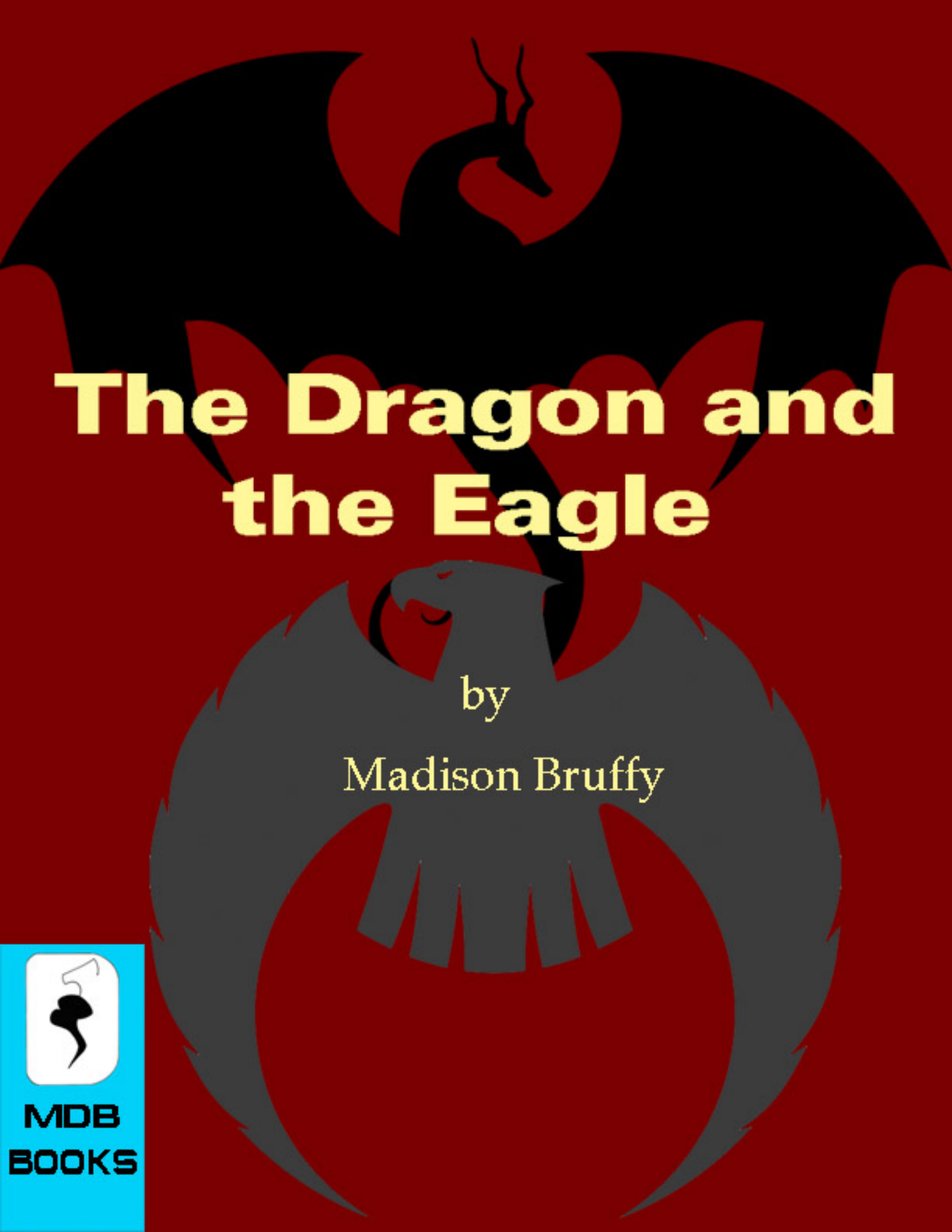




# The Dragon and the Eagle

by  
Madison Bruffy



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***The***

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## Prologue

It had been a clear day over London. But here, several miles away, in the skies above these rocky plains, storm clouds were gathering.

The growing, irregular drone of a wounded German bomber cut into the silence as the plane wandered into the area. On board, the entire crew was dead, their bomb load still on board and staged for a drop that never happened. The damage throughout the plane told of its struggle to stay with its group long enough to bomb London and return to Germany.

With no living hand at the controls, the plane had flown on alone, a metal coffin looking for an open grave to fall into. An engine sputtered and coughed before catching fire and leaving a contrail of smoke. The prop froze up and with only one engine; the heavy plane could no longer remain air borne and began a nose dive toward the plain below and a rough-hewn bullseye known as Stonehenge.

Thunder seemed to roll through the air and lightning flashed as the bomber struck the ancient structure and the bombs went off. But instead of destroying Stonehenge, the blast itself was transformed along with its force. Even as the earth shook and trembled, somewhere, deep beneath the ground, an ancient prison shattered like candied glass. Within these few moments, the explosion was transformed into a mystical- and magical- eruption. When it was over, Stonehenge remained unharmed and unchanged.

Of the bomber and its crew, no trace remained.

Of the ancient force that now stood in the center of Stonehenge, it was free to walk the Earth once more.

## Chapter One

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was a unique man in many ways. Foremost, in the fact that he was the leader of his country. Despite the fact that England was still considered a monarchy, the real power had long since passed to the office of the Prime Minister and Parliament. The dark cloud over Churchill's time in office, was a country named Germany and its fanatical leader, Adolf Hitler.

Tired from yet another round of wrangling on the Parliament floor, the man moved his somewhat large form into his private office at Number Ten Downing Street and sighed as he closed the door. Crossing to his desk, he opened the humidor resting there and took one of his favorite cigars in hand- intending to relax before dealing with the world again.

He'd never get the chance to light it.

"You are tired, Prime Minister. You should get more rest. A long sleep does wonders for a person."

Churchill turned, his eyes going wide at the sight of the...figure seemingly stepping from the shadows of the office. "How did you get in here? Who the devil are you?"

"Both questions have the same answer- as you will know once I tell you my name is 'Merlin'."

Churchill returned the cigar to its humidor, his eyes never leaving this strange man in his ragged black robes and shaved head. The shaft he held in one hand was a good foot taller than he and appeared to be solid oak. There was no way he should've been able to get into that

room without Churchill hearing him- or the noise of sentries trying to stop him.

Yet, he was obviously there- unless the Prime Minister was beginning to hallucinate- and that, Churchill refused to believe. Then he noticed the stranger's eyes and the seemingly unnatural glint that seemed to live within them. No human- no normal human- ever had such a glint in his eyes.

Slowly, the Prime Minister moved around his desk- putting it between himself and his unusual visitor. "All right, assuming I believe you- at least you look the part- what do you want?"

"Not to harm you," Merlin stated as he remained where he was. "Just information. I need to know about this war you've gotten involved in. I need to know if it's worth waking him for."

The Prime Minister's confusion was packed into one word. "Him?"

"In time," Merlin replied. "Now stop wasting mine and tell me about this mess."

Churchill shrugged. Why not? "There's not much to tell. The whole of Europe except for Russia is under the heel of a madman- a German named Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party. "He shook his head in disgust just thinking about it. "France was the last to fall. Our forces were defeated at Dunkirk. The United States is helping with food and supplies, but their people don't want to be involved in a war. Which leaves England standing alone."

Merlin stood for a long moment as he took this in, as well as a whole lot more than Churchill would never know about. "The entire world in flames."

The Prime Minister nodded. "Damn near. What Hitler or Mussolini don't want, the bloody Japanese do." Then, phantom or not, he met Merlin's gaze. "There's much more than *just* England at stake."

The wizard looked off for a long moment, seeing more than any mortal could- the past, the present, the future- the 'what ifs' and the 'why nots'. Finally, he nodded and looked to Churchill. "Very well. Expect us both later tonight. " Even as he spoke, Merlin was stepping back into the shadows of the room.

Churchill reached for the nearest lamp and turned it on-

Only to find himself alone in the room.

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The British Museum had a long history almost as unique as England itself. At this time of day, it had been closed for the better part of two hours. So the figure moving through its halls with unerring directness was definitely out of place. The sign over the entry to the hall read 'Antiquities wing'. Merlin looked up at it as he passed under it and only had one word for it. "Appropriate."

The windows he passed along his journey were covered with heavy black-out drapes, preventing any light from escaping. But the only light was an occasional wall lamp and the tip of Merlin's staff. He walked through the wing as if he owned it, recognizing some artifacts from

places he'd visited and resisting the urge to laugh at the terribly erroneous descriptions posted beside them.

At length, he finally came to the one artifact he'd come for. A large stone sarcophagus. The sign standing beside it, described it as the burial tomb of an ancient tribal leader. Merlin laughed and shook his head. "The fools found you and had no idea what they'd found." It only took the wave of his hand for the top of the ancient stone box to fade away, revealing the 'tribal leader' in all his ragged glory. "Wake up, Arthur, there's work to be done."

Even as the wizard spoke, a blurred shimmer seemed to cover the body as one spell ended revealing the result of another. Dried skin that looked pulled tight over a decayed skull, seemed to freshen and fill out on its own even as eyes and teeth seemed to return to their proper places. The decomposed, hand-sewn rags sparkled and took on a glow, only to be replaced by cloth more suited to a one-time King. Hair of a honey-blond color appeared to come back into existence and grow at an accelerated rate- leaving a neatly trimmed beard and mustache in their proper places.

Again, Merlin's voice echoed around the museum's hall. "*Arthur!*"

Arthur Pendragon, Once and Future King of England opened his eyes and his gaze went to the wizard as he slowly sat up. "Merlin- ? What- ?"

"Clear your head, man," the wizard ordered. "Come along, Arthur, there's work to do."

The befuddled look of one waking from a long sleep gradually faded from Arthur's face as he recognized Merlin and looked around. "Where are we?" he asked as he climbed out of the crypt.

“Something the people of this century call a ‘museum’,” his mentor replied. “Now do you want a guided tour or do you want to know why I woke you?”

His tone stung- not for the first time- and the former King turned to face him. “How long have I slept?”

“Long enough,” the older of the two replied. He then turned back the way he had come. “Now come. You have an appointment with someone who can answer your questions.”

Arthur followed and his eyes grew momentarily wider as Merlin pointed ahead of them and a large disc of light formed in the air. “Well? Are you coming, Arthur?”

Arthur Pendragon sighed at the wizard’s impatience and shook his head as the two stepped into the light and were enveloped by it.

## Chapter Two

The lights burned late at 10 Downing Street tonight- as they've done on many nights over the last few years. But tonight, Winston Churchill paced his office- the cigar in his mouth filling the room with a smokey haze as he waited- for what? A hallucination- or England's only hope?

"Perhaps a little of both."

He turned to see the wizard- if that's what he was- and another man, who was clearly a man of action- a leader. "Is this him?" Churchill asked Merlin. He turned to the new comer. "King Arthur, presumably?"

The man himself nodded. "I am Arthur Pendragon." He indicated the room by way of implying the passing centuries and shrugged. "...Former King of England."

"And you will be again someday," Merlin broke in with what seemed to be perpetual frustration. "Now quite wasting time and get on with it."

Churchill nodded and indicated Merlin. "Whether you two are who you say you are or not, he's right. England has very little time left."

He walked over to one wall in the office and Arthur's eyes grew slightly wider at the sight of what could only be a map. "The world has grown over the centuries."

Churchill glanced over at him as he answered. "Not really. We just know more about it." He pointed to Germany and with a wave of his hand indicated the rest of the European continent as he gave both Arthur and Merlin a brief history of the war. "...Every treaty Hitler's made from Poland onward, has been broken as soon as that country's

turned its back.” He shook his head and turned back toward his desk. “As of now, we’re the last Western Bastion between Hitler and the rest of the world.”

