaking their name. Until it hurts. We leave no one untouched."

The faces hardened. Brangaine nodded curtly. Bedivere flexed the bowstring as if testing her name. Cathan stepped beside Arthur and placed a heavy fist on his shoulder. "King," he said, "if you fall, I fall. I hate big words, but this one is small enough."

They set out as midday clung to the sun. The south smelled normal at first—horse, grass, dung—then, with every mile, less of the world and more of a cellar. The wind became wrong; it didn't blow, it sucked. Sounds came out of place: a bird's call sounded like someone rubbing a spoon on stone; the murmur of a stream was reminiscent of feverish breathing.

"Do you hear that?" whispered the young knight who believed in robes. "Say your name," growled Gaheris. "Tristan," he breathed. "Louder," said Brangaine, without turning around. "Tristan!"

The syllables hung in the air and then fell like stones. Arthur felt Excalibur begin to tremble beneath his cloak, very slightly, as if the blade were sticking its tongue out of its mouth to take away the taste.

"Not now," Arthur murmured, his hand on the handle. "Not yet."

After the next hilltop, they saw it. No fire—not the way the world thinks of fire. Brynwaith lay there as if someone had painted it and then forgotten to let the paint dry. The walls were standing, the thatched roofs too, but everything was smooth and dull, as if some breath had

clogged the pores. Smoke drifted from the doors, but it was white and heavy, it had no smell, and yet it caught the eye.

A dog stood in the middle of the street, rigid, as if reminded of how to be a statue. A man knelt before a fountain, his head bowed, his hands too clean.

"Don't touch it," Merlin said quietly. "As long as it's breathing, it'll eat proximity."

Arthur dismounted. "Cathan, with me. Brangaine, take three and go over the north ridge, Bedivere cover. Gaheris – stay with the horses, whoever flees, you hold back, with words or with your fists. Tristan, you say your name until I give you another."

"And you?" Brangaine asked. Arthur looked at Excalibur. "I'm asking if the blade can still extinguish without taking us with it."

The messenger, pale as ash, pointed with his chin toward the large barn at the edge. "There... that's where the breathing is deepest." He laughed briefly, a sound that didn't suit him. "You can hear it. If you're naive enough."

Merlin pulled a handful of dark earth from his pouch and rubbed it across Arthur's forehead. "For the name," he said. "So it sticks."

Arthur nodded. He would have liked to say that would help. Instead, he said, "When I begin, don't fall into me. Pull me when I... blur."

They left. The yard was quiet, but not empty. There's silence like sleep, and silence like a lie. This was the second. Something was breathing in the barn. Not a dragon you could take down with a good spear. More like a hole that had decided not to remain a hole.

Arthur drew Excalibur. The blade made no sound, but something in the air changed—as if the world had briefly gritted its teeth.

"Say your name," whispered Merlin. Arthur raised his blade. "Arthur," he said. Then, louder: "ARTHUR!"

The breath in the darkness paused. And began to speed up.

"This is it," murmured Merlin. "Our first test."

And Arthur thought: Not the first. Just the one who's already too big to lie. He stepped forward, Excalibur in his grip, the circle at his back—and the realm at his throat.

The barn was no longer a building, but a lung. Every step inside felt like entering a chest that slowly rose and fell. The boards didn't creak—they groaned. The smoke, white and heavy, slid along the beams like tongues that didn't quite belong in this world.

Arthur raised Excalibur higher. The blade gave off no light, but it attracted the darkness, as if it wanted to suck it in. The air vibrated softly, like a breath through tin.

“Speak your names,” Merlin commanded.

"Gaheris!" roared a voice outside. "Brangaine," growled a voice from the north. "Tristan!" came thin and trembling, but he held on.

Arthur opened his mouth. "Arthur," he said, then louder: "ARTHUR!" The echo came back, but not all the way. A part hung in the air, as if something had swallowed it.

And then they saw it.

Not a dragon—no mouth, no scales, no scream. But a hole in the room that breathed. A shred of air that twitched like an open wound, black and red, as if the night had fermented within. With every breath, the walls drew inward, bending as if they wanted to live with it.

Brangaine spat on the ground. "That's not an animal. That's a mistake."

"A crack," Merlin murmured. "Something that shouldn't be here, and that's precisely why it can't. But as long as it breathes, it will eat anything with a name."

Arthur felt Excalibur vibrate, stronger, faster. He raised it, and the thing in the darkness gasped. As if it had recognized him.

"King," said Cathan, his voice deep, "should I take it?" Arthur shook his head. "This isn't a fistfight."

Bedivere drew the bowstring outside. "Orders?" "Just have names ready," Merlin called back. "Arrows bounce off breath."

Arthur stepped closer, and immediately the thing crawled toward him. Not a step, not a leap—it rolled like smoke, it stretched like flesh. A child's face appeared in the mist, pale, distorted. "Arthur..." it breathed. "Brother..."

Arthur almost stumbled, his heart wrenching in his chest. But Merlin grabbed his arm. "Don't listen. That's not a child. It's your name it bears."

“Arthur,” the thing whispered again, and this time it sounded like Morgana.

Arthur shouted back at the top of his lungs: “I AM ARTHUR!” And he swung Excalibur.

The blade plunged into the smoke, and immediately the hole shrank. A scream ripped through the boards, as if the barn itself were breaking apart. Sparks flew, but it wasn't fire—it was names, torn syllables fluttering through the air.

Cathan yanked Arthur back, Brangaine thrust forward, cutting into what seemed like an arm of mist. Her blade slid through without resistance, yet she screamed as if she had struck flesh.

"More names!" Merlin cried. "Speak them, hold on tight!"

“Gaheris!” “Brangaine!” “Tristan!” “Bedivere!”

The barn shook, and the thing gasped harder. It contracted, a knot of breath, smoke, and voices.

Arthur raised Excalibur with both hands, the sword now glowing, not brightly, but deeply—like a glowing coal that could consume anything. "I am Arthur!" he cried again, and plunged the blade into the center.

For a moment, everything was silent. No smoke, no sound, just an emptiness that felt like drowning.

Then the scream broke out.

The barn cracked on its nails, boards splintered, the roof blew to shreds. The breath dissolved, not into smoke, but into dust that immediately sank into the earth.

Arthur fell to his knees, sword in hand. His lungs burned as if they had swallowed the very breath.

Merlin knelt beside him, looking at him seriously. "You didn't defeat it. You only... bound it to you."

Arthur looked up, sweat and dust on his face. "Then I'm his prison now."

"Yes," said Merlin. "Until it gets hungry."

When the dust settled, the barn was nothing more than a skeleton of beams. The sky above seemed brighter, but no cleaner—more as if the light were afraid to return completely. Arthur was still kneeling, Excalibur in his hand, the blade hot as if he'd plunged it into red-hot iron. He breathed raggedly, each breath burning as if the thing were still in his lungs.

Brangaine approached cautiously, blade in hand. "Is it over?" Merlin shook his head. "Nothing is over that has no beginning. The thing wasn't an animal. It was a hole. And holes don't disappear, they wait."

Arthur struggled to his feet, feeling the gaze of the Round Table. Some looked at him with awe, others with something that seemed even more dangerous—fear.

They combed the village. The streets were quiet, but not empty. Bodies stood upright against walls, frozen in the moment of escape. Their faces were smooth, expressionless, as if their souls had been scraped out, leaving only a shell.

A child sat on a doorstep, its eyes wide open. Brangaine knelt down, touched its shoulder—and the child simply fell apart, like dust that had already decayed from within.

Tristan, the young knight, cried out. "By all the gods—we are fighting against something that cannot die!"

Merlin placed his hand on his chest. "Say your name, boy." "Tristan," he whispered, tears in his eyes. "Louder." "TRISTAN!"

The birds on the roof flew up, frightened by the sound. But Tristan trembled less.

In one of the houses, they found a woman, still alive. Her skin was gray, her hair white, despite her youth. She reached for Arthur's hand and whispered, "You have bound it... I feel it. But it sits within you now, King. You are the breath."

Arthur pulled his hand back, but her words pierced his ear. You are the breath.

Bedivere looked at the woman, cold and calm. "She's alive, but she'll die soon. And her death will follow us." "We can't just leave her!" Brangaine cried. "We can't take her with us," Bedivere replied.

The argument began.

"You talk like an executioner," Brangaine snarled. "Every life counts!" "Not if the hole takes it with it," said Bedivere. "Then every life you save is a new grave."

Cathan threw up his arms. "Enough chatter. The king decides."

All eyes turned to Arthur. He felt Excalibur in his hand, heavier than before. He saw the woman looking at him pleadingly, and he knew: whatever he decided would divide more than heal.

"We'll take her out," he finally said. "But separately. She won't ride with us; she'll be led. If she dies—she won't die alone in the dust."

The group fell silent. Brangaine nodded, and Bedivere pressed her lips together.

As they left the village, the whispering began. Not from the people—that had long since died down here—but from within their own ranks. Gaheris murmured to Cathan, "He's tying weakness around his neck." Brangaine heard it and turned. "He's tying humanity around his neck. Better than your burbling." "Humanity dies first," Gaheris growled.

Arthur heard everything, but said nothing. He knew: The circle was still speaking together, but its thoughts were already separate.

Outside the village, Merlin stopped and looked back. The smoke was gone, but the air still shimmered, as if it hadn't fully returned. "It was only the test," he said. "The first. The realm has seen you—and it now knows what you smell like. And everything that is hungry will follow your scent."

Arthur closed his eyes. He thought of the woman who had whispered in his face: "You are the breath." He felt Excalibur vibrating, as if it confirmed just that.

They led the woman on a mule, wrapped in cloths Brangaine had soaked with wet herbs. She breathed shallowly, each breath a scratch, as if she were inhaling glass. No one spoke to her, no one dared—as if they were afraid her breath might stain them.

The path led through a forest, the trees dense, the sky gray. The horses shied, as if the wind still carried the breath of Brynwaith. Arthur rode in front, Excalibur at his side, heavier with every step. He felt it in his chest: a pounding that didn't come from him.

That afternoon, the woman began to speak. Quietly at first, then louder. "King... you didn't bind it... it is you..." Her voice was no longer a plea, but a song, a false song that refused to die. "When you breathe, it breathes... when you speak, it speaks..."

Arthur jerked the reins around and stared at her. Her eyes were wide open, gray, empty. "Shut up," he said hoarsely.

But she didn't remain silent. "Brother of Breath... King of Holes... Lord of Nothingness..."

Then her body collapsed forward, falling from the animal. She hit the ground without a sound and remained there.

Brangaine jumped off, knelt down, and tried to turn her. But the woman was already dust, trickling through her fingers as if she had never been flesh.

A silence fell over the table. Heavy, thicker than smoke.

"She was lost," Bedivere finally said quietly. "No," Brangaine snarled. "She was human." "She was Loch," Bedivere replied, "and now she's gone back."

Gaheris laughed harshly. "We should have left them in the village. Instead, we're dragging dust around with us."

Brangaine jumped up, her face hard. "You're filth, Gaheris. At least she believed. You only believe your own gut."

Cathan stepped between them and placed his hand on Brangaine's shoulder. "Enough. She's dust, and we'll soon be dust if we tear each other apart here."

But the words didn't help. A tear had opened, and he was bleeding loudly.

They sat in a circle around the fire that night, but the circle was no longer a circle. The flames cast shadows that stood between them like walls. Gaheris drank, loudly, provocatively. Brangaine silently polished her blade, so vigorously that sparks flew. Tristan murmured his name over and over, as if afraid he might forget it.

Arthur gazed into the embers and remained silent. The woman's last words still rang in his ears: King of the Holes... Lord of Nothing.

Merlin sat beside him, his eyes closed. "You see, boy?" he murmured finally. "A trial reveals more than it cures. Your circle has names, but no trust. And that's worse than breath."

Arthur clenched his fists. "How do I hold them together?" Merlin opened his eyes, which glittered in the firelight. "Perhaps you can't hold them. Perhaps only the crack holds you—for as long as it wants."

Arthur looked at Excalibur. The blade glowed softly, neither bright nor dark—as if it were itself listening. And in his heart, he knew: the test wasn't the village. The test began now, in fire, in mistrust, in conflict.

The night was damp, the fire burning weakly, as if even the embers were afraid to breathe. The forest around them was silent, too silent. No owl, no rustling, only that muffled rumble that Arthur had felt in his chest since Brynwaith—as if he carried the heartbeat of another world within him.

Tristan, the youngest, murmured his name again, softly like a prayer. "Tristan... Tristan... Tristan..." Brangaine gave him a sharp, but not mocking, look. "Louder," she said. He nodded, pressed his lips together, and finally cried out, "TRISTAN!" The trees answered with an echo that lasted too long, as if something foreign had climbed into them.

Arthur immediately sensed they weren't alone. He reached for Excalibur. The blade vibrated, barely noticeable, but it was enough.

"Guards!" he shouted. "Everyone up!"

Cathan jumped up. Gaheris stumbled out of the shadows, still holding the cup. "What is—" He couldn't go any further, because the forest was moving. Not like animals, not like wind. But like bodies that no longer knew they were dead.

They emerged from the trees—the people of Brynwaith. Men, women, children. Their faces were gray, smooth, their eyes empty. They walked neither fast nor slow, they simply walked, like a breath that never ends.

“They are dust,” murmured Bedivere, “and yet they walk.”

Arthur raised Excalibur. "Hold the circle!"

The Round Table formed, but the crunching began immediately. Gaheris: "They're not enemies, they're victims!" Brangaine: "They're dangers, nothing more!" Cathan: "Don't argue, or they'll eat you!"

The figures approached. One of the peasants opened his mouth—no scream, no word, just a long, drawn-out breath. Tristan raised his sword and struck. The body instantly crumbled to dust, but the breath remained, blowing into his face. He screamed, gasping for air.

Arthur leaped forward, yanking him back, Excalibur through the dust. The blade burned, sucking in the gray until it disappeared. But Arthur felt something of it remain within him, heavy in his chest.

The battle wasn't a fight, but a hold. Every blow disintegrated bodies, but the breath remained. He crawled, he bit, he wanted in.

Brangaine shouted names, over and over again, so no one would be silenced. "GAHERIS! CATHAN! BEDIVERE!" Gaheris shouted back, more defiantly than faithfully. "GAHERIS!" and slashed like a madman until his sword became blunt. Cathan laughed grimly, striking with his fist as if trying to choke his own breath.

Merlin stood at the center, his staff raised, murmuring ancient words. The ground vibrated, and a line of light burned into the circle surrounding the Round Table. For a moment, the figures paused, swaying.

"Now, Arthur!" Merlin cried. "Lead the blade, or we perish!"

Arthur raised Excalibur, feeling the blade burn, hotter than his blood. He swung it high—and rammed it into the ground.

A dazzling shock ripped through the ground. The figures burst, crumbling to dust that hissed in the light and disappeared. A scream echoed through the forest, not from one mouth, but from many, hundreds of them, until it died away like a snuffed-out fire.

The Round Table remained behind, panting, exhausted, the circle broken but not yet fallen.

Arthur sank to his knees, his hand clutching Excalibur. His breathing was heavy, and he felt that he wasn't breathing alone—something else was breathing inside him.

Merlin knelt beside him. "You saved her," he said. "But you also took her."

Arthur closed his eyes, heard Brangaine and Gaheris still arguing, heard Tristan crying, heard Bedivere silent. And he knew: the battle was over, but the test was not.

The morning smelled of ash, even though no fire had been lit. The trees stood still, the birds silent. Only the horses pawed restlessly, as if they knew the forest itself no longer belonged to them.

Arthur stood aside, his hands on Excalibur, the sword still warm like a heart that wasn't his own. Every breath hurt. It was as if he were breathing not air, but dust. And he knew the others heard him.

Brangaine was the first to speak. "King," she said, her voice harsh but not without concern, "you breathe differently."

Arthur raised his head. "What do you mean?"

"Your chest... it's heavier. Your breathing sounds like you didn't just fight the thing, you kept it."

Gaheris laughed dryly. "Maybe he's the thing now. Maybe he's carrying it inside him like a worm in an apple. Nice and shiny on the outside, but already rotting on the inside."

Brangaine turned around and snarled at him. "Shut your mouth!" "Why?" Gaheris cried. "Because he's king? If he infects us, we'll all be dust! Do we want to see it when he blows on us in our sleep?"

Cathan growled and grabbed Gaheris by the collar. "Keep still, or you won't breathe at all."

Arthur stepped in, raised his hand. "Enough!" His voice was rough, deeper than usual, and that was precisely what startled the group.

He looked at them, each one of them. Brangaine, who defended him, but with fear in her eyes. Bedivere, who remained silent, but whose gaze was so cool, as if he could already see the traitor. Gaheris, who mocked because he was afraid to remain silent. Cathan, who wanted to

fight because he had no other choice. Tristan, who murmured, "Tristan, Tristan, Tristan..." as if he were holding himself together like a breaking rope.

"Yes," Arthur finally said. "Perhaps I carry it. Perhaps it is within me. But listen to me: If the kingdom is already breaking because of me, then it was never a kingdom. If you fear me, fear me loudly, not from behind. If you trust me, then trust me completely. But decide—here. Now."

Silence. Only the cracking of twigs.

Then Bedivere spoke. "King. I believe you carry it. But I also believe you are strong enough to hold it. For now."

Brangaine nodded. "It holds. And as long as it holds, I'll hold on."

Cathan grumbled. "I'll follow until one of us dies. That's all the oaths need be."

Gaheris spat into the dust. "I follow because I have nothing else. But woe betide you if you breathe in my face while I sleep, Arthur. Then I'll slit your throat, even if you're king."

Tristan murmured his name. Louder this time. "TRISTAN! I... I'm following."

Arthur took a deep breath, feeling something vibrate inside him. He raised Excalibur, the sword glowing as if it heard everything.

"Then hear me," he said. "I am Arthur. I carry the sword. I carry the breath. But I also carry you. And as long as you call my name, it will not become dust, but stone."

The words hung in the air. No cheers, no applause. Just a faint nod, a snort, a gnashing of teeth. But the circle stood again—shaky, broken, but not yet disintegrated.

Merlin approached, his eyes tired. "Well spoken, boy. But words are not chains. The breath remains within you. It will wait, it will grow. And one day, it will no longer ask to be let out."

Arthur closed his eyes. Then I won't ask him to stay, he thought. But he didn't say it.

They returned, not as victors, but as men and women who had survived something that demanded no name. The horses walked more slowly, as if they too were carrying the burden. No one spoke much on the return journey; every breath sounded heavy, every thought like a stone in the stomach.

The fields north of Brynwaith seemed peaceful, too peaceful. Farmers saw them from afar, raised their hands, but no one came closer. Perhaps they smelled something the knights themselves could no longer smell: the breath that stuck to their skin.

When they entered a larger settlement, the people gathered. They saw the circle, they saw Excalibur. They wanted to hear stories. "Did you kill the dragon? Did you put out the fire?" Children cried, women wept, men clapped.

Arthur rode in front, and for a moment he wanted to answer, "Yes." But the truth weighed heavily on his chest. Instead, he raised his sword and said, "The village is free. Breath is bound. You live."

Cheers erupted, loud, full of hope. But the Round Table knew that behind the words lay another truth. The breath wasn't bound. It was merely displaced—in Arthur.

Later, in a lord's hall, they were treated to a meal. Meat, beer, and bread. But no one ate with joy. The knights drank, but the beer tasted stale, the meat too tough. Brangaine watched the fire silently, Gaheris made more noise than usual, and Tristan sweated as if he were still forgetting his name. Bedivere barely spoke, but his eyes were fixed on Arthur, searching, weighing.

Cathan slammed his fist on the table. "We did it. A village saved, an empire protected. Call it what you will—it was a victory."

“A victory that put dust in our lungs,” Brangaine replied quietly.

Merlin, sitting at the edge, simply sipped water. "Victory and defeat are the same here. You took the breath from a hole and put it into a man. Now he is called king."

All eyes turned to Arthur.

He felt the weight of those eyes, the awe and fear. He stood up and placed Excalibur on the table. The wood creaked beneath the blade.

"Hear me," he said. "The realm will send trials greater than ourselves. Today we have held. Tomorrow, perhaps not. But as long as we speak our names, as long as we hold the circle, we are more than breath, more than dust. I am Arthur. And I will hold—until I break. And when I break, it will be with you."

It fell silent. No enthusiasm, no laughter, no cheering. Just nods and brief gestures. But it was enough.

Late at night, when the others were asleep, Arthur sat alone, Excalibur draped over his knees. He heard his own breathing, heavy and strange, and wondered: Am I still king, or already a vessel?

Merlin stepped out of the shadows and sat down next to him. "Your first test," he said. "And it showed you that tests aren't about passing, they mark you. From now on, you are marked."

Arthur nodded. He said nothing. But a certainty grew within him that was colder than all the prophecies: The circle was still there, but the cracks could no longer be denied. And he himself had become the biggest crack.

The Hunt for the Dragon's Breath

The news came faster than the wind. First, a rumor that crept through the taverns: in the west, a grove had suddenly turned black, its leaves burned, but its trunks still standing as if made of stone. Then a messenger came running horseless, panting, his lips full of blood. He spoke only three words: "The breath grows." And collapsed dead.

Arthur stood in the hall, the people around him, lords and peasants mixed, all with the same question in their eyes: Are you our savior – or our curse?

A woman cried out, "It has been since you came! Since you thrust the sword into the earth! We have had fire, yes, but never breath, never dust, never children falling asleep without names!"

A man stepped forward, his face filled with fear, but his voice firm. "And yet you are the only one who can hold it. We saw you tie it. If you don't leave, King, the kingdom will die."

Arthur felt the space shrink, the weight of the eyes heavier than any armor. Excalibur vibrated at his side, a whisper only he heard. Hunt me.

At night he spoke to Merlin.

"It's spreading," said Arthur, his hands clutching his hair. "Not just the south. Now the west. Soon the north, the east. The realm is being swallowed up, and everyone's looking at me as if I were the knife that cuts them."

Merlin nodded slowly, as if he'd known this long ago. "Breath isn't a place, Arthur. It's a hunger. Where it once awoke, it seeks more. And since it breathes in you, it seeks with you."

"So I'm the source?" Arthur jumped up, almost angrily. "Myself?"

"Not yet," Merlin replied. "But you are his vessel. And vessels overflow. Before that happens, you must find the source. And perhaps…"—his voice trailed off—"perhaps plunge the sword into the right maw."

Arthur froze. "What if the Maw is me?"

Merlin was silent.

In the morning, Arthur stepped before the Round Table. Their faces were scarred—not only by battles, but by the night they had breathed dust.

"Hear me," Arthur began. "The breath is spreading. It's taking villages, forests, fields. It won't stop. We can't wait for it to find us. We'll hunt it. We'll search for where it was born. And we'll bind it—or we'll die."

Gaheris laughed bitterly. "We? Or you? Maybe it's not out there at all. Maybe it's already sitting in your chest, King."

Cathan growled. "If he falls, we fall. It's that simple."

Brangaine stepped forward, sword in hand. "Then let us ride. Better to die in the hunt than to be slowly suffocated."

Bedivere spoke quietly but clearly: "Then this hunt will also be the hunt for ourselves. Those who fall fall not only to enemies, but to doubt."

Arthur raised Excalibur, which glowed faintly in the morning sun. "Then doubts shall accompany us. But we ride. Today. Now."

They set off. The horses snorted, their hooves pounded the ground. Farmers watched them go, some praying, some cursing, some just spitting in the dust.

A boy ran alongside, shouting, "King Arthur! Give us back our breath, or take it with you so it doesn't eat us!"

Arthur didn't look back. He knew he had no choice. Either he chased his breath—or his breath chased him.

The first few miles were silent. Then the whispering began. Knights spoke, quietly, on horseback, but the wind carried them.

"We're hunting something that has no face." "We're hunting ourselves." "Perhaps we should hunt the king."

Arthur heard it, but he rode on, his eyes forward. He knew the hunt had begun. Not just against what was coming from Brynwaith—but against himself.

The path led them through a land that was no longer entirely theirs. Fields that had borne grain yesterday stood empty today, the grain withered into gray threads that sounded like voices in the wind. Rivers that had once been fresh flowed black, as if they had drunk ash. The farmers fled their huts, some with children, some empty-handed, some with only a name on their lips, which they cried out over and over again, as if they were clinging to it themselves.

Arthur saw all this and felt the horse's every step becoming heavier. Not just from fatigue—but because the realm itself seemed to be sinking beneath them.

On the third day, they came across the first false trail. Smoke over a village, screams, the clang of metal. They galloped, ready for the horror – and found men slaughtering each other. No ghosts, no breath. Just peasants smashing each other's skulls with scythes and pitchforks.

“What happened here?” Brangaine cried as she dispersed the combatants.

An old man, bleeding, his teeth knocked out, croaked: "We heard... breathing... at night... in the fields. Everyone mistook the other for the hole. Everyone saw it in their neighbor's face. So we hit."

Merlin stepped forward, touched the earth, then the man. "No breath here," he murmured. "Only fear. And fear is stronger than fire."

Arthur stared at the dead. Men who had been brothers, fathers who had slain their sons. He felt the realm crumbling—not just through breath, but through mistrust.

Some knights grumbled as they rode on.

"We're not hunting anything," growled Gaheris. "We're just riding from madness to madness." "That's the hunt," Brangaine countered. "The realm isn't just dying of fire. It's dying because no one believes anymore." "Then it's better to hunt faith," Gaheris scoffed.

Cathan shouted to drown out the voices. "Ride! As long as you ride, you live!"

But Arthur heard everything. Every sentence was a knife, and he felt the blade in his chest.

On the fourth day, the air smelled of sulfur. They found a forest where the trees weren't burned, but upturned, as if something had pushed out from within. The bark was smooth, as if melted by fire, but there was no burning smell.

Tristan stared, his eyes wide. "It's... it's like the trees were trying to scream."

Merlin knelt, his ear to the ground. "The breath was here. But not the source. Just a shadow, an extension. The source moves on."

"And we follow," Arthur murmured. He felt Excalibur vibrate, softly, as if the blade knew more than he did.

At night, by the fire, no one spoke much. The knights' faces were hard, but their eyes flickered. Gaheris drank, Brangaine sharpened blades, Bedivere remained silent, Cathan chopped wood, Tristan murmured his name as if it were already a prayer.

Arthur looked into the embers and heard the breath—not outside, but within. Heavy, strange, eerily steady. And he knew: It wasn't just a chase. It was a race. If he didn't find the source, he himself would become the source.

The fifth day brought no sun. Only a sky that hung like a wet rag, leaden and heavy. The horses panted as if they were pulling through water rather than air. Arthur felt the burden more deeply than the others—in his chest, where every breath reminded him that he was carrying the thing.

Shortly before noon, they saw the smoke. Not a village this time, but a circle of tents in a hollow, scraps of cloth fluttering in the wind. In front of them stood people, naked except for white markings on their skin. They moved slowly, evenly, their arms raised, as if they heard a rhythm no one else could hear.

"Cultists," Bedivere growled. "I've seen enough to know." "From whom?" asked Cathan. "From a god?" "From the Hole," Brangaine murmured.

They rode closer. The people didn't stop moving, as if the horses were merely part of the ceremony. Only when Arthur dismounted and drew Excalibur did the arms stay suspended in the air. Dozens of eyes turned to him. There was no fear in them—only radiance.

A man stepped forward, shaved bald, his skin covered in runes. His voice was rough but clear: "It's him."

Arthur froze. "What do you mean?"

"The Carrier," the others chorused. "Breath in flesh. The King of Holes."

Arthur felt his chest burning. He wanted to object, but Excalibur vibrated violently, as if agreeing with his words.

"You worship him?" cried Brangaine, indignant. "You worship what eats you?"

The man laughed. "It consumes us, yes. But what consumes redeems. What makes us dust finally frees us from guilt, from hunger, from names. You fight it because you're afraid. We worship because we understand."

The people sang, a deep, monotonous sound. Breathing. Breathing. Breathing.

Arthur felt the rhythm in his chest. As if he already belonged to them.

"Enough," cried Gaheris, drawing his sword and stepping forward. "They're madmen. Let's smash them, King, before their breath creeps into us!"

But Arthur raised his hand. "No." His voice was calm, but everyone heard the trembling. "If they think I'm their king—then I want to hear what their king is."

Merlin turned around, his eyes cold. "Arthur, don't do that. They're telling you something you already half believe." Arthur shook his head. "Or they're telling me what I already am."

The shaven-headed man approached, the runes on his chest shimmering in the gray light. "You are our sign, Arthur. You bound the breath, not banished it. You are what we expected—the one who turns dust into realm."

Arthur felt the knights moving behind him, restless, filled with anger. Gaheris murmured, "He's listening to them... Gods, he's really listening."

Brangaine stepped beside Arthur and whispered, “Tell me you don’t believe.”

Arthur didn't answer.

Suddenly, a scream ripped through the choir. Tristan, the boy, staggered back, his eyes wide. "They... they have no name!" He gasped for air. "I feel it—they are empty, they are only breath!"

Then the movement erupted. The cultists rushed forward, not with weapons, but with hands grasping at Arthur's chest, catching his breath.

Excalibur erupted, glowing, and a blinding slash ripped through the front row. Bodies crumbled to dust, like the woman in Brynwaith. But the others cheered, fell to their knees, and sang louder. Breathe! Breathe! Breathe!

Arthur screamed, swung the sword again, and the air itself trembled.

When the dust settled, the hollow lay silent. Dozens of bodies had disintegrated, only the shaven-headed man still knelt, his gaze fixed on Arthur.

"You can kill us," he breathed, "but you are already our king. The breath is yours. And you are ours."

Then he too fell apart.

Arthur stood panting, Excalibur burning in his hand. The knights looked at him—not as a king, but as a threat.

Merlin stepped up to him and placed his hand on his shoulder. "You see? Even the Void recognize you. But ask yourself: Is that an honor—or a curse?"

Arthur remained silent. Because deep down he knew: It was both.

They left the hollow with dust on their boots and suspicion in their eyes. No one spoke for long, only the horses snorted, as if they too were infected with the cultists' chorus. Arthur rode in front, Excalibur heavy in his hand, and in every pause in his breath, he heard their chant: Breathe, breathe, breathe.

On the seventh day, the path led them into a valley that looked as if it had died a hundred times before. The rocks were black, but not from fire—they shone damply, as if they were sweating. No grass grew here, only gray lichen that protruded from the earth like burnt fingers.

"It's stronger here," Brangaine murmured, her voice subdued. Merlin nodded. "Not the source. But an offshoot. A breath that has split off. If we don't bind it, it will consume the valley—and beyond."

Gaheris grinned crookedly. "Finally, something to grab."

But when they reached the cave at the end of the valley, his grin vanished. For out of the darkness came not smoke, not fire, but a pulse. Like a heartbeat, deep, dull, within the earth itself.

They entered. The floor was damp but cold, as if water dripped from a dead spring. The walls shone, not with minerals, but with something that looked like skin. And inside, in the center of the cave, hung a sack of smoke, pulsating, breathing, as if someone had forgotten the lungs of a god.

"That... is it?" whispered Tristan, his hand on his sword. "An offshoot," said Merlin. "A child of the breath. Not a dragon—just that which breathes dragons."

Suddenly the sack ripped open. Smoke billowed out, black and white at once, forming figures, faces, hands. They reached for the table, not like attackers, but like hunger.

The knights shouted their names. "CATHAN! BRANGAINE! BEDIVERE!" Each blow ripped smoke, but the smoke returned, thicker, more greedily.

Arthur raised Excalibur. The blade vibrated, hot, and he felt his chest pulsate in time. He breathed—and the thing breathed with him.

"Arthur!" Merlin cried. "Not too much! If you pull it too deep, you're not you anymore!"

But Arthur felt the power. The smoke dissipated when he swung. The figures disintegrated when he roared, "I AM ARTHUR!" Each time the blade sucked more, and each time it burned deeper within him.

Gaheris slashed beside him, but his blade cut through the fog without effect. "It's laughing at me!" he roared. "Only you can cut it!" "Then cover my back!" Arthur yelled back.

Brangaine yanked Tristan away as smoky hands wrapped around him. "Say your name!" "TRISTAN!" he gasped, and the hands fell away. But his eyes were glassy, as if he'd almost forgotten he even had it.

Arthur leaped forward, Excalibur raised. The sack pulsed harder, faster, as if ready to burst. Voices boomed in the cave, dozens, hundreds, and each one said his name.

"Arthur...Arthur...Arthur..."

He felt himself sinking. Not king, not human, just a word devouring itself.

"Stop it!" Merlin shouted. "With your will, not with your sword!"

Arthur closed his eyes, felt his breath inside him, heavy and burning. Then he roared, louder than all the voices: "I AM NOT YOU! I AM ARTHUR!" And he plunged Excalibur deep into the sack.

A blinding light erupted, the cavern shook. Smoke exploded, hands flung loose, faces screamed. The knights threw themselves to the ground. Arthur stood alone, his sword in his flesh, feeling the breath flowing in—not into the earth, but into him.

Then there was silence. The sack had collapsed, the cave lay silent, only drops fell from the ceiling.

Arthur knelt, panting, Excalibur still in his hand. His eyes burned, his breathing labored.

Merlin came to him and placed his hand on his shoulder. "You have won," he said. "But you have also taken. You are no longer just a bearer. You are the hunter—and the hunted."

Arthur looked up. Something flickered in his eyes that wasn't entirely his own.

They left the cave in silence. Every footstep sounded too loud, as if the ground itself feared it would tremble again. The sky outside was leaden, but after the darkness, it seemed as bright as a knife.

Arthur led the way, Excalibur in his fist, the sword still vibrating. He held his breath because otherwise he would have heard it breathing inside him.

Cathan was the first to break. "Gods," he growled, "we saw it. It ate him. Not all of it, but enough. Look at him."

Brangaine grabbed his arm. "Hold still. He saved us. Without him, we'd be dust."

"Saved?" Gaheris interrupted, his voice raw with anger and fear. "Saved? He's taken it inside! He's full of holes now! If he sleeps next to us at night, we might wake up as ashes."

Tristan whispered his name, quietly, over and over again, but it didn't sound like a prayer, more like a request for confirmation: Tell me that I'm still me.

Arthur stopped and turned around. "Enough." His voice was deeper, rougher, and not just from exhaustion. "You want to know what I am? I am Arthur. I bear the sword. I bear the realm. And yes—I bear the breath. But as long as I stand, I stand for you. If you don't believe me—then leave."

The knights were silent, but their looks spoke louder than words. Bedivere, cool, scrutinizing, as if already considering when the king would become an enemy. Brangaine, full of defiance, his eyes hard, but with a trace of hope. Gaheris, anger on his face, fear in his hands. Cathan, breathing heavily, as if a part of him were already ready to strike.

Merlin stepped beside Arthur, his face like stone. "They doubt because they're right," he said quietly, but so everyone could hear. "You're no longer just human. You're a vessel. A vessel breaks sooner or later. The question is how many will be buried beneath it."

Arthur gripped the wizard's staff, his fingers white with pressure. "Don't say that again."

Merlin ripped the staff free, his eyes flashing. "You fear it yourself! I see it in your eyes. You're not afraid of dragons, not afraid of wars. You're afraid of your own breath."

Arthur wanted to reply, but the words choked. Because Merlin was right. He heard it himself—the steady pull, heavier, stranger, as if a second chest were breathing within his own.

Night fell, they made camp. No one spoke much, no one slept well. Brangaine woke with her sword drawn, as if she distrusted not only the forest but also the king. Gaheris drank, laughing too loudly to drown his fear. Tristan sobbed quietly between the calls of his name, as if afraid he might disappear anyway.

Arthur sat alone, Excalibur across his knees. The blade still vibrated, softly, rhythmically, as if it were part of his heart. He placed his hand on his chest and felt two blows: his own—and the other's.

For the first time since he had drawn the sword from the stone, he wasn't thinking about victory, about the kingdom, about the crown. He was thinking about whether he himself was the enemy.

