

THE SAXON WARS

Britain had a leader at last. But across the sea, her enemies were preparing for war. For years, the Saxons had been waiting to invade Britain. Now that an inexperienced young boy was on the throne, the Saxon king, Aelle, saw his chance. He gathered an army and began invading settlements along Britain's southern coast.

News of the raids reached Arthur, who quickly assembled a war council at Camelot, his fortress in northern Wales. The council was made up of the wisest and bravest chieftains in the land. As they sat at the long table in Camelot's great hall, torches crackling on the walls, a chieftain named Uriens began to laugh.

"What amuses you, Uriens?" Arthur asked.

"You are so young, Arthur," the chieftain replied, "and you know nothing of war. When your father was king, war was a way of life. I was worried

at first that it would end under your rule, but now there is the promise of fighting, so my mind is at ease. War stirs the soul, Arthur, and I delight in it!"

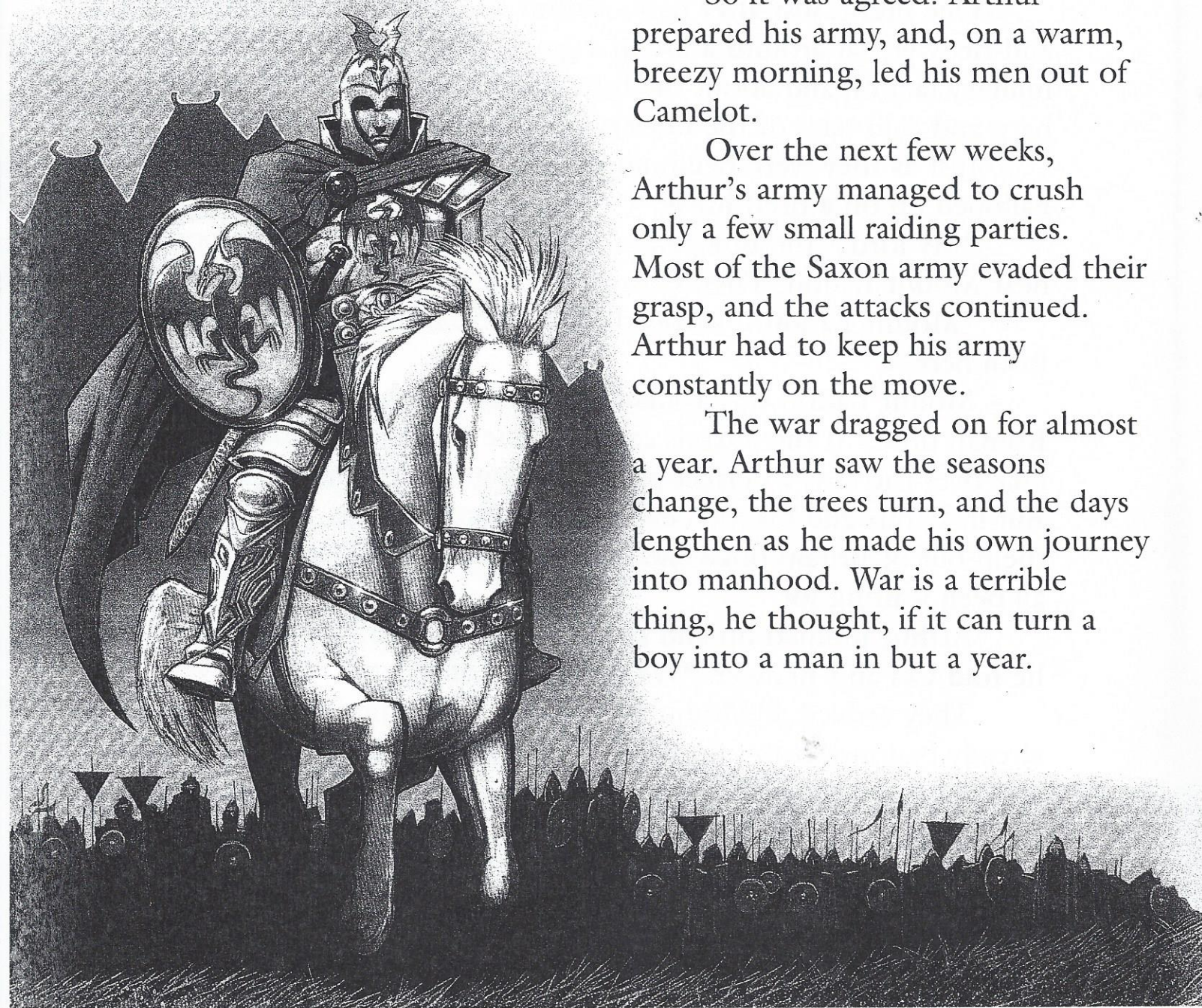
For a moment, a biting silence hung in the air. Then Arthur shattered it by slamming his fist down on the table.

