

THE
KNIGHTS
OF AVALON

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PROLOGUE

For many years, the lands of Albion were trapped in a cycle of constant battle and war between kingdoms. After the death of Uther Pendragon there was a time of great unrest in the lands. The people of the lands caught in the middle of power struggles between small kingdoms. Borders and rulers changed with every victory and defeat. There was hope for the people. A prophecy passed down through the generations. A magical sword trapped in a solid piece of stone. The *once and future king* who would pull the sword from the stone and return hope to the people. A king that would unite the kingdoms and the lands, to create a unified and peaceful Albion.

Arthur, son of Uther was instructed by Nimue, The Lady of the Lake to go to the stone and retrieve the sword; she told him it was his destiny. Arthur lifted the ancient blade, *Excalibur*, out of the stone, fulfilling his destiny to become King. Soon after for the first time the people were given hope for real peace in Albion.

Under the counsel and guidance of the wise wizard, Merlin, Arthur sought to bring the idea of a unified Albion to reality, forming treaties and alliances throughout the lands of Albion and helping and protecting each other in times of trouble and need.

Peace was made with the Highland Celts in the northern regions, and with many kingdoms across the sea.

Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table came to represent everything good and true about the kingdom, with justice and equality for all. Arthur and the knights had many adventures and quests, always proving brave and loyal in all they did. The bravest of them was Sir Lancelot du Lac. He served faithfully by Arthur's side through many trials and adventures. Lancelot and the other knights would often be away for great periods of time, travelling on quests and missions of mercy, and bringing peace and aid to those who needed it, vanquishing many creatures and monsters that plagued the land. The lasting symbol of their bravery, loyalty and friendship. The round table of Camelot, where all were equal.

One of the happiest days in the kingdom was the wedding of Arthur and Guinevere. The couple led together. A golden time of peace spread throughout the lands, lasting for many years of harmony across Albion. All too soon there came times of tragedy and great sadness in the kingdom. Enemies and evil forces came to rise up against Camelot and Arthur – even great betrayals from within the kingdom itself. That of the Lady Morgana. A ward of Camelot and member of the royal household. She soon grew into a formidable wielder of dark magic and a powerful sorceress. More painful was the betrayal of Mordred LeFay, a Knight of Camelot who sought to overthrow Arthur and take the kingdom for himself. During his failed bid for power, the fallen knight murdered Queen Guinevere.

With his brave knights, Arthur and the kingdom were able to withstand the forces of darkness and evil in these times of trial. Overcoming the evil of their enemies, Arthur displayed a powerful act of mercy. He allowed Mordred to live but banished him from Camelot forever. The sorceress Morgana was believed

by all to be destroyed in their last battle and she had not been seen since.

There began a silver age of Camelot. Arthur's rule as king continued, loved by his people. Not all of Albion remained at peace for long. Tyrants and cruel rulers began to rise, seizing opportunity to gain power across regions of Albion. The lands once again fell to battles and warring kingdoms throughout the isle. Reports of villagers and townsfolk fighting back against cruel leaders reached Arthur. He sent help when and where he could, working alongside his remaining knights. Together they did all they could to help maintain order and peace. Going wherever there was need, the Knights of the Round Table were there. Fighting for honour and justice throughout the years.



Many Years Later...

A small envoy ship finally docked in the busy port of an island kingdom after days at sea. The emissary stepped down the gangplank onto the pier and was greeted by a royal guard, then led to the palace and into the throne room. As the emissary entered, he could see the king and queen sitting on their dark wooden thrones, talking to each other in hushed tones.

'Your Royal Majesties,' said the emissary as he bowed, 'we are most humbled to be welcomed onto your Island kingdom.'

'You are welcome here, but tell me. Where is Mordred LeFay? Why does he not come himself to discuss peace and alliance,' said the king.

'My humble apologies, Your Majesty. My lord Mordred was unable to come, he is seeing to important matters in our

homeland of Albion presently.’

The king and queen shared a look before continuing.

‘I must tell you, we have been forewarned of Mordred and his actions by a trusted friend of the kingdom,’ said the queen.