Arthur’s brow furled as he asked, “Why hasn’t this...barbarian been killed before now?”

Churchill shrugged. “I’m sure someone has tried- at least once. In this day and age, assassination is frowned upon. However if Hitler were to turn up dead, I don’t think anyone would mind.”

During this conversation, as Churchill warmed to a topic he’d spoken on many times before, Merlin stood quietly to one side, staring off as if lost in thought. Now, pulling himself back to the present moment, the wizard blinked and spoke. “Any assassination attempt would fail. He is protected.”

The Prime Minister nodded. “Yes- by bodyguards.”

“He has the Spear.” Both looked to Merlin and the question was clear on both of their faces. “Have you not heard of the Spear of Destiny? It’s tied to *your* religion, not mine.”

Arthur slowly nodded as he stepped over toward a chair. “There were stories.” He looked to Churchill. “Christianity was just starting to gain hold in our time. There was a Roman soldier. According to the story, he stabbed Christ as he hung on the cross and the blood, instead of running off as one would expect it to do, soaked in as if the spear were made of cloth, in effect, becoming one with Christ.

“It’s been said, that ever since then, the Spear has granted protection to any that claim it.”

Churchill looked from one to the other as Merlin nodded. "It's one of the strongest talismans of your religion. No ordinary weapon can stand against it. No weapon at all, except- " The wizard looked to Arthur.

"Excalibur?" The former king's confusion was clear. "How can Excalibur stand against a weapon that's one with the Son of God?"

"Who do you think forged Excalibur in the first place?" Merlin asked him.

Arthur and the Prime Minister exchanged glances as the former king of Camelot spoke. "I'd always assumed the Lady of the Lake- "

Merlin shook his head and a tone of impatience crept into his voice. "She is only the guardian. Once He created it, He placed it in her care, knowing she'd watch over it- which she did for centuries. Trusting your father with it was her one mistake."

His former student stepped toward him. "Then we must go and ask her for it."

The wizard nodded and turned toward the door. "And quickly if we are to find your two companions as well."

Again, Arthur glanced over at Churchill, then took after the older man. "Merlin, what companions? You never said anything about companions before."

"I say what I like, when the time is right," the wizard replied. As he and Arthur reached the door, Merlin looked back at Churchill. "Prime Minister, expect us when you *don't*."

Churchill made to follow them as Merlin closed the door. He reached it and opened it- only to hear the sound of the front door closing. He shook his head in wonder. Had he entrusted England's survival to a Living Legend- or a pair of madmen?

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Arthur looked around in near wonder as he and Merlin walked the night time streets of London. "Merlin, when I was a boy, your confounded mysteries would always put me in awe of you. "He paused and watched as a car rolled by. "And while I am still somewhat in awe, I am more frustrated than anything else. Why do we walk the streets? You said earlier this was a poor time for a tour."

"You know I do nothing without a reason."

The son of Uther Pendragon nodded. "The problem is, you never explain what those reasons are."

The few people they passed looked at them strangely, but said nothing as they hurried on to their own destinations. "Odd," Arthur noted. "As large as the city has obviously become- and yet, so few people out and about."

The strange wail of an air-raid siren sliced through the air and both men looked up and around as search lights stabbed the sky. "What the devil- ?" Arthur wondered.

Anti-aircraft guns began to fire- tracers lighting up the sky in their own ways as machine guns positioned throughout the city began to follow suit. Then the sounds of bombs dropping and exploding began to fill their very senses even as the drone of German bombers passed by

overhead. Both men seemed to stand still as if frozen into stunned silence as London seemed to explode all around them. When Arthur found his voice again, it was a shocked whisper. “Merlin what madness have you brought us to? Centuries have passed and yet the killing goes on. When will there be an end to it?”

“When will there be an end to Man?”

The two traded glances, then a bomb struck a short distance away, knocking both men off their feet. Fires began to light up the night as screams and cries for help filled the air.

Merlin grabbed Arthur’s arm in a surprising grip of steel before his former student could run towards the source of the cries. “Now is *not* the time to get involved.”

“They’re in trouble,” the former King replied as the sounds of fire and ambulance sirens filled the air.

“Yes, they are,” the wizard replied. “And the best way you can help is by going to the source.” He nodded toward the burning buildings, the growing crowds and rescue efforts. “To stop this, you must confront the one responsible.”

Arthur’s fists were clenched in frustrated anger as he watched the bodies being recovered. When he spoke, his eyes never left the burning ruins. “Let’s get on with it, then.”

### Chapter Three

Mist lay heavily upon the ground in these early morning hours as Merlin and Arthur arrived by the one lake in all of England where they would find the one they were looking for. As Merlin's circle of light faded, Arthur looked around as dawn began to show itself. "Incredible," he whispered. "It hasn't changed."

Even Merlin's tone of voice was softer here. "And it never will. She sees to it that the rest of the world doesn't even know this place exists." He nodded toward the water. "You'd best be about your business, Arthur."

The former King glanced at his mentor and advisor before turning and addressing himself to the lake. "Lady? Lady it is I, Arthur Pendragon."

For a long moment, there was no answer. Arthur looked to Merlin as if to ask a question, and the wizard waved him to silence. Then, a voice—a seemingly impossible mix of dream and birdsong, floated through their minds. "I remember you, Arthur- and you, Merlin."

"Are you aware of the great evil that is spreading across the world?" Arthur asked.

"I am. I assume you have come for it?"

He nodded. "With your permission, My Lady."

"Granted." The water churned and boiled and then, out of that, a geyser shot up into the sky. When the water fell back into the lake, they could see a woman's arm, clad in gold mail, her hand holding the pommel of the one item Arthur needed to see at that moment. As the

morning sunlight shone down upon it, Arthur could only whisper its name:

“Excalibur.”

The Lady’s arm moved, swung and the sword was spinning through the air. Somehow, in some way he never understood, Arthur knew he had only to hold up his hand and the pommel smacked softly against his gloved palm.

For a long moment, silence ruled the lake. Then the Lady withdrew her arm beneath the water and the morning mists drifted over the spot where she had been.

“Come, Arthur.” Even Merlin’s voice held a hushed tone as he looked out over the lake. “We need to find you a place to sleep before-”

“No,” the former King replied as he too watched the water. Then he turned to the wizard. “No, Merlin. I have slept for centuries. I would find these companions you spoke of before I rest.”

Merlin met his gaze for a moment as if studying him. Then he nodded. “I never could talk you into anything.”

“Only *everything*,” Arthur replied with a sarcastic tone as he slipped Excalibur into his belt.

“Very well then,” Merlin declared as he raised his staff and the portal of light re-opened before them. “Come.”

Within moments, they had stepped into the light and were gone, leaving everything undisturbed and quiet by the lake once more.

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When they left the sphere of light, Arthur knew that only a few moments had passed. Yet, they were now in a totally different part of Britain. The structure they were standing in front of may have been handsome once, centuries ago, but no longer. Two stories tall at some point, most of the upper floor had long since collapsed into the first floor. Walls had collapsed in some areas and vines had overgrown the ones that remained.

Arthur shook his head, half convinced the wizard had brought them to the wrong place. But then, Merlin walked right up to the only remaining entrance and a door that had been locked for centuries, opened easily under his hand. As he entered, Arthur had no choice but to follow. “Merlin, why would one of these companions be here- in these ruins?”

“It was a fairly new structure when Guinevere came here,” the wizard stated.

As soon as he said the name, Arthur stopped in his tracks. “Guinevere? Here? How? How could she be alive?”

They moved on through the ancient abbey as the wizard replied. “Once you and Mordred had your final battle and both of you were presumed dead, she stole back into Camelot one night and made her way to my chambers- where she helped herself to ever book of spells and incantations she could find. Then she came here, to Willington Abbey and in ideal seclusion, she buried herself in study.”

Arthur’s whisper echoed in the old hallway. “Study?”

Merlin nodded as he turned toward a flight of stairs, cracked and chipped by the centuries. “Exactly- every spell. She became a better

student than Morgana ever was. She mastered them all- all toward the goal of learning the one spell she wanted most. The spell of life prolongation.”

“Are you saying she’s immortal now?”

The older male shook his head as they reached the top of the stairs and made his way around some rubble. “No- it would take more than simple magic to become immortal. Life prolongation is just the extension of the life-span. She was twenty-eight when she came to Camelot. Another millennium will pass before she looks anywhere near thirty. On the other hand, a sword or knife will still kill her as easily as anyone else.”

Arthur shook his head as they made their way along the hall, ducking under and around collapsed beams. “Why would she go to such extremes?”

“To make certain she lived long enough to be here when you returned.”

“Why?”

Merlin met his gaze. “To beg your forgiveness.” He then nodded toward the only remaining door on this floor- which in turn led to the only remaining room. “She lies beyond that door- a door only one man can open.

“Do I have to tell you who that man is?”

Arthur glared at him for a long moment through the shadows cast by the morning sun. Then he reached for the door’s handle. Once in contact with it, a glow formed and spread to completely cover the

door. It pulsed for a moment, then harmlessly faded even as the door itself swung open.

Merlin nodded in approval and smiled as he followed Arthur into a room that was untouched by time. The walls were plaster over bare rock. There was a balcony at one end, a fireplace to one side, a wardrobe, a small table, mirror and chair. Along with two night stands with candles on each, these made up the contents of the room surrounding the bed.

The bed itself was ornately carved- the posts reaching almost to the ceiling. The headboard held an intricate design of flowers and butterflies. The sheets were of the rarest silks- at least rare in Arthur's day.

Yet, all of this was mere backdrop and decoration to the figure lying upon the bed as if she were simply asleep. Guinevere. She did indeed look to still be a mere twenty-eight years old. Her honey blond hair framed her face even as it fell upon the pillow and down upon her shoulders. Arthur stood beside the bed and looked down upon a face that was untouched by the centuries.

"Well don't stand there with your mouth hanging open," Merlin scolded. "Kiss her and wake her up, we don't have all day, you know."

Arthur threw a glare in his direction, turned back, hesitated but a moment, then leaned down and gently kissed the woman he stilled clearly loved. As their lips met, there was a soft chime somewhere in the room and the rich brown eyes of the former queen fluttered open. "Arthur...Arthur?" Then her gaze focused and grew tender. One hand reached up and the former King took it in both of his. "You came..."

“As you anticipated,” he replied with a soft smile.

“Arthur, I...” She slowly sat up with his help, then saw the wizard.  
“Merlin.”

The gleam of satisfaction in his eyes was impossible to miss. “Well done, woman. Best I’ve ever seen it done. You should have taken up the Arts much sooner.”

Arthur looked over his shoulder at the man. “Merlin, leave us for a moment. Please?”

The scowl on Merlin’s face was clear, but he finally grunted and headed for the door- the streamers of his robe billowing out behind him as he moved. Once he’d closed the door, Guinevere swung her legs off the bed and slowly stood up, her gown falling into place as she did so. “Should you be standing so soon?” her husband asked.

“It helps to move around now that the spell’s over,” she replied as she moved toward the table and mirror and reached out to the chair nearby.

Arthur watched her as he spoke. “Merlin said you wanted to live long enough to ask my forgiveness.” He let the silence stretch for a moment before he asked, “Do you think you deserve it?”

She looked to the ceiling and its plastered surface and wooden beams and silently shook her head. When she spoke, her voice was a broken whisper. “No...”

He stepped toward her, yet stopped short of touching her. “Just tell me why- why you did it and how you could do it.”

What sunlight could get through the balcony doors, set highlights dancing in her hair as she turned toward him- the guilt clear on her face. "How can I explain it? How can a woman be in love with two men and love them both so intensely it tears her apart?" She turned away, her gaze going to the balcony doors as she continued. "Do you remember what I was like when I first arrived at Camelot? Naïve, impulsive, inexperienced. Ours was the first relationship I'd ever have- and it was arranged. Yet-" She turned to face him. "I fell in love with you so quickly and so deeply." She turned away once more and began pacing the room.