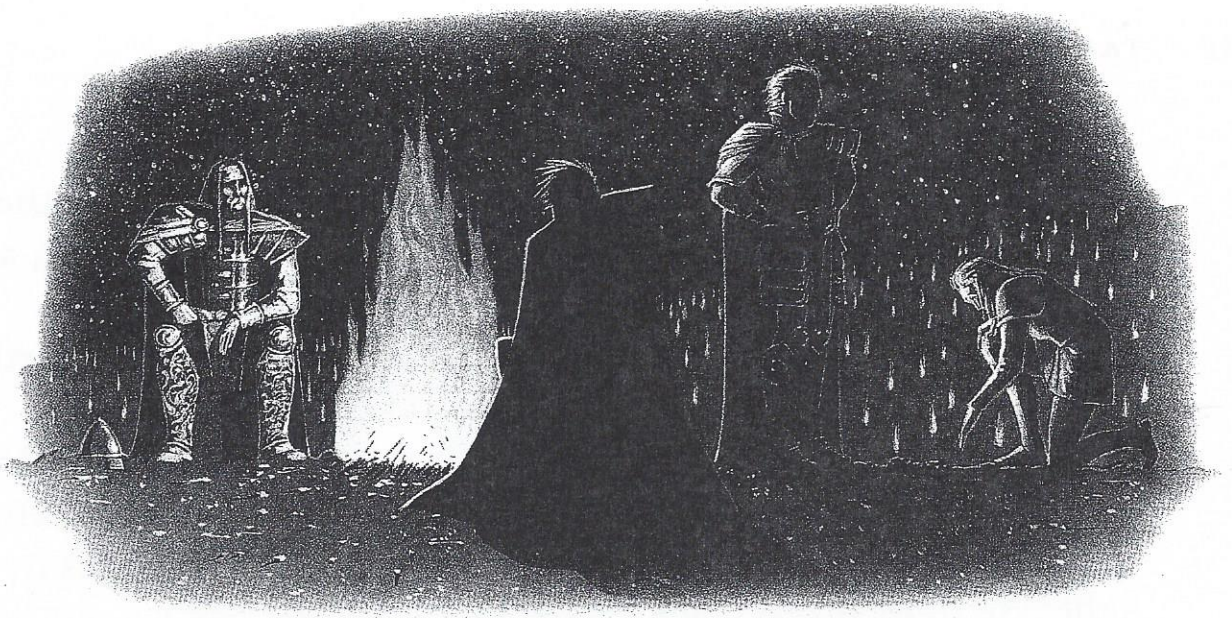
"No!" he bellowed. "No councillor of mine shall take delight in the death of others. War is a hateful thing!" He stopped, then spoke again in softer tones. "Nevertheless, if my country requires it, we must fight. We must protect our people and drive the Saxons out."

So it was agreed. Arthur prepared his army, and, on a warm, breezy morning, led his men out of Camelot.

Over the next few weeks, Arthur's army managed to crush only a few small raiding parties. Most of the Saxon army evaded their grasp, and the attacks continued. Arthur had to keep his army constantly on the move.

The war dragged on for almost a year. Arthur saw the seasons change, the trees turn, and the days lengthen as he made his own journey into manhood. War is a terrible thing, he thought, if it can turn a boy into a man in but a year.





One night, just after dark, Arthur and his most trusted aides, Cei and Bedwyr, sat around a fire in a grassy field. They talked about military tactics, and about the future and the past. Merlin played his harp and told tales of the bravery of Celtic warriors in days gone by.

Just as they were beginning to grow drowsy, a young messenger galloped up on a tired horse.

