

EXCALIBUR

Although Arthur had defeated the Saxon invaders at Mount Badon, a few renegade warriors remained, and in the days following the battle Arthur and his army had several skirmishes with these small Saxon bands.

In one such fight Arthur found himself surrounded by warriors. He whirled his sword around his head like a windmill, and hacked and slashed his way through them. Just as he was stumbling out of the circle they had formed around him, one Saxon brought his sword crashing down on the blade of Arthur's weapon. The metal shattered into several pieces, leaving a useless stump in Arthur's hand.

Arthur rolled to his left to avoid another blow of the weapon, and quickly snatched a sword from a wounded soldier who lay on the ground. He continued fighting with this, and he and his men managed to defeat the Saxons.

After the battle, Arthur returned to the fields where his army had camped, and sought out Merlin.

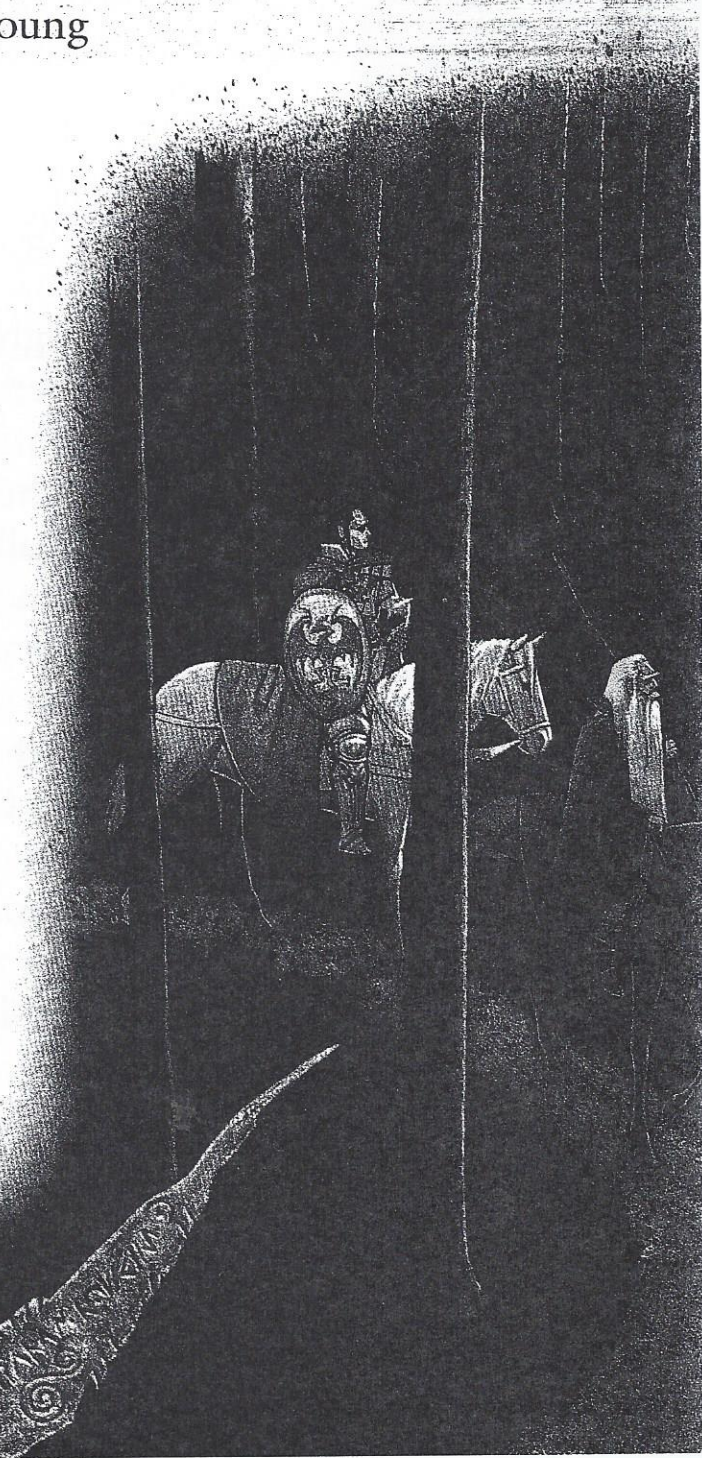
"Merlin," Arthur said miserably, "look at what the Saxons have done to the sword of the Pendragons."

Merlin said nothing, but took the stump of Arthur's sword from him, and moved silently forward. He motioned for Arthur to mount his horse, and Merlin himself did likewise.

"Where are we going?" the young king asked.

"Follow," was Merlin's only reply. As the late afternoon sun began to sink, he led Arthur down narrow, unfamiliar paths. They rode for what seemed like hours. At last, toward dusk, Merlin alighted and told Arthur to do the same.