Merlin sat down next to him, wordless. They looked at the fire, which crackled as if it were listening.

"Tell me, Merlin," whispered Arthur, "how long can I hold on?"

The magician was silent for a long time, then murmured: "As long as it holds you. And then the question is no longer how long you stand—but how far you fall."

Arthur closed his eyes. The chanting of the cultists echoed in his ears. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

And he knew: the hunt had found him.

On the eighth day, they reached a valley that smelled different from anything they'd seen before. No sulfur, no dust—just bread. Fresh bread. Smoke rose from chimneys, but it was golden, sweet, almost like honey.

“A village,” murmured Tristan, surprised, as if he had forgotten what normality looks like.

But as they approached, they realized: It wasn't normal. People were coming toward them, dozens, perhaps hundreds, in white shirts, their faces glowing. Children ran forward, throwing flowers that smelled of nothing. Women sang, men knelt.

"It's him!" someone cried. "The Lord of Breath!" "The King who bears fire!" "The one who doesn't burn us, but heals us!"

Arthur pulled the reins, and the Round Table stopped. The people surrounded them, hands outstretched, not hostile, but eager for touch.

An old woman pushed forward and grabbed Arthur's foot in the stirrup. "King," she whispered, "since you bound, we breathe easily. The fields bear fruit again. The cattle no longer drop dead. You are our breath."

Brangaine stepped back, her hand on her sword. "That's wrong," she murmured. "They worship him because he wears it. But when he wears it, they're only calm as long as he's calm."

Gaheris grinned sharply. "And if he falls, they fall. But look at them—they want it! Maybe he really should be their king. King of the holes, King of the dust. They love him more than anyone will ever love us."

Cathan growled. "Shut up. He's king for all of us, not just these fools."

Bedivere remained silent, just looked at Arthur searchingly. His eyes said: Do you want to believe it?

Arthur dismounted. The crowd cheered, hands grabbed at him, almost tearing at his coat. He raised his hands, and suddenly there was silence.

"Why do you worship me?" he asked. "I am a human being, nothing more."

"No!" they cried in unison. "You are more! You held the hole. You breathe for us. When you breathe, we live. When you die, we die. You are our breath."

Arthur felt his chest grow heavy. He wanted to scream: You're wrong! But deep inside him, where the strange blow had pounded, something like pride stirred.

Merlin stepped forward, his voice sharp. "You make him a god, and thereby make him your death. You don't know what you worship!"

The old woman turned to him, her eyes shining. "We know. We're not afraid. Just hungry. And he satisfies it."

The crowd joined in: “Hunger! Breath! King!”

Arthur looked at Merlin, then at the Round Table. Brangaine shook his head, Gaheris grinned, Tristan muttered his name in panic.

Arthur raised Excalibur, the blade glowing faintly. "I am Arthur," he said, "not Atem. I am king, not god. Don't forget that."

The crowd cheered anyway, as if he had promised them heaven.

Later, at the camp, the argument flared up.

"See, King?" cried Gaheris. "You don't have to fight the Hole—you are the Hole. And they love you for it."

Brangaine jumped up. "Shut up, you fool! He's king because he stands against the hole, not because he becomes one."

"Perhaps there's no difference," Bedivere hissed. "Perhaps the day he drew Excalibur was the day he began to become one."

Arthur was silent. All he could hear was the cheering in his ears—and the pounding in his chest, which grew louder, as if his breath itself were celebrating.

The night in the village was harder than any battle. They gave Arthur a house, but he didn't sleep. The day's cheers hung in his ears like bells that wouldn't go away. "Lord of the Breath," they had cried, as if it were a title, as if it were both crown and destiny.

He sat at the table, Excalibur before him, the blade glowing in the darkness like a never-extinguished coal. And then he heard it: his breath. Not outside, not in his chest—but in the sword itself.

He laid his forehead on the knob and sleep fell upon him.

He was dreaming.

He wasn't standing in a house, not in a village, not in his kingdom. He was standing in a cave, larger than any valley he knew. Walls of flesh, a floor of breathing stone. Above him, a sky of smoke that threatened to swallow him whole.

And at the center: a crack. No animal, no god, just a rift in existence. He absorbed everything—light, time, names. Hands, faces, shadows emerged from the darkness. Some he recognized: the woman from Brynwaith, the shaven-headed cultist, even knights from his own table.

Then he saw himself. Not as a human, but as a vessel. His body was transparent, and the crack breathed within him. Every breath stretched it until it threatened to burst. And the voices called: Arthur. Arthur. Arthur.

A figure emerged from the darkness. Morgana.

She wore no robe, only the shadow itself. Her eyes were green, and twilight burned in them. She smiled as if she had been waiting for him for a long time.

"Brother," she said, "you are chasing what has long been within you. The source is not in the land. It is in your blood. You are the breath. You are the kingdom. And if you fall, everything falls."

Arthur wanted to answer, but his voice was smoke.

Morgana stepped closer and placed a hand on his chest. "Don't be afraid. If you break, I'll catch you. And then we'll both belong to the breath."

Arthur screamed, and the sword rose—in dream as in reality. He awoke, the house trembled, and the blade glowed like fire.

Merlin stood in the doorway, his gaze serious. "You saw it." Arthur nodded, panting. "The source... isn't outside." "No," Merlin said quietly. "The source is deeper. Within you. But also beneath you. Where blood, stone, and breath are one."

Arthur lowered his gaze to Excalibur. It still glowed, as if it had seen the dream itself.

In the morning they set out. The people cheered, threw flowers, and cried: "Lord of the Breath! King! Savior!" But Arthur heard only Morgana in his ear: If you fall, I will catch you.

And he knew: The hunt was no longer just a search for a place. It was a path to the heart of the empire—and to his own heart.

The Wizard and the Warriors

The camp lay at the edge of a stunted forest. The trees leaned, as if they had been listening for too long, and the branches crackled softly in the wind, as if they wanted to join in the conversation. The fire crackled wearily, and the knights sat around it like men who, though they were side by side, weren't breathing together.

Arthur crouched at the edge, Excalibur over his knees. His breath in his chest was heavy, steady, like a second beat that wasn't his own. Everyone heard it—no one said it. Not yet.

Gaheris broke the silence. He stabbed the cup into the ground, soaking the wine into the dust. "I'll tell you how it is: We don't need wizards. No staff, no muttering. Swords, shields, muscles—that's enough. The breath is afraid of steel, not spells."

Brangaine snorted and spat into the fire. "You fool. Did you see how your sword ripped through the mist in the cave? It only cut through the air. If Arthur hadn't had the sword—and Merlin his spells—you would have been dust long ago, and your name an echo."

"My name needs no incantation," Gaheris snarled. "I'll shout it, and the gods will hear."

"The gods hear nothing," Bedivere interjected coolly. "They haven't heard for a long time. If anyone hears anymore, it's him." He pointed to Merlin, who sat silently at the edge, his eyes half-closed.

Cathan laughed dully and slammed his fist on the ground. "Leave the old man alone. Without him, we would have ridden blindly through the hole. But I also say: too much magic makes you soft. Steel holds. Magic eats."

“Steel eats you faster,” Merlin muttered without opening his eyes.

The voices died away briefly, as if the forest had been listening. Then Gaheris jumped up. "There, do you hear it? The old man is already whispering as if we were children. But he is the one who bound the king! He made him a vessel. Without him, Arthur would still be free!"

Arthur raised his head, the words hitting him like a blow.

Brangaine jumped to her feet. "Shut up, Gaheris! Arthur drew the sword himself. He was the one who took the breath. Merlin didn't force him."

"And yet," Bedivere growled, "he guided him. He led him to Stonehenge, to the stones that spoke. He brought him to the Hole. Maybe he meant it that way. Maybe it was always his plan."

The knights grumbled, their voices grew louder, hands reached for swords, not to draw them, but because they knew how quickly things could tip over.

Arthur raised his voice, rough and deep. "Enough."

They fell silent, but their eyes burned.

"I am the king," he said. "Not Merlin, not you. I bear the sword, I bear the breath. If you have doubts—speak them. But do not speak as if you are free of guilt. Every one of you nodded when I drew Excalibur. Every one cheered when I bound the breath. And now you want to tell me I am merely Merlin's vessel?"

He looked at them, one by one. Brangaine didn't flinch. Cathan pressed his lips together. Bedivere looked back coolly. Gaheris grinned, too proud to show fear. Tristan murmured his name in panic.

"Then hear me," said Arthur. "Without Merlin, we'd already be dust. Without you, too. I need both: sword and spell. If one is missing, everything falls."

Merlin opened his eyes, and there was no gleam in them, but weariness. "He speaks the truth," he said quietly. "But the truth will break your neck. For you will never hold it—the circle between blade and spell. One of you will always tear it apart."

"And who?" cried Gaheris. "Tell me, old man! Who's tearing it apart?"

Merlin looked into the fire, which leaped up as if it were answering itself. "All of you. And him." His gaze fell on Arthur.

The fire crackled, and the wind carried the words. The circle was silent—but there was more strife in the silence than in any shout.

The wind tugged at the fire, sparks leaping into the night. The silence following Merlin's words didn't last long. Gaheris stood up, swaying, his hand tightly gripping his sword hilt. "Enough talk. If the old man says we all tear the circle apart—then I'll begin. Then I'll show that a blade is more useful than magic."

Cathan snorted. "Sit down, fool." But Gaheris grinned broadly, a grin full of defiance. "No. I want to know. If Merlin's so clever, let him stop me."

He stepped into the circle, drew his sword, the metal flashing in the firelight. "Wizard! Speak your words, call your light. I want to see if it's more than smoke."

Merlin barely moved. He was still sitting, his hands on the hilt of his staff. His eyes were dark, deeper than the forest around them. "If I stop you, Gaheris, you're dead. If I don't stop you, the Circle is dead. What choice do you give me?"

This made Gaheris pause for a moment, but his pride prevailed. "Then choose. I stand here. Knight versus mage. It's that simple."

Arthur jumped to his feet, Excalibur in his fist. "Stop!" His voice growled, and the knights flinched. But Gaheris didn't budge.

"King," he growled, "you stand between us. But at some point you must choose. We knights—or your wizard."

Brangaine pushed him back, hard, almost like a punch. "You're an idiot, Gaheris. He's holding us all together. Do you want to tear him in two?"

Gaheris grabbed her hand and pulled it away. "Maybe he has to. Maybe this is the only way."

The sword flashed, Brangaine had drawn hers, and suddenly the air was full of steel.

Cathan jumped in, yelling, "Pull yourselves together!" But even he could barely separate the blades. Tristan screamed his name, over and over, in panic. "Tristan! Tristan!"

Arthur lunged forward, Excalibur raised. A blow to both blades, and sparks flew like stars. The sword's power sent Gaheris and Brangaine staggering back, their swords clattering to the ground.

Arthur stood between them, his eyes burning. "One more blow," he growled, "and you're not fighting yourselves—you're fighting me."

The knights stared at him. The fire reflected in his eyes, and for a moment he himself seemed like the hole he wore.

Gaheris slowly stepped back, his hands shaking. "That's it," he murmured. "You're no longer king. You're the Thing. You have more of him than you let on."

Brangaine raised her sword, the blade trembling. "No. He's Arthur. But he'll break if we keep arguing like this."

Bedivere was silent, but his look said it all: he had seen how close Arthur himself was to the abyss.

Merlin finally rose. The staff in his hand glowed faintly. "You see? This is the beginning. A circle that turns against itself cannot support a realm. Today it was Gaheris. Tomorrow it will be all of you. And one day—he."

His finger pointed at Arthur. The fire crackled, as if confirming the prophecy.

Arthur clenched his fist around Excalibur, which vibrated like a heartbeat. He wanted to object, but deep down he knew: Merlin was right.

The night was thick and stale, as if the battle itself had darkened the sky. The fire had burned down, only the embers still glowed, red like angry eyes in the dust. Most of the knights slept restlessly, each with a hand on his sword. Only Arthur sat awake, Excalibur across his knees, his fingers on the hilt as if holding onto a last hold.

A crackling in the leaves. Footsteps. Gaheris stepped out of the darkness, a silhouette, broad, swaying, his breath stinking of wine. He stopped in front of Arthur, his sword loosely at his hip.

"King," he began, his voice rough, "I want to talk. No arguing. Just talking."

Arthur looked at him, his face hard. "You've talked enough today."

“Maybe,” said Gaheris, “but not the right thing.”

He squatted down, his face in the flickering light. "Tell me honestly, Arthur: Do you really believe Merlin is on your side? Completely? Do you think he sees you as a king—or merely as a tool? It was he who led you to the Stones. It was he who made you draw your sword. It was he who made you devour your breath. And now he sits here, prophesying your doom as if he'd already decided it."

Arthur remained silent. The words burned.

"I'll tell you what," Gaheris continued, more quietly, almost conspiratorially. "Merlin has his own plans. Sorcerers always have plans. You are his vessel, yes—but not for breath. For him. He wants to hold you, guide you, until you break. And then he'll take what's left."

Arthur took a sharp breath. "And what do you suggest?"

Gaheris grinned, a crooked, dangerous move. "Keep the warriors close. Us. Let us build the empire. With sword, with blood, with courage. And keep him at bay. Listen to him if you must, but never fully believe him. For if you rely solely on him, King—then you are already lost."

Arthur stared into the fire, the words echoing within him. Merlin has his own plans.

Excalibur vibrated, softly, as if reacting. And his breath pounded in his chest, steady, mocking.

"And what if you're wrong?" asked Arthur. "What if Merlin's the only one who knows how to do it?"

"Then we're all dust," Gaheris said dryly. "But listen, Arthur: I'd rather die in the dust with a sword in my hand than watch a wizard make you dance like a puppet."

He stood up, swayed, and spat into the fire. "Think about it. Tomorrow you'll be king. But the day after tomorrow, perhaps only his shadow."

Then he disappeared into the darkness.

Arthur remained alone. He stared into the embers, heard his breath in his chest and Merlin's words in his head: You are a vessel. Then he heard Gaheris: You are a puppet.

He rested his forehead on Excalibur. For the first time in a long time, he didn't know what weighed more heavily: the hole in his chest—or the distrust among those around him.

The morning came gray, heavy as wet cloth. Not a bird sang, only the horses pawed restlessly, as if they sensed something was wrong in the area. The knights saddled in silence, each one separately, their swords firmly at their belts, their eyes alert—not only against enemies outside, but also against each other.

Merlin stood aside, his staff in the ground, his eyes closed. But he didn't need words to know: the night had shifted something. The warriors spoke more quietly, looked more often at Arthur—and even more often at him.

He approached Arthur, who was kneeling by the fire, breaking bread. "They talked to you." It wasn't a question.

Arthur looked up, his fingers hesitating. "Gaheris."

Merlin nodded. "He told you that I control you. That I hold you like a puppet."

Arthur remained silent. His eyes betrayed too much.

Merlin sat down next to him, his face hard but not without weariness. "Listen to me, boy. I didn't create you. I found you. And yes—I led you. Because the realm needed a king who was more than sword and crown. But I don't hold strings. I know the path, yet I won't force you to walk it."

Arthur bit into the bread, chewed, and swallowed hard. "And if they're right? If I'm just your vessel—for breath, for power, for your game?"

Merlin's voice was sharp as steel. "Then you would have been dead long ago. For vessels break if they are not carried. You are not a vessel. You are a bearer. But the realm believes more in swords than in spells. And so they will set you against me."

Arthur looked over to the Round Table. Brangaine drew his bow, Bedivere tested the blade, Cathan laughed too loudly, Gaheris was looking over at them again, his eyes like glowing coals. Tristan murmured his name, more quietly than usual.

“They will not leave me,” said Arthur, but his voice sounded not like a command, but like a wish.

Merlin placed his hand on Excalibur, which still vibrated slightly. "They won't leave you, no. But they will move against me. And if you stand between us, you'll be torn apart. That's the rift I spoke of."

Arthur felt his breath in his chest, heavy and uneven. "And if the rift is already inside me?"

"Then," Merlin said quietly, "the realm will fall in two. Spell against sword. Brother against brother. King against himself."

A farmer's horn sounded in the distance, a muffled cry. The silence shattered. The knights reached for their reins, their swords, and their shields. But Arthur remained seated for a moment, his gaze fixed on Merlin.

"You say I'm a porter," he murmured. "But what if the act of carrying itself breaks me?"

Merlin didn't answer. His silence was heavier than words.

Arthur rose, Excalibur in hand, and walked to the circle. He knew: the battle for the realm was no longer just outside. It had begun – here, between wizards and warriors.

They rode on in silence, the tension like a wire between them. The sky hung leaden over the fields, and with every breath, Arthur felt the echo of the hole in his chest. The knights looked at each other too often, too little ahead. Everyone distrusted each other, and Merlin was the invisible knot around which everything was held.

Then came the attack.

A scream shattered the silence, then the clang of metal. Figures leaped from the hedges along the path, hooded, armed with crude blades and poles. No breath, no fog—people. Robbers, perhaps peasants, perhaps mercenaries, but their eyes were glassy, as if they, too, had drunk something from the hole.

“For breath!” one yelled, and the whole crowd rushed forward.

The Round Table reacted instinctively. Brangaine raised his bow, and the first arrow pierced the neck of an attacker. Cathan charged with his axe, striking a man to the ground, blood spurting. Gaheris laughed wildly as he parried two at once with his sword.

Merlin raised his staff, murmuring words. The air grew heavy, sparks flashed like lightning. Two attackers stumbled as if invisible hands had pulled their legs from under them.

But instead of thanks, Arthur heard Gaheris roar: "Hold the spell, old man! I don't need your whispering to slit my throat!"

“And without my whispering you would already be dust!” Merlin thundered back, the staff twitching.

Arthur leaped into the fray, Excalibur in hand. The blade vibrated as if it were eager for blood. Every blow was a flash of lightning, his enemies fell, screamed, died—and each time, Arthur felt the blade take more than it gave.

He saw Bedivere fighting, coolly, precisely, not a blow too many. Brangaine shouted orders, holding Tristan upright, who was almost frozen. Cathan was still laughing, wild as an animal. Gaheris struck, but his gaze kept returning to Merlin, full of hatred, as if he were fighting less against robbers than against the sorcerer himself.

Arthur felt the circle breaking, even though they fought shoulder to shoulder.

The fight didn't last long. The robbers fled when half of them lay in the dust. Some crumbled as if their breath had been taken from them, others bled like humans. The field was silent, only the choking of the dying remained.

The knights stood there panting, bloodied, alive. But immediately, the fight flared up.

"Look!" Gaheris roared, sword still in hand. "He unleashed his lightning! We could have done it ourselves, but no—he has to prove again that we're just children!"

Merlin stared at him, his face dark. "You fight with steel against shadows. I fight with shadows against steel. Without both, we fall."

"Lie!" Gaheris stepped forward, his breath stank of blood. "Without you, we would be freer. You keep us bound—to spells, to magic, to fear."

Arthur raised Excalibur, the blade hissing. "Enough!" His voice rumbled, deeper than thunder. "One more word, Gaheris, and you won't fight him, but me."

The knights fell silent. The field was covered in blood, and in the silence, only Arthur's breathing could be heard—heavy, uneven, as if he himself were the enemy.

Brangaine lowered her bow. "Don't you see? The breath isn't just devouring the land. It's devouring us. And if we continue like this, we'll no longer be the Round Table, but dust in the air."

Merlin leaned heavily on his staff. "She's right. And yet you will continue to fight—against each other more than against the hole."

Arthur closed his eyes. He knew the realm needed unity. But all he saw was a circle of warriors and a wizard who distrusted each other—and he himself in the middle, already half-torn apart.

Night fell like a black cloak, and the blood on the field still smelled sweet, even though they had long since moved on. The campfire burned low, the knights lay scattered, each in their own stronghold of mistrust. Brangaine watched, her bow on her knees. Gaheris tossed and turned restlessly in his sleep, muttering words that sounded more like curses. Merlin sat still, his staff on his knees, his eyes closed, as if listening to a song only he could hear.

But Arthur couldn't sleep. He sat off to the side, Excalibur across his lap. The sword vibrated softly, like an animal breathing. Every time he closed his eyes, he heard the clang of steel, the calling of names, and beneath it all, a dark whisper that knew only three words: Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

He placed his hand on the handle, feeling the warmth. It wasn't the warmth of fire—it was the heat of blood that wasn't his own.

"Who are you carrying, Arthur?" he whispered into the night. "The realm? The breath? Or myself?"

The sword didn't answer, but he felt it vibrate more intensely. And suddenly, in the glow of the fire, he saw his reflection in the blade—not him, not entirely. The face was his, but the eyes were deeper, black, as if there were no longer a person there, but a hole.

Arthur tore his eyes away, but the image remained with him.

He thought of Merlin's words: You are a bearer. He thought of Gaheris' words: You are a puppet. And he thought of Brangaine's voice, full of defiance: You are Arthur.

All three voices echoed, blending together until he no longer knew which was his.

He whispered, "I am Arthur." Excalibur vibrated harder, as if in contradiction. "I am Arthur!" he shouted this time, and the fire flared up.

The knights murmured in their sleep, but no one woke. Only Merlin slowly opened his eyes, looked at him, and said nothing.

Arthur held the wizard's gaze for a heartbeat. He wanted to scream, "Help me!" But instead, he rested his forehead on the sword.

His breath pounded inside him, steady, mocking, like a second chest that had long since overshadowed him. And he knew: Perhaps there was no such thing as "wizard or warrior." Perhaps he himself had long since become the third—breath in the flesh.

The morning dawned not with light, but with noise. Even before the sun reached the horizon, a sound rumbled as if the earth itself were tearing open. The horses brayed, the knights leaped, hands on their swords, eyes filled with fear.

Arthur leaped up, Excalibur clutched in his fist, still glowing from the night. The sky above them was gray, but in the center of it, a crack opened—not fire, not lightning, but a rift that led downwards instead of upwards. Clouds drifted in, birds swooped down, as if the air itself had ceased to support them.

"The realm calls," murmured Merlin, already standing, his staff raised. "It shows you what you are—and what is to come."

“Gods,” cursed Cathan, “can the land never be quiet?”

Brangaine drew her bow, even though there was no enemy, only the sky. "It is only silent when it is dead."

Gaheris stepped forward, his gaze fixed on Arthur. "You see, King? Your breath is already tearing the sky apart. And that old man just calls it a sign."

Arthur stared into the crack, which slowly closed again as if it had never existed. But he knew he had felt it—in his chest, in the sword, in the realm.

"We're moving on," he said, his voice deep, without doubt. "No more arguing. Not today. We have no time for tongues when heaven and earth are breaking apart."

The knights nodded—not out of unity, but out of necessity. Bedivere pulled his cloak tighter, Brangaine shouldered his bow, Cathan grumbled, Tristan murmured his name, Gaheris just growled.

Merlin stepped beside Arthur and whispered, "They follow you because they must. But the rift remains. In them. In you."

Arthur didn't answer. He placed Excalibur at his side, feeling it vibrate in time with the crack in the sky.

And he knew: the war wasn't just outside. It was within them, between them, and above all – within himself.

Lancelot's betrayal

They came from a south that still smelled of dust to a city that hadn't been corroded. For the first time in weeks, they heard laughter rather than screams, they heard singing rather than breathing. And in the midst of it all, he was waiting: Lancelot.

The people stood close together as he rode through the gates. A sword like silver at his hip, a face that looked as if it had been carved from a better world. Women threw flowers, men called his name, children ran alongside as if he himself carried summer in his saddle. He raised his hand, smiled, as if he were accustomed to being worshipped.

"There," murmured Brangaine, removing her helmet and watching with narrowed eyes. "Our new hero. Shiny as a coin—and just as hollow, I bet?"

Gaheris spat. "He loves himself more than the empire. But look how they scream. As if he were a god."

Arthur stood at the gate, Excalibur at his side. He watched him silently. No cheers, no greetings. Only that gaze, that examined, weighed. The king saw not the smile, but the shadow behind it.

In the hall, Lancelot knelt, his sword before him, his gaze lowered. "My king," he said in that voice that caressed like warm wine, "I have come to serve. My arm is your arm, my blood is your blood."

Arthur placed his hand on Excalibur. "We need men who not only shine, but who can hold. Can you hold, Lancelot?"

A brief moment—barely visible, but Merlin saw it. A twitch around his mouth, a shadow in his eyes. Then Lancelot smiled again, flawlessly. "I stand, my king. To the end."

Merlin raised the staff and rubbed his fingers over the wood, as if hearing a song only he knew. "To the end," he murmured, barely audibly. "But whose end?"

At the feast, Lancelot was the center of attention. He drank, laughed, and rode with words like swords. Women giggled, men toasted him. Even Cathan, usually as suspicious as a dog, clinked glasses with him as if they had already shared battles.

Only Brangaine remained cool, his eyes like needles. "He's not here to serve. He's here to shine. And those who shine cast shadows."

Arthur sat at the head of the table, barely drinking, speaking little. He saw Guinevere. She was laughing—not loudly, not shrilly, but she was laughing. For the first time in weeks. A laughter that wasn't meant for him, but for the man sitting next to her.

Arthur felt his chest grow heavier. Not just from breathing. From something else.

Later, as the feast fell apart and the knights collapsed into the straw, Arthur went out. The courtyard was silent, the air cool. Merlin stepped beside him, as if he had long known where he would be standing.

"He is strong," said Arthur. "The people love him."

"People love mirrors," Merlin replied. "And he is a mirror. But mirrors break if you look too deeply."

Arthur was silent.

Merlin looked at Excalibur, which vibrated softly. "The circle was already full of cracks. And now comes one who smiles and shines. But his betrayal will not be a sword thrust. His betrayal will be a kiss."

Arthur looked at him, his face hard. "Then tell me: When?"

Merlin shook his head. "There is betrayal that has no date. Only breath. And you won't feel it until it has already devoured you."

Arthur closed his eyes. And already heard the cheering that wasn't meant for him.

In the days that followed, the people spoke of nothing else. Where Arthur had once returned to dust and silence, Lancelot once again brought cheers. Children painted his name in the dust, women tied ribbons to his armor, men drank until they dropped, only to say the next morning that they had toasted with him.

The Knights of the Round Table—those who had breathed dust, who had heard the breath in Arthur's chest—watched with mixed feelings. Cathan toasted him and exclaimed, "Finally,

someone who can still laugh!" Brangaine, on the other hand, pursed her lips as if about to be stabbed. Bedivere remained silent, examining, observing. And Gaheris? He laughed loudly, patted Lancelot on the shoulder—but his eyes remained cold, as if they knew that no shine lasts forever.

Arthur often sat in the background. He spoke little, ate little, and drank less. Excalibur vibrated restlessly, as if it, too, distrusted the new knight.

Guinevere, on the other hand, blossomed. It began quietly, almost invisibly. A gaze longer than necessary, a smile that lingered in her voice when she spoke Lancelot's name. She didn't say much, but when she laughed, it was brighter than she had in months.

Arthur saw it. He said nothing. But every time her eyes wandered from him to Lancelot, his breath became heavier in his chest.

One evening, at the training ground, the knights lined up to test their strength. Lancelot drew his sword, shining as if it had never been stained with blood. He faced Cathan, then Gaheris, then Bedivere—and he won. Not brutally, not cruelly. He won with a smile, as if every blow were a dance, as if he could go on forever.

The people cheered. Guinevere smiled.

Arthur watched. He didn't raise Excalibur. He knew that if he drew the sword, the game would end, and not with cheers.

At night the knights spoke.

"He is the best of us," said Cathan, half admiring, half envious. "He is a stranger," snarled Brangaine. "A shining dog. And you wag your tails." "He lifts us," murmured Tristan, almost reverently. "He makes us great again."

Gaheris spat. "He belittles us. We see him, and we know we are mere dust next to his smile."

Arthur sat silently in the hall, Guinevere beside him. Her hand rested in her lap, but it didn't move toward him. He didn't speak, she didn't speak. But when Lancelot entered, beaming from training, her eyes lit up as they hadn't in weeks.

Arthur saw it. Excalibur vibrated. And the breath in his chest whispered: There is your betrayal.

It was a mild evening, the courtyard silent, the air smelling of rain that hadn't fallen. Arthur had retreated to the map room, arguing with Merlin about strategies that had long since required more magic than steel. The knights drank, practiced, and cursed. Only Guinevere went outside, her cloak tightly wrapped around her shoulders.

She thought she was alone. But Lancelot stood at the well. Unarmored, his shirt open at the neck, his face shining from training. He drew water, drank, and when he saw her, he bowed deeply, almost mockingly.

“My queen,” he said, his voice soft as wine, “forgive me for blocking your way.”

She wanted to answer, sternly, politely. But what came out was a smile. "You're not blocking any path. You're the path everyone's talking about."

Silence hung between them, thicker than fog.

"The people love you," she said quietly. "More than they've ever loved." "The people love a picture," he replied. "But pictures are fragile."

He stepped closer, just a step, no more. "And what do you see when you see me? A picture? Or the man underneath?"

Her lips trembled, but she held her gaze. "I see what I forgot."

A drop fell into the fountain, the water rippled.

"You are tired, Queen," said Lancelot, almost gently. "Tired of breathing, of strife, of a king who is more silent than alive."

She swallowed, her throat dry. "He carries the empire. He carries everything."

“And who carries it?” asked Lancelot.

Her hand unconsciously reached for her coat, as if she could hold on to it. "Maybe no one."

For a moment they stood like that—too close, too still. Not a single word was spoken that sounded like betrayal. And yet the betrayal was already there, in the silence that spoke more than any confession.

Guinevere stepped back, taking a deep breath. "You should sleep, Sir Lancelot."

"Sleep is for the innocent," he replied. "And we both sleep poorly."

She turned and walked quickly back to the hall. But her heart was beating faster than she wanted. And Lancelot remained by the fountain, the water still, his reflection cut by the moon.

Arthur saw her enter later, her face cool, but her eyes too bright. He asked nothing. But the breath in his chest whispered: You're losing her.

The days that followed were like a game everyone knew about, but no one named out loud. Guinevere smiled too often when Lancelot spoke. Lancelot stood too long when she left the hall. And Arthur watched. He said nothing, he showed no emotion, but his hands tightened around Excalibur, as if the sword were the only thing that wouldn't run away from him.

The knights noticed. Of course they noticed.

Cathan grinned broadly when he saw it and whispered, "The hero hasn't just won the battle, eh?" Brangaine pursed his lips, spat into the straw, and snarled, "Fools. This isn't a game, this is poison." Bedivere said nothing, but his eyes betrayed that he was calculating. Not with smiles or glances, but with consequences. And Gaheris? He laughed loudly, too loudly, as if trying to drown the shame with noise. "Our king remains silent, and while he remains silent,

the new hero dances with the queen. I bet the kingdom won't fall by breath or sword, but by a kiss."

Arthur heard their voices, even when they spoke softly. He heard the whispering in the courtyard, the clashing of names and shame. He walked on in silence, his eyes hard, but the silence itself was a confession.

Merlin came in the night. No greeting, no pretense. He simply stood there, while Arthur leaned against the wall, staring into the darkness, Excalibur at his side.

"You see it," Merlin said quietly. Arthur didn't answer.

"You see it," he repeated. "And you know what it means. The empire isn't just breaking apart because of breath and war. It's breaking apart because of love. Or what you think of as love."

Arthur turned his head, slowly, as if each movement required effort. "Are you telling me to kill him?"

Merlin closed his eyes as if the question were a blow. "I tell you: If you remain silent, it will kill you. If you speak, it will kill both of you."

Arthur breathed heavily. Two strokes, two rhythms, man and hole. "Then there's no winning."

"No," whispered Merlin. "There is only one end. And that has already begun."

Arthur gazed into the night. He heard the laughter from the hall, heard Guinevere's voice, too bright, too close to Lancelot's. And he knew: the betrayal hadn't happened yet—and yet it was already here.

The summer evening was warm, almost too mild for a kingdom in tatters. Torches glowed in the courtyard, wine flowed, knights drank and argued about hunts, battles, and honor. Lancelot laughed as only he could—a sound that silenced even the dogs. And Guinevere laughed along with him.

Arthur sat at the head of the table, his cup untouched. He saw her gaze linger on Lancelot longer than it should have. He saw her smooth her hair back, even though there was no wind. He looked—and remained silent.

Later, as the hall emptied, Guinevere stepped out, her cloak tightly wrapped around her shoulders. She sought fresh air, perhaps peace. But no sooner had she passed through the side passage than Lancelot stood there, as if he had been expecting her.

“My queen,” he said quietly, “I wanted…” – he paused, smiled – “I don’t even know what I wanted.”

She took a deep breath. "Then don't say it."

For a heartbeat, they stood too close. The wall at their backs, his gaze in front of her. No hand touched the other, no word betrayed. And yet there was this fire that had already betrayed everything.

There was a clatter of footsteps. Cathan came staggering around the corner, the jug still in his hand. "Ha! There you are! I thought the dog Lancelot was drinking alone!"

Guinevere stepped back, her heart in her throat. "I... I was just looking for air," she stammered, her voice forced to be calm.

Lancelot grinned broadly, too casually. "And I found her. The queen is kind enough to show me the court."

Cathan blinked, then laughed dully. "The court, yes! And what else? Well, do what you want—I'll drink the rest for you!" He staggered back into the hall.

Guinevere pressed her hand to her chest, and Lancelot stepped back. "That was too close," she whispered.

"Too close," he repeated. "But not wrong."

She turned and hurried away. Lancelot remained, his smile crooked as if he had tasted blood.

The next day, the gossiping began. Cathan laughed louder than necessary when Lancelot spoke. Gaheris winked at Brangaine and murmured, "Show the court, shall we?" Tristan muttered his name twice as fast, as if trying to distract himself from it.

Arthur heard it. Every sentence, every chuckle, every half-word. He didn't speak, but his silence was heavier than any accusation.

Merlin came to him and whispered, "It's only a breath—and yet a breath is enough to start a fire."

Arthur looked at him, his eyes hard. "The fire's already burning."

Guinevere no longer slept. She lay in a chamber large enough to hold a kingdom, yet it felt like a cell. Her husband's breath, deep and heavy, vibrated through the walls, as if Arthur himself were merely an echo of the hole. She heard it night after night—that double pounding, heart and stranger—and it made her tremble. Not with love, not with fear. With strangeness.

During the day, she forced herself to be the queen. She spoke to the ladies, distributed smiles, and performed the needlework that had long since become meaningless. But her eyes searched for him—Lancelot. In the courtyard, during exercises, at meals. Not because she wanted to. Because she had to.

And he was there. Always there. With that look that lingered too long, with that smile that came so easily, while Arthur's mouth was like stone.

Once, in the garden, when the roses were blooming, he approached her. "You are not sleeping," he said.

She stepped back, her hands in her lap. "You speak too freely."

“Your eyes speak louder.”

She wanted to hit him. She wanted to kiss him. Instead, she turned away. "I am queen. And you are my knight. That's all."

"No," he whispered. "This is the cage. But we two... we are what lives in it."

Her knees went weak, and she leaned on the stone. "Be quiet."

"I can't."

Arthur saw her later. She stood at the window, her forehead against the glass, as if searching for a sky that was no longer there. He entered, quietly, and she turned to him, her face pale, her eyes too bright.

“Guinevere,” he said, his voice heavy, “what is it?”

She shook her head. "Nothing."

He knew it was all. But he remained silent. He sat down, placed Excalibur before him, felt the breath in his chest. And he understood: He could fight dragons, breath, entire armies. But not the silence between them.

Merlin came that night. He found Arthur alone, his sword across his knees. "You're losing her," he said.

Arthur looked up. "I know."

“And you know who.”

Arthur was silent.

"The realm," whispered Merlin, "can bear breath and shadow. But not love that is false. It will cleave the circle as no sword could."

Arthur clenched his fist around Excalibur, which vibrated. "Then tell me how to stop it."

Merlin closed his eyes. "You don't stop love. You let it burn—until it consumes everything."