‘Whoever this friend is, I fear they must be mistaken,’ said the emissary. ‘There have been many rumours and lies spread about my lord Mordred over the years. I assure you, he wants nothing but peace.’

The emissary gave his talk of peace and alliances long into the night before returning to their ship while others sent by Mordred crept out of hiding places on board under the cover of night to undertake their true mission on the island.

In the early hours of the morning, they made their way stealthily into the palace, then to the bed chamber of the princess. Using a cloth soaked in a potent mixture, they covered her mouth until she passed out.

The small group made their way back to the ship, but not without difficulty, ensuring they were not seen and raising no alarm. They arrived back at the ship as the emissary exited his cabin.

‘About time, Den,’ he said, exiting the ship and making his way to the palace.

The king and queen apologised that their daughter was not at this final meeting.

‘No need to apologise, King Óengus. I’m sure she has better things to do than be bored by someone like me and peace talks,’ said the emissary.

Prince Faolán thought it strange that his sister was absent and left the meeting abruptly.

When they finished meeting and eating together, the emissary said his farewells with a sly smile and a bow, and returned to the ship and gave the command to set sail.

‘Did they agree to an alliance?’ one sailor asked.

‘No,’ said the emissary, ‘but Mordred will have this kingdom, one way or another...’

CHAPTER ONE

THE FALL

‘He is the once and future king,’ Merlin had said once, many years ago...

The blade came crashing down at King Arthur with a mighty blow. He managed to block the blade, but it took much out of him. Arthur was still a strong fighter for his age, but his opponent was younger and quicker than he was. The attacker kept striking at him with blow after blow, showing no signs of resting or mercy.

The words of Merlin echoed through his mind as he faced the onslaught before him. His weathered face glanced back towards the once great city of Camelot. He wondered how true those words were, or if they ever were.

Camelot has fallen. A once majestic city, now in ruin with the surrounding villages burning after weeks of siege. Of the Knights of the Round Table, only five now remain. Bors, Gawain, Tristan, Bedivere and Galahad. Lancelot has not been seen in years, feared lost during his last quest. The rest have fallen to recent battles against Mordred’s forces. The invading army camped only a mile from the city gates, as Camelot’s forces continued to dwindle with every skirmish. The trade routes were blocked, forcing the common villagers and people to flee, seeking refuge

elsewhere. Mere hundreds of soldiers remain, not nearly enough to defeat the invading army or defend the crumbling Camelot for much longer.

The siege had been raging for days, Arthur growing more certain this will be the final day of his once great kingdom. Too many of his loyal soldiers had been lost, and most devastating to Arthur was the deaths of his brave knights. While he continued to fight with all his strength, Arthur knew in his heart that this was the final battle of Camelot, and it was a battle he had every intention of losing.



The night before the battle...

The council room of Camelot is crowded and all have gathered. Encircling the round table are the remaining Knights of Camelot and their king. Though as they spoke, it would have been hard to pick out Arthur as the king. His armour matched that of the knights, save for the crest depicting a blue dragon, the symbol for the house of Pendragon shining in the soft torch light of the council room. The torches flickered as a soft breeze moved through the room, illuminating the last elements of auburn in Arthur's trimmed beard. The ageing king leaned over the Round Table and slowly revealed his plan.

'I plan to return *Excalibur* to the stone from where it was pulled. Mordred must not be allowed to wield it, without it he can never truly be king, then hope for Albion will live on.'

'We can defeat them, we can win this fight!' said Bors confidently.

'I am not so sure, old friend.' Arthur ran his hand across the

detailed carvings on the table's surface.

'That is why I must return the sword, first Mordred must believe we are coming to battle to the very end.'

He looked around the room with his soft blue eyes at the loyal and brave warriors gathered before him, he knew many would not understand the decision, but it was for the best. He explained the plan to his knights and the loyal soldiers of his army, his plan to lose the battle.



The morning of the battle...

As the sun crept over the horizon on the last dawn of Camelot. A tall and lean man sat upon a black horse overlooking his vast army, ready to strike the final blow against Arthur and Camelot at his command. His short jet-black hair waved softly in the morning breeze, and he licked his thin lips in anticipation of his impending victory.