"My lord," the boy panted, "the Saxons are taking up positions near Mount Badon. Their entire army has gathered there!"

"Mount Badon?" snapped Bedwyr. "That's just half a day's march from here!"

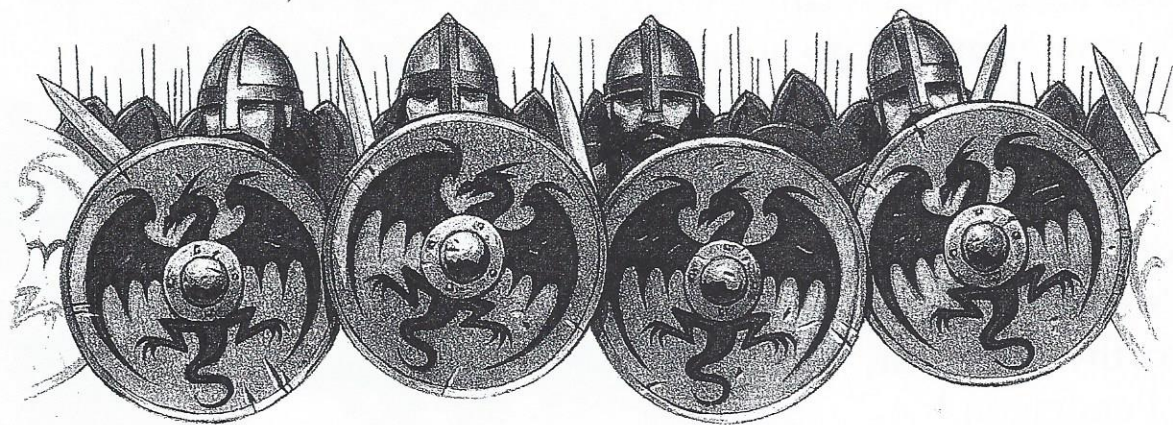
Mount Badon was a small hill outside Bath, an important city in Roman times. If the Saxons captured the hill, they would be able to take over the city, a perfect place to bring in more men and supplies. But if Arthur and his men defeated the Saxons here, they could drive them out of Britain once and for all. It was the decisive battle they had all been waiting for.

Arthur jumped up and stamped out the fire. "Prepare the men," he told Cei and Bedwyr. "We will march at dawn."

They arrived at Mount Badon just before midday. The Saxons had already begun moving up the hill and so had the advantage of the higher ground. If Arthur charged them now, he would surely lose. The Celts had no choice but to wait for the Saxons to attack.

Arthur rode out in front of his troops. “Many of you will die today,” he told them. “I cannot lie about that. What I can say is that in your dying, something far greater will be born—a peaceful, united Britain.”

Merlin then said an ancient Druid’s blessing over the men, and Arthur arranged the troops to form a shield wall against the Saxon charge. Some mumbled short prayers as they prepared for the attack.



Within seconds, the Saxons began rushing down the hill. Arthur wheeled his steed around and beckoned for a small group of mounted warriors to follow him. As the Saxons reached the shield wall, the Celts on horseback smashed into their flank. The shield wall broke, and the Celts charged the Saxons, scattering them instantly.

But the Saxons managed to recover and retaliate fiercely. The battle raged all day, the clever tactics and passion of Arthur’s Celts winning out one minute, the aggression and force of the Saxons taking over the next.



By the time the sun was setting, it was the Celts who had the upper hand. A few stubborn Saxon warriors continued to fight, but most of them willingly surrendered.

The battle was over. The Saxons were defeated. Men lay dead all around, and the soft grass was stained red.

On the crest of Mount Badon, the Saxon king Aelle knelt at Arthur's feet, his hands bound behind his back, Cei's knife at his throat.

"Shall I do it?" Cei asked

"No," Arthur said, drawing Cei's hand away. He untied Aelle and raised him up.

"You fought well. Gather what is left of your army and go home. Do not return here again."

Arthur's aides were as shocked as Aelle, who stared deeply into Arthur's eyes. "You are a worthy opponent, Arthur Pendragon," was all he said.

Arthur Pendragon reassembled his army, raised his banner once more, and began the march back to Camelot. His knights returned to Camelot as the liberators of a nation, and leading them was not a boy, but a man—a man who was a king.