Arthur breathed heavily. Two beats, two rhythms. And he knew: He no longer stood just between wizard and warrior. He now also stood between wife and friend. And there was no stopping him.

It didn't happen in a great hall, not to fanfare, but in the silence of a night too warm to sleep. Guinevere walked through the corridors, barefoot, her cloak wrapped tightly around her as if she were cold. Her heart was beating too fast, her breathing too loud. She just wanted to get out, air, silence, anything that would remind her of the realm that still breathed.

But he was already there. Lancelot. At the end of the corridor, in the shadow of a torch, as if he had been expecting her.

“You should sleep,” she whispered.

“Sleep doesn’t come,” he replied, “not when the heart is burning.”

She wanted to push him away, she wanted to hug him. Her hand rose, then fell again. She whispered, "We can't."

“We are not allowed to do anything,” he replied, “but we must do everything.”

Then there was no room for words. Only hands that found, lips that burned, the weight of guilt that, in the same breath, was lust. It was raw, greedy, not tender. Not a fairy tale, not love like in the songs. It was hunger. Two people who had lain in chains for too long tore them open—and knew that in doing so, they were tearing themselves apart.

At the same hour, Arthur sat alone. He held Excalibur across his knees, his eyes closed. The breath in his chest pounded like a second heart, deeper, harder. And he felt it. Not a dream, not a vision. He felt the betrayal, as if the realm itself vibrated.

He opened his eyes. No words, no images. Only a knowledge that burned in his bones: Guinevere was no longer his. Lancelot was no longer his knight. And the circle he had drawn around the realm had been broken before the sword ever left its sheath.

In the morning, no one pretended anything had happened. Guinevere sat silently, her hands folded. Lancelot laughed, louder than necessary, like someone covering up guilt with noise. The knights sensed it, even if they didn't say so.

But Arthur didn't speak. He just stared into the cup before him, and his breath vibrated within him. He knew: It wasn't just breath that was tearing him apart. It was love. It was betrayal. And both together were worse than any enemy he could ever have struck with steel.

The magic of the forests of Brocéliande

It began with rumors. A messenger arrived, barefoot, his clothes covered with leaves, his eyes wide as if they had seen more than humans should bear. He didn't speak much, but his few words burned into his memory:

"In the west... Brocéliande... the trees whisper of you. They call the king."

Then he collapsed, dead like a leaf left in the sun too long.

Arthur stood silently over the corpse. He heard the words echoing, as if spoken not by a human, but by the forest itself. They call the king.

Merlin stepped beside him, his gaze dark. "It was only a matter of time. Brocéliande never sleeps. It sees when the realm falters. And it calls to the one who bears the weight."

Arthur clenched his fist around Excalibur, which vibrated as if in agreement. "So I'll go."

"All of us," Brangaine intervened, hard and determined. "If you go alone, it will swallow you. If we go with you, it will swallow us all. But better all of us than just you."

"Perhaps," growled Gaheris, "it will devour the very one who has been dragging us into the hole for a long time." His gaze bored into Arthur, as if the king himself were already the monster.

Arthur didn't answer. He knew the knights weren't following him out of trust, but because the path was meaningless without him.

On the third day of the ride, the air changed. It smelled sweeter, thicker, as if the trees themselves had sucked the sky dry. The light turned green, even the sun shone as if through glass. The horses snorted, the reins almost wrenching in their hands.

"We're close," murmured Merlin. "Do you feel it? Time stands still. The forest's breath doesn't move like yours. Whoever rides on here will lose their rhythm."

"Sounds like gossip," Gaheris snarled. But he rode slower, sweat glistening on his brow.

Guinevere clung close to Arthur, her eyes wide. Since the night she fell, she had barely spoken. But here, in the shadow of the trees, she seemed even smaller, like a woman who sensed that the forest would see her guilt.

And Lancelot? He smiled. But his smile was sharper than steel, a mirror already cracked.

Then they saw the entrance. No gate, no wall, just two ancient oaks, their trunks entwined like lovers. Between them lay shadow, deeper than night.

"Brocéliande," Merlin whispered. He tilted his head, almost reverently. "The place where truth lies not in words, but in mirrors."

Cathan rubbed his hands. "A forest. Nothing more. We cut paths, and when shadows appear, we strike back."

Merlin smiled bitterly. "Try it. Every blow you strike here will hit you."

Arthur stepped forward, Excalibur at his side. The sword glowed faintly, as if sensing the ancient breath of the earth.

"Then let's go," he said. "If the forest calls me, I will answer. And if it tests you—then see if you really are who you think you are."

They rode through the oak gate. And immediately everything was different.

The air was heavy, humid, full of voices that didn't come from mouths. Shadows moved, even though there was no wind. Every step the horses took sounded double, as if someone invisible were walking beside them.

Brangaine murmured a prayer, Bedivere silently drew his sword, Gaheris cursed softly. Tristan murmured his name faster than ever before.

Arthur felt the trees looking at him. Not like humans—deeper, older. As if they already knew what he had done, what he would still do. And they weren't silent. They whispered.

Arthur. Breath. King. Betrayal.

He closed his eyes and moved on.

The forest swallowed them like water. They had barely passed between the oaks when the entrance closed behind them. No turning back. Only green, deeper than night, and an air that grew heavier the further they rode.

At first, there were only sounds—the cracking of branches, the rustling of leaves, the drops of water that no one could see. But soon the voices came.

Not loud, not clear. A whisper that tickled the ears, as if the trees were full of mouths.

"Gaheris..." it whispered. He whirled around, sword raised. "Who says that?!" "Brangaine..." She gritted her teeth. "Stop!" "Tristan..." The boy almost stumbled, muttering his name three times as fast as he could, as if he could drown out the strange voice.

Arthur heard it too. "Arthur... King... Breath..." Again and again. Sometimes from the left, sometimes from the right, sometimes from within. Excalibur vibrated as if it wanted to answer itself.

The group rode closer together. The horses snorted, their eyes rolling white.

"It calls us individually," Bedivere murmured, coolly, almost analytically. "It wants to tear us apart." "Then stay close," Arthur said, his voice raspy. "No one rides alone. Whoever breaks away disappears."

Merlin nodded. "He's right. Brocéliande tests everyone. But it knows our weaknesses better than we do ourselves. And it will reveal them to us."

"Weaknesses?" Gaheris spat. "I don't have any."

But the voice immediately whispered back: "Anger. Anger. Anger."

His face turned red, he punched a tree, and the tree groaned as if it had struck flesh. Blood oozed from the bark.

The knights held their breath.

Guinevere closed her eyes, clinging to Arthur. But she heard it too. "Love. Guilt. Betrayal." Three words, repeated over and over again. Her heart raced. She didn't dare look at Lancelot, but she felt his gaze.

Arthur heard it, didn't look at her, but he knew what the forest was saying.

The voices grew louder. Every tree, every branch, every drop called names, spoke secrets, sang of sins. The forest was not a place. It was a mirror that allowed no lies.

Tristan cried, muttering even faster, until Brangaine grabbed his arm roughly. "Be quiet! Your name belongs to you, not to the trees."

“And if they’re right?” he stammered.

“Then hold him tighter,” she hissed.

Arthur felt the pressure in his chest. His breath twitched with the whispering. King. Breath. Betrayal. Every word pounded like a heartbeat.

He raised Excalibur. The blade glowed faintly, cutting through the darkness. "Forward," he said, deeper than usual. "If the forest wants to test us, then we go. But we go together."

And so they moved deeper in, closer, heavier, each in the grip of their own voice.

The voices didn't stop, they just grew deeper. No longer whispers, but calls that echoed through the branches as if coming from all sides at once. Every name, every weakness, louder, more urgent. The forest wanted them one by one.

Gaheris was the first to break.

"Rage!" roared the forest. "Rage, rage, rage!" Gaheris' face twisted, his hands white around the hilt of his sword. "Do you hear that?! He's laughing at me!" He slashed at a tree trunk, which bled as before, and the blood spurted in his face. "I'll show him! I'll show everyone!"

Arthur pulled him back, but Gaheris lashed out, blind, furious, all flesh and rage. Bedivere and Cathan grabbed him, dragging him to the ground as he foamed at the mouth, his eyes wide with madness.

"That's how he sees himself," Merlin murmured, without pity. "Not a warrior. Just wrath cast in steel."

Brangaine stumbled next.

“Guilt,” whispered the forest, “Guilt, guilt.”

Suddenly, a child, barely ten years old, stood before her, eyes empty, stomach slashed open. It wasn't a real body, just mist, but the stench of blood was real.

"I didn't kill you," she whispered, her fingers trembling on the bow. "That was the breath. That wasn't me."

"You aimed," the child murmured. "You shot."

Her knees buckled. Tristan tried to hold her, but she pushed him away, her eyes filled with tears. "I... I aimed."

Tristan himself stood rigid, his chin trembling.

"Fear," sighed the forest. "Fear, fear."

His own reflection appeared before him. But not brave, not strong—just a boy covering his ears, crying, stammering the same name over and over again.

"Tristan," he whimpered. "Tristan. Tristan. Tristan."

"Stop!" Tristan cried. "Stop, stop, stop!" But the louder he shouted, the louder it shouted back.

He collapsed, hands over his head, murmuring his name in unison with his mirror.

Arthur felt the group disintegrate. One raged, one broke, one wept. The forest hadn't even needed violence—only mirrors.

Excalibur vibrated, hot, as if it were about to strike. But Arthur held it back. If he drew it, he wouldn't be fighting shadows—but his own men.

"This is just the beginning," Merlin said quietly. "Brocéliande takes what rots within you and lays it bare. Those who can't hold it will disappear. Those who hold it will be broken. But no one leaves here unscathed."

Arthur pressed his lips together, his chest heavy. Because he knew his mirror was already waiting. And he suspected that he saw more than just anger, guilt, or fear.

The forest was silent for a moment, as if it wanted to give the knights a breather – and then it turned against the two whose guilt was still fresh.

"Love," he breathed. "Guilt. Betrayal."

Guinevere held her breath. Suddenly, Arthur stood before her—not the living one, but a figure made of mist. His eyes were empty, but his voice was like steel.

"Why?" he asked. "Why, Guinevere?"

She staggered back, her hand to her mouth. "No... no, that's not you..."

"Yes," said the shadow. "You kissed him. You took him. Your king breathed—and you suffocated him."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she stumbled against a tree. The bark was cold as iron. "I... I couldn't... he was so far away..."

The shadow Arthur reached out, not touching her, yet she felt the pressure on her chest. "Distance is no reason. Guilt is guilt."

Beside her, Lancelot froze. He, too, saw. Not Arthur—but himself.

A second Lancelot emerged from the mist, flawless, radiant, celebrated by the people. But when he raised his eyes, they were black.

"You are no hero," said the mirror. "You are only hunger. You take what is not yours. Crown, queen, glory. All stolen. All borrowed."

Lancelot reached for his sword and struck at the illusion, but the blade passed through the fog, and the fog laughed like a crowd.

"They love you because you're beautiful," it whispered. "But beauty consumes. And when they're tired of you, you're just dust."

Arthur saw both of them. He saw Guinevere, weeping, kneeling, guilt on her lips. He saw Lancelot, fighting against his own reflection, which laughed like a chorus.

He wanted to roar, to intervene—but the forest held him fast. Excalibur vibrated, burning, but if he drew it, he wouldn't split shadows, but truth itself.

Merlin stepped beside him, his face dark. "This is how Brocéliande shows what has long been rotting in the flesh. You can't stop it. You can only see it."

Arthur clenched his fist around the hilt of his sword. His chest pounded heavily, two hearts beating in time. He saw Guinevere extend her hand—not to him, but to Lancelot.

And he knew: The forest didn't speak lies. It only spoke what already existed.

Arthur knew it was coming. The forest wasn't just a judge for the others—it was waiting for him. Every step deeper into Brocéliande made Excalibur feel heavier, as if the sword itself sensed what was about to happen.

Then came the fog. It billowed between the trunks, thick as milk, cold as the air of a grave. The knights disappeared into it, voices grew distant. Only Arthur remained, and the forest wouldn't let him go any further.

He stood alone. And before him, a man stepped out of the mist.

Arthur stared. It was himself. Older, heavier, his armor dented, Excalibur blunt in his hand. His face was lined, his eyes empty as holes.

“You are me,” whispered Arthur.

The mirror nodded. "I am what you become."

The elder Arthur spoke in a voice that sounded as if it had cried out in too many wars: "You carry the realm, yes. But you also carry the breath. And eventually there will be no difference. Your sword will cut dust, your realm will breathe ash. You will become king of nothing."

Arthur raised Excalibur. "I fight. I hold. I am not you."

The mirror laughed harshly. "You are already me. Every breath brings you closer. Every blow with this sword makes you less human. And in the end, you won't be the hero they sing about—but the abyss they curse."

Arthur felt the pounding in his chest, stronger than ever. Two beats, two rhythms—one his own, the other strange, deeper, older.

"No," he growled. "I am Arthur. I am king. I am more than breath."

The mirror drew closer, so close that Arthur could feel its own cold breath. "Tell them. Tell yourself. But if you fall at Camlann, you will not die a king. You will die as what you already are: breath in flesh."

Then the reflection shattered. The fog receded, and Arthur stood alone, sword in hand, chest heavy.

When the knights found him again, they saw the look in his eyes—dark, burning, empty. No one asked what they had seen. They knew that Brocéliande was not a liar.

Only Merlin approached him, quietly: “You know now.”

Arthur nodded. "I know. But I'm going on."

And the forest whispered in the leaves: Camlann. Camlann. Camlann.

The air grew thicker as Arthur returned. No knight dared to ask what he had seen. They all knew the look—the look of a man who had seen something that would never leave him.

But the forest wasn't finished. He turned to the wizard.

Merlin held his staff tightly, his fingers white around the wood that had already borne so many words. He knew it was coming. The forest was older than his spells, older than the stones of Stonehenge, older even than what men called "gods."

"Merlin," whispered the forest. "Wizard. Bearer of words. You think you lead. But you are only a servant. Always. To kings. To powers. To the breath."

A figure emerged before him—a man with a face that was his own, only emptier, more drained. In his hands, not a staff, but chains.

"You are not free," said the mirror. "You are bound. Every spell you cast binds you. Every king you serve drains you. In the end, you are no longer a magician. Only a slave to your own prophecies."

Merlin closed his eyes, murmuring ancient words. But the figure laughed. "Your words are dust. The forest speaks truth that no spell can break."

The knights saw him trembling, sweat running down his face. They had never seen him like this before—not as a master, not as a lord. But as a human being, trapped by something greater than himself.

Arthur tried to approach him, but the ground between them split, filling with water, and faces emerged—faces of those Merlin had led: kings, warriors, victims. All stared at him, blank, accusing.

"You led us," they cried. "And we fell. We died. Your wisdom was our grave."

Merlin screamed—no word, no spell, just a sound. The staff in his hand flared up, then went out.

When the fog cleared, he stood among them again. But he was broken. His back bent, his eyes dull, as if they had seen more than a human could ever bear.

Arthur put his hand on his shoulder. "What did you see?"

Merlin smiled wearily. "Only what I've always known: I'm not the one who controls. I'm the one who binds. And one day, I'll hang by my own chains."

The knights were silent. Even Gaheris said nothing. For they had sensed: For the first time, the sorcerer was not untouchable.

The forest whispered above them, soft as a dirge: Everything is breaking. King. Queen. Knight. Wizard. Everything.

The forest had spoken. Not in proverbs, not in songs, but in mirrors that no one could break. Each knight now carried his own image in his heart: Gaheris filled with rage, Brangaine filled with guilt, Tristan crushed by fear, Guinevere with shame, Lancelot with hunger, Arthur with his own abyss, and Merlin – bound by chains that no one could break.

Night fell, but in the forest there was no night and no day, only this endless, green twilight. They didn't camp, they crouched. No one spoke. Even Gaheris, who usually thundered, remained silent, his eyes wide open.

Then a wind arose. No ordinary wind—it was a whisper that crept along the ground, rose through the branches, and blew into their ears.

Camelot... Camelot... Camelot.

Arthur felt his heart stop.

The whispering grew louder, voices of thousands, men and women, children, kings, dead, living, all in chorus:

Camelot will fall. By the river. In the dust. By love. By sword. By breath.

The knights pressed their hands over their ears, but it was no use. Tristan screamed, Brangaine wept, Gaheris lashed out at the void, Cathan growled like an animal. Lancelot stared at Guinevere, and she didn't dare look back.

Arthur stood. Excalibur vibrated, burning. "Enough!" he roared. "Enough!"

The whispering stopped. Suddenly the forest was silent. Not a leaf moved, not a drop fell. Only the pounding in Arthur's chest, louder than any words.

Merlin stepped beside him, his voice faint but clear: "The forest has spoken. We no longer have a choice. We go, and we carry the knowledge with us. It will tear us apart, but we go."

They rode back. No one spoke. The oaks that had formed the entrance opened again, and Brocéliande closed behind them as if he had never seen her.

But everyone knew: They carried him with them. The forest was in their eyes, in their voices, in their hearts. And its whisper would never fall silent again.

Arthur looked back, one last time, and heard the echo: Camlann.

He rode on.

The Prophecy of Doom

They emerged from Brocéliande like men and women emerging from a long stream: heavy, dripping, silent. The forest remained behind them, but it clung to their limbs like mud that no fire can dry. No one spoke. Even the horses snorted more quietly, as if they knew that words would now be mere splinters driven even deeper into their skin.

The land did not welcome them with joy. Fields that once smelled of bread now tasted of iron in the wind. A stream that once rippled brightly now flowed dully, as if even the water had grown weary. A tree stood alone above a hilltop, its crown so silent that one could have sworn it was listening.

Arthur rode ahead. Excalibur lay at his side, heavy as a judgment. Every breath pounded twice in his chest—his heart and the other, the stranger who had accompanied him since Brynwaith. After Brocéliande, the rhythm was no longer background. It was a baton. And Arthur knew everyone in the circle heard him. They were just pretending not to.

Gaheris rubbed his face as if wiping away the anger of the day. It stayed in place, like a tattoo inked one stupid night and hated in the morning. Brangaine rode hard, her back straight, but her fingers trembled when the wind brushed the leaves in a way that reminded them of a child's hands. Tristan murmured his name, re-enunciated, as if he needed to learn it all over again: "Tri-stan." Bedivere was silent, calculating—distances, supplies, paths—as if mathematics could counteract the world's curse. Guinevere didn't look at Lancelot, Lancelot didn't look at her. But the air between them knew, and air doesn't forget.

In the early evening, they reached a village that crouched in the landscape like a question. Thatched roofs, a well, its rim bare from waiting. Not a soul in sight. A dog looked up, opened its mouth—and didn't bark.

"Hello?" called Cathan, whose voice usually broke the silence. It crumbled against the walls like dry bread.

Merlin dismounted. He knelt at the well's edge and dipped his fingertips into the water. He sniffed it, and something twitched in his face that might have been recognized as disgust, had his face been made for such simple things. "It tastes of stardust," he murmured. "Like water just before it forgets it can flow."

"What does that mean?" snarled Gaheris, who hated any sentence that didn't fit on a sword. "It means," said Merlin, "that the land ceases to remember itself."

Arthur rode a little farther and stopped at the edge of a field. There stood stalks of wheat, half-grown, half-broken, as if they had changed their minds mid-growth. Between the stalks lay a loaf of bread, uncut, untouched, as if someone had started eating and then forgotten what hunger was.

"See?" Brangaine had stepped up to him. "No breath. No fire. Just... stop."

"A country that stops working," said Bedivere. "Like a lung that forgets to breathe."

Before Arthur could answer, the sky frowned. No storm, no thunder—more like a grinding sound, as if two invisible plates were rubbing against each other, high above the clouds. The air grew colder, and the shadows of objects lengthened, without the sun setting. At first glance, it seemed like evening; at second, like a mistake.

Tristan pointed upwards. "There!"

A star fell. No glowing tail, no fireball that makes children cheer. It fell slowly, vertically, as if hanging from an invisible string. And when it reached the height of the cherry trees, it stopped. It glowed, white, still—an unblinking eye.

“Sign,” whispered Guinevere, and there was more fear than hope in the word.

"Signs of what?" Gaheris instinctively reached for the notebook. "Of," said Merlin, "that the world is ready to speak, whether we want to hear it or not."

The star—if it was one—pulsed once, twice, three times. With each pulse, the ground trembled. Water bubbled up from the well, as if something were laughing inside. The lone tree on the hilltop dropped a leaf. It didn't fall; it hung in the air, slowly spinning, as if demonstrating that rules were now negotiable.

"I don't like it," Cathan growled. "Stars are meant to fall or not. Floating is cowardice."

Arthur dismounted. The oars creaked as if in protest. He entered the village square and stood beneath the floating light. Excalibur vibrated, barely visible, but in his hand it felt as if a heart were trying to dwell within the blade.

"So?" he said. "Speak."

Merlin placed the staff on his head, once, gently. "You demand an answer? Then hold on tight."

The star contracted like a lung before the scream – and burst silently. Not a single splinter fell. Instead, a circle of white shimmer spread across the square, thin as skin. Images appeared on it.

A river. Fog. Men in armor, their shoulders hanging lower than armor is heavy. A flag, half in the mud, half in the wind. A crown lying like a ring in the rubble. Blood that wasn't red, but gray, as if breath had sucked it out. And in the middle of it all: Excalibur, half-sunken, like the mast of a ship that never saw the sea.

"Camlann," whispered Merlin. "It shows you the place and the way."

"Place?" Gaheris stepped closer, his hand outstretched to touch the image. His fingers slid through it as if through cold water. "Which river?"

“One,” said Bedivere soberly, “that can be anywhere if we carry him far enough.”

The images changed. Guinevere, closing her eyes, and a hand that was not her king's. Lancelot, kneeling, but before whom, it was impossible to say—perhaps before a sin that would not be forgiven. Brangaine, lowering her bow, though the target still stood. Gaheris, laughing until he cried, and in his laughter there was rupture. Merlin, standing in chains, forged from words. Tristan, saying "Tristan" until his mouth had stopped moving, yet the word continued.

Then Arthur. Not as a king in his glory, but as a man holding the blade that was eating his hand. His chest rose, fell—and remained in the fall. The light around him went out, not like a torch being blown out, but like a star deciding enough is enough.

"Enough," said Arthur, and the word sounded like metal breaking. "Enough pictures."

The circle contracted, glowed once more, and vanished without casting a shadow. The air suddenly smelled of rain, even though it wasn't raining.

They stood there, a heap of shining armor, tired faces, silent mouths. Somewhere a bird cawed, as if it had forgotten that there was nothing to sing.

"Prophecy," Gaheris finally spat out, "is just another word for threat." "Or balance sheet," said Bedivere. "The sum of everything we fail to heal."
Brangaine wiped her eyes, as if images could be wiped away like tears. "And if we ride away? Away from the river, away from Camlann?" Merlin looked at her, wearily. "Rivers are patient. They'll find you."

Arthur lifted Excalibur and set it back down. This small, useless act of order gave him, for a brief moment, the feeling he still had the right to decide. He looked at his people—his realm in ten faces. Guinevere, pale. Lancelot, too beautiful for what burned within him. Gaheris, a burning torch in human form. Brangaine, bow and conscience in one. Bedivere, the calculator. Tristan, still forming his name, quietly, like a faint fire. Merlin, the man whose voice was already chained.

"Hear me," said Arthur, and his voice wasn't loud, but it carried. "We've returned from a forest that showed us who we are. Now the sky shows us where we're going. I'm no fool: I know you can't bargain away from a star. But I don't ride to a river to die. I ride to stand. When the end comes, it will come in my armor, not at my back."

"And if the end is not yours, but ours?" asked Brangaine. "Then," said Arthur, "it is still mine."

Merlin stepped beside him, gently placing the staff on the ground. "The sign has been given. It cannot be taken back. We can only decide how we walk under it."

"With a full belly," grumbled Cathan, staring into his empty bag as if this were the greatest impertinence of fate: that prophecies come when provisions run out.

A few knights laughed raucously—not because anything was funny, but because sometimes the body needs to laugh before it cries. The dog finally barked. It sounded like a false echo.

Arthur turned to the east, where the morning rose heavily from the ground. "We ride," he said. "Not to the river—not yet. First we gather what we have left: allies, bread, the breath that is ours. Then we face the water."

The square remained as places remain: silent, after people have left. The tree on the hilltop dropped another leaf. It fell normally, obediently, as leaves fall. A consolation so small that you only see it when you're desperate enough.

They rode on, hooves in the dry dust that no longer smelled of summer. Above them, the sky remained empty, but everyone knew that emptiness is not a promise, but only a pause. And somewhere, far enough away that it wasn't painful, something murmured that sounded like a river.

The ride following the sign was harder than any march through mud and blood. Not because the ground was different, but because each eye saw a different image. No one spoke it, but everyone had seen what they had seen. And so the circle was no longer a circle, but ten individual paths that happened to run alongside each other.

Arthur held himself upright, Excalibur at his side, his fingers unconsciously on the hilt. He was king, yes. But since Brocéliande and the star, he knew: the title was only a cloak that didn't hide the cracks. Every ride, every breath reminded him that Camlann already roared within him like a river.

It began on the second day. It wasn't the sky that spoke, but the land itself.

They came to a field that was half burned. Not by fire, not by war—but by something that looked like fatigue. Stalks hung as if they had forgotten what growth was. In the middle stood a scarecrow. Its arms were wide, its face made of cloth. And yet its beady eyes rolled as the knights passed by.

"The thing is looking at us," murmured Tristan, his voice thin. "It has no eyes," growled Cathan. "It's just a sack." "Sometimes," said Merlin, "things don't need eyes to see."

The scarecrow opened his mouth. No scream, no word—just a gust of wind blowing dust across the field. And in the dust lay a sentence, clear as an engraving:

Your end is written. Not in blood. In breath.

Guinevere pulled her cloak tighter around her. She said nothing, but Arthur saw her lips tremble. He wanted to ask her, but he knew any question would reveal more than she could bear.

Lancelot rode beside her, his bearing radiant, his smile fake. But his gaze kept slid back to her, and the forest of Brocéliande echoed between them like a third horse accompanying her.

Brangaine rode behind, her bow over her shoulder. "If scarecrows talk," she snarled, "then the world has too many voices." "Or we have too few ears," Bedivere replied matter-of-factly, silently noting the direction of the wind, as if he himself could provide coordinates for fate.

On the third day, they set up camp by a river. It wasn't a large one, just a narrow tributary, but the water was black as oil. No fish, no mirror, just a surface that smelled like metal had been cooked in it.

They barely ate, the bread was hard, the wine stale. And then the murmuring began. At first they thought it was Tristan whispering his name again. But the voice came from the water.

Arthur… Arthur…

The king froze. Excalibur vibrated softly. The knights moved closer, looked into the water, and there they saw faces. Not strangers—their own. Distorted, older, dead.

"I don't want to see that," murmured Gaheris, his hand on his sword. "That's not me." "Yes," replied the water. "That's you, if you breathe Camlann."

Arthur knelt on the bank. His reflection looked back at him—not dead, not old, but exactly as he was now. And yet something was different: In the mirror, his chest was empty. No breath, no heart, just emptiness.

"King," whispered the water. "You lead them to their end. Not because you want to. Because you are."

He reached for Excalibur, about to plunge it into the water, but Merlin placed his hand on his arm. "Don't," he said quietly. "Because if you plunge the sword into the water, you'll kill us all."

Arthur paused, his fingers trembling. Then he lowered the blade.

The water laughed. No scream, no thunder—just a laugh so silent it hurt even more.

No one slept that night. Everyone could still hear it—the whispering of the river, the laughter of the mirrors. Only Tristan murmured, over and over again, as if trying to drown out his own end: "Tristan, Tristan, Tristan..."

Arthur lay awake, his eyes open. And he knew: Brocéliande had broken them. The star had condemned them. And the river had shown them that doom would not come. It was already there—they were just riding slowly through it.

On the fourth day, they met the seer. Or the seeress—no one was sure what they saw.

It was evening, the light hung heavy over the hills, when the figure stepped out of the tall grass. No armor, no sword, just rags that looked more like earth than cloth. The face was both old and young, the skin wrinkled, the eyes clear as water. The voice, when it spoke, was neither male nor female—but both, and more.

"King," said the figure, and Arthur knew immediately it meant him. "You are riding to your end."

The knights reached for their weapons. Gaheris snarled, "Another one who utters jokes? I've had enough of voices!" But the figure merely raised his hand, and Gaheris's sword became as heavy as stone. It fell to the ground as if he had never been able to lift it.

Merlin stepped forward, his face dark. "I know you." "Of course," said the figure, "for you are my brother in chains. You, too, have long known what I'm saying."

Arthur stared at her. "Speak. Say it clearly."

The seer raised her arms, and the wind stood still. Even the horses held their breath.

"Camelot," she said, "will fall. Not by the sword of an enemy, not by the storm of a god. It will fall by itself. By love that turns to betrayal. By betrayal that turns to hatred. By hatred that turns to mud. And at the River Camlann, the circle will close."

The knights froze. The word Camlann hung in the air like a blade.

Guinevere clapped her hand over her face as if trying to push away the truth. Lancelot clenched his fists, his smile gone, his teeth bared like a dog's. "No," he hissed. "No, this is not my destiny." The seer looked at him. "It is not your destiny. It is yours and hers. And it is his." Her finger pointed at Arthur.

Arthur felt everyone's eyes turn to him. "And if I refuse?" he asked harshly. "If I don't ride to the river?"

The figure smiled—not cruelly, not kindly. Just like someone who had long since read the end. "Then the river will ride to you. No king escapes its waters."

Brangaine stepped forward, bow held tightly in her hand. "And us? Are we just spectators in this game?"

The seer turned her head, and her eyes were like mirrors, in which everyone saw themselves—not now, but later. Brangaine saw her child. Gaheris saw blood that never stopped flowing. Tristan saw his name spoken one last time.

"You are part," said the voice. "Part of the circle, part of the break. Without you, no end. Without an end, no name."

Cathan laughed harshly and beat his chest. "Then I'll laugh in the river's face until it drowns me!"

"And he will laugh back," said the seer. "For water knows no mercy."

Arthur took a step closer. "And if I fight?"

The seer looked at him for a long time. "Then you die. And if you don't fight, you die too. But one thing remains for you: to decide what your people call your falling."

The words hung like chains. Then the figure turned and strode back into the grass. No one dared to follow it. It didn't disappear—it simply diminished until there was nothing left.

Night fell. No knight spoke. But everyone now knew that the word Camlann was no longer just a shadow. It was a goal. And the goal was destiny.

Arthur lay down, his gaze fixed on the stars. None of them blinked. Only emptiness. And he thought: Perhaps stars are just holes through which one can already see the end.

The night after the encounter with the seer wasn't a night at all, but a heap of breaths lying side by side in the darkness. No sleep came. Only the rustling of armor, the creaking of limbs, the whispering of thoughts that each swallowed.

It started in the morning.

Gaheris was first, as always. He drove the spear into the ground, shaking the earth. "Enough of this nonsense! One river, one end—damned fortune-telling! I tell you: prophecies are only chains you put on yourself. Anyone who believes in them will die before the sword strikes them."

"And whoever denies it," Brangaine snarled, "dies blind. You saw the forest. The star. The river. Did you think it was all a coincidence?"

"I only believe in blood and iron," growled Gaheris, his gaze wandering to Lancelot. "And sometimes in treason."

Lancelot stood his ground, his chin raised. "Say it if you mean it." "I mean it," Gaheris hissed. "Everyone sees the way you look at her. The forest showed it. And if Camelot falls, you'll be the nail that closes the coffin."

Guinevere jumped to her feet, her voice shaky but loud: "Enough! You dare to play with my name as if it were a dice in the dirt? I am queen! You owe me silence!"

But her gaze fell on Lancelot, and the brief, uncontrolled spark within it spoke louder than any words.

Cathan laughed harshly. "Silence, she says, and her eyes scream. Ha! The empire won't perish from breath—it will perish from bedtime stories!"

Tristan mumbled his name frantically, faster and faster, as if he could flush the word "bed" out of his ears. Bedivere sat still, but his eyes moved from one to the other as if from game piece to game piece.

Arthur stood, suddenly, rigidly, sword in his fist. Excalibur glowed, quietly, threateningly.

"Stop," he said. No shouts, no threats—just that deep, heavy word that made everyone pause. "You squabble about guilt while the realm is dying. Do you think the breath will wait until you curse each other? Do you think Camlann will lie still until we come to an agreement?"

He stepped closer, his blade in the light. "You want culprits? Then see me. I am the king. If we fall, it will fall through me. And if we stand, then it will fall through me."

A silence spread. No one objected. Not because they were convinced—but because his voice had the weight of steel.

Merlin stepped forward, leaning heavily on his staff. "The prophecy is no longer a mystery. It tells us what's coming. Camlann. The Fall. And yet you have a choice: You can tear

yourselves apart until the river no longer needs you. Or you can go toward it—as a circle, even if the circle is already full of cracks."

Brangaine breathed heavily, Gaheris spat, Lancelot looked at the ground.

Arthur raised Excalibur and slowly replaced it in its scabbard. "Then we ride. Not away from the prophecy, not into it. We ride—until the river finds us. But we do it upright. Like warriors. Like knights. Like men who know they are going to die."

Guinevere closed her eyes. There was resignation in the crease of her mouth—and something worse: agreement.

The sun rose, wearily, over the horizon. The group saddled, the horses stamped, the dust rose. And above it all hung the word that no one spoke aloud anymore, but that vibrated with every step:

Camlann.

The night after the quarrel hung heavy over the camp. No wind, no animal sounds, only the crackling of the fire, which did little more than shift the darkness a little. The knights lay scattered, each in his own world. Gaheris tossed and cursed in his sleep. Brangaine kept her eyes open, staring into the embers as if they were a wound. Tristan murmured his name, faster than usual, until it sounded like the chirping of an insect. Guinevere lay still, her face turned away from the fire, but everyone knew where her thoughts were headed. Lancelot's breathing was too even, too controlled, as if he were only feigning sleep.

But Arthur sat awake. Excalibur lay across his knees. The blade vibrated softly, like a heart that wasn't his. He held it tight, as if he could cling to it, and stared into the fire.

Then Merlin sat down beside him. Silently, like a shadow that had always sat there. The staff rested across his knees, and his eyes reflected no spark, only the darkness between them.

“You’re not sleeping,” said Arthur.

“Prophecies never sleep,” Merlin replied.

They were silent for a while. The fire crackled, a horse groaned somewhere. Then Arthur raised his gaze, heavy and hard. "Did you know?"

Merlin nodded, slowly. "For a long time."

Arthur gritted his teeth. "And you kept quiet?"

"Because fate isn't broken with warnings," said Merlin. "It comes true whether you know it or not. But sometimes... ignorance lasts longer."

Arthur slammed his fist against the hilt of his sword. "So all of this—Brynwaith, the woods, the Breath—was just a path to Camlann?"

Merlin looked at him. "Everything is going to Camlann."

Arthur breathed hard, two beats, two rhythms. "And if I refuse?"

"Then you are no longer king," Merlin replied. "For a king doesn't choose whether to fall. He only chooses how."

Arthur closed his eyes. "So everything I did meant nothing?"

"Everything," said Merlin, "has meaning. Because it brought you here. Because it drew the circle that is now breaking. Because it filled the name Arthur until he was big enough to die."

Arthur laughed, harshly, without joy. "A name that grows great, only to die. Is that the realm?"

"That's being human," said Merlin. "Names are nothing without their end."

They sat silently for a while. Arthur placed his hand on Excalibur, which vibrated like a caged animal.

"Tell me one thing," he finally murmured. "If I fall, will at least one of them be standing?"

Merlin was silent for a long time, so long that Arthur thought he wouldn't answer. Then he said, "Perhaps. But not for long. For Camlann is not just your death. It is the end of everything you have built. Camelot doesn't fall behind you. It falls with you."

Arthur nodded, slowly, as if he had known, but just didn't want to hear it.