Merlin tied both their horses to a pointed rock and beckoned for Arthur to follow him into what looked like a dense forest. It turned out to be nothing more than a thick, circular copse on top of a sloping embankment. Below the embankment was a lake, and on its bank was a stone altar. When he saw it, Arthur knew that he was on sacred ground.



"Look towards the middle of the lake," said Merlin calmly.

Arthur looked out, mesmerized by the magical tranquillity of the surroundings. Suddenly the glassy surface of the lake began to ripple. Arthur bristled with anticipation, then gasped as an arm, clothed all in white, burst through the water. It was holding a sword, which caught the last rays of the sun and reflected them back in a spectacular, fiery display.

The sword was dazzling. Its blade shone with the radiance of the brightest star, and its jewel-encrusted handle and hilt were engraved with intricate carvings.

"Take it!" whispered Merlin. "Take the sword! It's yours."

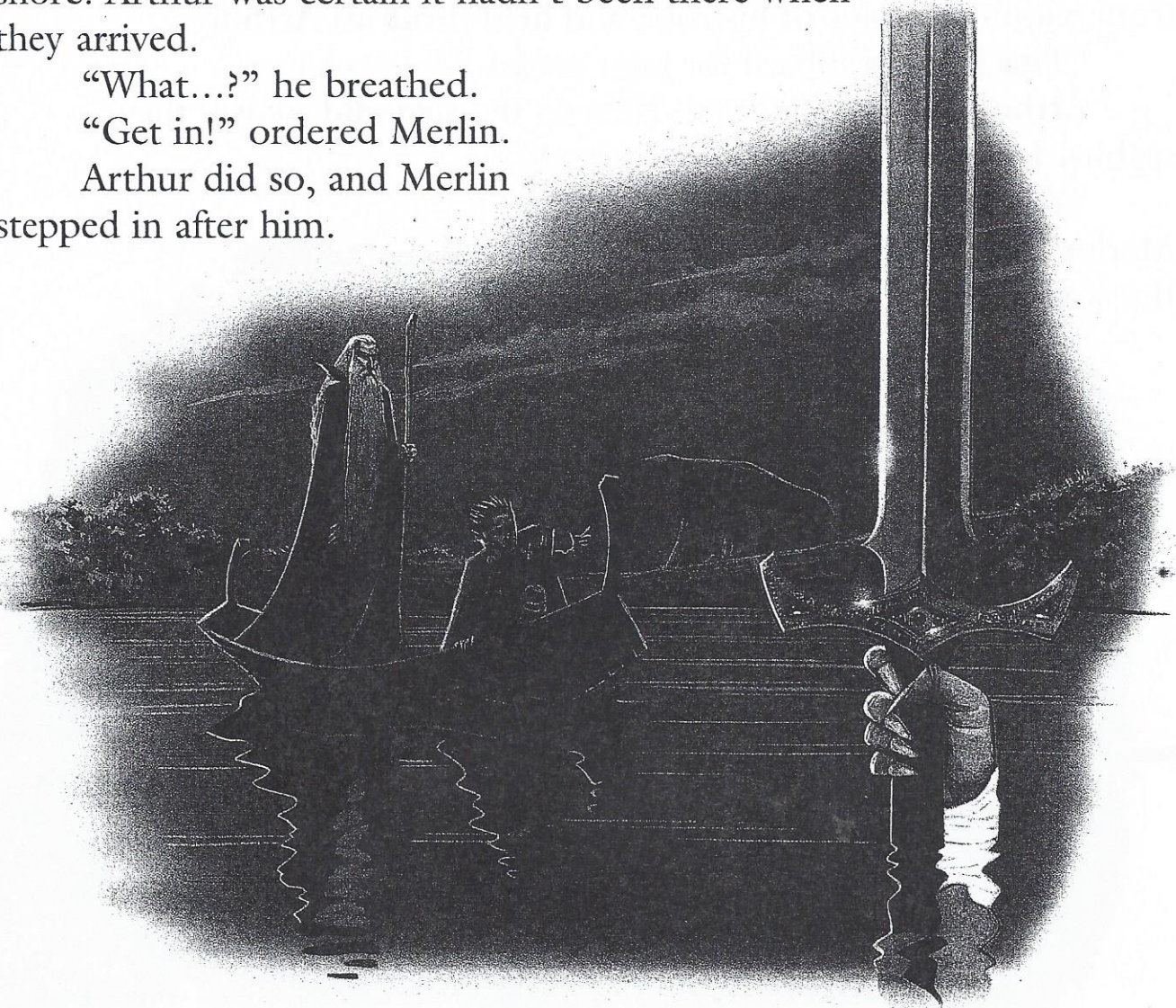
"But how shall I get it?" whispered Arthur.