Mordred LeFay – at one time he was a Knight of Camelot. Now he waited impatiently to conquer the kingdom, to claim *Excalibur* and the throne. Once he was king, he would reign over all Albion with an iron grip.

Mordred watched as for the first time in days, the gates of Camelot opened and the last of Arthur's battalions marched out. Only a few hundred men. Arthur led the army, two knights on either side of him, all with helmets on with the visors down, ready for battle.

'He's not coming to surrender,' Mordred snickered as he flicked his black cloak over his shoulder.

'Good.'

The last occupants of Camelot poured out and formed attack positions. The contrast between Arthur's men and the ground-shaking forces of Mordred's, numbering in the thousands, was so great he couldn't help but laugh. The sinister sound sent a shiver down the spines of soldiers standing nearby. In Mordred's years away from Camelot, he had grown in power as well as his wickedness and cruelty.

Beside Mordred was a knight in blood-red armour. The image of a wolf was scratched roughly into the chest plate. On his other side was a woman whose battle armour shone like rippling water. She wore a veil covering her pale face that flowed gently in the air, along with her dark shimmering hair. Her purple gown worn under the armour flowed like waves as the wind blew into it.

'This won't be any fun at all,' Mordred sighed.

'Send the infantry in first, Greywolf,' he ordered. The Red Knight nodded menacingly and rode away to instruct his warriors.



'Ready!' shouted Arthur, his sword raised, reflecting the sunlight on the metal blade. 'Prepare to charge.'

An enormous roar sounded from his army, with all the bravery and confidence of an army three times their size. Defending their beloved kingdom, they would fight to the very last.

'For Camelot!' Arthur screamed as he spurred his horse forward to charge the enemy. Mounted on his white horse, the king soared ahead of his men, with his knights close behind him.

'For Camelot!' The mass of soldiers cried as they ran towards certain defeat. Mordred's soldiers were not prepared for an offensive move. They were startled by the initial cries and oncoming army and were too slow to react. The front line

crumbled, momentarily giving Camelot's forces the upper hand.

Mordred showed no concern, gave the signal for the rest to attack and the final battle for Camelot commenced.

'Find the knights,' he ordered Greywolf. 'Kill them all... but Arthur is mine!'

The fighting spread and raged on over the fields of Camelot. The defending soldiers easily outmatched Mordred's forces in skill. Eventually, the numbers began to steadily sway the fight in the invaders' favour.

Triston and Bors were together, back-to-back to protect each other as they fought off attackers. They easily dispatched the ill-trained soldiers of Mordred. There was a violent crimson blur tackling Bors to the ground. Triston helped him back to his feet in time to see the Red Knight charge at them for a second time. He wielded a strange weapon made of two black metal blades stemming from one hilt, running parallel with each other. A small gap was between them, both blades ended in razor-sharp points. He moved with equal precision to the Camelot knights. Bors raised his sword to defend Triston from an oncoming strike, managing to push Triston aside and block the blow. With a sharp whip and violent movement, the sword of the mysterious, crimson-armoured knight protruded from Bors' back. The hilt shoved firmly into his chest plate, the blades had pierced the outer armour and chainmail as if it were cloth.

Triston cried in anguish for his fallen brother and struck out in fury at the knight in red. The two opponents battled fiercely, equally matched for some time until the Red Knight struck hard enough to throw Triston off balance.

Triston regained his footing and sprung forward with a strike of his sword towards the knight's chest. The mysterious knight caught Triston's sword within the gap of his double-bladed weapon. Then with a sharp, violent twist of his weapon, he

snapped Triston's blade in half.

Triston tried to recover, feinting to his left then quickly lunging he tried to pierce the Red Knight with his broken sword. The knight countered, spun and sliced Triston's side. The strange double-bladed sword sliced clean through both armour and flesh. Triston fell crumpled and bloodied to the ground, gasping for breath. The Knight of Camelot struggled to reach for his broken weapon.

The Red Knight stood over Triston and kicked the broken sword out of reach. He raised his sword over the green star that formed the crest of Triston's chest plate and was about to thrust his blade down to finish the brave knight when saw Gawain nearby. He let out a sinister laugh.

'Do not be troubled, you will see your friends again soon enough.'