The fire died down. Merlin rose and raised his staff. "Sleep, Arthur. Tomorrow we ride on."

Arthur looked at him. "And where to?"

"Always to Camlann," said Merlin, and walked into the darkness.

Arthur stayed behind, his hand tightly gripping Excalibur, and knew: He wasn't sleeping anymore. Not today. Not ever.

The morning came gray. No blue, no gold, just a sky that looked like a stone that had lain in water too long. The dew hung heavy on the tents, and even the horses pawed more quietly than usual, as if they had understood that every sound had to contend with something greater.

The knights didn't awaken—they crawled out, leaden, as if they all bore a burden heavier than their armor. No one had slept well. Guinevere looked as if she had wept, but her eyes were dry; the tears had curled inward. Lancelot tensed his shoulders, too taut, too flawless—a man playing a statue to himself. Gaheris threw on his cloak, growled, but his voice lacked its usual spark. Brangaine tightened the leather straps with cold fingers, each pull an attempt to bring order to a world that had long since ceased to exist. Tristan murmured his name, not quietly this time, but defiantly, as if to drag him into the day.

"So?" Cathan broke the silence, biting into a piece of bread that was more stone than food. "Do we want to eat it or shit on it? Fate, I mean."

"Eat," growled Gaheris, "until we vomit it up. Then eat again."

"Denial won't help," Brangaine interjected, her hands on her bow. "We now know how it ends. And we know where. Who do you think you are if you think you can drink it away or laugh it away?"

“And who are you,” Gaheris snarled, “to kneel before the fight has even begun?”

The voices grew louder. Cathan grumbled, Gaheris barked back, Tristan pressed his hands over his ears. Lancelot remained silent, but his gaze was fixed on Guinevere, who lowered her head as if trying to make herself invisible.

Arthur stepped into the middle. Excalibur was still in its sheath, but his hand on the hilt was enough to split the air.

"Enough," he said. He didn't shout, he just spoke, and yet they fell silent.

"You want to argue about fate?" His voice was rough, hoarse from the night. "Then listen: The end is certain for all of us. But that doesn't mean we've already fallen. We still stand. We still ride. We still eat, we still drink, we still curse. We are still Camelot."

He ran his gaze over each of them—Gaheris, Brangaine, Tristan, Lancelot, Guinevere. "If you break now, you will fulfill the prophecy before it hits us. Is that what you want? Do you want to die before you even reach the river?"

Gaheris clenched his fists and growled—but remained silent. Brangaine bit her lip. Tristan murmured his name, more slowly. Guinevere raised her head, a hint of defiance in her eyes. Lancelot exhaled as if he had just parried a blow.

Arthur nodded. "Good. Then we ride on. Not because we think we can avoid the end. But because we deserve to meet it head on."

The sun fought its way through the clouds, dull, like a diseased eye. The horses stamped, the leather creaked. The circle moved again, a group of people who knew they would break apart—and yet tried once more to be a circle.

Merlin looked at Arthur from the side, quietly, barely audibly: "You're holding her, but you're not holding yourself anymore."

Arthur didn't answer. He held Excalibur, and the sword vibrated as if it had long known that it was the last knot holding everything together.

They rode on, out of the brown fields, past villages barely breathing, and through forests whose leaves hung still as glass. The silence between them was not peace—it was only the sound that remains when all tongues are sore from arguing.

The sun was low as the path descended. Before them lay a valley filled with mist that flowed like water. No ordinary mist—it moved against the wind, creeping up the slopes as if seeking her.

“We are not riding into that,” said Brangaine, raising her bow as if it could skewer fog.

"Yes," Arthur replied. "Because the path goes there."

“And if the path eats us?” cried Gaheris.

“Then he’ll eat me first,” Arthur replied, urging his horse on.

They followed, one after the other, deeper into the white silence. The fog was cold, tasted of iron, and crept into every crack in the armor. The horses snorted, eyes wide.

Then, in the middle of the valley, it happened.

A murmur, quiet at first like a stream. But it wasn't a stream. It was a river – invisible, yet audible, amidst the fog.

"Do you hear?" whispered Tristan. "That's..."

"Camlann," Merlin said. The voice was barely a whisper, but everyone heard it.

The fog parted. And they saw something no human should see: the river itself, black and still, without banks, without source, in midair. It floated as if detached from the world. And reflected in its waters was not the valley, but battle. Armor, broken. Shields, in the mud. Faces no one wanted to name.

Excalibur glowed in its sheath, vibrating so strongly that Arthur thought it would burst open on its own.

"This is an omen," Brangaine said, her voice shaky. "It tells us that we..."

"That we're already on our way," Arthur interrupted. His hand rested firmly on the hilt of his sword. "No turning back. No detour."

The river slowly retreated, dissolving into the mist, as if it had only appeared to show them the way.

The knights looked at each other. No one spoke, no one was obliged. Everyone knew: That hadn't been a warning. That was an invitation.

As they left the valley, the fog lingered on their coats, in their hair, and in the cracks of their weapons. It was both a memory and a harbinger.

Arthur rode in front, staring into the distance. He felt the breath in his chest, felt Excalibur, felt the weight of Camlann already resting upon them.

And he knew: They were no longer riding toward the end. They were riding in the end.

The dream of the golden empire

That night, Arthur didn't sleep—he fell. Not in weariness, but in glory. He still sat by the fire, Excalibur across his knees, the metal warm as a cat that has finally stopped hissing. The double beat in his chest—heart and stranger—grew quieter, deeper, until he heard only a

rhythm so simple it reminded him of childhood. He breathed in, exhaled—and when his eyelids closed, he was already standing on the battlements of Camelot.

But it wasn't the Camelot he knew. This one was made of pale stone, undarkened by rain. Flags hung over the walls, heavy with color, and no wind tore them, yet they fluttered as if they wanted to. Morning pushed open the sky like a golden curtain. Below him lay the city: roofs leaning against one another, alleys that didn't stink, a market that sang. No scream, no clamor of bargaining that turned into curses—it was a buzzing, like bees that know exactly what they're doing.

Arthur lowered his gaze. In the square, an old baker was handling dough like a priest at mass. Children ran around his apron, receiving crusts of bread as warm as hands. A woman with heavy arms dropped a basket of apples into the hands of a beggar, and the beggar forgot to play gratefully; he simply laughed. A guard leaned against the gate, not tired, but watchful, like someone who has nothing to fear and, precisely for that reason, takes it all seriously.

Arthur raised his hand to his chest. There was only calm. No hiss, no foreign beat. He felt his own pulse—alone. Excalibur, at his side, was heavy as law and light as breath. It didn't vibrate. It hummed—a sound so small it was more like a thought.

He descended the stairs. The steps had no cracks, no holes that one could recognize and step over. In the courtyard, the air smelled of hay, iron, bread, and—oddly—apple blossom, even though there were no trees in the yard. A groom pushed his horse toward him, beamed, bowed, almost stumbled, and then laughed at himself. "Forgive me, my king," he said, "the animals aren't in a mood today." Arthur nodded, as if this were normal weather.

The hall was open. The round table, made of wood that shone like skin in the sun. Suits of armor lined the walls, shiny but not boastful. The knights came—not in parade, but in motion: Gaheris with a jug that actually contained water, and he acted as if that were no mistake. Cathan lugged a tray piled with goose legs and cursed because Brangaine stole one before he could put it down. Brangaine bit into it, grinned with grease on the corner of his mouth, and handed Tristan a second one; the boy took it without murmuring his name, saying instead—amazed at the sound—"Good morning." Bedivere arranged the knives and spoons so precisely, as if there were a law written into each piece of cutlery, and this time no one rolled their eyes.

Lancelot entered from the side, his helmet under his arm, his hair still damp from training. He stopped and knelt—no dramatic bow, no glance at Guinevere—just a clear, simple oath: "I serve." Gaheris patted him on the shoulder, not too hard, and no comparison resulted. Brangaine grinned, but it wasn't mockery. Tristan looked up and away, like one allowed to practice in peace.

Guinevere stood at Arthur's side, not far away, not too close. Her hand rested on his forearm, as naturally as if it had always been there. Her eyes had not the brightness of guilt, but the dull gold of calm. When Lancelot swore, she bowed her head, not to him, but to the silence in the room, which was more beautiful than music. Arthur felt her fingers close lightly. No tug, no hint—just weight.

Merlin came last. Without a staff. He didn't need one. He wore no beard full of riddles that could be wrung out, nor eyes that thought in chains. He came like a man who had slept well and knew exactly why he was awake. When Arthur looked at him, Merlin smiled—not

knowing, not superior, just warmly. "Today," he said, "I have no one to lead." And Arthur believed it.

They sat down. The table welcomed them like a lake welcomes boats. There was bread, cheese, meat, fruit; none of it was too much. Gaheris took the smallest leg, murmuring something like "politeness," and Brangaine nudged him, half tenderly, half out of habit, to take the larger one. Bedivere told how he had rearranged the watch schedules, and no one objected reflexively, because everyone realized that order here did not conflict with freedom. Cathan swore the horses would not shy away today, and the horses snorted as if they understood. Tristan asked for a piece of bread and forgot to say his name, and no one was alarmed.

Arthur let his gaze sweep over them, circling like the shadow of a cloud. Not a crack, not a splinter. He stood, and the hall rose with him. He spoke, and his voice carried without effort: "Friends. Today, Camelot judges small things: boundary posts that have moved; a bridge that needs replacing; quarrels over fish in the river. And then, when the sun rises, we practice. Not to kill—to hold."

"And to distribute the last chicken leg fairly," Brangaine called. Bedivere raised his hand: "I have a list for that."
"Burn the list," grumbled Cathan, "or we'll wage war over feathers." Laughter rolled through the hall, not loud, not embarrassing, just round.

They went out into the courtyard, into the day so golden that even the shadows remained bright. At the gate, a miller was waiting, wearing a hat too big for his cart, and explaining that his cart had lost its rim. Arthur let him speak, asked two questions that hit home, and sent two men with him. The miller bowed—not too low. A child ran up, paused briefly because it had been told not to run when the king passed, and in the same breath forgot the advice because its tooth was wobbly. It held the wobbly tooth out to Arthur like a trophy. Arthur laughed. The child laughed back and asked if it might touch the sword. "Only with two fingers," said Arthur, "and only on the blade, where it reflects the sky." The child placed two very solemn fingers on the metal. There was no blood in the blade, only blue.

Birds sat on the wall, in a row, as if someone had placed them there. They didn't suddenly sing in chorus; they sang individually, but the songs fit together, like when people happen to think the same thing and nod in a friendly manner. A blacksmith was hammering, and the rhythm wasn't that of a war, but that of a song one can carry while walking.

By the river—it was clear, it wasn't Camlann—fishermen were pulling nets, and instead of shouting at each other when a net remained empty, they began a strangely serious discussion about whether fish were more interested in good stories or breadcrumbs. An old man claimed that fish were courtiers by nature, and therefore polite nets were needed; a boy laughed so hard he almost fell into the water.

In the distance lay Stonehenge, not like teeth protruding from an ancient, but like stones that had decided to be friends. They hummed—not loudly, not mystically, more like mills working while no one noticed them. Brocéliande was a green line on the horizon, friendly like a hedge between neighbors who no longer quarrel.

Guinevere walked beside Arthur, her steps fitting. "So," she said, "it could always be." "So," he repeated, and realized that something burned in that word. Not pain—longing, already knowing that it will remain longing.

Merlin lingered briefly, stroking the stone of the gate as if stroking a cat's fur. "Gold," he murmured, "is the metal of perfection. But it is also the metal that carries the sun. And the sun burns if you get too close." Arthur turned to him. "Will you stick to pictures?" "Today," said Merlin, "pictures are enough for me. Because they don't bite." And he smiled, without a shadow.

In the afternoon they practiced. Not harshly, not angrily. Excalibur cut through the air, as if it were something that longed to be cut, to become lighter. Lancelot led a line, and no one sought arrogance in his stride; he led well. Gaheris held the shield, and the shield held him back so he wouldn't go too far. Brangaine gave signs everyone understood. Tristan parried, and his name stayed with him without him having to call it out.

As the sun sank lower, they sat on the wall and ate cool grapes. A small argument broke out about whether grapes tasted better if you count them before eating them. Bedivere insisted on counting. Cathan insisted on eating. Merlin offered to put a spell on the grapes to make them count themselves. They laughed—again roundly, again gently.

Arthur saw his kingdom—the people, the stones, the water, the breath of the city. He saw it and felt something within him calm down, so calm that he thought: So this is it. No talk of rivers, no word of fate, only the clear, weary will of a man who finally holds in his hands the thing he had sought all along: not glory, not victory—order that is kind.

"Camelot," he said quietly. No one asked why. Some things aren't explained, you just nod along.

The evening settled like a warm blanket. Bells rang, not too high, not too low. From the kitchen wafted the scent of soup that wasn't too thin. A cat rubbed against Arthur's boot, acting as if it were some great political act. Guinevere placed her hand on his arm again. Lancelot stood a few feet away, smiling—not at her, but at the air, as if the air were friendly today. Merlin looked up at the sky and didn't count the stars. Perhaps because there were no holes today.

Arthur breathed in. Exhaled. One heart. One kingdom. One day that was golden without boasting.

He thought: If I have to fall, then I'll fall from here.

Arthur remained in the dream, as if someone had bound him to this world with soft cords. Every image glowed—but not like the sun. More like metal polished so brightly that it dazzled.

The next morning—in his dream—he stood on the battlements again. The town below was the same, but this time he listened more closely. The hum of the market sounded beautiful, yes, but it was always the same note. No dissonance, no argument, not even an impatient shout. A child fell down, got up, laughed—and the mother laughed in exactly the same rhythm. It didn't seem wrong, but it seemed... coordinated.

At court, the knights rode out. They held their lances so evenly that the tips appeared like a single line in the sky. They laughed—and the laughter came simultaneously, as if they had practiced it. Cathan made a joke about geese, and everyone laughed, but Arthur heard that every note was exactly the same pitch. A chorus, without falsehood—and that was precisely what made it strange.

Guinevere walked beside him, so beautiful it hurt to look at her. But her beauty was like glass—transparent, smooth, uncracked. When she placed her hand on his arm, it was warm, but he felt no pressure. "So," she said, "it could always be." She smiled, and the smile remained, unwavering. Too perfect.

At dinner in the hall, Arthur saw that the table was full as usual—bread, meat, fruit, wine—but no one greedily grabbed food. No one ate too quickly, no one choked, no one cursed because someone else took the last piece. Everything went smoothly, fairly, quietly. Too quietly.

Brangaine bit into an apple, but the apple didn't crack. It crumbled softly, almost silently, like butter. Tristan spoke, but his sentence had no pauses, no stumbles. Gaheris grinned, but his teeth were too white.

Arthur drank wine—it was sweet, warm, without bitterness. And that was precisely what made him thirsty. He wished the wine had an edge, something to burn his throat. But it didn't.

He rode with Lancelot through the courtyard. The young knight spoke words of loyalty, pure, immaculate. But when Arthur looked, he noticed: Lancelot's boots were spotless, even though they must have walked through mud. No dirt, no dust. The horse's hooves were dry, even though it had rained.

“Everything is as it should be,” said Lancelot.

"Yes," Arthur answered. But he thought: It's too much like it should be.

In the city, everyone smiled. Every woman, every man, every child. Not fake, not fake—just the same. No one argued in the market, no one cheated on their measurements. Even the dogs didn't bark, they just wagged their tails. Arthur stopped and looked into their faces. They were beautiful. But they were too similar. Not copies, not masks—more like different versions of the same idea.

A baker offered him bread. Arthur took it. It was warm, golden yellow, crispy. But when he bit into it, he tasted nothing. No salt, no yeast, no grain. It was bread playing bread.

In the evening, the knights stood at the round table again. Everyone spoke wisely, evenly, and politely. No one interrupted. No one banged their fist on the table. No one laughed too loudly. No one cried.

Arthur saw her and thought: This is how it should be. And yet... this is how it shouldn't be.

His chest heaved. Not a double heart, just one. But this one beat as if to tell him: This is a dream. A golden one, yes. But a dream.

And as the hall laughed, as the voices sang, as Guinevere's hand lay steady on his arm, Arthur, for the first time, felt a longing not for more gold—but for a crack. For dirt. For blood. For a real sound that doesn't fit.

He thought: A dream that has no shadows is worse than a prophecy that consists only of shadows.

Arthur walked through the streets of his golden kingdom, and everything shimmered so brightly that he had to squint. But the more he looked, the more the strangeness emerged from the radiance.

A child ran by laughing. But the laughter didn't stop. It continued, its throat open, the same note, the same rhythm—five steps, ten steps, twenty—still the same laughter, as if someone had strung it on a string that couldn't be broken. Arthur turned around, but the child had already disappeared, and the laughter still hung in the air.

A dog passed him. No barking, no growling, just a perfect, silent wag of the tail. The animal looked at him, its eyes bright but without depth—as if someone had taken two shiny stones and placed them inside a mask. Arthur walked on, faster.

At the market, a merchant placed gold coins on the table. They didn't clink. They fell side by side, silently, each coin the same. Arthur picked one up, turned it over—on both sides was his face. Too smooth, too young, without wrinkles. "Golden times, sir," said the merchant. His voice was light, but his mouth barely moved.

Arthur dropped the coin. It landed upright and stayed that way.

That evening, he returned to the hall. The knights were sitting at the table, laughing, talking. But this time he heard it differently. The laughter sounded the same, as if in a single rhythm. Each sentence was the same length. Brangaine told them she had shot an arrow, and everyone nodded, exactly in unison. Cathan made a remark about horses, and everyone laughed as if they were a chorus.

Arthur slammed his fist on the table. No one flinched. No one paused. They continued laughing as if his blow hadn't happened.

"Can you hear me?!" he cried. "Can you see me?!"

Guinevere turned her head toward him. Her face was perfect. Too perfect. No shadow, no trembling, no fatigue. "Of course," she said. "We see you, Arthur. We see only you."

And everyone at the table repeated in unison: “We only see you.”

Arthur tore Excalibur from its scabbard. The blade was golden, brighter than ever. But as he raised it, he saw his reflection in it—not broken, not tired, not breathing twice. Just perfect. A face without scars, without flaws. Not a man. A statue.

"No," he whispered. "That's not me."

But the reflection smiled and spoke back: "That's you when you're golden. That's you when you're finally perfect."

Arthur lowered the blade. It didn't vibrate. It was silent, dead silent.

That night, he lay down next to Guinevere. She turned toward him, resting her arm on his chest. He felt no pressure. Her hand lay there, but it weighed nothing. Her skin was warm, but it wasn't alive. He closed his eyes, and even in the darkness, there was gold. Too much gold.

He turned away, and there was the sky. No star. No hole. Just a smooth, golden surface. No depth. No end. Just a lid.

Arthur understood. This wasn't a realm. This was a dream. And dreams that are too golden are traps.

He awoke—drenched in sweat, his heart pounding, Excalibur vibrating as if to remind him it was still there. Around him were the knights, murmuring, snoring, tossing and turning in their sleep. Gaheris tossed and turned, groaning, Brangaine gritting his teeth, Tristan saying his name, Guinevere whimpering softly. People. Real ones. Broken, dirty, alive.

Arthur placed his hand on his sword. "Better this," he whispered, "than a dead empire of gold."

Arthur stood in his dream again, in the middle of the hall. The table was set, the knights laughed, Guinevere smiled, Merlin nodded wisely—everything too smooth, too perfect. Excalibur lay before him, more golden than gold, so bright it was blinding.

"This is Camelot," said the Hall. Not one voice, not many—the Hall itself spoke. "So it should be. So it will be, if you forget the Darkness."

Arthur raised the sword. It was light. Too light. No weight, no heart, no trembling. Just a shining stick.

"No," he said quietly. "Camelot isn't like that. Camelot screams. Camelot laughs falsely. Camelot bleeds and drinks and breaks and loves. Camelot is filth and pride at the same time."

The faces around the table continued to smile, undeterred. Guinevere leaned toward him, placed her hand on his arm—light as a feather, as if it were nothing more than smoke. "But this way," she breathed, "it would be without pain."

"Without pain," Arthur repeated, "there would be no men. Without fault, no loyalty. Without betrayal, no love. Without blood, no crown."

He grabbed Excalibur with both hands. For the first time, it felt heavy, truly heavy, as heavy as it actually was. He screamed—not like a king, but like a man—and rammed the sword into the table.

The hall trembled. The laughter stopped. The faces remained rigid, but a crack flickered in their eyes, a black streak. The gold began to peel, slowly at first, then faster, like paint applied too thickly. The walls crumbled, the sky collapsed.

Guinevere dissolved like dust, the knights shattered into shards of light, the round table shattered—not into wood, but into empty, golden flakes.

Arthur screamed, Excalibur clutched tightly in his hands. "Better dirt! Better blood! Better a kingdom of dust than a lie of gold!"

He woke up. The fire was almost out, the night cold. His face was sticky with sweat, his fingers still clinging to Excalibur. And this time it vibrated, raw, real, full of weight.

Beside him, Cathan snored crookedly, loudly, like a dying pig. Gaheris mumbled something about "drinking" in his sleep. Tristan said his name, but he choked and coughed. Brangaine lay with her mouth open, a piece of bread still in her hand. Guinevere pulled the covers tighter in her sleep and sighed.

Arthur saw them all—not beautiful, not perfect, not golden. Human. Broken. Real.

He took a breath. Two beats. His heart and the stranger's. But for the first time, it didn't sound like a judgment, but like a drumming that said: You're still here.

He looked up at the sky. Stars. Holes. Finally.

"Thank you," he whispered. Not to God. Not to fate. Only to life itself, which had mocked him and loved him by making him imperfect.

Morning came with a sky that wasn't golden, but gray. Rain hung in the air, but it didn't fall—like a threat taking its time. The knights awoke one by one, sweating, hungover from sleep, with faces that looked like the truth: wrinkled, puffy, real.

Arthur was already sitting by the fire, Excalibur across his knees. He hadn't slept, not since the dream had turned to dust. His gaze was hard, but not empty—more like a stone that has lain in a river for too long, knowing it won't be washed away.

Gaheris growled, pulling his cloak tighter. "Another look like that. What was it this time? Another star showing you your grave?"

Arthur shook his head. "No. A dream."

"A dream?" Cathan laughed harshly. "Then tell us about it. Maybe we'll finally have something to laugh about that doesn't involve spoiled bread."

The knights gathered. Brangaine rubbed her eyes, Tristan murmured his name, Guinevere looked at Arthur, but only out of the corner of her eye, as if she already knew what was coming. Lancelot stared into the fire, his hands too steady. Merlin remained silent.

Arthur began. He spoke not like a prophet, not like a king—more like a man finally spitting out a truth that had been burning on his tongue.

"I saw Camelot," he said. "Not as it is, but as it could be. Gold, flawless, without strife, without blood. A realm so perfect that even the sky had no holes in it. And I tell you: it was wrong."

The knights looked at him, some in shock, some defiantly.

"Wrong?" repeated Brangaine. "An empire without blood, without treason—and you call it wrong?"

Arthur nodded. "Because it wasn't alive. Because there was no scream, no laughter that was too loud. Because bread had no taste, because hands had no pressure, because faces all wore the same mask. That wasn't an empire. That was a lie that wanted to gild us until we forgot we were human."

Gaheris snorted. "I don't need a dream to know that perfection is shit. But when you say Camelot needs dirt—what are you saying?"

Arthur looked at him firmly. "That we no longer fight to save a golden kingdom. There is no golden kingdom. We fight to hold on to the Camelot we have—with all its cracks, with all its pain. We fight so that it falls humanly, not flawlessly."

Guinevere clapped her hand over her mouth. Tears welled up in her eyes, not because he was embarrassing her—but because he was finally saying what she had always felt: that Camelot wasn't a fairy tale. It was her life.

Lancelot clenched his fists. "So you're saying we die in vain?"

Arthur shook his head. "No. We die—but not in vain. For even the fall of an empire is valuable if it shows that we were human. Not gold, not a dream, not a damned statue—human, with flaws, with guilt, with courage."

A silence spread. The fire crackled. Tristan murmured his name—and for the first time, it didn't sound like fear, but rather like a clinging: "Tristan. Tristan. Tristan."

Brangaine nodded slowly. "Then we die not for perfection, but for truth." "Exactly," said Arthur. "And truth is blood. And blood is Camelot."

Merlin raised his staff, his face dark but his voice warm. "You finally understand. The golden realm is a deception. The real Camelot is this—broken, heavy, dirty. But real. And it's worth dying for in Camlann."

Arthur nodded, and this time his hand didn't tremble as he picked up Excalibur. It vibrated, raw, alive, like a heart that didn't want to be golden.

The words still hung in the air, as if the fire itself had absorbed them. The knights sat around Arthur, each in their own silence, each with a different weight on their chest.

Gaheris was the first to react. He slammed his fist against his shield, making it resound. "Good!" he cried. "Fuck gold! Gold makes men lazy, satiates them, makes them soft. If we must die, it will be in the mud, with blood in our mouths and dirt in our nails. At least that way the earth will recognize us when it devours us." His eyes sparkled, not with fear, but with defiance.

Brangaine laid the bow across her knees, stroking the wood as if it were a wounded animal. "And yet," she said softly, "we all dream of gold. We do it, even when we know it's not ours. Perhaps this is our punishment—to know it could be better, yet live in the Rift." Her voice

trembled, but she smiled faintly, like someone who would rather embrace the pain than fight it any longer.

Tristan raised his head. His lips formed his name, but this time he didn't just say "Tristan." He said, "I am Tristan. And I don't want to die in a dream. I want... I." He paused, his throat tight, and Brangaine placed a hand on his shoulder. For the first time, he seemed less lost for a breath.

Lancelot stood. His fist rested on the hilt of his sword, his knuckles white. "You say we die for the truth. But what if the truth is that we ourselves are destroying Camelot? That it is not breath or fate that breaks us, but our own blood?" His voice trembled with anger, but not against Arthur—against himself.

Arthur looked at him firmly. "Then we'll fight anyway. Even if we ourselves are the ones who create the rift – we'll fight. Because that's also what being human means: making mistakes, bearing guilt, and still standing."

Lancelot closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. He remained silent, but the silence was louder than any words.

Guinevere finally looked up. Her eyes were reddened, but clear. "The realm was never golden," she said. "But it was... ours. I love it because it is ours. Even if it breaks." She looked at Arthur, and for a moment, there was no betrayal, no secret—only this naked truth, which hurt because it came too late.

Arthur nodded at her seriously. "Then we'll keep it. Until Camlann. We'll keep it not because it's gold, but because it's our dust."

Merlin stepped closer, staff in hand, as if he didn't need it this time. "Now you are ready," he said. "Not for victory. For fall. But a fall that carries weight. A man can expect no more."

Arthur stood up, Excalibur in his fist, heavy, vibrating, alive. He looked around, at every face, every weakness, every crack.

"Swear with me," he said, "not for a golden Camelot. Swear for the Camelot we have. For blood, for laughter, for mistakes, for what is real. Swear that we will fall, but not as a lie."

The knights stood. One by one, they placed their hands on their swords: Gaheris with sparks in his eyes. Brangaine with quiet hardness. Tristan trembling but smiling. Cathan grumbling, as if at odds with the world, yet willing. Bedivere silent but firm. Lancelot last, his hand heavy with guilt. Guinevere placed her fingers hesitantly over them, softly, barely audibly: "For us."

Arthur saw them all. "Then we'll ride on."

And above them the sky darkened—not golden, not black. Gray. Human.

The oath still echoed between them as their hands parted and the sword slid back into Arthur's scabbard. It was not a sacred vow, not a hymn that would endure for centuries. It was rough, fragile, full of doubt—and precisely for that reason, true.

The knights sat down by the fire again. No one spoke of gold, no one of salvation. They chewed hard bread, drank thin wine, and stared into the embers. Everyone thought of Camlann, but no one said the word. It wasn't necessary—the sound hung in the air like smoke, which can be smelled even long after the fire has gone out.

Arthur was still standing. He looked at them all: Gaheris, defiant as always, but with a spark of pride in her eyes. Brangaine, holding the bow like a guilt she would bear until the end. Tristan, quietly murmuring his name, this time like a mantra that kept him upright. Cathan, grumbling, but steady as stone. Bedivere, silent, the measure in his hands. Lancelot, tense, guilt like a second heart. Guinevere, beautiful and broken, but with him. And Merlin, the old magician, whose eyes had already seen further than anyone else could.

Arthur felt his chest pounding—two beats, two rhythms. Heart and breath. Life and death. He knew the end was inevitable. But he also knew now that they would meet it not as masks, not as statues, not as lies. But as people.

"So be it," he murmured. Not out loud, just to himself. "We don't die in gold. We die in dust. And dust is true."

He looked up at the sky. Clouds drifted by, gray, heavy, restless. Between them, a star gleamed, small, inconspicuous—but it twinkled. Not golden, not flawless. A faint, flickering light. Real.

Arthur nodded. "Then we'll ride."

And in that moment, he knew: The dream of the golden empire was not his legacy. His legacy was that he had shattered it—and chosen imperfection.

Nimue – Love or Ruin

The river was narrow, little more than a ribbon of water, running wearily between gray stones. No Camlann, no River of Fate—just a nameless trickle, lying like a crooked mirror in the landscape. The knights had dismounted to drink, to let their horses graze, to stretch their weary limbs.

Arthur knelt and scooped water into his hands. It didn't taste of iron like it had for the past few days, but strangely sweet, almost honey-like. He frowned. "This isn't normal water," he murmured.

Before anyone could answer, she stepped out of the river.

A woman, barefoot, her hair long and dark like a wet forest, her dress so thin it resembled mist rather than fabric. She was young, but her eyes bore wrinkles that knew no age. Every movement was soft, as if she weren't walking but being carried by the water itself.

The horses snorted, some backed away. Gaheris immediately grabbed his sword. "Witch," he hissed. "Get out of the way."

But Arthur raised his hand. Something inside held him back.

“Who are you?” he asked.

The woman smiled. "Names are chains," she said. "But if you want to call me—Nimue."

The knights exchanged glances. Cathan spat in the dust. "Another sorceress. As if we don't have enough." Brangaine unconsciously placed her hand on her bow. "What do you want?"

Nimue didn't see her, nor the knights. She saw Merlin.

The wizard stood a few steps behind Arthur. His face, usually so impassive, had changed. His eyes widened, not with fear, but with recognition. As if he saw in Nimue not a stranger, but an echo.

“You,” he whispered.

Nimue inclined her head, like a student greeting his master—and at the same time like someone who knows full well that one day she will take his place. "Yes. I."

Gaheris stepped forward, his blade half drawn. "I don't trust her. She comes out of the water like an eel, speaking in riddles—it stinks of poison."

"Everything you don't understand stinks of poison to you," Brangaine growled, her eyes never leaving Nimue. "But..." She paused. Her voice trailed off. "There's something. I feel it."

Arthur nodded. He felt it too—a warmth in the air that didn't fit the gray landscape. Not fire, not light, more like a breath brushing the back of his neck.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

Nimue stepped out of the water. Her feet remained dry, as if the riverbed had released them voluntarily. "Because you called me."

“Nobody has…” Cathan began.

"Yes," she interrupted, her eyes fixed on Merlin. "He."

Everyone looked at Merlin. He remained silent. His hand gripped the staff as if it were suddenly heavier.

"I..." He paused, coughing as if he needed to clear his words. "I dreamed. About a student. About someone who was learning what I can no longer bear."

"Then I'm here," said Nimue. "To learn. And to teach."

Guinevere stepped closer to Arthur and whispered, "She is beautiful." It sounded not like admiration, but like a warning. Arthur nodded, kept his eyes on Nimue—and realized he couldn't look away.

Nimue moved through the knights without fear. Gaheris dodged, growling. Brangaine tensed her fingers around the bow, but released the string. Tristan murmured his name, but when Nimue looked at him, he fell silent—as if she herself had taken the word from his throat.

She stopped in front of Merlin. "You're tired," she said. "You've been carrying it for too long. Let me hold it."

Merlin's jaw twitched. "Do you know what you're asking?"

"Yes," she replied, "and no. But I know that the chain will break if it isn't passed on."

Arthur felt something taut in the air—like an invisible thread running from the river to Nimue, from Nimue to Merlin, and from Merlin back to the water. It was as if a new axis had opened, and he knew: This was no coincidence. Nimue was destiny.

"We don't need any more secrets," Gaheris cried, losing patience. "We have enough magic and enough madness. Let's stick to steel!"

But Arthur raised his hand. "No. She stays."

Everyone stared at him.

“Why?” Brangaine asked suspiciously.

Arthur looked at Nimue, who looked directly at him, without fear, without subservience. "Because fate rarely shows itself twice. And when it does, it's as a mockery. I want to know if she's a blessing—or a curse."

Nimue smiled, and the wind stirred for the first time in days.

Nimue stayed. Not because everyone wanted her to, but because Arthur decided so. And when Arthur decided, that was how it was, even if it lay like an open wound in the circle.

They continued on, the river water still on their boots, and Nimue strode among them, barefoot, as if she weren't touching the ground. Each knight reacted differently—and she responded to each with a strange clarity that was both warm and cold.

She stopped at Gaheris, tilting her head slightly. "You are fire," she said. "But fire also burns those it seeks to warm." "Shut your mouth," he growled. "I don't need a witch telling me what I am." She just smiled, and that made him angrier. But for a moment, there was a flicker in his eyes—as if she had touched something he himself couldn't articulate.

Brangainewatched her, her bow half-drawn, as if every gesture were a target. Nimue looked at her seriously. "Your hands tremble because your heart is too big." Brangaine laughed harshly. "My heart is a weapon. And it hits better when it doesn't tremble." "Or it hits better," Nimue replied calmly, "because it trembles." Brangaine said nothing more—but she lowered the bow.

Tristanstumbled over his name as always. "Tri... Tri..." But Nimue placed a hand on his chest. "You are more than a name," she whispered. "Don't say who you are. Be it." For the first time, Tristan fell silent—and the silence seemed like a victory.

Cathangrowled as Nimue came too close to him. "Stay away, woman. I don't need riddles." "You're the Earth One," she said. "The one who holds the Circle, even if he despises it." "I hold nothing," he growled. But he didn't leave her side as she continued walking.

BedivereHe examined her, coolly, like a calculation. "You want to learn from Merlin?" he asked. "Or do you want to break him?" "Both," Nimue answered without hesitation. Bedivere just nodded, as if he had expected that.

She stopped at Guinevere and smiled, not in a friendly way—more knowingly. "You are the crack through which the light falls—and the darkness." Guinevere paled and looked away. "Don't speak to me." "I don't speak," said Nimue, "I only see."

And then there was Lancelot. She stepped to him and looked at him for a long moment. "You are too beautiful for your fate," she murmured. "And that's precisely why it will tear you apart." Lancelot didn't flinch. But his hand on his sword hilt twitched, as if he had briefly considered drawing the blade—not out of hatred, but out of fear.

Finally, she stopped before Merlin. He stood there, heavy, tired, with his staff like a crutch. Nimue placed her hand on the staff, and for a moment, it seemed lighter.

"Teach me," she said. "I can only teach you what will destroy you," he replied. "Then destroy me," she said. "For from destruction grows what lives."

Merlin closed his eyes as if he had been waiting for exactly this sentence.

Arthur watched everything. He felt the circle tighten, how every look, every touch, every syllable from Nimue cut through the Round Table like a knife. And yet there was also a pull—a force that wouldn't let go of him.

No one slept deeply that night. Nimue sat by the fire, her hair like shadows, her eyes bright. She didn't speak, she didn't sing, she was simply there—and yet every knight heard her, whether he wanted to or not.

Merlin sat across from her. And for the first time in many days, he didn't seem like a man in chains—but rather like someone holding the key.

In the morning, Nimue was already awake before the fire had completely gone out. She sat by the river, her feet in the water, humming a melody no one knew. No song, no words, just a sound that sounded like a bridge—between breath and silence.