Merlin jabbed a finger towards the water's edge, where Arthur saw a small boat bobbing gently near the shore. Arthur was certain it hadn't been there when they arrived.

"What...?" he breathed.

"Get in!" ordered Merlin.

Arthur did so, and Merlin stepped in after him.



Merlin pointed his staff, and the boat began to slice its way through the water towards the arm. When they reached it, Arthur stretched out a hand and took the sword. He held it up and admired its immense beauty.

"It is your sword, Arthur," said Merlin. "It is Excalibur, forged in Avalon, the Otherworld, by the Lady of the Lake herself."

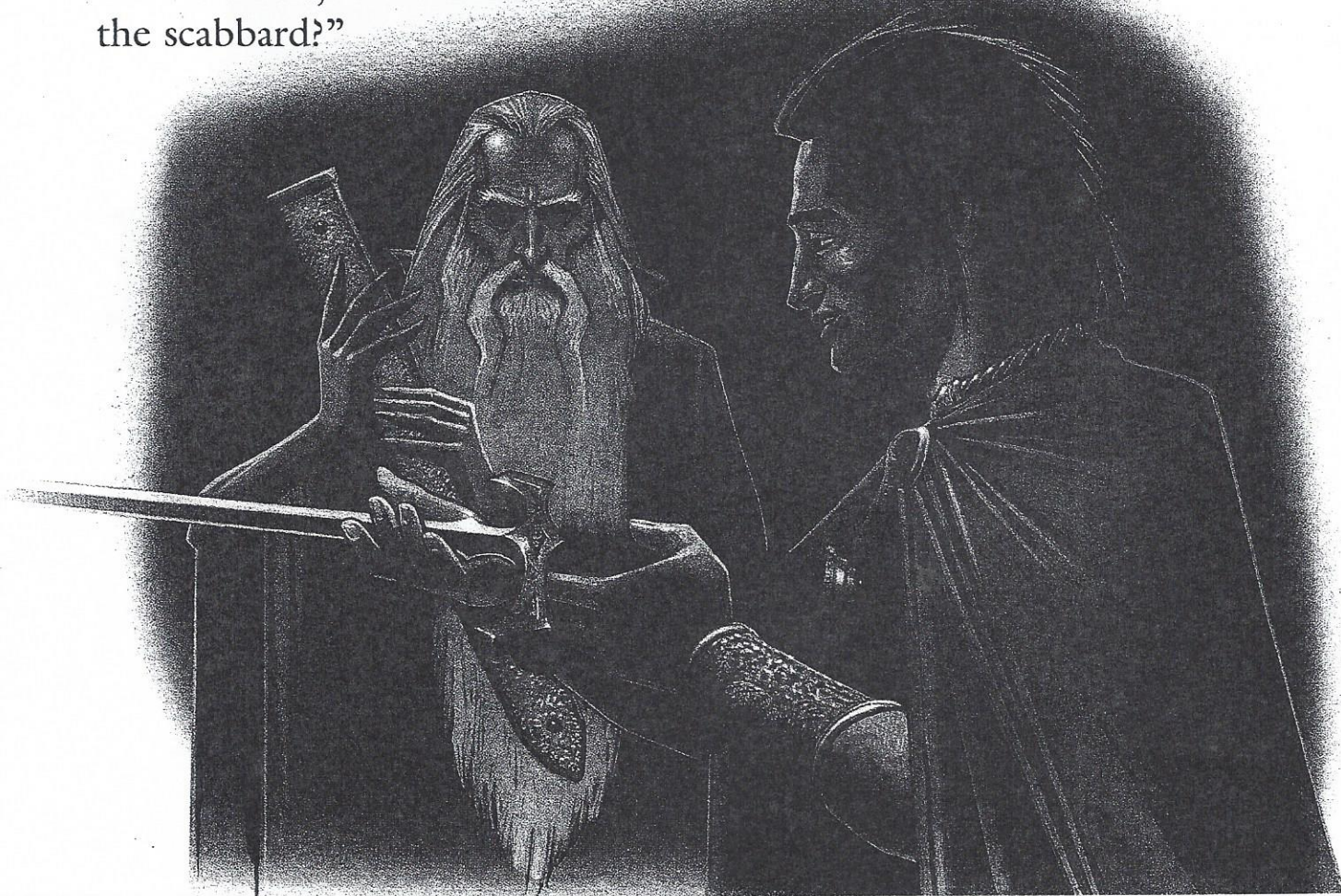
Arthur was awestruck. The Lady of the Lake—the powerful spirit who guarded the entrance to the Otherworld—had blessed him with this sword! All the way back to shore, he gazed at it, too overcome to speak, or even to read the words he saw engraved on the blade.