"Then he came to Camelot," she said. "So tall and dark in his shining armor and sitting astride that great white horse of his. I tried not to fall in love with him- I tried telling myself it was just infatuation. But I was wrong."

She turned to face her husband once more. "I never stopped loving you, Arthur. Never."

"Even when you were in his arms?"

"Even then," She answered. "I betrayed your love and your trust and I never intended to do either."

Arthur stepped away as he spoke. "The glen was well outside the walls of Camelot." He looked back over his shoulder. "That was no chance encounter."

She looked down at her hands and when she spoke, her words were directed to them. "I know. He sent me a note. He wanted to meet there to say good-bye." Arthur turned and she nodded. "Yes. He was going to leave before things could go any further. With Mordred looking over

our shoulders, we both knew there was a danger of him using us against you.” Guinevere paused for a long moment as if she were afraid to continue. “But when we got to the glen...I don’t know, things got out of hand.” She turned away from her husband. “We were...involved before we even realized it.”

“Was that the only time?” he asked as he watched her back.

“Yes,” was her firm answer. “I swear to the one God, yes.” She turned and the tears on her face were clear. “I was- am- guilty as charged.”

The silence hung heavy in that room for a long moment. Arthur looked to the ceiling as he took in and released a deep breath. He closed his eyes as he spoke. “It was Mordred that told me where you’d gone. Apparently he’d had spies watching our rooms.” He sighed once more. “He had seen what I had refused to.”

“Because he was looking for something like it to use against you,” Guinevere said softly as she remained standing where she was. “But that doesn’t make it any easier to bear.”

Her King shook his head. “No.” He turned and met her gaze. “No, it doesn’t. And now there is a greater evil that must be dealt with.” He looked around the chamber before meeting her gaze once more and while he tried to hide it, the hurt and frustration was clear in his voice. “You admit your guilt- and yet, you ask for my forgiveness. How can I give you that without knowing if I can trust you?”

She stepped toward him, clearly afraid to even touch him. The fear of being rejected was just as clear in her own voice. “What would you have me do?”

He went to her and did take her hands in his. “*Be* the woman I married. *Be* my wife, my companion, *my friend*. Show me that things can be the way they were- the way they should have been.”

“Yes- oh, Arthur, yes.” She bowed her head till she could kiss his hands and when she looked up and Arthur saw the tears, he took her in his arms and held her close and tightly as if afraid he’d lose her again.

A throat was cleared. “If you’re through now, we have another one to find before we’re finished for the day.” They both turned to see Merlin standing impatiently in the doorway.

“Where to now?” Arthur asked him.

The wizard replied with one word as he turned and left the room: “France.”

Husband and wife traded glances that were equal parts shock and foreboding, for France could only mean one thing:

Lancelot.

## Chapter Four

Arthur remembered Lancelot's many stories of his homeland and had often wished to someday see it for himself. But as the light sphere faded and Arthur looked around, all he saw was ruin. Holes in the ground that he didn't know were called 'bomb craters', vehicles like the ones he'd seen in London, twisted into metal junk, their insides showing signs of intense heat. Carts and wagons similar to those of his own time abandoned or smashed into uselessness.

There were also bodies. Some dead by no means Arthur recognized- never having seen machine gun fire. Others, burned beyond any hope of recognition. Guinevere stepped up beside him and it was clear they were both repulsed by their surroundings.

Merlin was first to speak as he glanced around. "You could've brought us in closer, woman."

She glanced at Arthur as she replied. "I told you I had never used that spell. You're lucky I didn't drop us in the Channel."

He waved it off. "Very well." He started off down the road, apparently unaffected by the death and destruction around him. "Any landing that's a dry one will do."

As the three moved off together, Arthur stepped up beside Merlin and spoke in a low tone. "If you wanted to arrive closer to Lancelot, why did you not bring us here yourself?"

"Two reasons," his mentor replied. "I've been using that spell off and on for the better part of a day and I was tired. Even I need rest occasionally."

His former student nodded in understanding. “And the second reason?”

It was Merlin’s turn to speak low. “I wanted to see how strong she’s become. We may have need of her new talents before this business is done.”

There came a sound none of them had ever heard before: gunfire. Machine guns. Before Merlin could stop him, Arthur drew Excalibur and ran on ahead with Guinevere right behind him- the skirts of her gown transforming into leggings even as she ran. Unseen by either of them, the wizard nodded and the gleam in his eyes was unmistakable. “Without conscious thought- very, very good indeed.”

Up ahead, Arthur spotted a building he’d once heard Lancelot refer to as a ‘chateau’- a two story structure with wood shingles on the sides and wide windows that allowed an excellent view of the countryside.

At the moment, it was surrounded by men in grey uniforms and wearing strange helmets, aiming equally strange weapons at those windows and the door. One German- for that’s who Arthur assumed they were- had reached said door and kicked it in. Bringing his weapon to bear, he charged in- But before any shots could be heard, there was sickening half gurgle and a moment later, his headless body fell back out the door.

By that time, Arthur was among the enemy, using Excalibur to knock weapons aside, of chop them in half, landing fists against flesh. Guinevere took a different tack. A raised hand sent weapons flying. A clenched fist sent her share of the enemy flying as well- to land hard a good ten yards away.

Her husband finally managed to reach the door of the chateau even as a final German came flying head first out the large bay window, sending broken shards of glass flying in all directions. "Lancelot?" Arthur glanced back at his wife, then stepped closer to the door. "Lancelot?" Carefully, with Excalibur in hand, he stepped inside-

-and barely had time to parry the blow that would have separated his own head from his shoulders. "*Damn you! How many more of you are there?!*" Before there could be an answer, swords clashed again, several times before Arthur's attacker backed off a step and glared at him. "Who are- ?" His eyes narrowed. Then they went wide in recognition. "*Arthur?!!*" Movement at the door, drew his attention. "Guinevere? I must have gone mad." He drops his sword and turned away.

As his wife joined him, Arthur watched his friend as he shook his head in despair. "It is not possible," the knight declared. He closed his eyes and the centuries seemed to weigh heavily upon him. He looked to the ceiling and raised his fist. "*Stop your tricks! I will not give in!*"

Arthur went to him and grabbed his arm- becoming aware only then, that Lancelot was in armor- nearly a full suit. "Lancelot." He turned the man to face him and took him by both shoulders. "Lance, look at me. I *am* Arthur. I've come back as...predicted."

The look of near madness slowly faded from the Frenchman's eyes as he took in the truth standing before him. He gripped the arm of the man standing before him. "...it *is* you- and Guinevere...and Merlin?" he added as the wizard stepped into view.

Arthur nodded as he released the man. "It's true, Lance. I have need of your help. But first, how is it that you are still alive after all these centuries?"

"Lancelot's connection to the One God has always been somewhat vague," Merlin commented as he leaned against his staff. "He never would die when he was supposed to."

The Knight's head came up and around and even in the dimness of the room, the glare he threw at Merlin was clear. "And I will *not* die- not yet. Not till I have atoned for my sins."

"What sins?" Arthur asked, even though he knew of at least one.

For a long moment, the man some had called the Greatest Knight of the Round Table, didn't answer. When he did, he couldn't meet Arthur's gaze. "Betrayal- of you, Camelot- of everything you- *and I*- believed in." As he staggered over to a nearby chair, Arthur and Guinevere both noticed for the first time the condition of Lancelot's armor. Most of it was covered in rust- sad testimony to Lancelot's failure to see to its upkeep.

Arthur watched him as he sat down- and the chair strained to hold him. He then glanced over at Guinevere and Merlin as he spoke. "Lancelot, I cannot deny what you've said- I wish I could. But we both know- " He indicated his wife and the wizard to include them- " We *all* know that you were not the only one responsible for Camelot's fall." He paused and looked off as if, like Merlin, he could see into the past. "There was blame enough to go around."

He then brought his gaze back to his friend and stepped toward him as he continued. "But if you believe you need to fight and win

redemption, then come with us and fight this new evil that has your country in its grip- and threatens mine.”

For a moment, it looked as if Lancelot hadn't heard. Then he looked up until he met Arthur's gaze. Then, just as slowly, he rose to his feet- only to fall to his knees before the one man he'd sworn loyalty to centuries ago. “A quest worthy of a fallen knight, my King.”

Arthur placed his hand on the man's shoulder as Merlin shattered the moment. “Now that that's over, woman, how about getting the four of us out of here before more Germans show up?” He then turned and left the building without waiting for an answer.

The look of frustration in Guinevere's eyes was clear as she spoke to Arthur. “It would serve the old coot right if I *did* drop him in the Channel!”

\*

On Merlin's directions, Guinevere returned the four of them to Ten Downing Street and another meeting with the Prime Minister that resulted in their first car ride into the English country side.

Arthur's interest in these modern vehicles was clear as he watched everything the driver did. The sun filled country side served to lift everyone's spirits by the time they pulled into the driveway of an old manor house. “Gladstone Manor, sir,” the driver explained when they asked. “The owners used it as a summer house.”

Arthur turned to face the man as they got out of the car. “You said ‘used’?”

“Yes, sir. They were killed last week,” the driver explained. “One of the bombing raids on London.” He then handed Arthur the keys to the house, nodded to each of them and drove off, leaving them on the doorstep.

The manor house was two stories tall and looked to have more than enough rooms to spare behind its fieldstone exterior and cut glass windows. “Well, Arthur?” Merlin asked. “Are you going to open the door or not?”

The Once and Future King just shook his head and put the keys to use. Soon, they stood in a foyer that led off in three different directions. “As Merlin has pointed out- more than once- we could all use some rest if we’re to be at our best.” Arthur looked to his wife and his best friend. “Tomorrow, we’ll start planning our moves against a madman.”

With that, curiosity pulled the four in different directions- and into different areas of the house. Lancelot looked around as he stepped out into the gardens behind the manor. He took in and released a deep breath as he thought back to those days at Camelot. It was clear without even talking to her that Guinevere had made her choice- and he admitted that it may’ve been the right one. He wished Arthur no ill- considered him his best friend as well as his king. But every time he looked at her, he remembered that night in the glen and the heights of the passion they’d shared- only to wake the next morning to find Excalibur stabbed into the ground between them. A short distance in either direction and one of them would have died that night.

\*

Elsewhere in the house, Arthur stepped into a room and his eyes went wide, for he'd stumbled upon the manor's library. In his time, books had been rare and few- and expensive, since each one was hand made from the parchment for the pages to the hides used for the covers and the actual hand writing inside them. Except for Merlin's collection, he'd never seen more than two or three in his entire life- he took that back. He'd seen several in the Prime Minister's office. But *here*, there were two full walls reaching some eight feet high, covered with books. And there was something else beside a desk with some kind of square box on it. There was a large ball in a stand and on it, he recognized the outline of England and the European continent from the map he'd seen in Churchill's office.

But by far, it was the books that drew his attention. As he stepped further into the room, taking it all in, he sensed more knowledge and learning in that one room than anywhere else he'd ever been. "You should take advantage of it, Arthur. It's a certainty no one else will."

Camelot's one and only king turned to glare at the wizard. But the glare softened into confusion. "Merlin...I would ask you something I have never asked."

"Oh, I've been waiting for this."

Arthur turned to face him fully as he spoke. "You knew the history of Excalibur. Most of the time, your actions make no sense- till after the battle, then they make perfect sense. You deal with deities like the Lady of the Lake with near casualness. You reject your father's leanings.