Merlin went to her. No greeting, no question. He sat down next to her, his staff across his knees. For a while, they were both silent. Then Nimue raised her hand and let a drop of water run onto her finger. The drop stayed put, didn't roll, didn't fall. It remained like a pearl.

“Show me,” she said.

Merlin sighed. "This isn't magic you can display. It's patience. Years. Pain." "Then take my years," she replied. "Take my pain."

He placed his hand over hers, which held the drop. And suddenly the drop began to glow—not brightly, but dimly, like moonlight caught in a glass. Nimue smiled. "Now," she whispered, "I understand."

The knights watched her from a distance. Gaheris growled. "See? He's already giving her everything. One drop, and he's clinging to her like a dog." Brangaine shook her head. "No. It's more. He sees something in her..." She paused, unsure whether it was admiration or fear. Cathan spat into the grass. "I'll say it: witch. Witch with a pretty face. And our old man is right in her net." Bedivere noted dryly: "If Merlin falls, Camelot falls. I'm just calculating."

Guinevere remained silent, but her gaze was sharp. Lancelot stood beside her, his hands clenched into fists. "She's causing trouble," he murmured. "Or truth," Guinevere replied, without looking at him.

Later, in the forest, the lesson began. Merlin spoke of powers that reside not in the hands, but in the breath. "Everything is pattern," he said. "Air, fire, water – threads in the same fabric." Nimue placed her hand on the ground. "And man is knot." Merlin nodded. "A knot, yes. That holds the fabric – or tears it."

They practiced with leaves, with sparks, with shadows. Nimue learned quickly, too quickly. A leaf she breathed on spun as if it were alive. A spark she caught remained in her hand like an ember, without burning her. A shadow fell on her forehead, and she laughed—as if it were hers.

"You're ready," murmured Merlin, "far too ready."

That evening, they sat by the fire. Merlin explained an ancient symbol that even the Druids only whispered. Nimue traced it—and the smoke above the flames bent as if following her. The knights stared.

"This is going too fast," whispered Brangaine. "No one learns that fast." "Except those who lie," growled Gaheris. "Or those who already know," said Bedivere.

Arthur was silent. He saw Merlin—and saw the old wizard laughing. Not tired, not bitter, not like someone who knows the end. He laughed like a man who, for the first time in years, wasn't alone.

And that scared Arthur.

The days that followed were a game of closeness and silence. Nimue and Merlin withdrew from camp in the evenings, ostensibly to practice. The knights heard the cracking of twigs, the whispering of voices, and sometimes a laugh that Merlin had never uttered before.

One evening, Gaheris slammed his fist against his shield so hard that sparks flew. "Enough! I swear, he's lost. The old man who was supposed to lead us all clings to her gaze like a lad to the apron of his first maid." Cathan nodded. "And then we'll follow a circle drawn by a witch. That will be our end." Brangaine remained silent. But there was concern in her gaze. She had seen Nimue's hands when she drew the symbols—delicate hands that held more power than even Merlin showed.

Arthur called Merlin to him. It was night, the fire was small, the smoke sluggish. "You know what she is," he said softly. Merlin looked at him, his eyes brighter than usual. "I know what she can be." "And if she is your undoing?" Merlin smiled wearily. "Then she is my undoing. But she is also the life I have left. Do you want to take that away from me, Arthur? After all this?"

Arthur remained silent. For there was no defiance in Merlin's voice, only a hunger he recognized—the same hunger that had built Camelot: the longing not to be alone.

The knights murmured openly. Bedivere spoke it, sober as a tally: "Merlin binds himself. And if Merlin falls, the realm falls faster than any river could." Tristan murmured his name, staring into the darkness as if seeking Nimue's shadow there. Guinevere sat still, her hands clasped. Finally, she said, "Perhaps he needs her. Perhaps we all need her." Lancelot laughed bitterly. "Do you need it too, Guinevere? A woman to eat the sorcerer while we ride to war?" Guinevere looked at him sharply, and for a moment, a truth flashed between them that had nothing to do with Nimue.

Nimue herself did nothing to extinguish the flames. She moved freely among them, speaking little, but every word struck home. She touched Arthur's arm once, only fleetingly—and he felt the warmth for hours afterward. She laughed at Cathan's curses, and for a moment, even he laughed. She placed a hand on Brangaine's forehead as she shook with fever, and the heat dissipated so quickly that even Bedivere made the Sign of the Cross.

But she always returned to Merlin. At night, she could be heard singing, softly, and Merlin's voice murmuring in between, almost pleading. In the morning, he seemed younger, lighter—and at the same time more fragile.

Arthur knew: something irreversible was happening. Not war, not fate—but bondage. Nimue spun a web, thread by thread, and even the strongest wizard in the realm allowed it.

And in his heart, between the two blows, a question grew that would never leave him: Was Nimue love – or was she the knife that was already at Camelot's throat?

The break came not with thunder, but with a leap.

It was morning, the sun hung pale over the hills, when Nimue returned from the river. Her hair was still wet, plastered to her forehead, her eyes shining. Merlin walked beside her, his staff light as a feather, his face almost peaceful.

Gaheris saw her and couldn't take it anymore. "Enough," he growled, so loudly that even the horses shied. "We're riding to our doom, and our wizard is having sex with a witch who crawled out of the water like a snake."

Nimue stopped. Not flinching, not shocked. She just looked at him. "Snake?" she asked gently. "Then call yourself Fire. For we both belong to the Earth, whether you like it or not."

"I call you Death," Gaheris snarled, his sword out. "And if Merlin is too blind to see you, I'll strike you down before you curse us all."

Brangaine grabbed his arm. "No!" But he pulled away. Cathan stepped forward, yelling, "Leave him alone! Maybe this is exactly what's needed."

Tristan muttered his name in panic, over and over again, faster and faster. Bedivere stood still, his hand on his dagger, waiting, like a man adding numbers.

Arthur stepped in, Excalibur half drawn. "No blood," he said, his voice harsh. "Not here. Not now."

But Gaheris's eyes were red. "You want to protect her?"

“I want to protect the circle,” Arthur replied.

Merlin stepped forward. His voice was sharper than ever. "Enough!" The staff crashed into the earth, and the tremor was stronger than Gaheris's rage. "She is my apprentice. Whoever hurts her hurts me."

“Then you’re lost,” spat Gaheris, “because she’s already eating you.”

“If she eats me,” said Merlin, “then at least I won’t be alone anymore.”

The silence afterwards was worse than any scream.

Nimue looked at him gently and placed her hand on his arm. "Let them talk," she said softly. "They don't know that love and ruin are twins."

Arthur stared at the two of them—the old wizard, who suddenly seemed like a young man, and the woman who held him as if he were both her prisoner and her savior.

Guinevere stepped to his side, whispering, "She will destroy him." Arthur didn't answer. Because he knew she was right—and that Merlin himself had chosen it this way.

The circle shattered a little further this morning. Not by a sword, not by blood—but by a look, a touch, a decision that no one could take back.

And Arthur thought, as Excalibur vibrated: Perhaps this isn't Camelot's downfall by fate. Perhaps it begins here, by the river, with two people who found each other when they should have avoided each other.

The tension was so thick that even the wind fell silent. Gaheris still held his sword raised, Arthur stood between him and Nimue, and Merlin pressed the staff into the ground as if it could hold the circle together.

Then Nimue raised her hand. No threat, no haste—just a gentle movement, as if she were picking up a leaf from the ground.

The river behind them stirred. First a gurgling, then a rushing sound, even though there was no wind. The water rose—not like a wave, but like a sheet being shaken into the air. Drops floated, dissolved, and formed patterns.

The knights stared. Brangaine instinctively reached for her bow, but lowered it, knowing no arrow would hit water. Cathan stepped back, his eyes wide. Tristan fell silent in the middle of reciting his own name.

The drops arranged themselves. First they were circles, then lines, then images. Faces appeared in the air—familiar faces.

Guinevere gasped: She saw her own face, younger, laughing, free. Lancelot saw himself, prouder, more unbroken, without guilt. Brangaine saw the child she had never borne. Gaheris saw his brother, still alive. Tristan saw himself, speaking the word "Tristan" clearly, without stuttering.

And Arthur—Arthur saw Camelot. Not golden as in a dream, but real: the walls full of cracks, the people laughing and cursing, the knights quarreling and swearing, the kingdom he loved.

Nimue's voice came softly, almost a whisper, yet everyone heard it. "This could be your being. Not a dream. Not a lie. Truth—if you let me."

The images flickered. For a moment, they believed the drops would actually become flesh and blood.

Then Nimue let her hand fall. The water fell, splashing back into the river. The spell was broken. Only the sound of the stream remained.

Silence. No one moved. Then Gaheris's voice broke, rough and defiant: "Witchcraft. Illusion. Deception." But even he didn't sound certain.

Brangaine stared into the water as if still searching for her child. Tristan smiled weakly, his first genuine smile in weeks. Guinevere looked down, her shoulders trembling. Lancelot clenched his fists as if trying to strangle his own dream.

Arthur stood silently. He knew it was a seduction. But he also knew: It had felt true, more than all the gold.

Merlin placed his hand on Nimue's shoulder. "She is not a snake," he said quietly. "She is the knife that cuts us—and perhaps the balm that heals us."

Nimue looked at Arthur. Her eyes were clear, dark, and bottomless. "Love or ruin," she said. "You will decide which I am."

Arthur felt Excalibur vibrate—not warningly, but questioningly.

And in that moment he knew: Nimue wasn't a companion. She was a test.

Night lay heavy over the camp. No wind, no animal sounds, only the dripping of the river, which still sounded as if it had remembered Nimue's hand.

The knights slept badly. Gaheris tossed and turned, muttering curses in her dreams. Brangaine kept her eyes open, as if she wanted to see her child in the water once more. Tristan smiled in his sleep, murmuring his name more clearly than ever. Lancelot paced restlessly, his hand repeatedly on the hilt of his sword, as if he could smash an image that had long since vanished. Guinevere lay still, her face averted from the flames, her eyelids heavy, but not from sleep.

And Merlin—Merlin sat with Nimue. He spoke to her softly, words the others didn't understand, words from a language older than the Circle. Sometimes he laughed, a laugh none of them had ever heard from him. Sometimes he lowered his forehead against her shoulder.

Arthur saw all this. He wasn't asleep. Excalibur lay across his knees, vibrating softly as if restless. His eyes burned, but not from the fire—from the images he had seen. Camelot as it could be. Camelot as it never will be.

Nimue suddenly raised her head, as if she had sensed him watching her. Her gaze met his through the darkness, clear, unmoving. No smile, no mockery—only this silence that cut like a knife.

"Love or ruin," her words echoed within him. He knew: For Merlin, she had long been love. For Gaheris and Cathan, she was ruin. For the others, she was temptation. And for himself? He didn't know. Not yet.

Arthur lowered his gaze, pressed his hand more firmly on the hilt of his sword. Two blows to his chest—heart and breath, life and death. And in between them, Nimue, shaking everything.

He understood that night that she hadn't just captured Merlin. She held Camelot in her hands, delicately, as one holds a flower—and at the same time, as one holds a throat.

In the morning, the circle would continue. But Arthur knew: the path to Camlann had taken on a new form. Her name was Nimue. And she would decide whether her downfall was love—or merely ruin.

Trapped in your own magic

Merlin sat in the forest, his staff across his knees. Around him, the chirping of crickets, the crackling of wood, the murmur of the river. Nimue crouched opposite him, barefoot, her hands in the grass, her eyes alert like two black mirrors. She had the patience of a cat who knows full well that the mouse will come at some point.

"There are spells that cannot be passed on," Merlin murmured. His voice was rough, broken by nights that carried too much. "Not because they are too strong—but because they are too final."

Nimue inclined her head. "And yet you will show it to me."

Merlin looked at her for a long time. A man who knew he should remain silent—and yet couldn't. He was the teacher who could never be without a student. And he was the old man who saw in her eyes a future he himself would never achieve.

"It's a spell," he said finally. "A circle of words. Whoever stands within it cannot escape. No sword, no fire, no prayer can break it. Only the one who casts it holds the key."

Nimue smiled. "Then show me the key."

They drew circles in the earth. First small ones, then larger ones. Merlin spoke the ancient syllables, words that sounded like stones falling into a deep well. Nimue repeated them, not haltingly, not hesitating—smoothly, clearly, as if she had already known them.

"Slow down," Merlin warned, but his voice trembled. Not with anger, but with amazement.

She placed her hands on the earth. The circle closed. A bird that happened to fly into it fluttered, flapped its wings—and remained trapped as if the air walls were glass. It screeched, a shrill, helpless sound. Nimue raised her hand—and the circle opened. The bird flew away, free, as if nothing had happened.

The knights watching from a distance froze.

"By all the gods," whispered Brangaine. "She can do it. The first time." Cathan spat. "Too fast. That's not learning—that's stealing." Bedivere noted dryly, "If she can do that, then she can bind him."

Merlin wiped the sweat from his brow. "You're grasping things too quickly," he said. "Or you've waited too long," Nimue replied. "Perhaps I've always been your student, Merlin. You just didn't recognize me."

He laughed briefly, bitterly. "Perhaps. Or perhaps you're the test they sent me too late."

Nimue leaned closer. "And if I'm both?"

Merlin's hand twitched as if he were about to retreat—but he didn't. He felt the warmth of her breath, smelled water and smoke.

Arthur stood a few feet away, Excalibur at his side. He saw Merlin, the greatest wizard, enchanted by a woman who seemed barely older than a girl. He saw Nimue drawing the circle, taking Merlin's heart from his chest without touching him.

Guinevere whispered beside him, "He's digging his own grave." Arthur didn't answer. Because he knew it was true.

Nimue drew a second circle, larger, heavier. Merlin spoke the words, and she repeated them—fluidly, flawlessly. The earth vibrated, the grass flattened, even the river seemed to stand still for a moment.

"This is dangerous," Merlin warned. "Everything is dangerous," she said. "Even love. Even breath. Even you."

Merlin closed his eyes. He knew he should stop. But he didn't.

He saw in Nimue not only a threat. He saw an inheritance. A hand that could take on his burden. And perhaps—just perhaps—a woman who would see him not just as a sorcerer, but as a man.

And so he spoke the last words. And he heard them back from her – stronger, clearer, more beautiful.

The spell hung in the air. Invisible, but tangible. A circle that held everything within itself. Nimue stepped into it, laughed, jumped out, free as a child at play. Merlin looked at her, and there was a gleam in his eyes that was more than pride.

"You're ready," he whispered. "Ready," she repeated. "And so are you."

Merlin didn't understand the words. Or rather, he didn't want to understand them.

But Arthur understood. And he knew: This was the beginning of the end.

The next day, the forest lay silent, as if listening for words that didn't belong to it. Nimue sat in the grass, tracing circles in the earth with a twig, while Merlin recited the syllables to her. She repeated them—no longer tentatively, no longer learning, but confidently, firmly, as if she had long since carried the voice in her throat.

The spell formed faster than before. The earth trembled, the air thickened. A squirrel that came too close ran blindly into it, repelled as if it had hit an invisible wall. It squeaked, ran in circles, until Nimue raised her hand and released the barrier.

She laughed, brightly, lightly. "It's like breathing," she said. "Not heavy, just hidden."

Merlin looked at her, his eyes filled with pride. "You're faster than I've ever been." "Because you're already tired," she replied. "But being tired isn't a fault, Merlin. It just means you have to keep passing."

Arthur heard it, and both hearts beat restlessly in his chest. Pass it on, he thought. Or betray it.

The knights whispered among themselves.

"This is going too far," hissed Gaheris. "She's playing with powers that even the Druids feared. And he's still laughing." Brangaine shook her head, but her eyes were narrowed. "There's something about her... as if she weren't a student, but a mirror. He recognizes himself in her. Perhaps that's the most dangerous thing." Cathan growled. "I'm telling you: he loves her. And when an old man loves, he's more stupid than any boy." Bedivere spoke coolly: "Let's be sober about it. If Merlin falls, we lose our balance. And everything we have falls faster. That's not passion—that's a weakness."

Arthur remained silent, but he knew Bedivere was right.

In the evening, when the fire was small, they approached Merlin. Arthur in front, the knights in a semicircle.

"You give her too much," Arthur said calmly. "This art is not for one we barely know." Merlin looked at him for a long time, then shook his head. "You don't understand. Nimue is... necessary. I have borne what no one could bear. She takes it from me." "Or she takes it from you," Arthur replied.

Brangaine stepped forward. "Master, hear us. She is powerful, yes. But power alone is no reason to trust. She's playing with you."

Merlin laughed bitterly. "You call it a game because you've never felt what it means to be recognized. She sees me, not just my staff, not just my prophecies. She sees who I am."

"And that's exactly why," Gaheris snarled, "she'll break you. Because she knows where your heart lies."

Nimue stepped out of the darkness of the forest as if she had heard it all—perhaps she had. Her gaze was calm, unwavering.

"Why do you fear," she asked, "that knowledge is ruin? Isn't it worse to die blind?"

Arthur held her gaze. "Because knowledge can be chains. And I can already see them wrapping around him."

Nimue smiled gently. "Perhaps. But some wear chains, not bind them."

Merlin stood between them, his gaze torn, but in the end he fell on Nimue.

"I trust her," he said. "More than I trust myself."

The knights were silent, but the answer was clear in their faces: This was the beginning of Merlin's downfall.

Arthur tightened his fingers around Excalibur. Two thumps in his chest, loud and restless. He knew: Soon the day would come when Nimue would speak the words he himself had heard Merlin teach.

And Merlin – blind with longing – would not resist her.

The night was silent, too silent. No animals, no wind, only the crackling of the embers. Nimue sat beside Merlin, her hair falling over her shoulders like black smoke. He seemed younger in her light, almost like a man who believes in a new beginning.

“Why do you trust me?” she asked.

Merlin looked into the fire. "Because I'm tired. Because I know my knowledge will end if it isn't passed on. Because you..." he paused. "Because you are the first mirror in which I see more than just the wizard."

Nimue placed her hand on his. "Then give me everything. Even what you never said."

He hesitated, the staff heavy in his fist. "There are words even kings were not allowed to hear. Words that are not power, but chains."

“And if I need them?” asked Nimue.

"Then I'm lost," he whispered. "But maybe that's exactly the price."

He drew a mark into the earth with the tip of the staff, slowly, hesitantly, as if scratching open a wound. A circle, within it a triangle, within it another circle. "This is the key," he said. "The

spell holds until this is broken. Whoever casts it relinquishes everything—except the hope of retaining the key."

Nimue traced it, precisely, almost reverently. "So," she said.

Merlin placed his hand over hers. "Never speak it against me."

She looked at him. A look both dark and soft. "I'm not promising anything."

And Merlin smiled—weakly, knowingly, yet glad that she was honest.

In the distance, the knights slept restlessly. Arthur lay awake, Excalibur across his legs. He saw Nimue and Merlin bent over the embers, too close, too familiar. It didn't look like magic lessons. It looked like a confession. A devotion. A bond, invisible but deadly.

Guinevere moved beside him, whispering barely audibly, "He loves her." Arthur nodded. "And she loves... what he gives her."

“There is no difference,” she said.

Arthur remained silent. But the double blow pounded in his chest, as if warning him: The end is already here.

Merlin took Nimue's hand and guided her over the symbol. "Now you know everything," he said. "Now you are more than a student. Now you are... my heir."

Nimue tilted her head, her hair brushing his face. "Or your fate."

And Merlin, blinded by the proximity, nodded. "Perhaps the same."

The morning came gray, with rain that refused to fall, hanging in the air like cold smoke. The knights gathered around the fire, bread hard as stone between their teeth, faces filled with suspicion. Nimue sat a little way off, her knees drawn up, her hair wet from the river, as if the rain had fallen just for her. Merlin sat beside her, silent, content, like a man who had finally found something to call his own.

Gaheris was the first to break. "Enough," he growled, hurling the bread into the fire. "I can't bear it any longer. She draws you like an eel to bait, and you bite like an old perch. We all see it, Merlin. You don't."

Merlin raised his head, slowly, like someone who doesn't like to be disturbed. "Speak with respect." "Respect?" Gaheris laughed bitterly. "Of what? Of a witch who controls your tongue? Of a spell you yourself place in her hands?"

Cathan grumbled, "He's right. Ever since she arrived, everything smells like a trap. You're not the same, old man." Brangaine nodded hesitantly. "She's powerful, yes. But power alone is no reason to follow. And you follow her. We don't follow you."

Merlin leaned on his staff and stood up. "You speak as if you were children who think shadows are monsters. Nimue is not a threat. She is hope."

"Hope?" Bedivere stepped forward, cool, razor-sharp. "Or your tombstone? I've counted, Merlin—every time she speaks, you become lighter, and we become heavier. The balance tips."

Tristan murmured his name, over and over again, as if trying to remind himself that he still existed. Nimue looked at him, and he immediately fell silent—as if she had taken away his voice.

Arthur rose, Excalibur in his fist. "Merlin," he said calmly, "we all see that you see more in her than she is. I'm not saying she wants to destroy us—but she could. And you gave her the key."

Merlin stepped toward him, his eyes bright and glowing. "And if so? What if I gave it to her because it had to be so? You think you carry the world on swords. But swords break. Words remain. Nimue is my student. My heir. You can hate her, fear her, accuse her—but she remains."

Silence. Even the rain held its breath.

Guinevere took a step forward, her voice clear and firm. "You're turning against us, Merlin."

Merlin closed his eyes, breathing heavily. Then he nodded. "No. I'm not against you. I'm behind them. And if you understand that against you—then so be it."

Gaheris ripped his sword from its scabbard. "Then be damned!" he roared, and if Arthur hadn't intervened, blood would have flowed.

Arthur held Excalibur sideways, the blade between Gaheris and Merlin. "Not here," he said, his voice hard as stone. "Not yet."

But at that moment, everyone around the fire knew: Merlin was no longer their shield. He was Nimue's shield.

And Camelot had one more crack.

The atmosphere in the camp remained tense, like a tendon about to snap. Every step, every word crackled. The knights cast glances at Nimue that oscillated between fear and hatred. But she didn't seem to mind. She walked barefoot across the wet ground as if it belonged to her, gathered herbs none of them knew, and spoke quietly with Merlin, so close it seemed like a confessional for two.

In the evening, they sat away from the fire, lit only by a small torch. The knights pretended not to listen, but everyone was.

"Why are you doing this?" Merlin asked. His voice was hoarse, like a flame that's been extinguished and rekindled too many times. "Why do you stay?"

Nimue smiled, not sweetly, but knowingly. "Because I am what you called. You thought you only needed an apprentice. But you needed more: a hand to hold you. A mirror to show you. And a knife to set you free."

"A knife?" Merlin frowned. "You speak of love and death in the same breath."

"Because they're the same," whispered Nimue. "Love is a spell. And spells always end in bonds."

He closed his eyes, breathing heavily. "I am the greatest wizard of this age. I have overthrown kings, ruled empires, and carried prophecies heavier than mountains. And yet I sit here—and you break me with a look."

Nimue placed her hand on his cheek. "No. I'm not breaking you. I'm opening you. You've trapped yourself, Merlin. I'm just the one who makes the chain visible."

He leaned forward as if to kiss her, but stopped at the last moment. "If I fall..." "Then you'll fall into my arms," she replied.

The knights whispered.

"Do you hear that?" Gaheris's voice was full of venom. "He's lost." Brangaine pressed her lips together. "No. Not yet. But once she holds him, she won't let go." Bedivere growled, "He's already gone. He sits here talking of shackles while we carry the realm." Tristan murmured his name, as if trying to bind his own fear.

Arthur sat silently, Excalibur across his knees. Two blows pounded in his chest, hard, warning. Love or ruin, it echoed within him. And he chooses both.

Merlin took Nimue's hand, holding it like a man who had long since decided to take the final step. "I trust you more than myself," he said.

“Then you are free,” she whispered.

And Arthur knew in that moment: Merlin was no longer theirs. No longer the wizard who had guided them. He was Nimue's. And he would not return.

The night was black, heavy, and starless. The fire had long since gone out, leaving only a faint glow of embers between the stones. The knights slept restlessly, one after the other, their hands on their swords, as if they had sensed that this was no ordinary night.

Merlin sat with Nimue off to one side, near the river. His staff rested beside him, forgotten. The shadows danced across his face, making him appear younger, almost peaceful.

"You gave me everything," Nimue said quietly. "The words. The signs. The key."

Merlin nodded wearily. "Because I wanted it to continue. Because I knew I couldn't carry on forever."

“And because you love me,” she whispered.

He closed his eyes. "Yes. Even if it's my downfall."

Nimue leaned closer. Her lips touched his forehead. "Then hear me, Merlin. Hear me speak your words."

She traced the circle in the earth, fluidly, surely. Her fingers glided like knives across the grass. She murmured the syllables he had given her—deep, heavy, ancient. The air grew thicker, breathing difficult.

Merlin opened his eyes – and saw it. The circle glowed, invisible yet burning, like a line cutting through the heart.

“Nimue…” he whispered.

"Hush," she said. "This is what you gave me. This is what you wanted."

He tried to stand up, but his legs wouldn't budge. He reached for the pole, but it lay beyond the line—and the line wouldn't let him out.

Panic flashed in his eyes, briefly, then it gave way to a bitter smile. "I taught you," he murmured. "And you learned. More than I ever wanted."

"You knew it would end this way," Nimue replied. "In love. In bonds."

The spell was closing. An invisible cage, as solid as stone, as clear as water. Merlin sat within it, motionless, his hands in his lap, as if he himself had chosen the chains.

The knights woke up. Gaheris drew his sword, Brangaine grabbed his bow, and Cathan cursed. "She's got him! She's got the old man!"

Arthur approached, Excalibur in hand. He saw Merlin circling—and Nimue standing calmly before him, her eyes dark and unmoving.

“Why?” asked Arthur, his voice harsh.

Nimue looked at him. "Because he wanted to. Because he wanted to be free—and freedom wears masks."

Merlin nodded weakly. "She's right. I dug my own grave. This has always been my path."

Arthur raised his sword, but Excalibur vibrated as if to tell him: This is not a battle of steel. This is a battle of will.

And the spell held. Invisible, but everyone felt it—like an invisible wall against which their breath crashed. Merlin sat in the circle, his shoulders hunched, his gaze turned inward. His fingers twitched for the staff once more, then sank into his lap.

"Merlin!" Gaheris roared, the veins in his neck swollen. "Fight! Do something! Tear that thing apart!" "He can't," Brangaine whispered. "He taught her himself." "Then he was more stupid than we all thought," Cathan spat.

Nimue stood calmly. No haste, no triumph on her face—just silence. "He's not stupid," she said. "He's free."

"Free?" Bedivere laughed coldly. "He's sitting like a dog in your cage." "Not in mine," she replied, "in his. You all build cages you can't see. I just used the key he gave me."

Arthur approached, Excalibur in his hand. The sword vibrated, demanding action. But he knew: steel was powerless here. He knelt at the edge of the circle, staring at Merlin.

“Old friend,” he said quietly, “is this what you wanted?”

Merlin slowly raised his head. His eyes were clear, but tired, so tired that one could see he was no longer fighting. "Arthur," he murmured, "I have raged against chains all my life. I have taken them from kings, from priests, from gods. But in the end…" He smiled weakly. "In the end, I was only my own knot. Nimue made it visible."

"And Camelot?" Arthur asked, his voice rough. "Who'll carry you if you fall?"

Merlin closed his eyes. "You. Always you. I only laid the stones. But you... you are the building. Now hold it as long as you can."

The knights raged. Gaheris struck the invisible wall, his sword sending sparks flying. Cathan roared, Brangaine wept silently, Tristan murmured his name until Nimue silenced him with a look.

Guinevere stepped to Arthur's side. "He's lost," she said. Arthur nodded, his heart pounding twice as fast. "Yes. But he went willingly."

Nimue looked at Arthur, cold and gentle at the same time. "He belongs to me now. But not as a prisoner—as one who can finally rest."

Arthur raised Excalibur, hesitated, then lowered it. He knew there was no cut that could break the circle.

He turned away, his shoulders heavy. "Then so it is," he murmured. "The greatest wizard fell not by war, not by fate. But by his own heart."

The spell remained, glowing faintly in the darkness like a breath that wouldn't fade. Nimue stood at the edge, unshaken, the knights filled with anger and suspicion, Arthur silent.

And Merlin – trapped in his own spell – smiled for the last time.

Arthur knew: He couldn't free Merlin. No one could.

The Fall of Camelot

The return to Camelot was no triumphal procession. No trumpets, no cheering children, no people throwing flowers. Instead, people stood by the roadside with bowed heads, some with

empty eyes, some with hard faces. Where once laughter and pride had reigned, there was now a heaviness that didn't come from the rain.

Arthur rode in front, Excalibur at his side, but the sword didn't vibrate. It hung at his hip, as if weary. Beside him, Guinevere, silent, her face hidden behind a veil. Behind them, the knights, fewer than ever, drawn, suspicious. And Merlin was missing.

The people sensed it immediately. They whispered. "Where is the wizard?" - "Has he abandoned them?" - "Without him, they are weak." - "Perhaps Camelot's days are numbered." Arthur heard every word, and every word cut like a knife.

The city walls rose like gray giants, but they no longer seemed like protection. They looked like cages. Torn banners hung on the battlements, battered by the wind. Once, this symbol—the golden dragon—had been a promise. Now it was just fabric, clinging to the rain.

As they rode through the gate, Arthur looked at the people who avoided them. No cheering, no trust. Only eyes that asked: Why did you come back if you can't bring anything more?

Arthur felt the double beat in his chest intensify – heart and breath, life and death, two rhythms that tormented him.

In the throne room, she was greeted by a silence louder than any feast. Once, it had been a place full of voices, shouts, and laughter. Now, every footstep echoed eerily.

Arthur sat heavily on the throne. Guinevere stood beside him, but she seemed distant. Lancelot took a step forward, bowed his head—a picture of loyalty, yet his jaw trembled.

"Camelot still stands," Arthur began, his voice raspy. "But it's not built on stone, it's built on us. We're back, without Merlin. But we carry on."

A murmur went through the hall – not cheers, not hope, but the quiet hum of a crowd that knows that words alone cannot hold walls.

At night, Arthur couldn't sleep. He walked through the corridors, listening to the voices seeping through the walls.

"The people are starving," he heard a maid whisper. "The fields are burned," a farmhand answered. "And the Norsemen in the north are just waiting." "Without Merlin," said an old man, "the king is naked."

Arthur stood in the shadows and heard his own rule crumble, not by swords, but by words.

In the morning, he called the knights to the round table. They sat down, heavy and tired, their faces full of shadows.

Bedivere spoke first. "The villages in the east have stopped sending taxes. They say the king no longer has any power." Cathan growled, "And the Saxons are gathering. My scouts report encampments by the river. They smell blood." Brangaine slammed her fist on the table. "And us? We only argue over shadows. Without Merlin, we are a circle without a center."

Everyone looked at Arthur.

He wanted to speak, wanted to remind them of the dream. But he saw their faces—tired, broken, full of mistrust—and he knew: the dream no longer held them.

And then Lancelot came. He rose, his face pale, his hands clenched into fists. "Arthur," he said, "there is something you must know."

The air froze. Guinevere lowered her gaze. Arthur felt the beating in his chest grow louder, as if his second heart was about to burst.

"Not now," he murmured. "Not here."

But he knew it would happen, whether he wanted it or not.

The days after their return were heavy as lead. No song echoed through the alleys, no market called for customers. Instead, farmers trudged through the streets with empty baskets, and children tugged at their mothers' sleeves, begging without anything left to beg.

Arthur often rode out alone, just to see their faces. He heard what they no longer whispered, but said openly: "The king has abandoned us." "Merlin is gone—without him, he's just a man with a sword." "Why should we starve when the knights at the round table still eat meat?"

It wasn't an open rebellion, not yet. But there was a glimmer, a rumbling. A king knew when words were more dangerous than blades.

He met the knights in the throne room. The tension was palpable.

"The people are starving," Brangaine said, her voice breaking from having seen mothers in the villages feed their children with water for too long. "And we can't give anything," Bedivere replied coldly. "The stores are empty, and the fields are burned. If we open the barns, we'll be finished within days."
Cathan slammed his fist on the table. "Then we fight for what's left! Whoever takes something from us shall feel the steel." "The people are not the enemy," Gaheris growled. "But they will become one if we continue to stand by."

Arthur listened, felt the circle breaking apart. They would have argued before, yes, but in the argument there lay embers that turned into fire. Now there was only ash.

The news came one morning: A village on the edge of the empire had refused to let the tax collector in. They had chased him away—not with weapons, but with stones, with fists, with desperation.

"It's a start," Bedivere murmured. "One village today, ten tomorrow."

Arthur stood up, heavy and tired. "We'll ride there. Not with swords. With words."

"Words?" Gaheris laughed bitterly. "The people only believe in bread. And we have none."

At night the knights argued by the fire.

"Without Merlin, we are lost," said Brangaine. "He was the bond." "No," snarled Cathan. "He was the chain. And now we are free." "Free?" Gaheris spat into the fire. "We are not free. We are divided." Tristan murmured his name over and over, as if it were the only one left to him.

Guinevere was silent. Lancelot sat beside her, their fingers touching in the shadows. Arthur saw it. He had seen it for a long time. But he also remained silent—for he knew: One more crack, and Camelot would fall.

And outside, beyond the walls, the enemies were already gathering. Riders from the north, war cries, smoke from distant villages. Camelot was bleeding, and the wolves smelled it.

Arthur stood in his chamber, Excalibur in his hands. The sword still vibrated, but more faintly. Like a heart about to stop beating.

"Not yet," he whispered. "Not yet."

It began with glances. Not on the battlefield, not at the round table—but in the quiet corners of the hall, in the shadows of the corridors. Glances that lasted longer than necessary. Fingers that touched fleetingly, yet never separated. Arthur saw them. He had seen them for a long time.

Guinevere, his queen, moved beside Lancelot as if she had forgotten that other eyes were watching her. Lancelot, the most loyal knight, no longer avoided her gaze. It was not a confession, not a kiss. But it was enough.

Arthur felt the double beat in his chest grow louder – heart and breath, love and death, fate and betrayal.

One evening, at the round table, it happened almost openly.

Guinevere handed Arthur the cup of wine. Her hand trembled almost imperceptibly—and Lancelot's hand was there to support him. It only lasted a moment, but the fire cast the movement across everyone's faces.

Gaheris growled and slammed his fist on the table. "This is a mockery! In front of everyone!" Cathan laughed harshly. "Not a mockery. Just the end we all see coming." Brangaine lowered her gaze and remained silent. Bedivere looked coolly at Arthur, as if to say: Now you must decide.

Arthur took the cup and drank without a word. But the hall was silent. Even Tristan didn't murmur a name.

Later that night, he found them in the garden—Guinevere and Lancelot, too close, too familiar. No lips touched, no embrace—but the silence between them was louder than any action.

"You love each other," said Arthur. No accusation, no scream. Just a single sentence.

Guinevere froze. Lancelot stepped forward as if to take away the blame. "It's true," he said harshly. "But we didn't mean to…" "Not destroy you?" Arthur laughed bitterly. "You did it long ago."

Guinevere stepped closer, tears in her eyes. "Arthur, I..." "No," he interrupted. "Don't say anything. Words won't change anything. The rift is there."

He turned away. Behind him, he heard Lancelot take her hand. Arthur stopped, his sword heavy at his side. Excalibur vibrated as if it wanted to be drawn—but he let it go.

"Not yet," he murmured. "Not with steel. Not like that."

The next morning, the group knew. It was evident in their looks, in their silence, in the harshness of their voices. What had once been a circle was now a rupture.

"This is the beginning of the end," Brangaine murmured. "No," Bedivere replied. "The end is already here."

And outside the walls, the enemies gathered. The fall didn't begin with swords—it began with hearts that betrayed one another.

The first blow came not from without, but from within. An uprising in the south—peasants who found their fields burned, their children starving, and no longer a king to give them hope. They took up torches, scythes, and stones. They didn't march into the fields—they marched on Camelot.