He struck down, piercing Triston through the chest. He pulled his unique blade back out and walked away, in the direction of the knight, Gawain.



Mordred slaughtered most of the guards defending Arthur and strode towards the ageing king. His horse lost in the first charge of Camelot's army, Arthur now stood alone as the last guard fell to Mordred's blade. While he was younger than Arthur, he knew that the old king was still as strong and skilled as ever. The fallen knight approached with caution yet was confident in his impending victory.

'Give up the sword, old man!'

Arthur prepared himself, *Excalibur* drawn back, ready to strike.

'I'll take it from you either way. I will be king!' said Mordred.

‘You’ll never be king, Mordred,’ said Arthur defiantly, staring back into the former knight’s menacing yellow eyes.

Mordred swung his sword up with rage, then brought it smashing down. Arthur only just managed to block the powerful strikes Mordred continued to strike again and again. He used his speed to overwhelm Arthur, not allowing him to make use of his larger build and strength.

Their battle ranged all over and became so intense that soldiers around them were distracted by its ferocity. They watched as the two slashed against each other, Arthur wielding *Excalibur* and a shield with the blue crest of Pendragon shining bright upon it. Mordred, using his deadly, double-edged broadsword, with such accuracy and power that he started to outmatch Arthur and gain control of the duel. Mordred hammered down with blow after blow against Arthur.

Arthur and Mordred fought as if the outcome of the entire battle rested with their duel. Mordred struck a powerful, upward, two-handed blow forcing Arthur’s shield to clash with his helmet, impeding his vision. Arthur knew he would have to drop his shield to adjust his helmet. He threw the shield towards Mordred, knocking him back for a moment, quickly adjusted his helmet and turned back to the group of archers waiting away from the battle.

‘Now!’ Arthur yelled out to them, waving his arms.

‘Please let this work!’ he said to himself as he raised *Excalibur* to block another strike.



Ignoring much of the battle raging on around him, the Red Knight searched the field of soldiers. Single-focused on finding

his targets, tearing down any who got in his path. He lost sight of Gawain in the melee. But he turned to come face to face with another knight, a great swordsman and wisest of the Knights of Camelot.

‘Bedivere...’ he said, standing before his foe spattered with blood matching his crimson armour.

‘The one and only,’ Sir Bedivere said, with a mock bow. ‘Do I know you?’

‘I am your demise,’ said the Red Knight.



‘Now!’

The archers unleashed their arrows on Arthur’s command. Their arrows were dipped in oil and lit before firing. They landed in strategic places throughout the battlefield. Where the fiery arrows hit, flames erupted from the ground spreading through the dry grass and quickly travelled through the fields along lines of oil and hay in multiple directions.

Flames engulfed the fields, separating the two armies. In the chaos, the last of Camelot’s forces retreated and dispersed, retreating into the surrounding hills and forests as they had been instructed by Arthur.

Mordred darted his eyes back to where Arthur had been moments before. He saw nothing but a wall of flame. His path to Arthur and *Excalibur* was blocked. He turned just in time to block an oncoming strike from another knight, one he recognised.

‘Gawain, come to die in place of your king?’ he asked.

‘Death is only the beginning of a greater adventure,’ said Gawain.

Mordred scoffed as he fainted forward with one leg, forcing

Gawain to parry to defend his left. He quickly changed direction for a strike to the right, aimed at Gawain's chest.

The blow was blocked just in time by Gawain. The skilled knight countered and knocked Mordred off balance with his own powerful strike.

'Pretty sure I taught you that one, Mordred. You'll need to do better than that,' said Gawain with a smirk.

Mordred scowled in anger and prepared another strike, leaping forward at Gawain with a loud growl, swinging his blade towards the knight.



Arthur hardly believed it himself, but the plan was working so far. Mordred's main forces had been drawn into the battle, now stuck behind walls of fire. Arthur's men were ordered to retreat when they saw the flames; he would rather see them run and live than die to save an already fallen Camelot. The priority now was to return *Excalibur* to the stone. As soon as the fires started, he ran in the direction of the ancient ruins where the stone was located. He met Galahad along the way, with some royal guards that could not be convinced to abandon Arthur until the task was complete. They just had to make it to the ruins before their plan was discovered.