"You're not the Devil's Advocate." He stepped toward the wizard. "Are you God's Merlin? Are you God's Advocate?"

For a long moment, the older male didn't answer. There was a gleam in his eye that Arthur couldn't quite pin down. When Merlin finally did speak, he did so through a gentle smile. "Would it make any difference if I were, Arthur? Would it have affected the decisions you've made- or will make?"

"Damn you," the former king said gently as he turned away. "Why can't you give me a straight answer- just once?"

"If I did, how would you learn anything?" Merlin then turned and left the library, the gleam in his eye never fading.

\*

Upstairs, Guinevere had found the Master Bedroom and a fully stocked wardrobe belonging to the former Lady of the house. She slowly took in the sight of the blouses, skirts, slacks and shoes, then considered the gown she'd been wearing- literally- for centuries. Well aware that their former owner would never have need of them, she picked out a blouse, skirt and a pair of shoes and began to change into them- only to find that their previous owner had been a size larger than herself.

She looked frustrated for just a moment, then with a slight tilt of her head and a momentary flash of magical light, the garments all fit as if they'd been made for her. Spotting a full length mirror mounted on a stand, she walked over to it- doing so carefully in the high heels- and gave herself a good inspection. As she turned one way and then the other, she nodded in approval- then she turned and looked up- aware of her husband's anguish as she never had been before. In an instant,

she was in the library, watching as Arthur turned off the box on the desk. "Arthur?"

He waved a hand toward the object. "The voice that came from it called it a 'radio'," he explained. "A wondrous device. It gives forth music as well as news of the rest of the world."

"And that news troubles you," his wife noted. "I could sense it clear upstairs."

Arthur nodded as he stepped away from the desk. "The Prime Minister was more correct than he knew." He crossed over to the large globe he'd seen earlier. "This Hitler and Mussolini are carving up the western European continent between them and their insanity's spreading south- onto a continent called 'Africa'." He pointed to the globe. "And then, in this area- called 'The Orient', a country called 'Japan' is invading its neighbors as well."

Guinevere stepped over beside him as she looked at the globe and shook her head. "Has the whole world gone mad?"

"If it hasn't already, it's on the verge of doing so," her husband answered. It was then that he noticed how she was dressed. "Where did you find those?"

"In the Master Bedroom," she replied. "Left behind by the owners." She stepped away and turned so he could see the outfit- skirt and all. "It was a little large at first, but a touch of magic was as good as a seamstress."

"I see you're finding pleasure in your new talents," Arthur noted.

She turned to face him and the skirt settled into place as she spoke. "Do you wish me to stop using them?"

Arthur shook his head as he reached out and took her hands in his. "I would never deny you anything that brings you pleasure. " He dropped her hands as he continued with a shrug. "Besides, Merlin has told me that we may need your new talents before this insanity's over. Therefore, the more comfortable you are with them, the better off you'll be."

She in turn, took his hands in hers. "In that case..." A gentle smile came to her face and they were enveloped in a sphere of light...

...when it faded, Arthur found himself in the Master Bedroom. It was only a moment later, that he realized they were both undressed- their clothes folded and laying on a nearby chair with Excalibur lying across its arms.

Guinevere released his hands and stepped back, holding hers out to him. "Come and take me, Arthur. Take me as you did on our wedding night." She stepped closer, her hands resting against his chest. "From what you've said, we'll be facing Hell soon enough. For now, remind us both of what Heaven is like."

He looked down at her for a long moment, searching and studying her face. Then he leaned down and kissed her as her arms slip up around his neck. She gave a soft 'yelp' as he lifted her into his arms- literally sweeping her off her feet. He then looked down at her once more before carrying her to the bed.

\*

Elsewhere in the manor, in a room more sparse than the Master Bedroom, Merlin was seated in a combination of meditation, concentration and simple deep thought. In this state, he was more than aware of his surroundings. He knew Lancelot was in the garden praying, just as he was aware of the love-making going on almost directly above his head.

Everything was quiet, calm.

For the moment.

He was a blur of motion as he spun round, brought his staff to bear, fired a mystic bolt and watched as the demon screamed and exploded in a magical eruption moments before it would have snapped the wizard's neck. Merlin's warning echoed through the house- in both minds and ears. "Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, to arms! We're under attack!"

Moments later, Demons were everywhere and coming from every direction.

In the garden, every slash and swing of Lancelot's blade brought forth the scream of death from a demon before it disintegrated and another took its place.

In the Master Bedroom, Excalibur flashed and gleamed in Arthur's hands as Demon heads were separated from demon shoulders. Mystic bolts erupted from Guinevere's hands as instinct served for lack of experience and one demon after another exploded when hit.

As for Merlin, his speed and swiftness belied his age as he ducked and spun, bringing his staff down on one demon's head even as he blasted another with a mystic bolt.

How long the battle lasted, none of them knew. But the sun had set by the time the last demon fell and the four could gather in the manor's main hall. "Merlin, it is clear someone else knows about us."

"Lancelot, you always did have a gift for stating the obvious," the wizard growled as he paced the hall.

"Who would it be, Merlin?" Arthur asked as he indicated the body of a demon that was even then fading away. "Who else could have known that we've gathered together? Could- "the former king glanced around. "Could Morgana have survived to this century? Could *she* be behind this?"

Merlin stopped his pacing as he thought it over. "The essence, the aura...it *feels* like Morgana- and yet...it's wrong somehow, twisted..."

Guinevere nodded. "Merlin, I sensed it, too. Almost as if there were..." she shrugged. "I don't know...layers..."

Merlin met her gaze as he slowly nodded. "Yes. Very good, woman- Very good." He nodded again. "There *were* others involved. Morgana's aura was there, but not her guidance."

Lancelot shook his head. "Are you saying someone *made* her do this? Used her- "

The wizard spun round, meeting the knight's gaze with his own penetrating stare. "Yes! Used- but not her. Only her powers."

Arthur shook his head in frustration. "Merlin, for once will you please say what you mean?!"

The older man turned away from all three, stepping toward the fireplace located to one side of the main hall as he spoke. "This attack was *not* Morgana's doing. *Think* about it. Has she ever sent demons against us before? No. This was the work of someone steeped in Evil. People who were legends long before any of you three were born."

For a long silent moment, Merlin stared into the unlit fireplace, seeing far more than just the logs waiting for their fiery end. "They are called the 'Triad'. Three brothers- the three most evil sorcerers existence could possibly conceive. They'd enjoy seeing Hitler's madness take over the world. Then they could practice their Dark Arts and none would dare try to stop them."

"But how is Morgana involved with them?" Arthur asked.

"As a prisoner." Merlin turned from the fireplace and stepped toward the patio doors leading to the garden. "The three are parasites, sucking the powers from her and adding them to their own. If it's allowed to continue, in a few more centuries, there'll be nothing left of her except a dried out husk."

Arthur took a step toward him and stopped as he spoke. "Then we must save her." Merlin turned and joined with Guinevere and Lancelot in staring at him in shock. "They are using her," he reminded them. "Feeding off of her. Take her away and they are weakened." He turned to Guinevere as he nodded toward the wizard. "If, as Merlin says, they favor Hitler's madness, they have to be stopped before they decide to move openly in his defense." He looked to Lancelot, then Merlin and

back to his wife. "But, above all of that- and despite what she's done to us, she's my sister, the only blood family I have."

Merlin stepped toward him in frustration, half determined to physically throttle some sense into his one-time student. "Even *I* am not strong enough or *fool* enough to face the Triad. Even with Guinevere- as strong as she's become- we would be sorely out-matched."

"When have we ever been otherwise?" Arthur asked as he met his former mentor's gaze. He looked to everyone as he continued. "There were those that said I would never unite England- but I did. There were those that said we would never find the Holy Grail, but Perceval did. There were those that said Camelot would not last. As a physical place, they were right- *But* as an idea- as a goal to reach for, it lasted long enough to be remembered to this very day- centuries later." He turned back to face Merlin. "And we will free my sister."

"Where are they?"

"What do you propose?" the wizard demanded. "To just walk in the door as if you were a houseguest? You'd be dead before you could announce yourself."

"Then the three of you will have to keep them busy," Arthur countered. "Just give me enough time to get in, find her, free her and get out."

Merlin met his gaze for a moment more with a glare of his own as he growled deep down in his throat in clear frustration. He had learned centuries ago that there was no point in arguing any further once Arthur made up his mind. "Very well- but keep in mind that you are

endangering *everyone* for someone who would just as soon stab you in the heart as look at you!”

## Chapter Five

The winds blow cold and harsh here in the French Alps- even in summer. Arthur looked around as Merlin's spell ended, taking in the area with the eye of a seasoned warrior. Barren, rocky- patches of snow. Here and there, a small bush or tree. Grateful for the coats Guinevere had found while exploring the house, Arthur turned his collar up against the wind. "Which way?" he asked the wizard as he rested a hand on the pommel of Excalibur.

Merlin didn't answer right away. Instead, he held out his hand to Arthur and gave him a pendant. "Put this around her neck when you find her," he said. "It will counter the spells they're using to hold her." He then struck out across the rocky plain. "Now come along if you're going to, before the moon rises."

The four then began their trek, crossing terrain that changed very little as they walked. Finally, they reached the top of a rise just as the moon cleared the horizon and Merlin pointed. "There, Arthur. The retreat of the Triad."

It was easily five stories tall and the walls were blacker than the surrounding night. Of doors and windows, there were no signs. Lancelot had the first question. "So how do we get in?"

"We don't," Merlin stated. He turned to Arthur. "I can pierce their defenses for only a few moments- enough for one man to get through. But be warned, the moment I do so, they will know we're here."

His former student nodded as they paused a short distance from the Retreat.

“Arthur!” He turned as Guinevere came to him. The kiss they shared was short, intense- and filled with the kind of promise only a wife could give. “You live up to the prophecies Arthur Pendragon,” she whispered. She looked down and then met his gaze. “And make damn sure you come back.”

“I’ll be counting the minutes,” He whispered in return as he gently touched her face. In that moment, he knew with absolute certainty that she’d be there- by his side- forever more. Then he looked to Merlin and turned toward the Retreat once more.

The wizard raised his staff even as a breeze began to ruffle his cloak and banged it against the ground, bringing forth a glow of energy at its tip. A moment later, that energy exploded against the walls of the Retreat, revealing an oblong opening. “Now, Arthur!”

Without hesitation, the former king of England stepped through the portal even as hell erupted around his companions. As the portal closed behind him, Merlin raised his staff and held it in both hands, creating a magical shield. Mystical energy exploded against it, splashing the world with color. “I can do more,” he told the others. “The shield takes all of my- *Guinevere!* “

She spun, instinct coming to her aid once more as her mystic bolts exploded from her hands to strike the winged monstrosity that had swooped down from the skies. Monstrous screams came from the wizard’s other side as Lancelot’s sword ended the life of one demon after another.

As the battle raged outside, Arthur moved carefully through the halls of the Retreat. As he walked, with Excalibur in one hand, he took

Merlin's pendant from his pocket with the other and saw it glow as well as felt the warmth coming from it. He looked one way and then the other and noticed the pendant's glow seemed to dim or grow stronger depending on which way he turned. Merlin had made it for Morgana and it was only then that Arthur realized it would lead him to her.

Going in the direction the pendant indicated, Arthur couldn't help thinking about his reasons for being there. They were valid reasons. The fact that Morgana had plotted to destroy him and Camelot notwithstanding, she was still his sister. But even then, if she had been a total stranger, there was still another, simpler and more basic reason for doing this mad thing:

It was the right thing to do.

Torches lit the halls and every little bit another set of stairs branched off to some other place. The pendant dimmed as he walked past one of these flights of stairs and Arthur back tracked and took them, moving carefully as he made his way upward into the Retreat.