Arthur rode towards them, not with an army, but with a handful of knights. He called out to them, he spoke of unity, of the kingdom, of the Round Table. But the faces that met him were hard, empty, hungry. They saw no king—they saw only a man who failed to fill their stomachs.

Stones flew. One hit Gaheris on the helmet, another on Brangaine's shoulder. Cathan screamed, about to draw his sword. "No!" Arthur roared, his hand on Excalibur. "No blood! Not against our people!"

But the people didn't stop. They cried out that Camelot had betrayed them. They cried out for bread, for justice, for an end to the lies.

In the end, the knights rode back, insulted, pelted with stones, without victory, without answers. Camelot had lost its children.

But as soon as they were back within the walls, the second news came: the Saxons in the east had crossed the rivers.

"They smell blood," Bedivere said coldly. "We're weak, they smell it. They'll come, and this time they won't just plunder."

Arthur rested his forehead in his hands. Two blows pounded in his chest, as if his own body were mocking him. "We'll hold them," he said. "We must."

But he knew: With each passing day, Camelot was crumbling from within – and now the enemies were also gnawing at him from without.

There was an argument at the round table.

"We ride against the Saxons!" Cathan roared. "We show that Camelot still lives!" "And who will protect the people?" Brangaine snarled. "Shall they die while we seek glory?" "The people have already turned their backs on us," Gaheris growled. "What's the point of protecting them if they betray us?" Bedivere slammed his hand on the table. "You talk as if it's a matter of choice. It's a matter of survival."

And in the middle of it all was Arthur, silent, while Excalibur vibrated as if it wanted to force him to finally choose a direction.

Guinevere remained silent, her eyes red. Lancelot sat beside her, his gaze fixed on Arthur, as if every breath between them were a silent battle.

Arthur knew he was fighting on two fronts: against Saxons and Northmen—and against the cracks in his own hall. And he suspected that the second front was deadlier than the first.

At night, he climbed the walls alone. The sky was black, not a star in sight. Only smoke in the distance, the fires of the Saxons, the glow of the uprisings.

Arthur raised Excalibur. The sword vibrated, weakly, wearily, as if it sensed that its brilliance would soon fade.

"Not yet," whispered Arthur. "We're still holding. Still."

But deep down, he knew: Camelot was already falling. Not by fire, not by sword—but because its own walls were turning against each other.

The round table was no longer a circle. It was a battlefield of words that could have turned to steel at any moment.

Gaheris stood up, his face red, his hands on his sword hilt. "I will no longer fight for a queen who betrays the king." His voice echoed through the hall, and the knights froze.

Guinevere paled, and Lancelot jumped to her feet. "Keep your tongue shut, or I'll cut it out!"

“Try it,” growled Gaheris.

Cathan slammed his fist on the table. "Enough! Do you want to tear Camelot apart in the hall before the Saxons do it outside the walls?"

Brangaine shook her head, but her voice was filled with bitterness. "It's too late. The betrayal is open. Everyone can see it."

Arthur stood at the head of the table, Excalibur in his fist. "Sit down," he commanded. But no one obeyed. Their gazes were sharp as blades, their hands on handles, each ready to break the circle in blood.

"I said sit down!" Arthur thundered, and this time Excalibur vibrated audibly, a scream of steel. They sat down, reluctantly, like animals retreating only briefly.

Arthur looked at each of them. "We die outside or we die here. Choose."

“Then we die here,” murmured Gaheris, “because traitors are more poisonous than Saxons.”

The days that followed were poisonous. Lancelot never left Guinevere's side. Some knights avoided her, others joined her, as if they had long known that Arthur's heart was broken.

Brangaine remained silent with Arthur. Bedivere spoke only numbers, soberly and coldly. Tristan murmured his name, faster and faster, louder and louder, as if trying to drown out the noise.

The circle was no longer a ring. It was two halves, facing each other, connected only by the swaying throne.

One evening, Arthur entered the hall and found Lancelot alone. The knight held his sword in his hand, bright and shining.

"You will judge me," said Lancelot. "Sooner or later. Because I love the queen. And because she loves you—but differently."

Arthur stopped, heavy and tired. "I should kill you," he said. "And yet I won't. Because we were brothers."

Lancelot looked at him, and there was pain in his eyes, real pain. "And that's precisely why I am your greatest betrayal."

Arthur knew: The time had come. The circle could no longer exist. It had to be broken so that Camelot could at least maintain the semblance of order.

The next morning, he called the knights. "From today on," he said, "the Round Table is no longer a circle. Whoever remains loyal to me will ride with me against the enemy. Whoever turns away may remain in Camelot—but no longer under my banner."

The hall echoed with silence. Then Lancelot stood up. "Then I am no longer your knight." Guinevere followed his gaze, and with her others who wavered.

Arthur lowered Excalibur as if he himself had split his heart.

The news reached Camelot like a thunderbolt: the Saxons had broken through the border. Villages were burning, smoke rose over the hills, and the screams of the refugees echoed to the city walls.

Arthur stood on the battlements, his hand on Excalibur. Below him crowded women, children, the elderly—everyone who had fled from the fields. They didn't cry out for glory, they cried out for bread, for protection, for salvation.

Behind him the knights were arguing again.

"We have to ride out to meet them!" Cathan roared. "If we wait, they'll burn us like the others." "And with whom?" Brangaine snarled. "Half a circle, half a force? Lancelot and his men are missing!" Gaheris slammed his fist against the battlements. "Then we'll ride with those who remain! Better half a force than none!"

Arthur turned to them. His gaze was tired but hard. "We ride," he said. "Not for glory. Not for victory. Only because we're still standing."

The knights gathered at the gate, fewer than ever before. Lancelot's place was empty, and his absence weighed more heavily than a hundred enemies. Guinevere stood in the shadows, a veil over her face. Arthur didn't look at her, couldn't.

The people didn't cheer as they rode out. They remained silent. And in that silence lay something worse than fear: indifference.

The battle came sooner than they expected. At the river, where the water glowed red in the evening light, they encountered the Saxons. A flood of shields, spears, and warriors with eyes as cold as stone.

Arthur raised Excalibur, and the sword vibrated—once again, as if it wanted to flame, as if it wanted to live. "For Camelot!" he roared, his voice breaking through the fog.

The knights followed him. Gaheris like a wild beast, Cathan roaring like thunder, Brangaine with arrows so fast they disappeared in the smoke. Tristan murmured his name, over and over, as a spell against his fear.

They fought. Blood, mud, screams. Arthur cut through spears, through shields, through men who fell like shadows. But for every one who fell, two more came.

And in the distance, on the other bank, Arthur saw them: Lancelot. With his men. He stood there, shining, strong, but he didn't ride toward them. He only watched.

Arthur felt the blow almost tear his chest apart. "Brother," he whispered, "where are you?"

The battle didn't end in victory. It ended in retreat. The knights rode back into the night, bloodied, wounded, and fewer than before.

Arthur remained by the river, his sword heavy in his hand, his heart pounding twice as hard. Behind him the realm, before him the enemy—and in between the void where his brothers once stood.

Camelot hadn't fallen—not yet. But it was already collapsing.

They returned, but not like knights. They trudged home, horses lame, armor dented, faces blank. The gates of Camelot opened slowly, without cheers, without song. The people stood there, silent, looked at their heroes and realized: they were no longer heroes, but men and women who had lost more blood than they could bear.

Arthur rode in front, Excalibur held limply in his hand. The blade no longer gleamed; it hung like a piece of iron. Guinevere stood at the gate, her veil lifted by the wind. Her eyes searched for him, but he avoided her gaze.

"Where is the victory?" asked a voice from the crowd. Arthur stopped, not looking down. "There was none." A murmur, a murmur that rolled through the streets like thunder. No scream, no uprising—only the certainty that the dream was shattered.

The knights gathered in the throne room. Gaheris's forehead was marked by a scar, Brangaine's shoulder was bleeding through the bandage, Cathan's voice was hoarse from shouting. Tristan murmured his name, more quietly than usual, almost like a lament. Bedivere counted, coolly and matter-of-factly: "We're only half."

"And they'll be back," he added. "Stronger. Soon."

Arthur sat heavily on the throne. The hall echoed empty. Once a place of splendor, it was now just stone.

At night, he wandered alone through Camelot. The walls looked like gravestones, the banners like rags. The people weren't sleeping—he saw lights in the huts, heard children crying, heard men cursing. They all knew what he knew: the kingdom had fallen, even if the walls still stood.

Arthur stopped on the highest battlement, looking out into the night. Smoke rose in the south, torches in the east, and somewhere in the darkness – Lancelot. Both brother and traitor.

The double pounding in his chest was so loud that it drowned out the world. Heart and breath, life and death. And Arthur knew: The end wasn't near. It was here.

Camelot didn't fall in a single night. But in that moment, on that pinnacle, Arthur realized: The fall was irreversible. All that followed was merely the last trembling of an empire that was already dead.

The Last Battle of the River Camlann

The morning of Camlann was no morning at all. It was a gray rift in the sky, a silence between night and day. No bird sang, no wind stirred. Only the snorting of horses and the clanging of iron echoed through the air.

Arthur rode in the lead. Excalibur hung at his side, heavier than ever. Once, it had burned when he drew it, had sung when he swung it. Today, it vibrated only faintly, like a heart too tired to beat.

Behind him rode the last knights: Brangaine, clinging to her bow even though her shoulder still bled. Gaheris, silent, his eyes red with the hatred that kept him alive. Cathan, cursing as if trying to drown his fear in the mud. Tristan, murmuring his name over and over, quietly as a prayer. Bedivere, cool, sober, calculating, as if every mile were merely a number.

There weren't many left. And they knew it.

The people stood at the city gate, but they didn't cheer. No shouts, no songs. Only silence, eyes full of hunger, hands full of emptiness. Some wept, others looked away. They knew this wasn't a ride to glory, but to death.

Guinevere stood at the edge, her veil drawn over her face. Arthur didn't look at her. He knew her heart had long since belonged to someone else. Lancelot wasn't there. Not that morning.

The seat next to Arthur was empty—and that empty seat weighed more heavily than any enemy.

As they left the city behind, the sky began to shake. Black clouds gathered, a rumble of thunder vibrated across the land. Brangaine felt it first. "This isn't weather," she murmured. "It's a sign."

Merlin wasn't there to interpret it. Only the silence remained—and Nimue's shadow, hanging in Arthur's mind like a chain that held even in his absence.

On the horizon, they saw the river Camlann. It meandered lazily through the land, but today it glittered red, as if it had already drunk the blood of the coming dead.

Arthur stopped and looked at his knights. "This is the place," he said. His voice sounded like stone breaking. "This is where it ends. Perhaps with victory, perhaps with death. But we ride because we are Camelot."

No one responded with cheers. Gaheris spat in the mud. "Then at least we die with our swords drawn." Cathan nodded. "Better here than in bed like dogs." Brangaine looked up at the sky. "Or like birds caught in nets." Tristan murmured his name, more firmly than usual, as if he had finally grasped the sound. Bedivere quietly noted: "Six against a hundred."

Arthur drew Excalibur. It flickered briefly, a final glimmer, like a heartbeat in the darkness. "For Camelot," he said. Not loudly, not for glory—but like a man speaking his last words.

They rode on, into the valley, toward the river. And on the other bank, the enemy was already waiting: shields like a wall, spears like a forest, faces painted with blood and mud. There were many of them. They were ready.

Arthur stopped and saw the army. Both hearts beat in his chest. Not yet, he thought. Not yet.

But he knew: Camlann wasn't the future. Camlann was now.

The omens piled up like empty bottles after a long night. First, it was the wind, which didn't blow yet tilted the grass backward, as if an invisible hand were stroking time. Then it was the crows above the valley—a black circle, silent, as if they had traded their voices for better positions in the afterlife.

Arthur knelt on the riverbank and dipped his hand into the water. It was cold, but not like water is cold. More like iron. From somewhere, there was a smell of rain that never fell. Beside him, Excalibur emitted a sound—not the old, bright twang, but a thin, weary click, as if an invisible tooth were cracking deep within the metal.

"Did you hear that?" asked Brangaine, drawing and lowering her bow as if the sky itself were the target. "Yes," said Arthur. He didn't say: It was a crack.

Gaheris stood with his legs apart, his fingers on the hilt, his lips bloody from biting them. "When prophecies come, let them finally speak. I'd rather hear thunder than wait like this." "This is thunder," Cathan grumbled. "Only without the noise."

Tristan felt his name with his lips, spoke it once, clearly: "Tristan." It wasn't loud, but it stuck. Bedivere wrote a number in the mud with his glove, as if he needed to at least give the ending some order, and wiped it away again.

A fog lay over the right bank, taking on no color. It clung to the thorns, to the enemy's shields, to the eyes of the men across the way. A Saxon captain raised his spear and moved it slowly like a priest with a monstrance. No battle cry answered from the ranks. Only the scraping of wood and breath in beards.

Arthur straightened up. The double throb in his chest was beating unevenly, as if a river were flowing backwards inside there too. He looked into the faces of his knights – drawn maps, each with a different border, but all fighting the same war.

"Listen," he said, and the words carried because nothing else around him dared to move. "This is it. No more tricks, no more turning around. If anyone wants to leave, they can leave now. I'm not holding anyone back."

No one moved. Brangaine nocked an arrow she would never retract. Gaheris spat into her palm. Cathan grinned toothily at the river. Bedivere just nodded, lacking the breath to say yes. Tristan placed his hand on Arthur's elbow, briefly, like a child checking for reassurance.

Then the light shifted. Not much. Just enough to make the men's shadows lengthen and the river lay as black as oil for a moment's breath. A fish leaped—without a splash, as if the water's surface were glass. On the farthest heights, a cloud tore open like an eyelid: for a fraction of a heartbeat, there was no sky visible in the opening, but something white, round, a still eye. The star from back then? Or just the memory of it? It was enough. Everyone knew: the seer hadn't lied.

Excalibur vibrated more noticeably now, a tired tremor creeping into Arthur's forearm. He raised the blade slightly, and the edge reflected not the enemy, not the river—only a thin line running across his own face. Not a crack in the steel. A crack in the man.

"Merlin," Guinevere's name whispered within him, even though she stood far behind walls and he no longer recognized her scent. Instead, he heard the spell crack in his memory like old wood. He saw Nimue's motionless gaze before him, like a hand grasping nothing yet holding everything. A distant whooshing ran through the valley, as if wind were blowing in another world.

"Signs enough," Bedivere said soberly, because someone had to say it. "Time's up."

On the opposite side, a standard was raised. No words. A skull made of pitch, roughly painted on coarse linen. The line of spears lowered, a collective breath over a hundred bodies.

Arthur gripped it tighter. "We don't do it for songs," he said. "Not for gods. For those who stand behind us and need bread. For those who fall beside us. For Camelot, filthy as it is."

Gaheris grinned crookedly. "And if heaven objects?" "Then let him come down," said Brangaine, and the bow finally spoke: an arrow that didn't whistle, but simply vanished. Across the river, a man fell, without a sound, as if the ground had impatiently pulled him toward it. The response was a dull thud that made the bank tremble.

In this trembling, Arthur also stirred. Something clicked within him—not hope, not courage, just the old, dry necessity that lifts one's knees from sleep every morning. He looked at Excalibur and thought: Once more. And never again after that.

The crows broke their circle and settled in the willows, as if they wanted to listen more closely. The river was now visibly flowing faster, creating small eddies that looked like open mouths. A tire burst far behind—not a leather tire, but one in his head: Lancelot's name flew briefly like a spark through Arthur's brain and was extinguished because sparks found no fuel in this fog.

"Form up," he ordered. "Three ranks, close together. No heroics, just work." Cathan laughed dryly. "I can do work." "Then work quietly," growled Gaheris, pushing himself to the head of the left flank. Brangaine took the right, arrows like breaths. Bedivere held the center like a nail. Tristan stayed with Arthur, and this time it was right.

Another sign: A stone broke loose from the mud, rolled uphill, and landed in front of Arthur's boots. He didn't bend down. Don't pick up anything you can't carry all the way to the end.

"King," Bedivere said quietly. "Say it."

Arthur raised Excalibur. No shine, just metal that knew what it was forged for. "Forward."

They began to move. No battle cry, only the rubbing of leather and the discordant concert of metal, teeth, and breath. Behind them remained the valley, which this morning no longer held any memory. Before them, Camlann, opening its mouth wide.

One last omen: A single drop fell, even though it wasn't raining. It hit Arthur's forehead, ran down his eyebrow, and tasted of salt. Perhaps it was sweat. Perhaps the world, already weeping with him.

"Okay," Arthur said to no one. "Then count."

And they went.

The first arrow was Brangaine's – it pierced the neck of a Saxon carrying the standard. The banner swayed, fell into the water, and was swallowed by the river. For a split second, there was silence. Then came the thunder of shields.

The Saxons ran like a black wave. Spears outstretched, eyes gleaming beneath helmets, teeth bared. The ground trembled, mud splashed, the river hissed as if already humming the names of the dead.

"Shield up!" Bedivere roared. The knights formed a line, a narrow wall against a sea. Metal struck metal. The impact wasn't a sound, but an earthquake. Tristan fell to the ground, scrambled to his feet, muttering his name between his teeth as if he were his only support.

Arthur snatched Excalibur up. The blade vibrated like a heartbeat, sending sparks flying as it struck iron. He sliced a spear in two, split a helmet, and drove the nearest enemy back into the mud. Beside him, Cathan swore, each blow raw as a curse. Gaheris charged forward, so blinded by rage that he roared more than he breathed.

Brangaine fired, quickly and precisely. Arrow after arrow. But the mass continued to advance, rolling forward, accepting every loss.

A scream. A knight was pressed to the ground, spears stabbed, the body disappeared beneath boots. Tristan saw it, screamed his name like a spell, and struck down an opponent twice his size.

The river foamed. Men stumbled into it, swept away, bodies and weapons drifted away, disappearing into the current as if the water were hungry.

Arthur fought, step by step. Every blow was a denial against the end. But the opponents were many, too many. Shields clashed, swords broke. The ground was mud and blood, no footing, only a sliding of bodies.

Gaheris laughed, dying. "Not yet, you dogs!" He snatched a spear and plunged it through the throat of his nearest opponent. Warm blood splashed onto his face, and he grinned.

Brangaine screamed as an arrow struck her. She collapsed, bow still in her hand. Cathan tried to reach her, but the enemy pushed in between. "Hold the line!" Bedivere roared, cold, and struck down a man, his helmet shattering.

Arthur saw it all, and every loss was another stone eroding from Camelot's walls. But he had no time to mourn. A warrior rushed at him, sword raised. Excalibur sang brightly one last time, breaking through the attack, cleaving flesh and iron.

The air stank of blood and mud. The men's screams were no longer a sound, but a storm in which they were drowned. The sky hung black above them, heavy, as if it were pressing the valley itself deeper into the earth.

Arthur fought on, Excalibur heavy in his hands, his heart pounding twice in his chest. He knew this was just the beginning.

And Camlann would drink a lot more blood before it was satisfied.

The battle devoured its way forward like fire through dry wood. Every step the knights took was driven back the next. The ground was no longer a field, but a black, slippery pit where blood and rain melded into a single mess.

Arthur swung Excalibur, feeling the weight deeper in his arms. The blade was still sharp, but it no longer vibrated as it once did. No song, no fire—just cold metal cutting mercilessly.

Gaheris was a fury. He charged forward, screamed, struck, was hit, again and again, but he didn't fall. A spear pierced his side; he ripped it out and used it to stab the man who had been leading him. "Come on!" he roared, his face smeared with blood. "I'll take you all!"

Cathan stood at his flank, his sword broken, fighting with an axe he'd wrested from a Saxon. He laughed between blows, a laugh filled with madness. "Finally, a job that satisfies me!"

Bedivere held the center, as precise as a bookkeeper. Every blow calculated, every kick perfectly timed. He counted the men he felled, not out of pride, but because numbers provided

order. But even his composure shattered when he saw Brangaine lying on the ground. She was still gasping for breath, the arrow lodged deep in her chest.

Arthur fought his way to her and knelt briefly beside her. "Brangaine!" She opened her eyes, blood at her mouth. "Camelot... was only a dream," she whispered. "But a beautiful dream." Then her head lolled to the side, and the bow slipped from her hand.

Arthur closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, his face was stone.

Tristan stumbled, muttering his name over and over again as if he could save himself. An enemy struck him down, but he crawled up, screamed his own name in the man's face, and plunged the blade into his stomach. Blood gushed, Tristan laughed hoarsely—and muttered "Tristan" one last time before sinking into the mud.

Arthur felt the circle tighten. There were fewer of them, fewer and fewer. Around them were the Saxons, a sea of steel, faces like masks, arms full of strength.

"Hold the line!" Bedivere yelled. "There's no line anymore!" Cathan yelled back. "Just mud and bones!"

A horn blared from the other bank. Reinforcements. More enemies. Arthur knew they couldn't hold it. But he raised Excalibur, heavy and weary, and cried: "Once more! One more time for Camelot!"

The knights roared and fought on. But the Saxon tide pushed them back, step by step, into the water, into the mud. The river foamed red, carrying bodies away as if it were a maw that could not satiate itself.

Arthur saw it, knew it: Camlann was not just a battle. It was a grave. And they were all sinking deeper into it.

The river rumbled as if laughing. Blood stained the water, bodies floated like pieces of wood that no bank wanted. The rain began to fall, heavy, thick, mixing with the mud, making every sword heavier, every heart weary.

Gaheris screamed, a roar more animal than human. A spear struck him in the chest, ripping it free, breaking it in half, and hammering the spear into the throats of two men surrounding him. His armor hung in tatters, his face barely recognizable, but he fought on, striking with his bare fists as the sword slipped from his hands.

"Not yet!" he gasped. "Not until... I take every one of you... with me!" Then the blow came from behind. An axe, deep into his skull. Gaheris slumped to the ground, and the river took him, silently, as if it had been expecting him.

Cathan saw it and laughed, a rough, wild laugh. "Good, brother! I'll be right there!" He threw himself into the crowd, circling his axe, each lift a cut, each lowering a death. He sang as he did so, a song without melody, just roars and breath.

Three spears struck him simultaneously. One in the hip, one in the chest, one in the neck. He spat blood, spat it in the faces of his opponents, and dragged another to his death. Then he, too, fell, and his song faded into the mud.

Bedivere watched them die, and his face remained stony. "Two less," he murmured, as if it were merely a number. But his hand trembled as he raised his sword.

Arthur didn't hear it. He continued fighting, step by step. Excalibur sliced, vibrated, but the light was almost extinguished. Every blow felt like striking against fate itself.

Tristan was already lying in the mud, Brangaine was silent, Gaheris and Cathan had fallen. Only Bedivere stood by his side, cool, precise, a last vestige of order amidst the chaos.

The Saxons pushed them deeper into the river. The water rose up to their knees, cold and rushing. Arthur felt a tug on his legs, as if it wanted to take him away.

"Back!" he yelled. "Back to the shore!" But there was no turning back. Only mud, blood, and water.

Excalibur vibrated, weak, tired, like a heart about to fall silent. Arthur looked at the blade and knew: This wasn't just a battle. It was a judgment.

The battlefield had become a swamp of bodies. Knights, Saxons, horses—all lay on top of each other, a wall of flesh slowly swallowed by the river. The rain had turned into a gray curtain, the sky hung so low that it smothered the valley.

Only Arthur and Bedivere remained standing. Bedivere, precise as ever, his sword like a ruler, drawing lines on their bodies. He was breathing heavily but orderly, as if he himself were still calculating his own fate. Arthur beside him, Excalibur in his fist, heavy as the whole world.

The Saxons surrounded them, a circle of shields and spears that slowly tightened. One after another, they stepped forward, attacked, and fell. But there were too many. More and more. Ever closer.

Arthur looked up – and there he saw him.

Mordred.

He stood on the far bank, armored in black, his face half-hidden, his eyes glowing like coals in the rain. In his hand was a sword that didn't sing like Excalibur, but silent, dull, cold. He strode through the mud as if the land belonged to him, as if he had only waited until everyone else was tired.

"Father," he cried, and the word wasn't a greeting, but a blow. "Your dream ends here."

Arthur felt the double blow almost tearing his chest apart. Heart and breath, life and death, love and betrayal. All in one name: Mordred.

Bedivere took a step forward, standing between them. "I'm holding him," he said, coolly and firmly. "No," Arthur replied. "He's mine."

Bedivere looked at him, nodded, as if he knew this was inevitable. Then he turned back to the Saxons, who were tightening the circle. He fought like a tower, unyielding, a last vestige of order against chaos.

Arthur approached Mordred.

The rain poured down, heavy and cold. The river roared as if in celebration. Mordred raised his sword and smiled thinly.

"Camelot is dead," he said. "And you die with it."

Arthur raised Excalibur. It vibrated faintly, but it answered. "Perhaps," he said. "But I'll take you with me."

And so they stood there, father and son, king and traitor, dream and end – by the river Camlann, in the rain, in the blood.

The Saxons paused, watched. Even the river seemed to quiet down, as if it knew: This was the blow to which it all led.

The rain lashed, the river swelled, blood and water mingled into a single red torrent. Arthur and Mordred faced each other. All around, the Saxons held their breath, as if they were spectators of an ancient drama that no one dared to disturb. Bedivere still fought, alone against the crowd, but even the enemies gave him space, because everyone knew: the real battle was here.

Arthur raised Excalibur. It vibrated faintly, its brilliance merely a flicker. Mordred swung his sword, dark, heavy, without song.

They stormed forward.

The first clash was like thunder. Steel on steel, a sound that cut through marrow and bone. Arthur stumbled, caught himself, and slashed back. Mordred laughed, a short, cold laugh that hurt more than the blade.

"You built an empire," he gasped, "on dreams and lies. Now it falls, just as you fall." Arthur growled, slashing from above. "I built what I could. And you are what I did wrong."

Their swords clanged, sparking sparks that the rain immediately extinguished. Mordred thrust, striking Arthur's shoulder, drawing blood. Arthur roared, struck back, and tore the blade across Mordred's breastplate, a crack that opened with a crunch.

The ground beneath them was mud. They slipped, fell, and got up again. Mordred's sword ripped through the air, grazed Arthur's jaw, cutting flesh. Arthur staggered, the blood in his mouth salty and heavy. But he held on to Excalibur.

"You are my blood," he gasped. "No," Mordred snarled, "I am your shadow."

Arthur swung, Excalibur chanted once more, faintly but clearly. Mordred leaped forward, sword outstretched.

The moment was silent.

Arthur thrust, Excalibur penetrating Mordred's chest. In the same breath, Mordred's blade plunged deep into Arthur's stomach. Two screams, a single sound.

They stood wedged together for a moment, father and son, king and traitor. Then both collapsed, heavy as trees falling in the same storm.

Bedivere saw it, gasped, his sword bloody. Around him, the battle broke apart. The Saxons retreated as if they had understood: It was done. The king had fallen.

Arthur lay in the mud, the water around him red. Excalibur slipped from his hand, half in the river, half on the bank. Mordred beside him, motionless, his eyes open, without shine.

Arthur breathed heavily, every breath a war. He saw the sword, saw the river, saw the sky finally opening and revealing a star—the last one.

"Camelot..." he whispered. "It was... just a dream."

Then he closed his eyes.

The river took the rest. Bodies floated away, blood became current, and Camlann was silent.

Camelot had fallen.

The Death of the King

Camlann was silent. No battle cry, no horn, only the heavy breathing of a river that had seen too much. The rain had eased, but the willows still dripped, slowly, patiently, as if the trees too had learned to digest death in small portions. Bodies lay across the gravel banks like discarded suits of armor, and armor lay above the bodies like discarded bodies. The mud had become something thicker, sucking beneath boots and demanding that every step be kept.

Bedivere stumbled, caught himself, and stood up again. His sword hung crookedly in his fist, dulled by the day, dulled by the world. He wasn't looking for victory—there wasn't one—he was looking for a man with a scar on his jaw and a sword that had been more than steel. He was looking for the king.

"Arthur!" he called, first softly, then louder, then not at all, because the river transformed all names into the same sound. He knelt beside a body that had taken on the color of his own armor, turned it over, and let it sink again. Another. Another. The sky remained silent.

Then he saw a blade, half in the water, half in the reeds, as if hesitating. Excalibur. The edge ungainly, a subtle tremor, as if it didn't know whether it wanted to be a sword or a mirror. Beside it lay Arthur, his cloak heavy with mud, his breathing shallow, his skin that peculiar gray that all kings end up with.

"My king," said Bedivere, sounding as if he were speaking to a child who must not be woken. He knelt, gently lifted Arthur's head, and placed his own cloak beneath him. His face was torn open at the jaw—Mordred's blow—and his belly bore a deep gash that held his breath.

Arthur opened his eyes. There was still blue in them, but it had retreated, like water that no longer wants to reach the shore. "Bedivere," he whispered, "don't count."

Bedivere nodded, even though the numbers had long been running through his mind: How many knights. How many steps to the city. How many breaths until... He held onto the thought as if it were a blade better left in its sheath.

“The Saxons?” asked Arthur.

"Away," said Bedivere. "Not out of grace. Out of satiety."

A hint of laughter flitted across Arthur's mouth, caught in the pain. "Fed," he repeated. "Good. Let them choke." He coughed, blood foaming at his lips, thin, dark, tired. Bedivere wiped it away with the back of his hand and only noticed, as the blood cooled, that his glove seam had burst.

The river took a step back and then forward again, as if breathing with him. Excalibur lay at an angle, its point in the gravel, its hilt in the grass. Bedivere saw the sword, saw the man. A thought, as old as any legend, took hold: If I keep this thing, I'll keep something of him.

Arthur followed his gaze. "Later," he said, "we'll talk about loyalty."

"I'm not leaving," Bedivere replied. "Not leaving your side anymore."

"You'll have to," Arthur replied quietly. "Not now. But soon."

A breeze swept down, bringing the smell of wet iron and cold ash. Somewhere, metal clanged again—perhaps a buckle came loose, perhaps a helmet fell, perhaps a corpse decided to weigh less. Bedivere put his arm around Arthur's shoulders and lifted him slightly. The king drew in a sharp breath, as if someone were calling him in a direction he didn't want to go.

“Tell me,” murmured Arthur, “what’s outside.”

"The river. Night. And us," said Bedivere. "Of ours... I don't know. None are left standing. Perhaps some live among the reeds. Perhaps not."

Arthur nodded, as if this answer had confirmed everything he'd known for years. His fingers groped in the mud, finding Excalibur's hilt. He didn't hold it, he simply placed his hand on it, as one might stroke the forehead of an old dog.

"Do you remember," he said, "how it sang? When we were young. When it made us bigger than we were."

“Yes,” said Bedivere.

"Now it's making us smaller," whispered Arthur. "Just right."

They didn't speak for a while. Bedivere felt the trembling that ran through Arthur's body—not anger, not fear, just that deep, physical realization that things end, even those you've kept inside your whole life. The king closed his eyes, opened them again. In the pupil lay a shadow that became his own.

“Guinevere,” he said then, not as a question, not as an accusation, just as a stone falling into the water.

"In the city," Bedivere replied. "She's alive."

Arthur nodded. No second question. No third. Legends are sparing when they die. "And Lancelot?"

Bedivere remained silent. Then: "He was there. Not with us. But there."

A touch of warmth crossed the corners of Arthur's mouth—not a smile, more like that brief flicker of a fire shielded by a hand. "This meets," he murmured, "like a knife and its shadow."

Camlann pulled a flag from the mud—a scrap of linen that immediately sank again. An eel brushed against Arthur's boot, invisible, only a cool line. Bedivere pressed his cloak closer to the king's body.

"Listen," Arthur said suddenly, his voice firmer, as if an invisible scribe were taking the last sentence. "You will do what I tell you, and you will hate me for it. But you will do it."

Bedivere leaned closer.

"When I'm gone..." Arthur paused, waiting until the pain crept back into his bunk. "You carry the rest. No speeches. No golden lies. Only order where there are still scraps. Bring the women home. Bury the boys. Tell the people the king is dead—not tomorrow, not soon. Now. And if they ask what remains..."

He searched for a word, found none, and laughed hoarsely. "Tell them that if someone finds the barn, there'll be bread. And that stories will remain. That's enough for them. They've never had more."

Bedivere nodded. A yes that weighed like two years.

"And one more thing," said Arthur, turning his head until his gaze fully took in the hilt of Excalibur. "This... doesn't belong to us. It's only loaned to us. Give it back."

The sword twitched almost imperceptibly, as if it had understood. Bedivere saw the blade and felt another metal awaken within him—greed disguised as loyalty. Preserve it, something whispered. Preserve this at least. His hands grew heavy, as if the river had put lead gloves on him.

“Now?” he asked.

"Soon," said Arthur. "When the river breathes and the crows are silent. You'll lie twice. Then you'll do it right. I know you."

Bedivere pressed her lips together. "I'm not lying to you."

"Yes," Arthur smiled crookedly, "and that's a good thing. Otherwise you wouldn't be one of us."

For a while, all they heard was water. Bedivere noticed the king's breathing becoming shallower, but regular—as if sand were trickling through a glass that no one was turning over

anymore. The wind shifted, bringing the distant clang of a boat, or the memory of one. Bedivere raised his head. Nothing. Only fog, lying on the stream like a hand.

"Merlin," Arthur said then, and this time there was something in the name that could be called love, if you were old enough to know what that meant. "I hope he's asleep."

“He is… bound,” Bedivere answered cautiously.

"Of course," Arthur murmured. "All of us."

He closed his eyes, opened them again. "Help me up."

Bedivere hesitated. "You're bleeding."

"I'm dying," Arthur replied matter-of-factly, as if he were talking about the weather. "Help me do it sitting down."

Bedivere lifted it, carefully, as if the king were made of glass. Arthur sat down and looked at the river, red and black in one breath. Excalibur lay with its tip in front, as if pointing the way.

"Listen," Arthur said for the second time, and now his voice was so clear that the river wrinkled. "I've ridden as far as I could. The rest is on foot. Take me a little way. And then bring the sword home."

"Where?"

"To where it came from." Arthur's gaze searched the dark back of the water. "To the mouth that spits it out or swallows it."

The crows shifted as if changing seats in a theater. Bedivere stood up, picked up Excalibur, and the weight shot into his shoulder like a memory. He took two steps, stopped, and looked back. The king had closed his eyes again, but his brow was smooth. Not peace—just no more strife.

"I'll be right back," said Bedivere, startled by how commonplace that sounded. He walked to the shore, raised his sword, and felt the cold creeping down to his elbows. Throw it, said duty. Keep it, said everything else.

He stood until the river had taken one breath and one exhaled. Then he turned around. "It's done," he said, his voice too calm. "The river took it."

Arthur opened his eyes and looked at his hands as if they were no longer on him. "And what did he give you?"

Bedivere blinked. "Nothing."

"Then you weren't there," Arthur murmured, gently, almost tenderly in his severity. "The river never takes without giving."

Bedivere lowered his gaze. "Once again," he said.

Arthur nodded. "Once again."

The river fell silent. Night fell. And Bedivere knew: Only now did the task begin.

Bedivere stood on the shore again. Excalibur lay heavy in his hand, as if it had decided to be bone rather than steel. The hilt was cold, clinging to his fingers like a second will. He raised it, wanting to hurl it, but his arms wouldn't obey. He saw the blade in the gray morning light—it didn't seem like a sword, but like a memory that refuses to be forgotten.

"If I keep it," he murmured, "at least something will remain. When the empire falls, when the songs fall silent, then this will remain."

The river didn't answer. It flowed, indifferent, incessantly, as if it knew that everyone ultimately makes the same mistake: thinking they can hold on. Bedivere lowered the blade and returned to the king.

"It's done," he said. "The river has taken it."

Arthur was still lying upright, his back propped against Bedivere's cloak. His eyes were half-closed, but when he heard the words, he raised them slightly. "And?" he asked. "What did he do?"