Arthur had lost sight of Bedivere and Gawain, and received word that Bors and Triston had fallen.

Arthur ran on with Galahad and the guards, now out of sight from Mordred and the armies on the battlefield.

Please, let this work, Arthur thought as they entered the forests that led to the ruins.



Gawain lay wounded and beaten on the ground. He saw the Red Knight approaching Mordred and himself. Bright stains of blood covered the knight's unique weapon. A small cut across his shoulder was weeping fresh blood.

'No sign of Galahad, Bedivere put up a worthy fight,' the Red Knight said as he held his shoulder. 'The rest are dealt with.'

'You have done well, Greywolf,' said Mordred.

'Now comes the end of the noble Gawain.'

Though beaten and doubtful he would live the day, Gawain smiled in the face of his foe. The first part of the plan had worked. He had done his part; there was no way Mordred could intercept Arthur before he returned *Excalibur*.

'Where is he?' screamed Mordred, saliva spitting from his mouth, his face as red as the fire around them.

'That, I take with me to the next great adventure,' said Gawain bravely, rising onto his knees from the ground.

The Red Knight lowered his sword, resting it right above Gawain's neck.

'No!' Mordred bellowed, moving quickly to hold back the duel-bladed sword. 'I'll finish him.' A wicked grin stretched across his face.

Mordred stood menacingly over Gawain, aimed his sword directly at the knight's heart and thrust the blade deep into Gawain's chest, piercing through the middle of the yellow crest of the shining sun. He withdrew the blade and the noble knight slumped to the ground.



Arthur stood with Galahad and the few royal guards with them at the edge of the ruins facing the stone that once cradled

Excalibur. He could not see any adversaries as they moved forward. When they were mere feet from the stone's raised platform, an odd scent caught Arthur's nose in the breeze. He signalled for the guards to halt, Galahad looked at Arthur puzzled.

'Arthur, what's the matter?' he asked quietly.

There was a slight crunch of dead leaves underneath heavy foot.

'I think—' Arthur started to say.

SNAP!

A small branch broke as an ambush attacked. In a matter of moments, they were surrounded from all sides.

Mordred's men came from everywhere at once. By Arthur's count, they numbered twenty. *Not too bad*, he thought. He had well-trained fighters with him and they could handle them, if they maintained defensive positions.

This worked... for a time. The attackers' numbers were dwindling; however, Arthur had also lost a few men so far. They fought off the attackers as they came, making their way step by step towards the ancient stone within the ruins.

Arthur and Galahad fought the attackers, working together as they progressed slowly to their goal. They finally reached a raised area of the ruins where the stone lay. They were now so close to completing their task; Galahad looked at Arthur with a small glint of hope.

'Do it, Arthur. Return the sword. Without it, Mordred can never win.'

Arthur was about to thrust the sword into the old stone when he heard the noise of battle grow quieter... almost silent.

A terrible scream cut through the silence, followed by more screams of terror, and chaos all around the ancient ruins.

'Look out!' came the urgent cry from one of Arthur's soldiers.

‘A demon!’ screamed another just before his cries of panic were cut short.

Arthur was knocked to the ground, a few feet from the stone. He scrambled to his feet, looked around and saw what at first sight could have been a demon. A man standing at least seven feet tall with shoulders as broad as two of Arthur’s men. There was no armour or clothing above his waist, only simple leather breeches covering his lower half. Muscles rippled through his whole frame as well as horrible deep scars that ran the length of his body. His skin was a sickly pale green, and his head had long dark oily hair hanging down over his face. He began hacking his way through Arthur’s guards and even Mordred’s men if they were in his way, showing incredible strength and rage, with no signs of mercy.

Galahad jumped into the monster’s path to keep him busy long enough for Arthur to return *Excalibur*. He struck a good number of blows against the green man, yet none slowed him down. His muscled green arm shot forward and wrapped tight around Galahad’s neck. The green man took Galahad’s sword from his hand and struck down across the knight’s chest, a diagonal tear now ripped across the yellow cross that once shone brightly on Galahad’s armour. The remaining guards tried to attack, but nothing phased the strange fighter. He hurled Galahad into a large nearby tree, and the knight’s body limped to the ground. Then the green brute made short work of the few guards still able to fight. One by one he broke them, leaving nothing but a pile of lifeless bodies scattered around the ruins.