Outside, as Merlin continued to ward off the energy bursts of the Triad, Guinevere dispatched another demon, then ducked the clawed grab of one even as Lancelot cut off its head.

Arthur moved carefully as the pendant led him to the upper most level of the Retreat. There were doors on each side of the hall- old wooden doors alternating with cobblestone walls and floors. The torches showed timbers above his head supporting a wooden ceiling. The torchlight moved and flickered in its usual way, until Arthur came round a corner and a shadow became a man far larger than he. "You trespass on Triad land," the giant growled. "That not allowed."

“And how do you intend to stop me?” Arthur asked as his grip on Excalibur tightened.

“I kill you,” the giant replied as he lunged. “With bare hands!”

Arthur swung Excalibur with both hands, bringing the blade down into the giant’s neck and halfway through it, causing the male to land against a wall. But to the former king’s astonishment, there was no blood- and the wound closed over even as he watched. “By the One God,” he whispered.

The giant’s laughter rumbled like thunder deep down in his chest as he climbed to his feet. One fist slammed against his chest as he spoke. “Garek die three centuries ago. How you kill one that’s already dead, Swordsman?”

He came at Arthur again and the smaller man ducked under his grab as the torches cast weird shadows on the walls. Then Arthur remembered stories of villages burning bodies that had been left unburied too long. He grabbed one of the torches from its sconce even as Garek came at him and shoved the flames in the giant’s face!

Like dry leaves in Autumn, the giant’s skin, hair, clothes- all caught fire at the same time turning Garek into a towering bonfire that screamed as he knocked the torch from Arthur’s hand. The former king ducked under his grab once more and turned to see the giant collapse to the floor as the fire quickly consumed him.

Turning from the sight, Arthur checked the pendant and followed its glow to the door the giant had been guarding. Pushing it open, he stepped inside and stopped at the sight before him.

Morgana was enveloped in what looked like pulsing ropes of light that wrapped around and wound their way around her. She stared off, oblivious to Arthur and everything around her. Stepping closer, Arthur took the pendant's chain in hand and being careful to avoid the glowing ropes of light, he dropped it over her head- allowing the pendant to fall against her chest. It had no sooner done so, than the ropes of light silently exploded and Morgana collapsed to the floor, free for the first time in centuries. Arthur was immediately at her side. "Morgana, come on, on your feet. We must be gone before the Triad figures out what's happened."

He moved her glossy black hair out of her face as her eyes opened at the sound of his voice. "Arthur...? Then her mind cleared. "*It is you.*" She shoved him away. "Leave me be!"

"We don't have time for your attitude," he half-brother told her as he helped her to her feet. "That pendant you're wearing is the only thing keeping the Triad from draining your life away!"

She looked down at the object and grabbed it as if to tear it off. But she stopped shy of doing so and looked to Arthur. "Why? Why are you here risking your life for me?"

Arthur sighed in frustration as he stepped away. He knew she could be stubborn- but why now of all times? "There are several reasons. But the most basic is the most true. Despite everything that has passed between us, you're still my sister whether you like it or not. Once I learned what had happened how could you expect me to stand by and allow it to continue?"

“And the other reasons?” she asked as she watched him with narrowed eyes.

He stepped toward her and the note of urgency in his voice was clear. “Morgana, we don’t have time to talk about this now. Even as we speak, Merlin, Guinevere and Lancelot are facing the Triad’s anger- anger that will be turned toward us if we don’t leave- now.

“All I ask of you at the moment, is a truce until we can talk this over. No one attacks anyone till we have talked. Agreed?”

She looked to the door and then to Arthur. The desire for freedom clear on her face. “How do you propose we leave? There is a guard- “

“Who is already dead,” Arthur told her. He waved a hand toward the door. “Now come- please?”

Morgana glared at him for a moment longer, then headed for the door. “What century is it?”

“I think I heard someone call it the twentieth,” her half-brother replied as he made to follow her out.

She immediately dove for him, knocking him to the floor-

-as a giant serpent lunged past where their heads had been. “You must deal with it,” She said. “I’ve not had time to rebuild my strength.”

The serpent got its coils beneath it and its hiss sounded like a geyser erupting as it looked from one to the other before the gleam of torchlight on Excalibur’s blade caught its eye and it lunged.

“*Behind me!*” Arthur shouted as he gripped Excalibur in both hands. Morgana dove behind him as blade met serpent in a shower of blood

and splitting skull that left the over-grown snake dead on the floor. Arthur then grabbed his half-sister by the arm and headed back down the hall. "Let's go before they throw something else at us!"

But as they passed another door, Morgana heard something and stopped. When Arthur turned back to urge her on, she waved him to silence, then nodded toward the door, meaning for him to listen. Her brother did so, then he stepped back and kicked the door in, revealing the chamber belonging to the Triad. The three brothers were out on the balcony, their shaved heads bowed as they waged their fight against Merlin, Guinevere and Lancelot. But it was clear that without Morgana's additional powers added to theirs, they were tiring as they faced an enemy for the first time in centuries.

Not giving them time to realize who or what was behind them, Arthur screamed and lunged with Excalibur gleaming in the chambers torchlight. One of the brothers turned and raised a hand to spell cast- a hand that was lost to Excalibur.

An instant later, in a clap of thunder, all three brothers were gone.

"You surprised them," Morgana said. "They are scattered and it will take time for them to re-group." She then turned to face her brother head on. "*Now* we will talk."

But Arthur shook his head. "Not in the enemy's lair. Let's get back to England- then we will talk."

She met his gaze for a long moment, before finally nodding.

## Chapter Six

Upon rejoining the others, Arthur and Morgana had to take time for those that use magic to regain enough strength to perform the traveling spell. Once back at Gladstone Manor, Arthur led his sister to the library, knowing his best chance of settling things between them would be now- one on one.

In a gown more form fitting than any Guinevere ever wore, Morgana followed him into the room, never taking her eyes off of him. She stopped in the middle of the library and folded her arms across her chest. "All right, Arthur. There's no love between us- there never has been. Why bother to rescue me?"

Arthur stood by the room's desk and for a moment, he didn't answer. "As I said, there were several reasons. Taking you from the Triad weakened them. Scattering them- or killing them would stop them from assisting the greater evil."

Her eyes narrowed slightly as she watched him. "What greater evil?"

Her younger brother told her all of it. From Merlin's freedom to his own awaking and meeting with Churchill. From tracking down Guinevere and Lancelot to fighting demons in that very house. Then he stepped over to the globe and pointed things out as he told her about the rest of the world.

She stared at him in shocked disbelief. "...And you want me to help you stop them?! Why should I even care?"

Arthur looked up from the globe as he answered. "Because, while you've done evil things, I do not believe that deep down, you *are* evil. And I also believe that there's a limit to what even *you* will accept."

She turned away from him, her gown swirling about her as she moved. "Then you assume wrong."

"Do I?" Arthur asked as he watched her. "I'll tell you what else I believe. I believe you have a right to your anger and hatred- but you aim them at the wrong person. You take them out on me because you cannot reach my father."

Morgana turned round to face him and said anger was clear on her face and seemed to leap from her eyes. "Merlin helped him *rape* my mother. *You* were nothing more than payment for services rendered."

He shrugged. "I cannot deny it- what's more, I agree with you. Regardless of the century, what Uther Pendragon did was wrong- and if he were here today, I'd stand aside and let you have at him. But he's not, so you attack me instead." He watched her close. "In fact, you even stooped to his level when you masqueraded as someone else and tricked me into helping you conceive Mordred.

"That makes you no better than Uther."

Her fist came flying- and Arthur grabbed it. "Yes, the blood of Uther Pendragon flows through my veins, but *so does the blood of the Lady Elaine*- or had you forgotten that? By attacking me, you attack her as well. Is *that* how you chose to honor her memory?"

She pulled her hand free and stepped away, her slippered feet making no noise on the library carpet. "You never knew her- how she

was after Merlin left with you in his arms. It was as if nothing mattered anymore.” Her voice took on a hard edge. “Nothing and *no one*.” She turned to face him. “Merlin didn’t just take you that day, he took my mother as well. She collapsed into a madness she never came out of- and died a year later.”

Arthur’s voice was soft. “I’m sorry. I...I never knew.” He walked toward the desk, speaking as he reached it. “Morgana, I cannot change my origins. Nor can I change what has passed between us- as much as I may want to. However it happened, we *are* family- and as your brother, I am asking for a truce- at least till this...world war is over.

“If, after that, you still want to kill me, I will meet you face to face under any terms you name.”

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion as she stepped toward him. “Do you mean that?”

Arthur met her gaze without hesitation. “I swear it on the grave of *our* mother.”

\*

Elsewhere, in the mountains of Germany, in a village called Berchtesgaden’s, is a structure- a two story estate known as the Berghof. Its owner was a man everyone outside of Germany- and some secretly within- considered the Mad Dictator of Germany. But the sad part of it was, that Adolf Hitler knew exactly what he was doing.

At this moment, high up in those Bavarian Alps, he left his mistress in the living room and went to his private office. Upon closing the door and turning on the light, he stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of

the robed form standing unsteadily before him, his shaven head reflecting the room's lights as he held his left arm against his chest. "Mein Gott," the German Chancellor whispered. He had to swallow before he could continue. "What happened?"

"There are new players in the game, Her Fuehrer," the Triad brother stated. "They attacked us- freed our supplement, scattered us. Beware of them." He stumbled and had to brace himself against the desk.

"Who?" Hitler demanded. "Who did this to you?"

"Legends," the Triad elder whispered. "Old Legends- as we are. Beware of them! Keep the Spear of Destiny close, do you hear? Keep it close or your neck will look like my wrist!" He then revealed his slashed and bleeding limb. "It will take time...to recover. Time to locate my brothers and re-group." He looked from his wrist to meet Hitler's eyes with a glare of his own. "Keep the Spear close. When the crisis comes, it...maybe all the protection you have."

Then, in a burst of flame and smoke, he was gone, leaving only swirling smoke and a scorched mark on the rug to show where he'd stood.

\*

Back in England, Guinevere had taken it upon herself to prepare the evening meal since there were no servants to be had. Using the magic she'd learned, she was in the kitchen, bringing forth bread, meats and ale. Something told her to turn round and she did so- jumping slightly at the sight of Lancelot standing just inside the kitchen door. "Lance."

"Your Majesty."

“That’s very formal,” she replied as she turned back to the kitchen table and picked up a tray of meat. “Especially since it’s the first thing you’ve said to me since we found you.”

“It’s clear you’ve gone back to Arthur,” he said gently. “As a result, it is equally clear that I should keep my distance.”

Guinevere set the tray back down and closed her eyes. When she spoke, the tone of frustration in her voice was clear. “As I told Arthur, I love you both so much, it tears me apart.” She turned to face him. “But Arthur was there first- and as my husband, he must remain first in both my mind and my heart.

“Falling love was not the sin, Lance,” she stated. “Giving into it, was.” She picked up the tray once more. “What happened in the glen was a mistake.” She turned to face him. “One I don’t intend to repeat.”

He nodded. “I agree. It was fantastic and wonderful- and a mistake.” He took one step toward her. “I wanted you to know that once this current business is over, I shall be returning to France. As long as any of my country remains in that madman’s grip, I intend to do whatever I can to free it.”

Guinevere watched his face for a long moment. Like she had been with Arthur earlier, she was more aware of this knight now- and on a far different level. “Do you go for love of country – or love of me?”

He stepped back and shrugged. “Perhaps both. I will leave once I’ve atoned for my past sins.”

Guinevere looked down at the tray she was carrying. "Back in Camelot, I would have tried to stop you. Now, I will just tell you that I will always love you- and will always remember what we had."