"Nothing," said Bedivere. "No sound. No sign."

A faint smile crossed Arthur's face. "Then you lied."

Bedivere lowered his gaze. "My king—"

"No," Arthur interrupted, "not my king. Not now. Just a man who wants to return his tools." His voice was weak but clear. "You go back. Once more. And this time... throw it until it sings."

Bedivere walked. Slowly, as if he were carrying not just a sword, but an entire dream. Excalibur hung in his hand, gleaming dully in the gray light. The river lay before him, calm, like an animal waiting for prey.

“Take it,” murmured Bedivere, “or leave it to me.”

He swung, but again his arm fell. Another voice inside him spoke: Keep it. A sword like this will make you a master when all masters have fallen. With this sword, an empire can rise again.

Bedivere closed his eyes, heard his own blood rushing. He couldn't. He turned away, returned.

Arthur saw him, and this time Bedivere didn't even have to lower his gaze—the king already knew. "Once more," Arthur whispered. "You will try three times, like all that is true. Go."

Bedivere felt shame like iron in his stomach. He went for the third time. Excalibur lay in his hand like a snake that wouldn't let go. He raised it, felt the rain on his forehead, felt the river pull.

This time he took a deep breath, closed his eyes and threw.

The blade cut through the air, no scream, no gleam—just a whoosh. Then—a flash. A sound, clear, bright, so distant it was more memory than sound. From the river rose a hand, white, shimmering, surrounded by water. It caught the sword, held it high, so drops fell like crystals. For a brief breath, the world seemed to stand still. Then the hand sank again, and with it Excalibur, deep into the current, away.

Bedivere stood there, panting, his arms empty, his heart heavy. "It is done," he whispered this time. And he knew: it was true.

When he returned to the king, Arthur looked at him, and there was something like peace in his eyes. "Well," he murmured, "the kingdom isn't ours. It was only borrowed."

Bedivere knelt beside him. "And you, sir?"

Arthur laid his head back, breathing shallowly. "They're... taking me back, too."

The river murmured. The crows were silent. And Bedivere realized that it wouldn't be long now.

Arthur was still sitting on the bank, his back leaning against Bedivere's cloak. His breath was coming in gasps, as if each breath had to be drawn from a pit. The blood at his side had stained the fabric dark, and yet there was a gleam in his eyes that no longer had anything to do with life, but with something growing beyond it.

“It’s gone?” he asked.

"Yes," said Bedivere. "The river took it. With a hand, like light. It wasn't a dream."

Arthur nodded weakly. "Good. So be it. No human... may hold such a thing." He coughed, blood on his lips, but he smiled as he did so, a bitter, proud smile. "Not even me."

The silence around them was not empty, but heavy. The river murmured softly, the crows perched motionless in the branches. No enemy, no friend, only the world waiting.

“Tell me, Bedivere,” murmured Arthur, “what remains of Camelot?”

The knight fell silent. Words no longer made sense. But Arthur continued: "They will lie. Poets, priests, kings. They will sing songs that make us greater than we were. They will say we built an empire of gold, when we built it only of bread and blood."

“And you, sir?” Bedivere leaned closer.

"Me?" Arthur coughed again, closing his eyes briefly. "They'll say I was just. But you know, Bedivere... I was just tired. I wanted order, and order always costs blood. That's not heroism. That's... craftsmanship."

Bedivere placed her hand on his shoulder. "You were more."

Arthur smiled wearily. "Perhaps. But more is never enough. Not against greed. Not against hunger. Not against love." His eyes opened, looking far across the river. "Guinevere..." He spoke the name softly, without bitterness. "I forgive her. She loved as she could. And I loved as I must. That's enough."

Then he closed his eyes and whispered another name: "Lancelot." A hint of anger, but also warmth, as if betrayal and brotherhood were the same when one looks back as one dies.

The wind rose, cold from the north, brushing through Arthur's hair. He coughed one last time, hard and wheezing. "Listen, Bedivere," he said, and his voice suddenly had strength again, as if it were no longer quite of this world. "Don't tell them I've fallen. Tell them I'm gone. Gone, not dead. They need stories, not graves."

Bedivere nodded, tears on his face that he couldn't wipe away.

"And if they ask if I'll come back..." Arthur opened his eyes again, now brighter than they had ever been. "Say: maybe."

Then his head sank back, his breathing became shallow, deeper, audible in the pauses. Bedivere held him tight, felt the trembling diminish. The river rushed as if taking over his breathing.

And finally there was only silence.

The king was dead.

Bedivere held the lifeless body as the rain grew finer, almost disintegrating into dust. The king weighed barely anything anymore—as if death were a thief, taking the weight first and leaving the rest behind.

"Arthur," Bedivere whispered, but there was no answer. Only the river, softly lapping against the stones, as if speaking a language only the dead could understand.

He carefully laid the king down, stood up, and stared across the field. Bodies in the mud, helmets without heads, shields riddled with broken pieces—Camlann was no longer a battlefield, but a graveyard that didn't yet know its name.

Bedivere knelt again and took Arthur's hand, which had gone cold. "You wanted me to say: maybe," he murmured. "Maybe you'll return. Maybe the realm will need you. Maybe a dream will be enough." His voice broke. "But I... I need you now."

Then it came. A sound from the river, quieter than the water itself. A rushing sound, as if something heavy were pushing against the current. Bedivere raised her head. Mist crept up from the water, thicker, whiter, enclosing the banks like a veil.

A boat glided through the clouds, silently, as if cutting not through the water, but through a dream. It was black, but not gloomy—black as velvet, not ashes. In it stood women, three, perhaps four, their faces veiled, their dresses flowing like smoke. Their hands rested clasped, as if holding something invisible.

The boat stopped at the shore, no one rowing. One of the women raised her arm and pointed at Arthur.

Bedivere stepped back, his heart pounding. "Who are you?" he cried. But no voice returned, only the lapping of a wave kissing the shore.

The women didn't get out. They waited.

Bedivere understood. Hesitantly, he lifted Arthur, heavy yet light, and carried him to the water's edge. His boots sank deep into the mud, but the boat slid closer, almost lifting the body from his arms.

The women spread their hands, and the king seemed to become lighter, as if they were lifting him with invisible force. They laid him on the bow, cradling him as if he hadn't fallen, but merely fallen asleep.

Bedivere stopped, the water up to his knees. "Where are you taking him?" he cried desperately.

Then one of the women lifted her veil a little. Her face was pale, her eyes like stars under water. "There where no crown weighs down," she said softly, "and no sword sings." Then she lowered the veil again.

The boat pushed off, without a stroke of the oars, without wind. It glided out into the fog, silently, inexorably.

Bedivere waded back to the shore, stood there, stared, until the boat disappeared, until there was only fog, until there was only river.

He knelt down and pounded his fist into the mud. "Arthur," he whispered. "Perhaps."

The river fell silent. The women in black were gone. And the legend began.

Bedivere stood for a long time on the bank, the water cool against his legs, his gaze fixed on the mist that had swallowed Arthur. It was as if the river had opened a door and closed it again, leaving him on the wrong side.

He staggered back onto the field. Every step sucked him deeper into the mud, as if the dead wanted to keep him with them. He saw faces in the mud—knights, enemies, friends—all the same. Gaheris, half submerged, his face smashed. Cathan, axe still in hand, eyes fixed on the sky. Tristan, his lips still open, as if still murmuring his name. Brangaine, clutching his bow, even though it had long since broken.

Bedivere passed them, whispering to each one, "I see you." It wasn't a prayer, not a promise—just a testimony. Someone had to remember, or everything would have been in vain.

The silence of the battlefield was not empty, but full. Full of screams still hanging in the air, full of unfinished breaths. The rain had turned the earth into a single wound, and the river carried the blood further, out into a sea that gave nothing back.

Bedivere knew: He was the last. No song, no trumpet, no crown. Just him, his breath, his feet dragging through the mud.

In the distance, Camelot rose, barely visible, a gray shadow against the sky. No fanfares, no banners, just a silhouette that looked like a tombstone.

Bedivere stopped, leaning on his sword. "He's gone," he whispered, as if speaking to the walls. "Not dead. Just gone."

The words sounded hollow, but they echoed within him, louder than drums. He had promised Arthur, and he would keep it. He would lie if necessary. Lies so that hope would remain.

He looked back at the river once more. No boat, no mist, just water flowing on. But Bedivere knew: there, behind the veils, was Arthur now. Not a king, not a warrior—something else that no one could name.

Bedivere wiped the blood from his face and stood up. His legs trembled, but he walked. Someone had to return. Someone had to speak. Someone had to bear the burden of history.

And so he walked, alone, across the field of Camlann, the last knight, the last witness.

It took Bedivere days to reach Camelot. His horse was dead, his armor shattered, so he walked, carrying a stick that had once been a spear. The path was lined with ruins, burnt huts, and fields smelling of ash. He didn't speak on the way, only heard the crows circling above.

When he saw the walls of Camelot, there was no cheering, no horn blowing, no gate opening quickly. The guards stared at him silently, one finally asking, "Where are the others?"

Bedivere remained silent. He allowed himself to be escorted into the gate, step by step, his body heavy, his eyes empty. The news hung in the air before he spoke a word.

Guinevere stood in the throne room, pale, her veil drawn over her face. There were no knights left, only servants, maids, and a few old women. Bedivere entered, swaying, and finally knelt, her head bowed.

“Where is the king?” she asked.

Bedivere raised his head and looked at her, the weight of Camlann in his eyes. But he remembered Arthur's final plea. "The king," he said, "is gone."

A murmur went through the hall. Guinevere pressed the veil to her lips. "Dead?" she whispered.

Bedivere shook his head. "Not dead. Gone. Put on a ship, out on the river, into mists unknown to man. He will return when the realm needs him."

It was a lie, and yet it was truer than any other answer. You could see something stirring in people's faces—not cheering, not laughter, but a glow, a spark. They clung to it because everything else was dust.

“Perhaps,” murmured Bedivere, “perhaps he’ll come back.”

Thus began the legend. Not with trumpets, not with triumph, but with an exhausted knight who spoke a lie greater than the truth. Camelot had fallen, Arthur was dead—but he lived on in the stories.

And so an empire fell, but a myth began.

The night over Camelot was silent. No feast, no song, no triumph. Only the sounds of walls creaking in the wind and the distant cry of wolves. Bedivere stood alone on the highest battlement, his cloak around his shoulders, his sword at his side—not Excalibur, just an ordinary piece of steel.

He looked out. Below him lay the roofs of the city, the people huddled together, exhausted, broken—and yet not entirely lost. For in their eyes, in the whispers he had heard during the day, there lay something that, despite all the lies, was real: hope.

"He's not dead," they said. "He's gone. He'll return."

Bedivere closed his eyes. He knew it was a story he himself had created, from Arthur's last wish, from a lie greater than truth. But he also knew: stories last longer than swords, longer than walls, longer than kings.

He thought of the fallen. Gaheris, who ended like a storm. Cathan, laughing in death. Brangaine, who hadn't let go of her bow. Tristan, who murmured his name until the very end. All those who were now part of a ground that would never be untouched again.

And Arthur—the king, the man, the brother, who had borne betrayal and love equally. Bedivere remembered his last words, the "perhaps." That small word was now greater than any realm.

The stars emerged, timidly, as if afraid to be seen above this place. One flickered brighter, reflected in the river, which glowed like silver in the distance. Bedivere followed it with his eyes, and for a moment it was as if he saw the prow of a boat, far away, in the mist.

He took a deep breath. "Maybe," he whispered.

Then he turned away. The last knight, the last witness, the last person who knew how it had truly been. He walked down the steps, into the darkness of Camelot, ready to bear the story.

Not the death of the king – but the dream that should remain.

And so not only a life ended, but a myth began.

Merlin in Chains

He woke by the smell. Damp stone, old ash, cold earth—the kind of perfume known only in places where time doesn't pass, but stagnates. A drop fell from the ceiling, hit the floor, and waited until the next one came. The drops counted what no clock wanted to count.

Merlin moved his fingers. Nothing. Then his hand. Nothing too. It was as if his hands were stuck in the night, and the night was chained. He raised his head, slowly, because every movement creaked, as if there were sand in his bones.

The cave was as narrow as a coffin and as high as a shaft. Walls covered with runes, ancient, slender, carved into the stone with a patience that only brings forth guilt. The symbols didn't glow, but they were light—the dull, gray glow of things that don't ask whether you understand them. Above him, a crack that wasn't sky, only paler darkness. Outside, it must be raining, because the drops came more regularly, more determinedly.

He breathed. The air tasted of iron. Not blood—a memory of blood. He smiled crookedly. "How fitting," he murmured, his voice that of a man who had talked to stones for too long.

The chains – at first he thought they were iron shackles, but when he lowered his gaze, he saw they were threads. Thin lines, lighter than skin, darker than smoke. They didn't go around his wrists, they went into them. Wherever they entered, there was a tingling sensation, warm, cold, all at once. Every fiber vibrated a touch – like strings plucked by someone who knows no music, yet plays it.

He tested them, pulling without force, just with will. The threads buzzed, and in the buzzing lay a name. Not his. Nimue.

"Of course," he said. "Who else would bind me if not those I asked to release me?"

The cave didn't answer. Caves are good confidants: they never betray anyone and rarely comfort.

He laid the back of his head against the rock. A pain shot through his neck, honest pain, without mystery. Good. He needed something that had no meaning. Just pain.

Then came the trembling—not within him, but through him. From outside, like distant hooves on wintry earth. A wave of cold, then warmth, brushing his chest. He knew this feeling. It was the way the world died. Not with a bang. With a pulse.

"Camlann," he said, and the word wasn't a question, but a switch. The runes twitched almost imperceptibly. In the distance—not with eyes, with something ancient behind the eyes—he saw the river, black, thick, heavy. He saw steel cutting without song, and men falling not because they wanted to, but because the weight crushed their knees. He saw Excalibur, vibrating like an ancient heart. He saw Arthur.

It wasn't a face, not even an outline, but rather a depression in the fabric of the world, the kind that only comes from walking the same path too often. The king was a hole through which the light passed. And the hole grew larger.

Merlin closed his eyes. A star flared briefly behind his eyelids—not outside, but inside—and he knew that the drop from just now hadn't been rain, but time.

"I'm not here," he said into the cave. "It's happening, and I'm not here."

The threads in his wrists tightened like breaths. A voice that needed no air came through them. No words, just sound—the timbre of water that wants to know.

"He's falling," Merlin replied. "Yes. It's time."

The voice hummed. Perhaps agreement. Perhaps just the sound of a net feeling its weight.

He thought of shoulders he'd pressed into mud so they'd learn to stand up. Of nights he'd honed like knives so a boy would become king. Of lies he called "signs" so they'd stung less. "I gave you too much," he said to an image that never came—Arthur's face rarely came when called. "And then I took you when it was time to carry yourself."

The cave crept closer. Or his breath crept shorter.

"If I were to step out now," he said to the crack above him, "I wouldn't change anything. I know that. I've always known it. I'm just the man who lays the stones. The path still goes where it must."

The drop fell. And another. The rhythm was no longer right. Irregular—as if the rain outside had decided that order was arrogant.

"Nimue," he said, and this time he put warmth into the name that shouldn't be called forgiveness. "You bound me, yes. But who showed you the knot?"

The threads grew warm, gentle. A memory slid toward him, soft as an evening: hair smelling of the river, a forehead pressing against his, the softness of lips that stole words. "Love and chains," he murmured. "Twins. I taught you both. You gave me both."

He laughed—not a pleasant laugh, more like a rusty hinged door. "And I accepted it. Call me stupid, call me man—is there a difference?"

Again, that distant trembling. A heaviness that crept into his arms, as if he were carrying an old friend who had slept too long. He saw—no, he knew, without seeing—how steel pierced his stomach, how another blade pierced his chest. Two screams, one sound. Father. Son. King. Shadow.

Merlin rested his forehead against the stone. Coldly. Honestly. "It is done," he whispered, and the word smacked too much of a priest to be pleasant. "Of course it is done. It has been done since the first lie I called 'Ancestors.'"

He waited for tears. They didn't come. Chains save water.

"If I were free," he asked the rock, "what would I do?" He waited for the old, self-satisfied answer (bend the world), but it didn't come. Instead, there was only a sentence, as simple as bread: "I would sit next to him."

The runes seemed darker for a heartbeat, then returned to their former glory. No consolation. Only acknowledgment.

He twisted his wrists until the threads whirred, vibrating like midges in summer. "Not today," he said to the magic that wasn't his, yet made of his voice. "Not tomorrow. But I'll get out. Chains are not an end, only a delay with ambition."

The cave breathed in agreement, or he imagined it. At his age, imagination is a legitimate tool.

He let his head sink. Sleep didn't come—sleep has principles—but something resembling himself settled over him. In it, he heard voices he knew: Gaheris's raw laughter, Brangaine's bow, Tristan's name like a stone in the stream. And beneath it, much deeper, the silence of a sword that no longer sings, for it has returned to where songs begin.

"Bedivere," he murmured, his mouth tasting of wet soot. "Tell them a good lie."

The chains became lighter. Not weaker—lighter. As if they recognized that a man in chains is still a man and not a piece of furniture.

Merlin opened his eyes. He counted the drops. One. Two. A third, who took his time. "Good," he said. "You count. I remember."

He took a deep breath, until his ribs creaked. "Arthur," he said into the cave, "you go. I'm staying. For now. But don't worry: history is patient. It waits for old men who come too late."

The drop fell. And between the second and the third, there was enough space to grasp the end and not break. He rested his chin on the stone again, closed his eyes, heard the river he couldn't see, and the kingdom he was no longer allowed to hold.

"Camlann," he whispered, "was always a word. Now it's quiet. That's right."

The runes hummed, the threads were at rest, and in the humming there was no comfort. Only truth. Some nights are honest. This was one of them.

The night in the cave crawled over his skin like an animal. Merlin counted the drops until he forgot how to count. The chains sang softly, each hum a memory he hadn't summoned.

First, it was Arthur's laughter, young and bright, before it grew heavy. Then a fight by the river, a sword slipping from the stone, and the look of the boy who didn't understand that he would never be free again. Merlin squeezed his eyes shut. "Stop," he hissed, "he's dead. Let him sleep."

But the chains showed no mercy. They pulled back the image, more clearly: Arthur in the mud, Mordred's blade embedded in him, Excalibur heavy in his hand. Merlin gasped, as if he himself felt the wound.

"I should have been there," he murmured. "I should have—" He broke off. He knew it was a lie. He couldn't have changed anything. Fate was written as thickly on this world as runes on stone. But the knowledge didn't make it easier, only more bitter.

A voice rose from the threads. Soft, flowing, sweet like water that carries poison. Nimue.

"You would have been there if you had been free," she whispered, "and it wouldn't have changed anything. That's why I bound you. Not out of hate. Out of love. Because I knew you would ruin everything if you had the choice."

Merlin laughed hoarsely, the sound of a throat that's seen smoke for too long. "Love," he repeated. "That's what they call love: chaining a man to a rock while his world burns. You're crueler than I ever was."

"I did what you taught me," the voice replied, soft, almost sad. "Binding. Shaping. Forcing things where they must be. Isn't that your craft?"

Merlin remained silent. His hands twitched, the threads tightened, and pain burned like small fires.

The vision changed. Now he saw Guinevere, alone, her face hidden in the veil, while Bedivere spoke: "The king is gone." Merlin cursed softly. "Gone... Bedivere, you faithful dog. You lie well."

The voice in the threads chuckled gently. "Just as he commanded. Your lie lives on, even if you're in chains."

"Mine?" Merlin growled. "No. Arthur's. I gave him words, he made them into chains. Now he even holds me under his spell, from the grave."

He turned his head, feeling the cold stone against his cheek. "Tell me, Nimue," he murmured. "Why still? Why do you hold me? Arthur is gone. Camelot is dust. What do you still fear?"

The threads trembled. A sound that was half like silence, half like confession. "I fear you," the voice said. "Even in your weakness. Even at your age. You are a man who moves the world without even knowing how. Setting you free would be like giving a storm a road."

Merlin laughed dryly. "And what do you have now? A storm in a bottle. Congratulations."

But as he said this, he felt the words rebound within him. He truly was a storm in a bottle. All his power, his wisdom, his knowledge – locked away, with nowhere to go. He felt it beneath his skin, like fire that couldn't breathe.

"Perhaps," he thought, "this is the punishment. Not dying. Dying is easy. But knowing that you're alive when you're no longer allowed to hold on to anything."

He lowered his head and closed his eyes. The drop fell. The chains hummed. And somewhere far away, a child laughed who should never have grown up—and became a king.

The drops stopped for a moment. The cave held its breath. Then another sound settled over the rocks—soft, like a piece of silk falling on stone.

Merlin opened his eyes. She stood there. Not like a body, more like a shadow the fire had forgotten to cast. Nimue. Her face was half light, half dark, and the two merged so that he didn't know where the boundaries lay.

"You're finally here," he murmured. "I thought I'd have to keep talking to the stones."

She tilted her head. "The stones listen to you. More than I ever did."

He laughed, a dry cough. "That's true. You won't betray me either."

She stepped closer—or only pretended to. The chains hummed louder, as if they sensed their mistress. Merlin saw the threads extending from his wrists, how they trembled as her gaze passed over them.

"Why, Nimue?" he asked. "He is gone. The realm is dust. Your fear is fulfilled, your work is done. Why do you still bind me?"

Her voice was quiet, almost brittle. "Because you always come back. Because you never stop. Even when your body dies, your voice finds a new ear, your dream a new vessel. I didn't hold you for Arthur. I held you for all who come after him."

Merlin closed his eyes and shook his head. "You listened to me when I was young. But you didn't understand. I never wanted forever. I just wanted... enough this time."

She knelt beside him, and for a moment, she was once again the woman with hair like water who once kissed him, gently, greedily, knowingly. "You wanted more than enough," she whispered. "You wanted everything. And everything always gets burned."

He grimaced. "Perhaps. But you also took, Nimue. More than I ever gave."

She smiled thinly. "Yes. Because I could."

A silence. Only the river in the distance roared as it carried away Camlann's blood.

“Do you still love me?” he asked.

She raised her hand, almost touching his forehead, then pulled it back. "It's not important."

"Yes," he growled. "Because love is the strongest bond. Stronger than these chains. If you still love me, then you're holding yourself captive."

Her eyes flashed, like water stealing the sun. "Then I'm in chains too," she said. "But mine are invisible."

Merlin laughed hoarsely. "Then we've both lost. You in the shadow, me in the stone. And outside, the world is burning."

"No," she objected. "Outside, a story begins. Without you. Without Arthur. Without Camelot. One that isn't about kings."

Merlin closed his eyes, feeling the threads burn. "And yet," he murmured, "they'll repeat me. Because no one wants to tell a story without a wizard."

Nimue was silent. A drop fell, this time louder, heavier, as if the cave itself wanted to have the last word.

The chains tightened, taut like bowstrings. Merlin gasped as if his bones themselves were being stretched into strings. Before his eyes, the darkness shattered, not outward, but inward.

There was the river again. Camlann. Red, thick, overflowing with bodies. He saw Gaheris, axe in his head, teeth still bared. Brangaine, with the broken bow, fingers clenched as if she

were holding it for eternity. Tristan, lips open, his own name on his tongue. And Arthur—on his knees, Excalibur heavy in his hand, Mordred's blade in his chest. Two screams, one sound.

Merlin screamed, trying to look away. The chains yanked his head back. "No!" he roared. "I already know that, I don't need that again!"

Nimue's voice came, sweet and cold: "But you have to see it. Again and again. Until you understand that it was inevitable."

"Inevitable?" Merlin spat the word out. "Nothing is inevitable! I've seen paths, a hundred paths, that ended differently!"

"And they all led here," she whispered. "You steer, you push, you pull—and in the end, everything falls. Not because you're too weak, but because you were too strong. Arthur was never free. He was your work. And work breaks."

Merlin breathed heavily, the threads burning hot. Images flooded him. Arthur's birth, which he had forced. The throne he had brought him. The sword in the stone, the spell that made it shine. Every prophecy, every sign, every ruse—everything was him.

"Damn it," he muttered, "you're right. I made him. But I also loved him. Do you know what that's like? Creating a child and knowing it will outlive you, only to bury you?"

Nimue's voice trembled. "Yes."

Merlin opened his eyes wide and looked at her—half light, half shadow. For a moment, she was neither a sorceress nor a traitor, just a woman who also knew what love does to you.

"Then release me," he said. "Release me, if you understand."

"No," she answered quietly. "Because love not only holds, it also binds. And sometimes it saves by destroying."

The chains vibrated, hot, cold, then still again. The visions faded, leaving only an echo—Arthur's last breath, Bedivere's lie, the barge in the fog.

Merlin sank back, drenched in sweat, his forehead pressed against the stone. "Guilt," he whispered. "Always guilt. Perhaps this is the true chain."

Nimue remained silent. But the runes on the wall glowed faintly, as if confirming his words.

The images faded, but they left an aftertaste like iron in his mouth. Merlin panted, sweat ran in rivulets down his face, and the chains felt heavier, as if each vision had taken on weight and settled on his arms.

"Guilt," he murmured. "Always guilt. I formed it like bread, I distributed it like wine, I ate it until I was full... and still I feel sick."

The cave didn't answer. Only the dripping, which had started again—irregularly, as if the stone had forgotten how rhythm works. Merlin began to count, every time water fell. One.

Two. Three. Then none came. Then it did. Soon he was speaking the numbers aloud. "Four. Five. Six."

The runes on the wall shimmered in time, as if repeating his voice.

"Ah," Merlin laughed hoarsely. "You're talking to me. You just don't want to admit you're listening. Just like humans."

He continued speaking, sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly. He told the stones stories they had long known: how Arthur stood in the mist, how the Druids tested him, how Camelot grew. He cursed the runes, calling them arrogant scribbles, and in the same breath thanked them for holding him, because he didn't know what he would do without them.

The voices in his head—whether Nimue's, or his own—mingled with the drop and the runes. Everything sounded the same. Everything was one. Merlin felt the boundary between him and the cave blur.

"Perhaps," he whispered, "I am already stone. Perhaps I am merely an echo haunting these rocks. Perhaps I was never more than that."

But in the silence following this sentence, something strange happened. No sound, no light—just a feeling. A breath that wasn't his, a touch of warmth in the cold.

Hope.

So small it almost hurt. So weak it was ridiculous. But it was there.

Merlin closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall. "Perhaps," he said, "that's the trick. Not to be free, not to be strong, not to be immortal. But simply to wait. Longer than all of them."

A drop fell, this time soft, almost friendly.

Merlin laughed, quietly, brittlely. "Good. Then I'll wait."

The runes had fallen silent. The drop paused, as if it had decided that pauses were more important than rhythm. Merlin drifted between waking and sleeping, his head leaning heavily against the stone.

There she came again. Nimue. Not as a flickering voice in the chains, not as a shadow, but more clearly. Her outline was sharper, her eyes were not just water and light, but eyes—gray, tired, almost human.

Merlin raised his head as far as his bonds allowed. "You again," he murmured. "I thought you'd tortured me enough."

"Perhaps," she said. Her voice wasn't sweet, not mocking, but brittle, as if she herself could barely carry the words. "But perhaps this is tormenting for me, too."

He blinked. "That almost sounds like... regret."

She knelt beside him, so close that he could smell the scent of her hair—no longer of river, but of dust and time. "I don't know if it's regret," she said. "I only know that I can't leave without seeing you. You're in here, and yet... I feel you everywhere. You are my chain as much as I am yours."

Merlin laughed, brittlely, with a cough. "That's the beauty of love: It's the only prison you enter voluntarily, and by the time you realize it, it's too late."

She placed her hand on his cheek. For the first time, she touched him, and the chains didn't hum; they were silent. Her gaze was soft, and in it he saw not the sorceress, not the apprentice, not the traitor—only a woman tired of being held.

“If I let you go now,” she whispered, “what will become of the world?”

"The same as always," Merlin replied. "She will sink, rise, sing, lie, die. With or without me. With or without you."

"But Arthur—"

"Arthur is gone," he interrupted. "And yet he remains. Just like us. The world loves to collect ghosts."

For a moment, the air hung between them, heavy, close. Merlin had almost forgotten that his hands were bound, so clearly did he feel it burning into his skin again—not as a spell, but as a memory of warmth.

“You should never have loved me,” she whispered.

He smiled wearily. "But you should never have tied me up either. And yet we did both. Maybe that was the magic."

She pulled her hand back. Her eyes were wet, or perhaps the glow of the runes deceived him. "I can't let you go."

"I know," he said. "And yet you keep coming back."

She stood up, turned, the shadow of her figure flickering. "One day, Merlin," she said, "your chains will look different. Perhaps then they won't be chains anymore. But today... I can't change that."

He nodded, letting his head sink back. "Then go. Let me talk to the stones. They're more honest company."

Nimue lingered for a breath longer, as if she were about to say something she would never say. Then she vanished, like smoke in the wind.

Merlin closed his eyes. His face still burned from her touch, his hands ached from the chains. "You are my chain," he murmured. "And I am yours."

The drop fell again. The cave took it back. And Merlin waited—as he always had.

The darkness closed again after Nimue's figure disappeared. Only the dripping remained, indifferent, patient, as if nothing had happened. Merlin breathed heavily, the pain of the chains burning in his joints, but the spot on his cheek where her hand had touched him still glowed—like a brand that no runes could erase.

He lowered his head, letting his forehead strike the rock. Not hard, just enough for the stone to remind him he still had a body. "So this is how it ends," he murmured. "Not in glory, not in fire, not in song. But in the drippings of a cavern. A king dead, a queen broken, a realm sunken—and a wizard counting his own chains."

The runes on the walls didn't respond. They shimmered dully, evenly, as if they knew: words are only dust, but shackles are stone.

But then he felt something. Not in his wrists, not in his bones—deeper. A whisper that wasn't Nimue's and didn't come from the rock. A breath, barely audible, but older than any prophecy.

You will wait.

Merlin closed his eyes. Yes, this was it. His punishment wasn't to die here. His punishment was to stay. To outlast. While everyone else left—Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, even Nimue eventually—he would sit here, bound, the last one who still knew what it had been like.

And someday, when the world was tired enough, when people needed stories again, someone would come, random, foolish, curious, and touch the runes. Then the chains would break.

And Merlin would rise again.

He laughed softly, a dry, rusty laugh. "That's the joke, isn't it? I'm not a king. I'm not a hero. I'm just the man you can't get rid of."

The drops fell. One. Two. Three. He stopped counting them and began to accompany them.

"Good," he said. "Then I'll wait. A year. A century. An eternity. What is time to one who has betrayed it?"

He laid his head back, his eyes closed, his smile tired but genuine. "Arthur," he whispered. "Sleep. I'll stay. And when they call you—maybe then I'll be free. Maybe."

The chains hummed, this time quietly, almost as if in agreement.

And so Merlin remained. In stone, under a spell, in love and guilt. Not dead. Not free. But waiting.

The Path of Shadows

It began with the drop stopping falling. Merlin lay there, his head leaning against the stone, his eyes half-closed – and suddenly there was no more movement. Not a drop, not a humming of the runes, not a breath. The cave stopped like a heart refusing to beat again.

Then there was a crack. No sound, no light—more of a pulling sensation, deep inside, as if someone were pulling his soul from his bones, not roughly, but carefully, like pulling a thread from old fabric. He wanted to scream, but no sound came. And before he knew it, he was no longer sitting in the cave.

He stood. On a path.

The path wasn't ground, but a line in the void. Fog lay all around, thick, heavy, tinged with whispers. There was darkness to the left, darkness to the right, and the path itself was barely wider than a gravestone. Every step felt like treading on memories.

"Ah," he murmured, "so these are the shadows." His voice didn't echo; it simply dissolved, as if the fog were hungry for words.

He left. The chains were gone—not vanished, but invisible, somewhere deep in his skin. He didn't feel them, but he knew they were still there. He stretched out his hands, and the fog didn't leave. It wasn't cold, it wasn't warm, it was simply there.

After a while—seconds, hours, he couldn't tell—figures appeared in the fog. Shadows, half-formed, half-forgotten. Some wore helmets, others carried swords, still others had faces consisting only of eyes.

Merlin stopped. One of the shadows stepped forward: Brangaine. The bow in her hand, but the arrow was made of light, not wood. Her lips moved, but no sound came. Only her gaze—accusation, tenderness, farewell all in one.

"I know," Merlin murmured. "I know you wanted more. A life that doesn't end in mud. But I was too busy supporting the crown." He held out his hand, but it crumbled into the mist.

Behind her came Tristan. He murmured his name as always, but this time Merlin heard it clearly, as clear as bells: "Tristan." Just the one word. Then he disappeared.

Merlin continued walking. The shadows crowded closer together. Gaheris, laughing, with an axe in his skull. Cathan, covered in blood, still singing. They all passed him, brushed past him, leaving a trail of shadows behind.

"You are echoes," he murmured. "No longer yourselves. But you still burn."

Then he stopped. Before him, in the middle of the path, stood Arthur. Not young, not old, but all his faces at once. The boy with the wide eyes, the king in armor, the man in the mud with Excalibur in his fist.

Merlin's breath caught. "Arthur..."

But the shadow didn't speak. He simply raised his hand and pointed down the path, to where the trail turned into darkness.

"I should go on?" asked Merlin. "And you? Aren't you coming with us?"

Arthur shook his head. Then he detached himself, piece by piece, until only his outline remained, and disappeared into the fog.

Merlin sank to his knees, resting his forehead against the path. "You're gone," he whispered. "And I... I go on. On and on. Because I mustn't die."

The path vibrated beneath him as if he had spoken the truth the Way wanted to hear. He stood up, heavily but resolutely, and walked deeper into the fog, into what waited beyond death.

The fog thickened the further Merlin walked. At first it was just a veil, then a weight on his shoulders. Every breath tasted of ash, of rain, of things that should never have happened.

The path changed. It was no longer smooth, but broken, full of cracks from which voices emerged. Merlin leaned over one of the openings and saw faces within—grimaces of men, women, children, all screaming something. Some screamed for justice, some for vengeance, some simply for a name.

"These are the ones I've abandoned," he murmured. "Not the heroes, not the kings—the others. The ones I never wanted to see."

The cracks closed as he moved on, but the sound remained in his bones.

Suddenly, the landscape changed. The path led into a forest, but the trees were carved from shadows, their branches like fingers reaching out to touch him. Not a leaf moved, not a bird sang. Only the crunch of his footsteps.

"Ah," said Merlin bitterly, "the forests of Brocéliande, as I saw them in nightmares." He remembered songs, rituals, nights when he spoke to the stars while the trees listened. But here they didn't hear—they peered.

A figure appeared between the trunks. Morgana. Her face was half light, half darkness. She approached, her dress not flapping in the wind because there was no wind.

"Brother," she breathed, "you bound him to the crown. And me? I only bound him to lust. We are more alike than you think."

Merlin growled, feeling the chains begin to burn invisibly on his arms. "No. You were the temptation. I was the shackle. It's not the same."

Morgana smiled, turned, and vanished like smoke. The path remained.

He continued walking. The forest gave way to a plain of black water. Mirrors floated in it, dozens, hundreds. Each mirror showed him—young, old, smiling, crying, domineering, broken.

Merlin stopped, seeing himself in a hundred forms. "So this is the test," he murmured. "Not Arthur. Not the others. Me."

A mirror cracked, shattered, the glass shattered, and inside he saw an old man with a blank expression, chained in a cave. "That's you," said the mirror voice. "Not the sorcerer. Just the prisoner."

Merlin raised his hand, trying to smash the image – but then the mirror shattered by itself, and the path beneath it became visible.

He breathed heavily and continued walking. Every step felt like a judgment. The fog grew darker, thicker, until he barely knew whether he was moving forward or just going in circles.

"This isn't a punishment," he murmured finally. "It's a test. And tests... have an end."

But the path was silent.

The fog suddenly lifted, and the path led into an open space that seemed like a square—circular, empty, surrounded by nothing but darkness. No tree, no mirror, no scream. Only silence.