‘No!’ Arthur cried out. He parried and struck down a soldier that had charged him. Arthur rushed towards the stone once again.

The green monster, standing among the slaughtered bodies, turned and gave an ominous roar and pointed a pale finger directly at Arthur’s majestic sword.

As Arthur raised *Excalibur* up to thrust back into the stone, the lumbering green monster reached him and was drawing his own blade out. It was scratched and chipped all over, with a slight bend in the blade. The green menace was about to swing a killing stroke...

WHIISP!

Arthur thought he heard an eagle cry as something flashed past his face. Arthur looked up to see an arrow protruding from the giant's chest. With no more notice than the arrival of the first, three more arrows lodged into the green man's body with sickening wet thuds. A fourth hit his neck. The muscles in his neck were so thick the arrow did not stick. It fell harmlessly to the ground. The green man oozed violet-coloured blood from each wound. There was nothing more than a small cut on his neck.

Two more arrows flew past Arthur, hardly a breath between. One firmly lodged into the brute's leg just below the knee, the other penetrated through the foot completely and pinned him to the ground, forcing him to stop to pull out the arrows.

Arthur seized the moment and thrust *Excalibur* back into its rocky cradle. A thunderous noise and a flash like lightning exploded from the stone, sending Arthur and the green man flying away from the secured blade. Arthur landed in some nearby forest shrubs out of sight of the ruins. He hit his head on a piece of jagged rock as he landed. He saw a blurred hooded figure standing above him beginning to reach down as all turned to darkness for Arthur.



Deep in a forest far from Camelot, in a hut formed into a small hill, dwelled an ancient power of dark magic. Her faithful pet, a

large black crow, returned to her through an open window in the hill. She had been watching the events of the battle and Arthur's return of *Excalibur* to the stone. seeing all that transpired through the eyes of her pet. A crooked and wicked smile spread over her face. Now that the powerful blade was not a direct threat, her plan for power could begin to take shape.

She hobbled to the small window and stroked her pet. The crow was as dark as night, with a broken beak. She gave it new instructions, and the bird flew away into the forest. Her warrior servant, who for the time being she instructed to aid Mordred in his conquest of the kingdom, would soon return upon her call.

The time was approaching for her to enact her true plan...



Mordred's fury at the outcome of the day's events, particularly the loss of *Excalibur*, to Arthur's trick had all those around him on edge. He stared at the mystical blade, lodged once more in the stone, taunting him with the jewel-encrusted hilt, shining in the sun. His strongest men were trying unsuccessfully to pull the sword from the ancient stone it now rested in.

'You failed me, Uaithne!' Mordred said to the woods on his side. Out of the woods stepped the muscled green man, blood now caked and dried all over his body. Over one shoulder he carried a large oddly shaped sack. As he approached, he pulled out the last arrow from his chest; the wound healed right before Mordred's eyes.

'You certainly are full of surprises, yet still failed. You let Arthur return *Excalibur* to the stone!'

In a deep gravelly voice, the green man replied, 'Failed? If you had not fallen for his deception—'

‘You challenge me!’ Mordred cried, stepping towards the tall green man.

Uaithne was silent for a while then turned his head, as if in response to an unheard voice, and walked back into the woods and away from the ruins.

Mordred stood silently fuming for some time, his pale face now flushed and his pointed nose glowing with a quiet, unspoken rage. Eventually one of the soldiers nervously approached him.

‘Dread lord? What shall we do now? We cannot remove the blade; no man is strong enou—’

Mordred spun and ran his sword through the man’s chest far enough that the hilt was pressing firmly against the light leather armour. He withdrew the sword and the man fell to the ground.

‘Return to Camelot. We have other matters to attend to,’ Mordred ordered.

He mounted his horse to leave when one of the men asked.

‘What shall we do with our wounded? Shall I have someone recover them?’

‘No,’ Mordred said coldly. ‘They failed their task. Kill them.’