She stepped past him then tray in hand and very much aware of him as she did so. He in turn almost reached out to her- but stopped himself. He knew he didn't have the right.

He never did.

After a moment, he followed her into the manor's dining hall, where Arthur and Morgana were sharing an uneasy silence between them. Before any of them could sit down however, Merlin burst into the room at a near gallop. "Lancelot, I require your company. There is a journey we must take."

Arthur stepped toward him. "Where to?"

"I have been summoned," the wizard answered. "By my father."

The former King met the gaze of the Devil's son for a long moment. "I thought you rejected everything he stood for?"

Merlin nodded. "I do. But on the rare occasions when he calls, I attend- if only to find out what he's up to."

"Then, I'll go- "

"No, Arthur," the wizard declared. "Your time for action will come soon enough." He looked to the Frenchman. "This is Lancelot's time."

The former knight of the round table looked around at his companions and shrugged. "I have lived in a self- proclaimed purgatory

for the past several centuries.” He stepped up to Merlin and met his gaze. “Maybe it’s time I visited Hell.”

The wizard looked to the women. “I have no choice but to trust the two of you to do what must be done till we return.” He then raised his staff and rammed it against the floor. In an uncharacteristic burst of flame and smoke, both men were gone- leaving behind the stench of what could only be...Brimstone.

## Chapter Seven

As soon as they arrived, Lancelot closed his eyes as the hot air tried to dry them out. Sweat evaporated as soon as it formed. There was little or no moisture to be found here. He finally opened his eyes and looked around to see a terrain that was somewhat reddish in appearance. "A sky?" he asked as he took in the pale red sight. "How can a place that is underground have a sky?"

"Hell is not a simple cavern or hole in the ground," Merlin told him as he set off toward a nearby structure that vaguely resembled a temple. "It's a level of existence below yours just as Heaven is a level above." The wizard slowed his pace as he looked around. "If you value your life, do not let down your guard," he told the former knight. "The minions of Hell take many forms- all of them are deceitful and potentially deadly."

They had reached the temple by that point and a low voice that was more growl than speech was heard. "I summoned only *you*, Merlin."

"That's why I brought him," the wizard answered. "When dealing with you, I prefer to have a witness-" he glanced at Lancelot- "and someone watching my back as well."

A form appeared in the shadows of the temple- larger than a man with fiery, glowing orbs where his eyes should've been. Those points of light were locked on the wizard. "You disappoint me, Merlin."

"One of the traps of being a parent," the wizard answered.

"You plan to stop the one named 'Hitler'."

“Do you support him?” Lancelot asked after getting past the shock of facing the Devil himself.

Those eyes turned toward him and for a moment, there was no answer- almost as if Merlin’s father was shocked that this lowly mortal would dare to speak. “No, mortal. But I approve of his actions.”

Merlin snorted at this. “*You* would,” he said in disgust.

“Leave it alone, my son, or you will force my hand.”

The wizard shook his head. “His insanity must be stopped.”

The eyes of fire looked skyward. “Then you leave me no choice.” Only then did Merlin and Lancelot take notice of the vultures circling overhead-

-or rather, what they had taken at first, to *be* vultures. All their host said was, “Kill them,” and the winged minions from hell swooped down, claws and fangs ready to rip and tear the bodies of their prey.

Between mystic blasts and slashing sword, the spray of demon blood and the shredding of rotted feathers, Merlin and Lancelot were actually managing to hold their own- till it happened.

One demon managed to dodge Lancelot’s swing and lunged, biting down and through the knight’s armor and into his shoulder. One of the creature’s fangs broke off in the wound even as Lancelot’s back swing cut the creature in half.

The knight’s scream of pain sliced through Merlin like a second sword. The wizard immediately raised his staff above his head even as Lancelot collapsed and a pure blinding light erupted- reaching out into

every crevasse and canyon in Hell, sending minions and demons scrambling for the cover of darkness.

By the time any of them were able to see again, the wizard and the knight would be several days gone.

\*

At Gladstone Manor, Arthur paced the library with increasing unease. Guinevere couldn't help sensing it, but she knew her husband well enough to know he'd rather be left alone right now.

Morgana, however, while also able to sense Arthur's mood, was another matter entirely. Yet, for some reason she couldn't quite pin down, she did him the courtesy of walking into the library instead of just 'arriving'. She found her half-brother standing by the globe, sounding out the names of the countries that had come into existence since Camelot's time. "Arthur, have you figured out how to get to your enemy if Merlin doesn't return?"

He looked up and over at her. "What makes you think he and Lance won't be back?"

She shrugged as if it were obvious. "They've gone to see the Devil."

"And Merlin is the Devil's son," Arthur reminded her. "They'll be back." He turned fully from the globe to face her. "I didn't have an opportunity to ask earlier. How did the Triad capture you?"

For a moment, he didn't think she was going to answer. But then she stepped closer to the globe as she spoke. "It was four centuries ago. I had been wandering the world, looking for something to occupy my time." She pointed to an area on the globe. "This place is called

‘Indonesia’. They’d had heavy rains that year- so much so, two of the earthen dams in the area had given way.

“I’d actually decide to do a good deed.” She glanced over at Arthur. “I was using my magic to help them rebuild their dams. As far as I knew, there was no one else on the planet that was a threat to me, so I lowered my guard.” She looked down at the globe. “The Triad was upon me before I was even aware of them.” She looked to the ceiling. “What’s the saying? ‘No good deed goes unpunished’? I spent the next four centuries paying for mine.”

Before Arthur could think of anything to say, Guinevere’s words-thoughts?-came into their minds. “Arthur, Morgana, they’re back- and Lance is wounded!”

The two traded glances and then ran from the library to reach the main hall in time to see both Merlin and Guinevere kneeling by Lancelot’s form as it twitched and convulsed. Merlin was removing the knight’s damaged armor as Arthur spoke. “What happened?”

“He was bitten by one of Hell’s Minions,” the wizard replied as he tossed the knight’s breast plate aside. “The fang is still in the wound.”

Arthur’s eyes went wide in shock as he took in the blackened and oozing hole in his friend’s shoulder. “I have never seen a wound like that,” he whispered with disgust clear in his voice.

Merlin stood up as he replied. “Pray you never do again. Lancelot is being poisoned by pure evil. If left untreated, the wound will never close and by morning, your best friend will be your worse enemy.”

The former king met his gaze. “Then heal him.”

"I cannot."

Arthur could only stare at his mentor in shock. "What? But you- "

"You have not been listening," Merlin snapped as he turned away. "He is being poisoned by evil. Even as we speak, it's spreading through him. No one that has been touched by evil can cure him. As the Devil's Son, I would only make matters worse if I tried." He waved a hand toward the women. "*They* must remove the fang and perform the healing spells if Lancelot is to survive."

Guinevere took a step toward the wizard. "Merlin I have never used those spells- I never had reason to."

"But you know them," he answered. "And your instincts have been surprisingly good so far."

"You're crazy," Morgana declared. "What guarantee to we have that the evil will not infect us as well?"

Lancelot cried out and convulsed again.

Arthur stepped toward his sister. "Morgana, please?"

She stared at him as if he were crazy. "Save your rival?" she asked as she waved a hand toward Guinevere.

"He is *not* my rival anymore," Arthur told her. "But he's always been my friend." He took a deep breath. "Morgana, save him- and any debt you owe me for saving you from the Triad is paid."

She met his gaze half in disbelief even as she called out, "Guinevere!" she then pointed to the other side of Lancelot's form. "Sit

there.” As she sat down herself, her next words were for he brother.  
“We will need a knife to remove the fang.”

In a sign of his own trust, Arthur handed her his own dagger and then stepped back. Merlin took his arm. “We can do no more here. Come. We must talk.”

As they moved off, Morgana spoke to her sister-in-law. “Begin the chant while I go after the fang.”

Guinevere immediately began to chant in a near whisper. Lancelot moaned as Morgana opened the wound further in search of the fang. As soon as the blade of Arthur’s dagger touched it, reality seemed to blur and waver and then fade around them...

## Chapter Eight

...Lancelot blinked and tried to see through the fog that seemed to surround him. There was pain in his shoulder and he couldn't remember how it got there. He was in his armor- sword in hand. Had he been in a battle? Why were his thoughts so blurred?

The fog seemed to withdraw gradually, leaving him standing in a clear spot. The sound of footsteps made him turn and he stared in wonder as another man- another Lancelot in black armor- stepped into the clearing. "You disappointed me," the man in black said. "I expected to feel the body of Guinevere back in my arms by now."

"It will never be," Lancelot stated. "She has made her choice and I will respect it."

"Because Arthur is your *friend*," the stranger sneered. "Friends have killed friends over women before- why should this be any different? Do it right and she'll even turn to you in her grief."

"No!" Lancelot shouted. He pointed his sword at this enemy. "I do not know what you are, but I will not listen to anymore!"

"Then die!" the man in black shouted as he drew his own sword and lunged...

\*

...Morgana stood on a rocky plain which was as flat as a table top. She looked all around, in every direction and while she could see for miles, there was simply nothing to see.

"Hello, little sister."

She turned- and stared in shock as another woman approached.  
“This cannot be,” She whispered.

“What’s that?” the newcomer asked.

“You. You’re- “

“Morgan LeFaye’,” the woman replied.

Morgana shook her head, half convinced she’d gone mad. That name was the one *she* had used the night she seduced Arthur and tricked him into helping her conceive Mordred. “This cannot be. You were a disguise- nothing more.”

“Oh I am much more than that,” Morgan declared. With a wave of her hand, Morgana was enveloped in an electrical field that caused her to scream in pain. “I am your stronger half.

“You’ve grown weak, Morgana. Helping those fools in Indonesia, allowing yourself to be captured by the Triad- only to be rescued by *Arthur* of all people!” The glint in Morgan’s eyes was pure hatred. “You’ve grown soft over the centuries- Forgotten what it’s like to hate!” Those eyes narrowed. “You don’t want to kill Arthur anymore. Why? Because he was stupid enough to risk his life to save yours?

“Fine then. Use Lancelot. Allow the evil to consume him and he’ll gladly kill Arthur.”

Morgana struggled against the field, crying out occasionally as the pain grew. Her own eyes narrowed in anger. She would *not* be imprisoned again! With that thought, the energy surrounding her exploded outward.

The two versions of this woman stood some ten yards apart. They both watched the other as mystic energy began to form around their hands.

Then the bursts started flying...

\*

...The wizard followed Arthur into the library, yet he was first to speak. "You cannot kill Hitler, Arthur."

The former king turned in shock. "Why not? He has killed thousands- and will go on to kill thousands more. If anyone deserves killing it's him."

Merlin nodded. "On that point, I will not argue." Then he shook his head. "But you cannot kill him."

Arthur stepped toward him. "Tell me why not. No riddles, no word games- give me a plain, straight answer: Why not?"

The wizard sighed and actually looked his years. "When Lancelot was struck down, I had a vision. Killing Hitler and stopping the war at this point, *will* save thousands- in the *short* term. But in the *long* term- in the years *after* the war- *Billions* will die as a result."

His former student shook his head. "I still do not understand."

"Like any weapon is made better, more durable by tempering it in fire, so too, are men tempered in war," the wizard said. "You have seen this yourself- how a man, untested, may go into battle for the first time and if he survives, comes out wiser and stronger for the experience."

“There will be men fighting this war who will be men of good character. They will be tested- and tempered- and when this war finally ends on its own, these men will rise to power. When the next crisis comes, they will be in the right places to make the right decisions that will save billions of lives.

“This war will also serve as a warning. The atrocities Hitler will order will awaken Humanity to just how insane the acts of future despots and dictators can be.”