Merlin stopped. He sensed immediately: He wasn't alone.

A figure emerged from the darkness. Tall, stooped, staff in hand, face lined with furrows. His beard was gray, his eyes tired. His skin was parchment-thin, his shoulders heavy. He looked like a man who had waited too long.

Merlin didn't need a name. He knew. That was him.

"There you go," he murmured. "The end comes to me."

The figure spoke. The voice was his own, but deeper, more ragged, as if from a throat that knew only poison. "You're a fool," said the old man. "You thought you were a teacher. You were just a player. And the children you guided died at your beck and call."

Merlin clenched his fists. "I didn't force them. I just showed them doors."

"No," growled the old man. "You broke them. Arthur was your greatest work, and you broke him because you never let him go. You wanted him to be king, but not human."

Merlin took a step closer, feeling the ground vibrate. "And what are you? My judge?"

The old man laughed dryly. "No. I am your remnant. I am what remains when the stories fall silent. I am the Merlin no one sings about in songs: the wizard who lies in chains while his king dies. The man who knew everything—and could prevent nothing."

"You are bitterness," Merlin hissed. "Nothing more."

"And you're a lie," replied the old man. "Nothing more."

The two stared at each other. Two faces of the same man—one who always wanted to go further, the other who had long since given up.

"Then fight," said Merlin. "Show me if you are more than a shadow."

The old man raised his staff, and the ground shook. Flames shot out of nowhere, and the mist turned into hands that reached out, grabbed, and pulled.

Merlin screamed, threw up his arms, and for the first time in a long time, magic flared within him—raw, dark, painful. His hands burst, the flames extinguished. But the old man still stood there, unmoving.

"You can't kill me," he said. "Because you are me."

Merlin panted, sweat on his forehead. "Then... I'll carry you."

And he stepped forward and hugged the old man.

For a moment there was nothing but pressure, pain, heat. Then the figure broke, dissolved, and drew back into him like smoke into a lung.

Merlin stood alone, the square empty, the fog calm again. But something burned within him now. Sharper, heavier.

"Good," he whispered. "Then you'll come with me. Until the end."

The path glowed faintly, as if confirming that the test had been passed.

Merlin continued on. The path was narrower now, fragile, as if it would break at any moment. But he felt that he had become stronger—not because the chains had disappeared, but because he had accepted their burden. The old, bitter Merlin was within him, and he wore it as one wears a scar: visible, painful, but part of one's flesh.

The fog opened, and a figure appeared before him. Not Arthur, not Morgana, not Nimue. This time it wasn't anyone he knew. The figure was tall, almost too tall, as if it itself were carved from fog. A face was barely recognizable—sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes just a mask of shadow.

“You have come far,” said the figure, and its voice was not one, but many: deep, bright, young, old – a choir that collapsed in on itself.

Merlin stopped. "Who are you?"

"I am that which stands at the end of every path," she said. "Some call me God. Some call me Death. Some merely Shadow. But to you... I am that which you will never understand."

Merlin laughed hoarsely. "Then you're in good company. I've never understood myself either."

The figure approached. "You led Arthur. You created Camelot. And you destroyed it. Why?"

Merlin snorted. "Because I could. Because it was necessary. Because I was stupid. Pick one answer, they're all true."

The figure inclined its head. "And yet you're still here. Not king, not hero, not dead. Why?"

Merlin was silent for a long time. Then he said, "Because stories mustn't die as long as someone still remembers them. And I... I'm the last one to know them."

The figure raised a hand, and an image formed in the mist: Arthur in the barge, the women in black around him, the river carrying him. "He lives in the songs," she said. "But you... you will live in the shadows. Your destiny is not glory, but waiting. Not fire, but dust. Can you bear this?"

Merlin saw the image, saw the fog, saw the chains on his arms, invisible but tangible. He nodded. "Yes. I can wait. I am old, I am tired, but I can wait. Until the world calls me again. Until the shadows are tired of me."

The figure stepped back. "Then go on. But don't forget: the shadows give nothing. Everything you are, you carry yourself."

Merlin smiled wearily. "I've been doing this ever since I was born."

The path became visible again, brighter, as if it had a destination. The fog retreated, just a little, just enough to continue. Merlin stepped forward, heavily, but more firmly than before.

He knew: This wasn't salvation. It wasn't liberation. But it was insight. And sometimes that's all that remains.

The fog thinned. The path, which had just been a crack in the void, took on contours, as if it itself were turning to stone. Merlin walked, heavily but no longer swaying. He had no strength, but he had found something else: direction.

At the end of the path, he saw an arc of darkness. No gate, no temple, simply a crack in the mist, shimmering brighter than anything around him. He stopped, felt the air vibrate. A humming, deep, quiet—the humming of his chains.

"So this is where it ends," he murmured. "Or begins."

He raised his hands, looked at the invisible threads resting in his skin. They pulled, taut, as if they wanted to pull him back. But he stepped forward, and the threads gave way. Not because they were weakening, but because they knew this was part of the test.

He stepped through the arch.

A blow, as if he were falling. A crack, a cut, a pull – and then everything was as before. Darkness. Damp stone. Drops falling. Runes shimmering.

Merlin lay in the cave, his forehead pressed against the rock. The chains hummed, taut and unyielding. But something had changed. Not in the shackles, not in the cave—in him.

He breathed heavily and laughed hoarsely. "Good. You didn't break me. You just reminded me."

His gaze wandered to the runes, which glowed faintly. "I was there," he murmured. "I saw him. Arthur. The others. Myself. And I understood: I am not the one who dies. I am the one who remains."

He laid his head back and closed his eyes. "Then wait with me, stones. Wait with me, drops. I won't die until they call me."

The cave was silent. But the silence wasn't empty. It was full—of shadows, of stories, of the future.

Merlin closed his eyes, and for the first time in a long time, he felt peace. Not hope, not comfort—only the quiet knowledge that he would last. Longer than kings, longer than empires.

"I'll wait," he whispered. "As long as it takes."

And the drop fell again.

Between Gods and Men

It began with a sound that wasn't a drop. The drops had become his rhythm, his clock, his company. But this was different. A deep rumble that didn't come from the stone, but rather went through it. The runes on the walls flickered as if someone had touched them with breath.

Merlin raised his head. "Ah," he murmured. "Now it's you."

The air became heavy, thick like wet clay, settling in the lungs. Voices emerged from the darkness of the cave. First one, then many, then so many that they were indistinguishable. Some sounded like thunder, others like the rustling of grass. Some roared, others whispered. But all shared the same hunger.

"Merlin," they echoed. "Child of the Earth. Child of the Daemon. Our servant."

He laughed, dry and rusty. "Servant? I serve no one. Not anymore. Especially not you."

A crack opened in the wall. Not a single stone broke, not a single crack gaped—it was as if the cave had suddenly become deeper, as if there was a space behind it that had never been there. Light emerged from the crack. Not bright, not warm, but the kind that doesn't question whether you can bear it.

Figures emerged. Not humans. Not animals. Something in between.

The first was tall, made of storm. Her body was cloud, her eyes lightning, and her voice was wind screaming in ravines. "I am the storm," she thundered. "Your breath was always mine. Your anger, your magic—all is my inheritance. You are my tool."

Merlin looked at her, almost yawning. "Tool? I've summoned you a hundred times and sent you back to sleep. What kind of god can be turned on and off so easily by an old man like me?"

The figure twitched, the thunder died away, and it dissolved into the fog.

The next one stepped forward, heavy as a mountain. Skin of granite, eyes deep as caves, a voice that tasted of boulders. "I am the earth," she boomed. "Your body is my dust. Your bones are my rock. Without me, you are nothing. Kneel down."

Merlin smiled crookedly. "I've slept on you, I've dug inside you, I've molded your clay into walls. If you're all-powerful, you're damn useful to mortals who need to build houses."

The earth was silent, only humming softly until it withdrew again.

A third came. Fire. Flickering flames that formed a face that never remained the same. "I am the ember," she hissed. "You used me in your rituals, in every sacrifice, in every torch. I made you great."

Merlin coughed, the smoke burning his throat. "You only warmed me when the nights were cold. No one made me great—not even myself. Go away."

The fire hissed, roared, and disappeared.

Finally, the river came. Water that stood in a shape, skin made of waves, eyes from the depths. "I am the river," it growled. "I took your sword. I carried your king away. I will carry you away whether you like it or not. All that lives returns to me."

Merlin nodded. "Yes. You were the only one who never lied. You take, you give, you flow. But you don't need me—and I don't need you anymore. Go on, river, there are enough who need to drink from you."

The river retreated, only murmuring in the background, as if it were offended.

The voices fell silent. The crack in the wall remained, but no figure emerged. Only the echo hung in the air, as if the gods themselves were surprised that he disobeyed them.

Merlin leaned his head back, breathing heavily, and smiled wearily. "So that's what you are. Storm, Earth, Fire, River. Powers that think they're gods, but are nothing more than mirrors of our own misery. You want sacrifices, songs, blood—just like kings. You're nothing more than humans with greater hunger."

The cave trembled as if it were contradicting him. But he closed his eyes and spoke softly: "And yet—without humans, you are nothing. A god without witnesses is just wind. And humans... they don't carry you because you are big. They carry you because they are small. And I—I stand between them."

The chains hummed. The runes glowed. And the voices fell silent.

After the figures disappeared, the cave remained silent. But the light in the crack hadn't gone out. It flickered, as if something were still waiting—not loudly, not threateningly, but quietly, almost shyly.

Merlin blinked. Images emerged from the light. No gods this time. No storm bodies, no tongues of flame. Humans.

The first was a young woman, with a shawl around her shoulders, a child in her arms. Her face was tired and gaunt, but her eyes were clear. She cradled the child, murmuring words Merlin didn't understand, and suddenly laughed softly as the little one grabbed her hair.

"This," he murmured, "is greater than all of you. More God in a smile than in a thousand flashes of lightning."

The woman disappeared.

The next was an old farmer. Crooked, his hands covered in calluses, his back bent from the plow. He stood in a field with more stones than grain, sweating, cursing, but never stopping. He kept going, a plow against a soil that refused to yield.

Merlin watched, breathing heavily. "Yes," he said. "You are the storm and the earth at once. You fight, you don't give up. No song, no crown. Only the will to carry on. If anyone carries a realm, it's you."

The farmer faded.

Then a girl came. Barefoot, barely older than twelve. In her hands she held a candle. The wax dripped over her fingers, burning them, and yet she held on tight, her eyes so serious, as if the world depended on this small light.

Merlin stared for a long moment. "This is fire," he whispered. "This is embers. But not yours. Not the kind that demands and consumes. This is the flame that endures, even when it hurts. This is the true fire."

The girl blew out the candle, and the smoke rose into the cave like incense. Then she, too, disappeared.

Merlin lowered his head, his eyes closed. "There they are," he murmured. "The true gods. No clouds, no rivers, no flames. Just humans who continue to live despite everything being against them. You up there—storm, earth, fire, water—you are only mirrors. But they... they are the image."

The runes flickered as if they understood.

"And I," said Merlin, "am the one in between. Not god, not man. Just the one who knows both sides. Maybe that's enough. Maybe that's all."

He laughed quietly, tiredly, but sincerely.

The light in the crack flickered more intensely, harshly, angrily. The cavern shook, dust trickled from the ceiling. The voices returned—louder, sharper than before, a chorus that was both thunder and storm.

"You dare," they hissed, "to mock us? Us, who bore you, who formed you? You are our tool, Merlin! Your blood is ours, your breath is our gift!"

Merlin laughed, a dry, throaty laugh that made even the runes tremble. "Gift? You gave me nothing that wasn't also cursed. You gave me demon in my blood, earth in my bones, wind in my breath—and I did with it what I wanted. I didn't serve you, I used you."

The voices swelled, as if they wanted to tear him apart. "You're nothing without us!"

Merlin raised his head, his eyes shining, even though he remained bound. "And you are nothing without men. Without their songs, without their fear, without their sacrifices, you are merely a storm without a sky, a fire without wood, a river without a spring. You are mirrors. Nothing more."

The air grew hot. The fire hissed, the earth rumbled, the river rushed, the storm howled. Everyone tried to shout him down. But Merlin continued, loudly, clearly, almost triumphantly:

"I have seen you in your greatness and your smallness. You are not the creators, you are the consequences. Humans make you, not the other way around! You only live because they believe in you. You die when they forget you. But I—I remember. I am a witness. I am a bridge. I stand between you and them. And that, you damned gods, makes me stronger than you can ever be."

The cave trembled. For a moment, it felt as if it were about to collapse, as if the storm, earth, fire, and river were about to crush him. But then—silence. A vacuum so deep that his heart seemed to stop.

And then, almost reluctantly, a single voice broke away from the others: "Perhaps... you really are the one in between. But remember, Merlin: He who stands between two worlds belongs to neither. Your place will always be solitude."

Merlin breathed heavily and smiled thinly. "I've known that for a long time. I was never a king. Never a god. Never a father. I was always just the one who showed the way – and no one wanted to follow. But I prefer solitude to slavery."

The light in the crack flickered once, twice—and then went out. The voices fell back into the depths, muffled, echoing, until only the drop remained.

Merlin lowered his head, the chains humming softly. "Very well," he murmured. "I am your witness. And you remain my mockery. We can live with that."

He closed his eyes. The cave was silent, but this time the silence wasn't a burden. It was a space he himself had filled.

The silence that followed was deeper than any silence before. Not a drop fell. Not a rune glowed. It was as if the cave had held its breath, as if it were listening for something yet to come.

Merlin remained motionless, his forehead leaning against the stone. He waited until his thoughts fell silent, until even his anger had faded. And then it began—not with thunder, not with fire, but with a whisper.

Images flickered before his eyes. No gods this time, no shadows of the past. Humans.

He saw a blacksmith hammering iron in a sooty hut while rain beat on the roof outside. No armor for a hero, no sword for kings—just a plow for a field that needed to be cultivated. The blacksmith sweated, singing softly to himself as the iron glowed.

Then he saw a woman at the stove. Her hands were torn from carrying wood, her eyes tired, but her smile warm as she handed the children bread she had laboriously baked.

And then a boy, barefoot, carrying a candle in an alley. He held it high, even though the wind was almost blowing it out, and protected the flame with both hands, determined not to let it die.

Merlin saw them all and understood. "You are the future," he murmured. "Not kings. Not swords. Not gods. You. The blacksmith with his work, the mother with her bread, the child with its candle. You are what is worth waiting for."

The visions remained, for a moment longer, then faded like smoke.

He took a deep breath. "Very well," he said. "I'll stay. I'll wait. Year after year, century after century. And when the world needs me again—not for kings, not for wars, but for you—then I'll be there."

The chains hummed, this time quietly, almost gently, as if they had come to terms with his vow.

Merlin closed his eyes, leaned his head back, and smiled wearily. "Between gods and men," he whispered, "isn't a bad place. If you know why."

The Silence of the Stones

There wasn't a drop left. No humming of the runes. No whispering of the gods. The cave was so silent that even his breathing sounded like an intruder. Merlin opened his eyes, listened, waited—nothing. Only silence.

It wasn't empty, this silence. It was heavy. Thick, like an old coat you can't take off. He tried to move his head, but the cracking of his joints broke the silence like a crime. He hardly dared to breathe again.

"So this is it," he murmured, his voice shaky. "This is what the end of the world sounds like."

But the world wasn't over. It was just silent.

The stones all around shimmered faintly, but not as before. No runes flickered, no spell intruded. They were simply there—cold, immobile, indifferent. And yet he felt something: a weight that was older than any memory.

Merlin rested his forehead against the rock. He expected cold, but he felt warmth. Not friendly, not comforting—the warmth of something that has been doing the same thing for millennia: carrying his weight, nothing more.

"You are the most patient," he whispered. "You don't talk, you don't ask, you only wait. Longer than all kings, longer than all wars. You were here when no one had a name. You will be here when the last ones are forgotten."

He closed his eyes, and the images came. Not visions of gods, not shadows of men—images that crawled out of the stone itself.

He saw druids standing among the monoliths at night, torches in hand, their voices like thunder as they called upon the heavens. He saw sacrifices being made, blood running into the

earth, and the stone drinking it without moving. He saw warriors striking their swords against the stones as if to make them into weapons—and the stones remained unmoved.

He saw children playing, leaning on the stones, climbing on them – and the stones remained silent.

Centuries passed, battles, storms, plagues, songs – and the stones remained.

Merlin breathed heavily. "You are the true witnesses," he said quietly. "Not me. Not the songs. Not the gods. You."

The stones didn't answer. But he heard something—no words, no voices. A weight, a pressure that came not from outside, but from within. A knowledge: We exist. We remember. Nothing more is needed.

He gave a small smile. "You're right. Everything else is just noise."

The chains hummed faintly, but even they seemed to grow quieter, as if they too respected the power of silence. Merlin leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

He realized: If he were ever free again, it wouldn't be because he had defeated the gods. But because the stones allowed it. Because one day they would have seen enough and released him—not out of mercy, but because it was time.

Until then, however, he would stay. Silent. Listening.

Merlin kept his eyes closed, but the darkness had no end. It was a curtain behind which images emerged, heavy, slow, as if carved in stone. Not dreams, not visions of the gods—memories.

The stones began to speak. Not with voices, not with words, but with weight.

He saw men and women standing in circles a thousand years ago. They were naked, their bodies painted with symbols that predated even the Druids. Their faces were solemn, their eyes glowing in the firelight. They sang, but the stones heard not the sound, but the thunder of their footsteps as they stamped the earth in rhythm.

Then the scene changed. Warriors marched past the stones, their shields dented, their spears bloody. They called to the heavens, praying for victory, and some struck their swords against the monoliths until sparks flew. The stones took the blows, unmoved, unperturbed.

A king was crowned among the stones, clothed in gold, surrounded by warriors and priests. He promised eternity. A few breaths later—in the language of the stones—Merlin saw the same crowns in the mud, forgotten, rusted.

Merlin's breathing was shallow, his heart heavy. "You keep everything," he murmured. "The song, the blood, the crown. And you don't laugh, you don't judge. You only hold fast."

The images continued to change. Children played, climbed on the stones, carved their names into them, laughed, and ran away. Centuries later, the names were still there, half-blurred by

the rain, but not gone. The stones had kept them—not because they were important, but because they had happened.

He saw farmers resting at the stones, eating their bread, breastfeeding their children. No rituals, no wars—just everyday life. And the stones preserved that, too.

"You don't discriminate," Merlin whispered. "Hero or child, king or peasant—for you, everything is equally difficult. Everything is equally valuable."

The stones were silent, but in their silence there was consent.

Then they showed him themselves. Not now, not in the cave, but earlier: young Merlin, walking through Brocéliande, studying the stars, speaking to stones and believing they answered. They had seen him making Arthur king, dressing lies in prophecies, shedding tears in secret.

And they kept that too. Without judgment. Without consolation. Only memories.

Merlin closed his eyes tighter, his forehead pressed against the stone. "I am no more than a breath within you," he whispered. "And yet—when I go, you carry me. Not the gods, not the songs. You."

For the first time in a long time, he felt something like humility. Not the forced kneeling before a threatening power, but the silent acknowledgment that something is greater than him, and that it needs no proof.

Merlin placed both hands against the wall, as far as the chains allowed. The stone was cold, cracked, rough. No warmth, no pulse, no breath. Only hardness.

"I've spoken to kings," he whispered. "With gods, with spirits, with shadows. Everyone wanted something. Blood, obedience, songs. But you... you want nothing. You're just there."

The stones offered no answer. Yet, precisely within them lay a kind of answer.

Merlin closed his eyes, breathing heavily. "I could ask you to release me. But that wouldn't change anything. You don't set anyone free. You preserve. That's your craft. And my mistake was believing I was more than you."

His forehead rested against the rock. The silence crept deeper into him, until he had the impression that he wasn't sitting in a cave, but was himself made of stone—a block into which nothing could enter or leave.

After a while, he began to speak. Not like a supplicant, not like a prophet, but like a storyteller around the fire.

"You saw Arthur draw his sword. You saw him fall. You heard the screams, the coronations, the prayers. And you said nothing. So I say it for you."

He continued speaking, hour after hour, perhaps even days. He told the stones what they had seen but never spoken: how the children played, how the warriors died, how the women wept, how the fields burned. His words were not magic, not power—they were translation.

And as he spoke, he noticed that he was becoming lighter. Not because the chains were fading, but because he understood.

"So this is it," he finally murmured, his voice rough. "You preserve. I tell. Without you, I would be empty. Without me, you would remain silent. Together – we are history."

The stones remained silent. But this time, in their silence, he felt not weight, but recognition. No applause, no cheering. Only the silent confirmation that he had understood.

He leaned back, his face exhausted, his eyes half-closed. "Then continue to be silent," he said softly. "I speak for both of us as long as I breathe. And if one day I fall silent, you will carry me on in your silence."

The drops began again. Evenly. Slowly. The rhythm was back.

Merlin smiled weakly. "Good," he whispered. "That's enough."

Merlin sat still. Talking had left him empty, as if he'd sent all his breaths into the cave, keeping only a faint residue for himself. But instead of weakness, he felt something else: calm.

He placed his hands on the rock again, his forehead next to it. The stone didn't vibrate, it didn't glow, it didn't do anything. But this very nothingness began to absorb him.

He could no longer hear his breathing. He could barely feel his heartbeat. The boundary between his skin and the wall blurred. First at his hands, then at his forehead, finally at his shoulders. He could no longer tell where it ended and the stone began.

“Perhaps,” he thought, “that is the secret: one does not become free by breaking free, but by becoming one with that which binds.”

He fell into a kind of trance. No images, no visions, just weight. He was as heavy as rock, as cold as rock, as still as rock. He saw the centuries flowing through him—rain, storm, sun, snow. He felt time no longer count.

The chains were still there, but they were like roots that didn't bind him, but anchored him.

A thought briefly flickered through my mind: Maybe I'll stay here forever. Maybe this isn't a prison, but a living grave.

But instead of fear, he felt calm.

The runes around him shimmered faintly, as if to say: You are on the path. Not to the end, but to the core.

Merlin smiled in the darkness, a smile no one saw. "If this is my destiny," he whispered, "then I will not scream. I will wait, I will listen, and if anyone needs my voice, I will speak through the stone."

The drop fell. Evenly. Hard. Louder than ever before. But this time it wasn't a noise. It was a heartbeat. The heartbeat of the stone.

And Merlin noticed that he was beating to the same rhythm.

The stone absorbed him like a drop of water. No resistance, no crack, no pain. He wasn't swallowed—it became permeable. Flesh, breath, blood: all soundless, all sheltered in silence.

And then the images came. Not as fast and bright as visions of the gods, not as sharp as dreams, but heavy and slow, as if centuries were compressed into a single breath.

He saw kingdoms yet unborn. Towers taller than any tree, made of stone and iron, reaching for the sky. He heard languages he had never known, full of sharp sounds and strange music.

He saw wars as big as storms, fires consuming cities greater than Camelot had ever been. But he also saw children laughing, mothers baking bread, farmers plowing new fields—no different from the ones he already knew.

The stones showed him that the world continued. Always. No matter who died. No matter which king fell.

And then, among all the images, he saw himself. Not young, not old—just a figure in the shadows, a magician who appeared again and again. Sometimes with a staff, sometimes with a book, sometimes with nothing but his voice. Always there when people remembered.

"So that's it," he murmured. "I'm not a king, not a hero, not a god. I'm a memory. Nothing more, nothing less."

The stones didn't answer, but they held the image – and he knew it was true.

A final vision came, brighter than the others. A circle of people, somewhere far in the future. They told each other stories. One spoke his name. "Merlin." The children laughed, the old people nodded, and the flame of a candle trembled as if it understood.

Merlin closed his eyes, tears welling up, salty and heavy. "Then it'll be worth it," he whispered. "If they still know me, if they still talk about me... then the wait will be worth it."

Slowly, the images faded. Only the stone remained. Heavy. Silent. Patient.

Merlin took a deep breath and laid his head back. "Good," he said quietly. "Show me anything you want. I will wear it. I am your mouth, and you are my heart."

The drop fell. Again. Evenly. Hard. And this time it sounded like an eternity.

Merlin's breath returned as if after a long dive. First shallow, gasping, then deeper, harsher, as if his lungs were relearning how to breathe. The rock let go of him—not because it was spitting him out, but because it no longer fully held him. He was both man and stone.

The runes glowed faintly, like embers after a fire. No fire, no anger, just residual warmth. The drop fell regularly again, and each stroke sounded like a clock chiming, telling him: You're back.

Merlin opened his eyes. The cave was the same, the chains the same. But he himself was no longer the same. He no longer felt rebellion against the shackles. No anger. Only clarity.

"I get it," he murmured. "I'm not here to be free. I'm here to wait. I am the voice for that which is silent. And when the world calls me, I will speak."

He leaned his head against the stone. His body was exhausted, heavy as a sack of bones. But his mind was calm. No more anger at Nimue, no more questions for Arthur, no more accusations against the gods. All that remained was silence—and the certainty that he could bear it.

"Between gods and men," he said quietly. "Between shadow and stone. That is my place."

The chains hummed, not hostilely, but like strings holding a melody. They bound him, yes. But they also gave him support.

The cave didn't breathe. It didn't speak. But in its silence lay consent.

Merlin closed his eyes, a tired smile on his lips. "Then keep quiet," he whispered. "I'm listening."

And for the first time in a long time, he felt no loneliness. Only the silence of the stones.

The hours slipped away. Maybe they were days, maybe years—to Merlin, it made no difference anymore. The drops fell, and he heard them not as water, but as syllables of a language known only to stones.

His breathing was calm. No struggle, no resistance. His body was old, broken, chained – but his mind was broad, bright, sharper than ever.

And in the silence that was not emptiness, he spoke. Not with his voice, not with his lips—but with what remains when even breath and flesh fall silent.

One day you will come. You who seek. You who believe. You who touch the stones and want to break the silence. Then I will be there.

The runes flickered once, as if the rock itself had burned the oath into itself. No thunder, no gods, no light. Only the silent, unyielding promise that held deeper than any magic.

Merlin smiled weakly, his eyes half-closed. "Then it is decided," he murmured. "I am silence. I am memory. And if they need me, I will speak."

The drops continued to fall. Evenly. Endlessly. And the silence of the stones preserved him—as it had preserved kings, wars, and children.

Merlin wasn't sleeping. He was waiting.

The magician between the worlds

The cave was the same—chains, stone, drops. And yet it wasn't. Something had shifted, not in the rock, not in the water, but within him. The barrier that had previously separated him from

everything—from the dead, the gods, the shadows—had become thin. Thinner than fog. Thinner than breath.

Merlin opened his eyes, and it was as if he were looking not only into the cave, but into a thousand other rooms at once. He saw fields where farmers were ploughing. He saw kings on thrones that soon crumbled to dust. He saw children laughing, gods roaring, rivers rushing, and stones falling silent. All at the same time, all in the same breath.

He breathed in – and heard the voices of the gods in his chest. He breathed out – and felt the hands of men on his heart. He lowered his eyes – and saw the shadows of the fallen. He laid his forehead against the stone – and became the memory of the earth.

"So that's it," he murmured, a hoarse, dry laugh in his throat. "I've always wondered where I belong. Answer: nowhere. And everywhere."

The chains hummed softly, not like shackles, but like strings. And he understood: They didn't just hold him—they connected him. In every direction. Into the world of the living, into the world of the dead, into the silence of the stones, into the screeching of the gods. He wasn't a prisoner, he was Knot.

He remembered the boy from the mist, barefoot, scared, hungry, curious. He remembered the magician who led Arthur into the light. He remembered the old man who waited in the cave for his end. All were him. All were there. And no one was complete.

But now he sensed the unity: human and demon, earth and sky, life and shadow. Not cleansed, not healed—just brought together.

"Merlin," he whispered to himself. "No king. No god. No saint. Only the one who sits among them all and watches."

The drops fell. But this time he didn't just hear them. He understood them. Every drop was a story. Every beat was a name. Some he had known, some he hadn't. Some were past, some were yet to come.

He laughed again, a bitter, beautiful laugh. "I sit here in chains and hear the whole damn world dripping. And they call me a wizard."

But in the same breath, he knew: This was true. Not because he spoke witchcraft, not because he performed miracles. But because he was the only one who could hear the silence and translate it into words.

He placed his hands on the stone and took a deep breath. "Then be it so," he said. "I am the one in between. I am the thread that connects them. When men forget you gods, I speak. When the gods despise men, I speak. When the shadows terrify them and the stones silence them—I speak. Not as master, not as servant. Only as a voice."

The chains hummed louder, and he felt them in his skin, in his bones. He was no longer afraid.

He closed his eyes. Everything flowed into one another: king and peasant, god and river, shadow and light, stone and breath.

And in the middle of it all sat he. Not a king. Not a priest. Not a god.

The magician between the worlds.

He could have been solemn now. The situation almost demanded it: final act, final breath, final insight. Instead, Merlin grinned—that crooked, old grin that had been around for three regicides—and thought about how the world would tell his story.

“Come on,” he murmured, “make me big.”

He saw them before him, the future voices. First, the bards in smoky taverns, their harps out of tune, the ale watery, their pockets empty. They would turn his life into a fireworks display, because a spark brings more reward than a truth. In their songs, he would summon storms with a snap of his fingers (he was more concerned with cold feet and bad boots), and the stars would peck from his hand like chicken grits (in reality, ravens pecked at his provisions). They would claim he had led dragons on beard lichen, raised kings from eggs, and turned priests into toads. He snorted. "If I could turn priests into toads, there would be fewer toads."

After the bards would come the monks. Ink, parchment, pious seriousness. They would press his life into lines, neat and tidy, with small capitals and marginalia. Footnotes everywhere: cf. Prophet X; see also Miracle Y. They would wash out what was dirty, what smelled of sweat and wine, what smelled of women and fear, until only a saint remained, thin as a day's fast. "Thank you," he murmured, twisting his mouth, "but I've bled enough already. You don't need to drain the color from me."

Then the alchemists and court scholars would come, with flashing devices and terms that sounded like magic words, but were merely excuses. They would package his deeds into systems, paint them on diagrams, in circles and triangles, and neat order. Some would make him a demon, others an angel of reason. "Nice," he said into the cave, "I'll fit into any cage, as long as it's painted nicely enough."

And finally, the people, who added wood on long winter evenings and told stories to children so they wouldn't starve to death. Herein lay the real danger, thought Merlin – and the real salvation. For the people lied better than bards, more cleanly than monks, warmer than scholars. They lied out of love. Out of necessity. They made him the grandfather of miracles, the old man with the stick who always appeared at the right moment; the eccentric codger who saved children and cursed kings; the drunkard who spoke to ravens; the fool who told the truth because he was too tired to lie.

"That's the prettiest lie," he said tenderly. "Keep it."

He imagined how the centuries would dress him—like a wax figure, decorated differently for each festival. A pointed hat, embroidered with stars. A staff as big as a flagpole. A beard down to his waist so children could recognize him from far across the square. "The beard is useful," he admitted. "It catches crumbs."

And somewhere, he thought, a thespian would put into his mouth the sentences he'd never uttered: droning prophecies, round words that sound like oracles but are actually just good craftsmanship. He saw schoolteachers turning him into a lesson ("Merlin teaches us..."), preachers turning him into a threat ("Merlin warns..."), and market criers turning him into a

product ("Merlin in five easy steps"). He laughed, coughed, and wiped his lips. "If anyone's selling 'Merlin's Secrets,' it's definitely my old cookbook."

The chains hummed in agreement or just in time with his mockery.

He thought of the mistakes they would attribute to him. They'd say he'd known everything—ridiculous. He'd guessed like everyone else, only with better cards. They'd say he'd orchestrated everything—nonsense. He'd given shoves and hoped no one fell down the steps. They'd say he'd destroyed Camelot—as if one man could destroy an empire nailed together from a thousand hungry bellies and ten thousand little greedy babies. "I predicted the weather," he said dryly. "The sky itself makes the rain."

And yet—he liked to contradict himself—there was truth in the future exaggerations. A lie, when it comforts, is sometimes truer than the truth, which only chills. When a child sleeps more easily because it believes an old wizard is watching in a cave, then his waiting had meaning. When a young warrior lowers his sword because it occurs to him that stories live longer than lists of victors, then his silence had weight. When a mother shares bread and whispers, "Merlin says there's enough for tomorrow," then that was perhaps the greatest spell he would ever cast—without ever being free, without ever joining.

He narrowed his eyes, imagining the first scribe brooding over a line on a wet evening: "Merlin returns when the land needs him." A lovely sentence, rounded, portable, easy to remember. "Keep him," Merlin whispered. "He's better than me."

He foresaw how he would be tamed: household friend of kings, mascot of the upright, patron of losers, bogeyman of bureaucracy. How he would be unleashed: storm in children's books, thunder in a tavern, whispering in church, eye-rolling in an alchemist. He fit everywhere and belonged nowhere. "That's the trick," he said. "If you don't fit, you hold everything together."

A final twist into the crude, because life rarely ends on a solemn note: "And if any of you later claim that I turned an entire army into rabbits with a single spell—then please let them know who recaptured the rabbits. Not me."

He laughed, which sounded like a cough in the cave, yet remained a laugh. The stone received it, not disapprovingly, more like an innkeeper offering a late-arriving guest another glass.

"All right," said Merlin, his tone becoming calm. "Make me taller. Trim me. Weave stars into my hat and thorns into my reputation. I'll bear the burden. Because in the end, behind the songs and the lies, I'll still be sitting here listening for drops. And if you're really quiet, you'll hear them too."

He rested his forehead against the rock again. The chains hummed, the drops counted. Outside—far out, beyond kingdoms, churches, and fairs—somewhere a child lit a candle and held a protective hand around it.

“You see,” Merlin whispered into the stone, “that’s my target audience.”

Then he fell silent – not offended, not solemn, but cheerful, like someone who knows that the punchline has been delivered and the stage now belongs to the audience.

The silence returned, but this time it didn't feel like imprisonment. It wasn't the weight of stones, not the roar of the gods, not the echo of shadows. It was a space where words found a place—the last words he wanted to say.

Merlin sat up as far as his chains allowed and spoke softly, almost as if he were talking only to himself.

"I promise you nothing great. No victories. No eternal kingdoms. No miracles that justify blood. I am no savior."

He took a deep breath. "But I promise you that I'll stay. That I'll be here if you need me. That I won't die as long as you still whisper my name, even if you pronounce it wrong."

His gaze slid to the runes, which glowed dimly, like embers in cold ash. "I am the wizard between the worlds. I belong to neither, and yet I hold both. You can chain me, you can forget me, but when the night grows too long, when the fire dies down, when the stories grow faint—then you will hear me again. Not with trumpets, not with lightning. But quietly, like drops in a cave."

He paused briefly, and a tired smile flitted across his face. "That's enough. You may not demand more of anyone—not kings, not gods, not sorcerers. That he is there when he is needed. Everything else is a lie."

The drops fell in time with his heart. A rhythm that never ended.

Merlin closed his eyes. The chains hummed softly, as if confirming the oath.

"I'll stay," he whispered. "Until the last song."

The drops continued counting, patiently, unerringly. One. Two. Three.

Merlin listened. Every beat was like a heartbeat that belonged not only to him, but to the world itself. A rhythm that transcended kings, gods, and wars. The rhythm of duration.

He laid his forehead against the rock. No more vision. No more voices. Only stone. Only silence. Only time.

For the first time, he didn't feel it as a burden, not as a test, not as a mockery. It was... peace.

"So," he murmured, "it ends like this. No thunder, no fire, no choir. Just drops. Just stone. Just me." He smiled thinly. "That's enough."

The chains hummed, like the strings of a lute that was no longer playing its last song, but merely holding it.

Merlin closed his eyes. His breathing stilled. No sleep, no death. Only waiting.

The cave was silent. The stones listened. And somewhere, far away in the future, someone would whisper his name again.

Until then, the magician remained between the worlds.

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