When they were back on land, Merlin drew a golden scabbard from within the folds of his robe and held it out to Arthur.

"This is the scabbard for your sword," he explained.

Arthur was disappointed. Next to the splendid sword, the scabbard looked plain and unimportant.

"Which do you like more," Merlin asked, "the sword or the scabbard?"

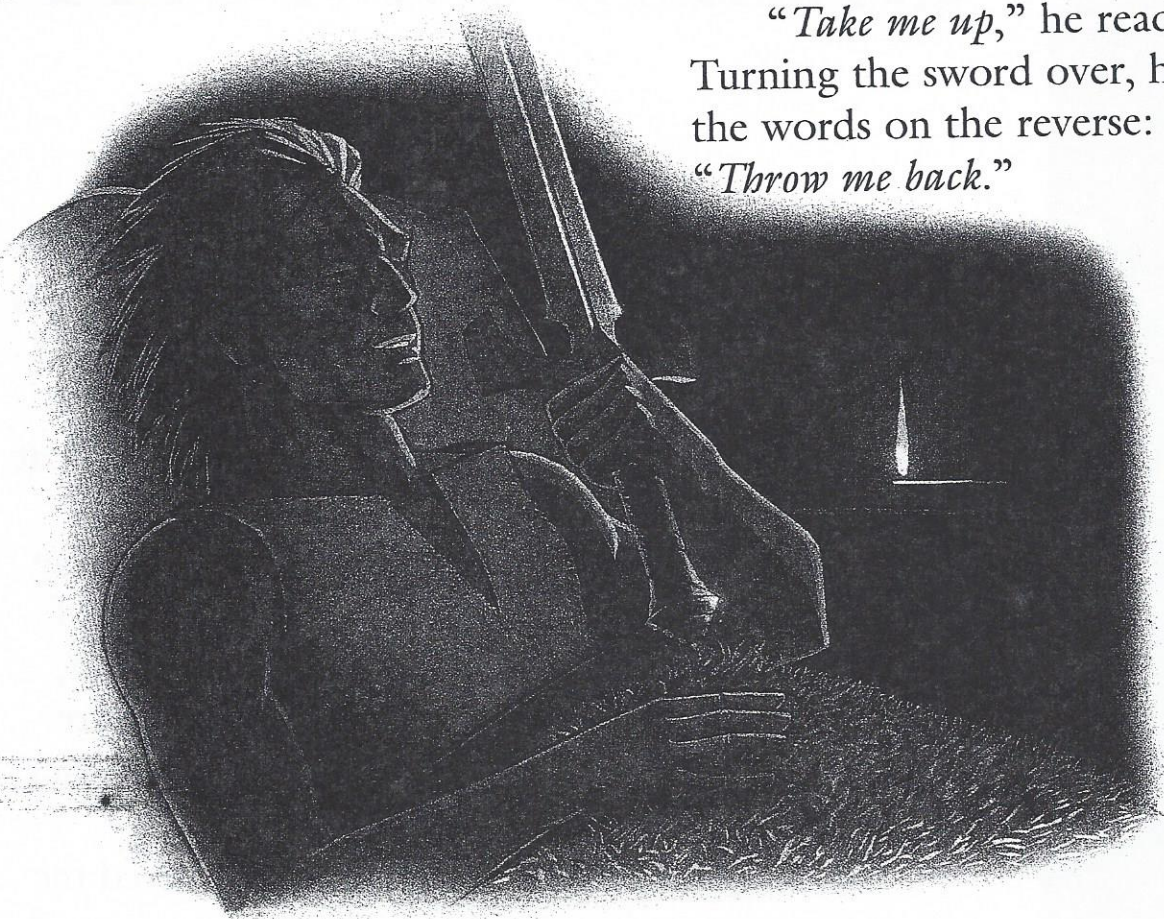


Arthur could not lie. "The sword," he replied. "I can win wars and defend my land and people with this magnificent sword. But what use is the scabbard to me, especially one so ordinary? I could easily do without it."

"Looks can be deceiving," Merlin said. "The sword will serve you well, but with this scabbard at your side, no sword, spear, nor any weapon carried by any son of earth shall harm you. Take good care of the sword, Arthur, but make certain you never lose the scabbard."

That night, before he lay down to rest, Arthur took a final look at his new sword. This time, he looked closely at the words etched on the blade.

"Take me up," he read aloud. Turning the sword over, he read the words on the reverse: *"Throw me back."*



The words were as mysterious to Arthur as everything else that had happened that day. With a yawn, he replaced the sword in the scabbard and, clutching it to him to keep it safe, he was soon fast asleep. When he awoke the next morning, he once again gazed in wonder at the beauty of this mighty sword ... his sword: Excalibur.