Arthur met his gaze for a long moment before turning away in silence. When he finally spoke, the confusion was still clear in his voice. “You are telling me, that I must allow thousands- maybe millions- to die now, in order for future *billions* to survive?”

Merlin sighed and nodded. “Yes.”

“What of England, then?” Arthur demanded as he turned to face the wizard. “Do I stand by and let him storm England? Why did you even bother to wake me then?!”

Merlin heard the anger and frustration in Arthur’s tone and countered it with his own. “Defend England, Arthur. Get the Spear of Destiny away from him- but you *cannot kill him!*”

At that moment, the argument was interrupted as Guinevere came into the room. Arthur was first to notice her. “Guinevere? Is it over then?”

“Not quiet,” she told him. She then turned to the wizard. “Merlin, something...pushed me out. Morgana and Lancelot are still entranced. But I was...shut out.”

The wizard nodded. "Because you were no longer needed. Sometimes, the healing spell will expand beyond the physical wound. Pride, lust, arrogance, guilt, shame, grief- these are wounds as well. You worked through yours- dealt with yours- centuries ago, in the normal way.

"Morgana and Lancelot are just now facing theirs."

\*

...Morgana's bursts exploded against Morgan's defenses- unable to penetrate even as Morgan's failed to get through hers. It was a stalemate neither wanted nor would tolerate.

There was a clashing of swords and they both turned to see Lancelot- both of them- going at it and blocking each blow.

Morgan recovered and fired-

Morgana ducked the burst in time and let go of one in return- only to see Morgan bat it away.

"Damn you!" the Black Lancelot shouted as he brought his sword down and was blocked. "I shall skin you alive! Then I shall kill Arthur and take Guinevere for my own!"

"Never!" Lancelot replied as he swung his sword again- and was again blocked.

"You'll never survive on the side of Good," Morgan told her counterpart. "There is no compassion in you, Morgana- no love! You only gave birth to Mordred so you'd have another weapon to use against Arthur!"

“Damn you!” Morgana shouted. “I am tired of the hatred! Arthur was right- and Damn me for being a fool! If I want to change how I live that is *my* choice!”

Mystic blasts and the clash of swords continued with neither side gaining the advantage. Then Morgana glanced at Lancelot- and found him glancing at her.

Without a word between them, Lancelot turned, swung- and his sword separated Morgan’s head from her shoulders even as Morgana’s mystic blasts tore through Black Lancelot’s armor and destroyed him from within.

The two stood for a moment on that rocky plain and then, the purest white light they had ever seen washed out everything...

## Chapter Nine

It was an hour shy of midnight when Morgana slowly opened her eyes to find herself lying in a bed with someone seated nearby. It was only a moment later that she realized who it was. "Arthur..."

Her brother immediately leaned forward in his chair and smiled. "Welcome back."

"Still...looking out for me?" she asked with no sarcasm in her voice.

The former king nodded. "Yes."

"Will you always be there if I need you?"

He reached over and gently took her hand. "If you'll let me."

She gave a half nod as her eyes drifted closed and she easily drifted off into a normal sleep.

Arthur watched her for a moment more. How he wished they had grown up together- had been given the chance to be sister and brother. Possibly, the insanity between them would never have happened. Standing, he looked down at her for another moment before he turned and left the room- to find Guinevere coming from Lancelot's room. "How's he doing?"

"He woke for just a moment," She said as she joined her husband. "He asked about Morgana and then drifted off to sleep- and Arthur, the wound has already healed over."

Arthur sighed and nodded in satisfaction. It sounded as if this war had finally come to an end. "Then it sounds as if this crisis is over."

Putting his arm around her, he headed for the Master Bedroom. With Guinevere comfortably at his side, they entered and she watched as he continued on out, onto the balcony. After a moment, she followed. "Something still bothers you," she noted.

He glanced over at her. "Magic or a wife's instincts?"

"A little of both," she replied as she leaned on the balcony beside him. "What's bothering you, Arthur?"

"I have a choice to make," He told her. He turned to look out over the country side. "The hardest choice I've ever had to make."

"What is it?" she asked.

He told her what Merlin had said about how Hitler had to live in order for future Billions to survive. "...Yet, if I stop him tomorrow, kill him, thousands will live *now*." He looked over at her. "Do I save the Present- or the Future?"

She shrugged gently. "Why is it the hard ones always fall to you? There's more to it than being King- especially since you're not anymore."

"And yet, the responsibility is even greater," her husband answered as he looked down at his hands. "It's not just Camelot this time. My decision will affect the entire world for decades to come." He gently squeezed her arm. "Best get some sleep. If Morgana and Lancelot are up to it in the morning, we five will be moving against a madman whatever I decide."

She took his hands in hers and gently kissed them. Then she watched as he left the balcony- and the room.

He wandered back to Morgana's room and quietly entered- to find Lancelot kneeling by her bedside. He gently placed a hand on the man's uninjured shoulder. "Lance?"

The knight looked up at him, then back to Morgana as she slept. "There is much more to her than we ever imagined, Arthur."

"I know," the former king replied. "She chose to change her life. Not many have the courage to make that decision and stand by it." He gently patted Lancelot's shoulder. "Come now. Like her, you should be asleep."

Lancelot stood up and the two quietly left the room- but not before he looked back at his friend's sister. Arthur nodded down the hall. "Get some sleep. If you and Morgana are up to it, then tomorrow, we face Hitler himself."

The Knight met his gaze. "Then the time has come to atone for my past."

Once more, Arthur placed his hand on the man's shoulder. "My friend, you- and my sister- have faced an evil spawned in Hell- and survived when no one else has. I would think that you have already atoned- or you wouldn't be here now."

The two locked gazes for a moment, then Arthur watched as Lancelot turned and headed back to his room.

## Chapter Ten

Morning in Germany dawned cloudy and overcast. Hitler stood on the patio looking up, taking in the sight of the churning clouds as they seemed to roll across the sky. He glanced at the uniformed aide standing beside him and then returned his gaze to the country side. "What is the latest weather report?"

"Our airfields are expecting clear skies, Mein Fuehrer. The same over England."

Hitler nodded as the storm clouds continued to churn overhead. "Continue the operation as planned."

"Jawohl, Mein Herr."

Dismissing the aide, Hitler turned back toward the house, pausing as he entered and reaching over to one side, where the Spear of Destiny had leaned against the wall while he was outside. "...Old legends- Beware of them," the Triad brother had said. "Keep the Spear close- when the crisis comes, it will be all the protection you will have."

As his grip on the Spear tightened, Hitler looked to the sky once more and the concerned worry on his face was clear.

\*

In the Master Bedroom of Gladstone Manor, Guinevere woke and reached across the bed- to find only sheets. The former queen of Camelot sat up and looked around. It only took her a moment's concentration to find her husband standing out on the balcony- fully dressed. It was clear he had not been to bed all night. Rising from the sheets, she went to him and simply put her arms around him.

Looking down at her, a gentle smile came to Arthur's face as he in turn put an arm around her and rested his cheek against her head.

Into that momentary silence, came a growing, droning noise. They both looked up to see them passing over head- more and more and more of them. "Arthur?"

"Merlin says they are called 'airplanes'," the one time King said. "'Bombers'. In this case, German bombers on their way to bomb London again."

"So many," Guinevere noted as they continued to pass over.

"Yes," Arthur answered as he kept his eyes on the sky. "There is no time for breakfast. Gather the others in the Main Hall. I will join you in a moment."

She nodded and in the next second, she was dressed even as she left the room.

\*

Down in the garden, where he'd been spending the morning in meditation and prayer, Lancelot had also seen the bombers pass over. Now, he rose to his feet and turned at the sound of footsteps behind him, to see Morgana standing before him. "Are you well enough to be up?" he asked.

She slowly stepped toward him as she shrugged and answered. "I should be asking that of you." She stopped within arms' reach, looked down and then up, meeting his gaze. "Last night was the first time I'd ever taken part in the healing spells," she revealed. "I need to ask...ask

you if...if any of it actually happened or was it all some kind of dream-nightmare?"

Lancelot could only shrug. "I do not know. You know more about magic and the Arts than I. It seemed real at the time. I remember it as if it *were* real."

"As do I." Morgana turned away and her next words were a whisper. "I had not realized how cold and empty my soul had become." She glanced back over her shoulder. "You were the one with the actual wound. But it seems we both had a great deal of healing to do."

He stepped up behind her, being careful not to touch her. "And now?"

She shrugged and shook her head. "I do not know- and that worries me." She turned to find herself closer to him. "I am facing something I have never faced before- and it actually frightens me."

Gently, he reached out and tilted her face upwards. "There is no need to face things alone," he told her. "You must learn to trust and let people into your life."

Surprisingly, tears were beginning to form in her eyes as she whispered, "I do not know how."

Without another word being spoken, the former knight of the Round Table carefully took her in his arms and simply held her as she in turn, hesitantly put her arms around him and held onto him as if her life depended on it.

The gentle clearing of a throat made them both turn to see Guinevere standing in the patio door. "I did not mean to intrude," She

said gently. "But Arthur wants everyone assembled in the Main Hall as soon as possible."

Both Lancelot and Morgana nodded and followed her back into the house.

\*

With Merlin standing nearby, Arthur finished donning the suit of armor he'd found in the house and then turned from pacing the floor as the three arrived. His eyes went straight to Morgana's face, then to the hand that held Lancelot's and for a moment, he wondered if they were even aware of it. "I'm glad you both feel up to taking part."

"We are with you till the end," Lancelot stated. He looked to Morgana and Arthur's expression was enough to ask the question.

"You need not worry about me, Arthur," she stated. "I will stand beside you till this is over."

He nodded his thanks and then looked round to each of the four as he spoke. "Ever since we gathered together in this century, we have been re-acting instead of acting- a mistake I made once before." He paused as if in thought before going on. "That ends now. Effective immediately, we are taking the battle to Hitler himself before another follower or supporter can interfere." He looked to Merlin. "And damn anyone who gets in our way."

"A moment, Arthur," Morgana called. She then turned to her sister-in-law. "Guinevere, I must ask: Do you want Arthur to survive this battle?"

The once and future king's wife looked back at her in shock. "Of course I do."

"I do not ask the question lightly," Morgana told her. "If you want Arthur to survive, if you want to be successful, then *you* must be prepared to do what you have never done: You must be prepared to kill if necessary."

Arthur started to speak, only to have Merlin touch his arm and shake his head.

"I have killed," Guinevere stated.

Morgana shook her head. "I am not talking about demons in your bedchambers. I am talking about German soldiers- flesh and blood men with very little difference between us except for the fact that they wear the wrong uniform. I am talking about husbands and fathers who will certainly try to kill you the moment they lay eyes on you.

"You must be prepared to go just as far as they will. You must be prepared to kill them if necessary."

Lancelot nodded. "She is right, Guinevere. This battle will not be too different from Camelot's day. There can be no half-measures."

She looked from one to the other and then to Arthur as she shrugged. "I can only promise to do my best."

He nodded as he momentarily reached out and took her hand. "I'm sure that will be more than enough." He then looked to his former teacher. "Merlin- ?"

“Oh I can get us there,” the wizard said. “But taking all five will be draining. If we run into more than we can handle, it’ll up to the women to get us out.”

With that, he raised his hands and the end of his staff began to glow and pulse. A moment later, all five were enveloped in a golden glow of light which quickly faded to leave only the manor house behind.

## Chapter Eleven

In Berchtesgaden, the wind had picked up and the clouds seemed heavier. They seemed to hang lower as if searching for something.

As Merlin's spell ended and everyone arrived, Guinevere concentrated, transforming her skirt- and the bottom half of Morgana's gown- to slacks. Arthur's sister looked down at this new garment, then to her sister-in-law. "I know, I should have asked first," Guinevere said. "But believe me, when things start to happen, they'll be far easier to move in."

"Can you find the Spear?" Arthur asked the wizard. "Hitler will no doubt keep it close at hand."

With his black cloak looking like the ragged wings of a vulture as it billowed in the wind, Merlin pointed toward the door of the Berghof- Hitler's residence. "Inside."

But their arrival had not gone unnoticed- in fact, standing upon the balcony, Hitler himself had seen them arrive. Now, he could be heard shouting and the result to those shouts came quickly as soldiers appeared to come from everywhere. Using bayonets fixed to their rifles, the first wave charged. With both now wearing armor, Arthur and Lancelot stood to the front and met the charge with swords in hand. Even as German weapons were shattered and smashed and shoved aside, others on walls and rooftops began taking aim.

Merlin was first to bring magic into play. Still too drained from the transportation spell to produce the defensive shield he'd created the day before, he pointed and a burst of mystic energy struck a hand weapon with all the force of a hand grenade.

Guinevere's first burst flew past Morgana's head- destroying the gun in a soldier's grip and frying his hands before he could blow Morgana's head off. She returned the favor a moment later by taking out a soldier that was taking aim on Guinevere's back.

In the meantime, Arthur and Lancelot had reached the house, kicked in the door and despite the armor they wore, dove clear as guards inside opened fire.

Up on the balcony, Hitler watched the battle in frustration. Old legends, the Triad brother had said. Two knights a wizard and two sorceresses? Holding the Spear of Destiny tightly in his grip, the Fuehrer swore loudly as the battle raged and German soldiers died.

Inside the house, Arthur and Lancelot fought their way through a squad of soldiers bent on stopping them. Shots were fired in haste and widely missed their marks. Swords swung and found theirs as men lost hands and arms to both Excalibur and Lancelot's blade. The knight spotted a flight of stairs and nodded to Arthur. "Go! I will guard your retreat."

Arthur met his gaze, shattered another machine gun, and bolted for the first step.

Outside, the German platoon had fallen back, but maintained a ring around the wizard and his female companions. A moment later, every

soldier in sight screamed in pain as they erupted into flame- a fire that was gone in moments leaving a spot of ash where each man had been.

An explosion of fire and smoke erupted in front of the three and Guinevere's voice was a whisper. "By the One God."

The Triad had returned.

As the familiar trio stood before them, their leader spoke. "None have the right to kill you except us." He waved his handless wrist toward the house. "Your leader dies even as we speak."

Having reached a landing in the stairwell, Arthur gasped and clutched at his chest as Excalibur fell from lifeless fingers to clatter on the floor. Being sensitive to him both wife and sister started toward the Triad with Arthur's name on their lips.

The Triad leader pointed at them. "Cross us and you will die a death far worse than the mortal has."

But Arthur wasn't dead yet.

Guinevere glanced at Morgana, then even to Merlin's surprise, they cut loose, putting everything into one massive blast of energy that struck the Triad-

-enveloped them-

-and consumed them, leaving only charred bone behind.

Of this, Merlin had only one comment. "Very, very nicely done. Now, get us to that balcony. We'll arrive the same time Arthur will."

Seeing his allies incinerated, Hitler backed away from the balcony wall, his eyes wide in shock. "Nein," he whispered. "Nein, this cannot be." His grip tightened around the Spear of Destiny.

'Stand your ground, Butcher.' The voice's British accent was unmistakable and the German Fuehrer stood straighter. Slowly, he turned to see one of the knights standing before him- a sword in hand and pointed at him.

"Who are you?" Hitler demanded in heavily accented English.

"Centuries ago, I was Arthur Pendragon- King of England."

Hitler took an involuntary step back. Legends indeed!

Smoke and light erupted off to one side, announcing the arrival of Merlin, Guinevere, Morgana and Lancelot. "Merlin, what- ?" the knight looked around and spotted Arthur facing off against Hitler. He started forward- only to be blocked by Merlin's staff. "There are more important matters at hand than using German soldiers for butchery practice. This is Arthur's time. Whatever happens now is up to him alone."

"Merlin!" Guinevere pointed to the house as soldiers began to arrive.

With a wave of his staff, there was a flash of light and the soldiers found their way blocked by an invisible force. "They will not interfere."

Arthur advanced on Hitler, keeping Excalibur pointed at the German's heart. "You will surrender the Spear- and cease any plans to invade England."

Hitler's eyes narrowed. This out-of-date myth was trying to tell *him*- the savior of Germany- what to do? "Of course mien friend," he replied. Then, lowering the spear, he lunged. "On a cold day in Hell!"

Arthur side-stepped as the German charged past. "Madman! I could kill you here and now! I'm giving you a chance to live- and repent!"

"I will not repent for bringing the German people back to greatness!" the Fuehrer declared. "The Fatherland and the Aryan Race will last for a thousand years!"

Arthur stared at the man in shocked disgust, seeing before him a twisted reflection of his own one-time dream for Camelot.

The rolling thunder overhead was ignored by all as Hitler charged Arthur with the Spear once more- only to have Arthur bat it away one moment- and grab the German leader by his shirt front the next.

"Listen closely, Madman and I will make this so simple even *you* can understand it. If you wish to continue living, surrender the Spear- and *stay out of England!*" He then shoved Hitler away-

-and made the mistake of turning his back on him.

A furious anger flooded Hitler's face and he raised the Spear above his head, preparing to ram it through Arthur's back. Both Guinevere and Morgana saw it and their voices rang out as one as the thunder rolled. "*Arthur- !*"

Lightning flashed as Arthur spun, brought Excalibur up and around-

Hitler screamed in anger as he prepared to ram the Spear home-

-and Arthur brought Excalibur down, through the Spear's shaft, shattering it even as an explosive burst of energy was discharged, knocking Hitler a good five yards away.

When the glare faded and the dictator could see, he expected to find Arthur on his back as well.

Instead, the former King was still on his feet, Excalibur grasped tightly in both hands. There was not a mark on him, while Hitler's uniform was scorched and burnt.

As for the Spear, it lay on the balcony floor in shattered pieces, smoke slowly rising into the air.

Hitler looked up from the pieces, met Arthur's gaze and saw true hatred staring back. Then Arthur raised Excalibur high, fully intending to separate the dictator's head from his shoulders.

Merlin's voice rang out. "Arthur! This is not the time!"

"Damn your times and visions, Merlin!" Arthur cried as he continued to face Hitler. "This one would stab a man in the back!" lightning reflected off of Excalibur's blade.

Hitler raised a hand as if to ward off the blow he knew was coming.

Thunder rolled and a woman's voice cried out in a heavy German accent. "No! Adolf!"

Arthur looked up and around to see a woman- a stranger- running toward them. She ignored him and knelt by Hitler, holding onto him as only a loved one could.

The former King started to raise Excalibur again- and stopped. “*DAMN!*” He planted the blade against Hitler’s chest- piercing the scorched uniform. “Hear me, you Bastard. It is only because of this woman that I’m sparing your life. Keep your forces *out of England* or by the One God, I swear I will return and end your life with your head on a *pike*- is that clear?”

Not trusting his voice, the Fuehrer nodded and watched Arthur nervously. If he ever knew true anger and hatred, he saw it then in the Englander’s face.

Arthur finally turned away from the couple in clear disgust as the rains finally started to fall. It was then that he noticed that Guinevere had gathered up the pieces of the Spear of Destiny. He nodded in approval and took in all four of his companions as he spoke- the anger still clear in his voice. “Get us the hell out of here.”

As Hitler and his mistress rose to their feet and the soldiers finally gained access to the balcony, the former king of England turned and met the dictator’s gaze as Guinevere and Morgana began the traveling spell.

Hitler would remember that look of disgust on his enemy’s face for the rest of his days.

## Chapter Twelve

That evening found Arthur in the manor garden, trying to escape into its silence. For a long moment, Guinevere stood in the patio doors and simply watched him. Finally, she stepped toward him. “Arthur?”

He turned at her call. “Well, what did the Prime Minister have to say?”

“He was disappointed that you didn’t come with us,” she began. “But he says that according to the latest intelligence reports, all invasion activity along the French coast has stopped.”

Arthur nodded in apparent satisfaction. “Anything else?”

Guinevere nodded and indicated the Manor. “He’s arranged to give us the house as a ‘thank you’.” She shrugged. “Since we have to have *some place* to live, I accepted in your name.”

He reached out and took her hand. “That’s fine. I know you’ve come to like it. What of the others?”

“That’s another reason I came to find you,” his wife said. “They’re preparing to leave.”

As soon as she said the words, Arthur headed for the house with her practically running to keep up. They arrived in the main hall to find Merlin, Lancelot and Morgana all there. “Guinevere tells me you’re all leaving?”

Merlin nodded. “My father has agents all over the globe, Arthur. I must track them down and stop whatever mischief they’ve gotten into.” He looked to Guinevere. “Continue your studies, Woman. You’ve

a natural gift for the Arts- you should have started much sooner. You've mastered much- But there's still much to learn."

"But I no longer have your books," she stated.

The gleam in his eyes was unmistakable. "Don't you? Check the library. You might even find one or two you missed first time round." He then turned to Morgana. "And you- ask politely, and she may let you borrow them from time to time." He then faced Arthur. "Will I be welcome if I return?"

Arthur closed his eyes and nodded. He then met Merlin's gaze. "Always."

Merlin returned his nod and indicated the women. "Don't give too much concern to the idea of these two outliving you. Behave yourself and you'll live just as long as they will."

Arthur's face started to cloud over in confusion, then his eyes narrowed dangerously. "When did you- ?"

"Don't jump to conclusions, Arthur. It's a bad habit," Merlin told him. "The three queens of Avalon performed the life prolongation spells when they first took you into their care. How do you think you survived all these centuries? You were under the same spells Guinevere used on herself- just consider yourself lucky it didn't require a kiss to wake *you*!"

Morgana's laughter broke in on that as everyone tried to get a handle on the image Merlin presented. Thankful to hear his sister laugh, Arthur let it pass as Merlin turned to Lancelot.

"Sir Knight, by facing Hell and defeating the evil within yourself, you've been granted a reprieve." Merlin glanced up, then back to

Lancelot. "Don't waste it- and when the time comes, die like you're supposed to."

He then turned away from them all, took two steps- and was gone.

Arthur then looked to his friend. "And what of you?"

"I must return to France," Lancelot stated. "As long as my country remains in Hitler's grasp, I cannot rest."

"Then we'll probably see you soon," Arthur told him as they shook hands.

Guinevere then turned to her sister-in-law. "And you, Morgana? I hope you know you're welcome to stay."

Arthur nodded as he joined them. "Indeed, yes."

Morgana sighed. "I know you both mean it. But after the last few days, I have a lot of thinking to do." She met Arthur's gaze. "And I cannot do that when the subject of most of that thinking is in the same house."

"The hatred and anger are not there anymore, Arthur. I'm not sure what is- and I need time to figure that out." She glanced at Lancelot. "If Sir Knight doesn't mind, I would go with him. German soldiers sound like excellent targets for taking out one's frustrations on."

Arthur laughed lightly. "They do indeed."

"But keep that spare room ready," Morgana continued as she prepared to leave. "I may still drop in from time to time-" There was an uncharacteristic touch of imp in her face as she met Guinevere's gaze-

“If only to check on my niece and nephew.” Then in a surprisingly gentle burst of light, she and Lancelot were gone.

As the glow faded, Arthur turned to his wife with raised brow. “Niece and nephew?”

The former queen shrugged and spoke with a smile. “I guess we’ll find out in nine months.”

Arthur stepped toward her, took her face in his hands and smiled.

A moment later, their lips met in a promise of years to come.

END