

MASON GIDEON

and the Caves of fate

Legacy of the Round Table – Book One

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Chapter One

Birthday Changes

When his alarm clock screeched, Mason Gideon slammed his fist onto it, silencing the noise before rolling onto his side and yanking his blankets over his head. He wasn't ready to get up. Mornings were the bane of his twelve-year-old existence. *Wait, make that thirteen.* Today was October 11—his birthday.

That thought brought a smile to his face and almost gave him enough of a boost to open his eyes.

When his bedroom door creaked open, Mason knew his chance to go back to sleep was over. Every single morning—even on the weekends—his mother was up before the sun peeked above the horizon and sipping her first cup of tea. It was enough to make a kid—*teenager*—weep.

"Mason, honey, I know you're awake. I heard your alarm. Happy birthday," she said in something close to a whisper.

"Five more minutes, please?" he groaned from beneath his blankets.

"Don't be like that. It's your birthday!"

He heard the thud of a laundry basket on the floor and knew she'd been up extra early doing the wash, probably some dishes, and whatever else adults did instead of sleeping to a proper hour.

"All I want for my birthday is one more hour of sleep."

"Request denied. School is mandatory, even on birthdays," his mom laughed. "You have ten minutes to get your teenage bottom into the kitchen. I'm making your favorite."

"Bacon sandwiches?" He poked his head out from under the blanket, half of his blonde hair plastered to the side of his head and the other half sticking straight up.

"With brown sauce," she smiled slyly because she knew she had him. He never turned down bacon sandwiches. "Wait a tic, what happened here?" she asked, pointing to his bedside table.

"I hit the snooze, same as always."

"I'll say you hit it, all right," she observed as she picked up the remnants of his demolished clock. "Did you pound it with a hammer or blow it up?"

Mason glanced over his shoulder at the clock or at least what was left of it. His mom was right; pieces of it were strewn all over his bedside table.

"I'm sorry, Mum. I don't know what happened, honest."

"Don't worry about it," she sighed then smiled so brightly that Mason thought she might be glad he'd broken the clock. "We'll find a way to buy you another. But until we get enough money, I guess you get me as your alarm."

He groaned as he flopped back down onto his bed.

"Mason Henry Gideon, I've had quite enough that teenage attitude," she said, obviously trying not

to laugh. “Get moving or you won’t have time to eat before school.”

“I’ll show you teenage attitude,” he grumbled, making sure his voice was loud enough for his mom to hear. “Don’t make me start rebelling. You know, fighting the man and all that.”

“Well, you can’t fight the man on an empty stomach, so get moving.” She pointed at the laundry. “You’ve got clothes to put away as well. Hurry or the bacon will get cold.”

As she left, Mason threw off the covers, shivering in the cool morning air. It was only October, but a brisk autumn cold already had arrived in Southern Wales.

To check the weather, Mason leaned on the window frame, trying to see past the dirt and grime caked on the glass. The sun was trying to fight its way through the clouds. It was a great effort, but Mason would bet his bike—the only thing he owned of any value—that it wouldn’t succeed. Caerleon wasn’t a city used to the sun. It was more of an it-could-rain-any-minute type of place.

As he pushed himself up, Mason heard the window frame crack, and the wood broke off in his hands, exposing the exterior brick. *Damn*. Now they’d have to call Mr. Harrington, the owner, landlord, and first-floor resident of their three-story brick building. Not that Mr. Harrington would do anything about it. The building was in shambles. Mason was even forbidden to go near the second floor because it was so bad that no one could live there. The flat he shared with his mother wasn’t much better, making them barely a step above being homeless.

Still, Mason loved his home because it was just the two of them. He hadn’t known his father and had decided a long time ago he didn’t need one. His mom was the greatest, and even if there was never enough money and wouldn’t be any birthday presents, he didn’t care. They had each other, and that was what mattered.

Mason grabbed a towel and headed for the tiny bathroom. Maybe it was his imagination, but the bathroom felt smaller today. He bonked his head on the showerhead when he got in, and no matter which way he turned, his shoulders brushed against the curtain or the wall.

As a child, he’d learned the importance of quick showers. It was more cost-effective, better for the environment, and there was never any hot water anyway. He washed quickly, closing his eyes and wishing the water would be warmer. To his surprise, the temperature rose enough to take the edge off.

“It’s a bloody birthday miracle,” he said aloud as he washed.

Wrapping a towel around himself, he stood in front of the mirror. The edges were fogged from the warm water for the first time in as long as he could remember. Mason brushed his blonde hair away from his face. It was getting a bit long. He’d need to cut it before the headmaster noticed. School had just started, and he’d already accumulated plenty of demerits for being tardy. He didn’t want to add uniform violations to his record.

Donning the black trousers and white collared shirt required for school, he noticed the pants were snug at the waist and a bit too short in the legs. Same with his white collared shirt; the sleeves were suddenly too short. Nothing he could do about it now. These clothes were expensive, and he knew they didn’t have money for new ones.

He pulled on his blue blazer, tugging on the sleeves to try to make them longer. He didn’t want his mom to notice and worry about the cost of replacing them.

Stuffing his regulation clip-on tie in his pocket so he wouldn’t get any brown sauce on it, he headed

to the kitchen where he could smell the bacon cooking.

The kitchen was barely big enough for a table, so most of the time they ate dinner on TV trays in the living room. Breakfast, on the other hand, was usually a hurried meal eaten standing at the counter. On said counter, his mom had a plate of his favorite crispy bacon on buttered toast waiting for him.

She was dressed for work in the black dress and red apron required at The Red House Diner where she waitressed. She'd put a smiley face sticker next to "Evelyn" on the nametag pinned over her heart. Taking a long sip of tea as he entered, she tucked a chain with a gold ring beneath the collar of her dress.

Mason could swear her cheeks looked hollower today than they had yesterday. It gave the impression that her brown eyes were much larger than they were.

"Mum, did you eat any of these?" he asked around a mouthful of bacon. "They're amazing! Tell me you had one."

"Oh, honey, I'm not hungry. I'm good with my tea."

Mason tilted his head to the side, unconvinced.

"I can get something at work," she insisted.

She wouldn't, though, because her boss would take anything she ate out of her paycheck. He knew she wouldn't touch a bite.

"It's my birthday, and I refuse to enjoy my bacon if you don't share it with me." Mason held out the plate of uneaten sandwiches. "Go on. I insist."

"All right, fine," she said, taking half a sandwich. "But just this one. You're a growing boy, and you need it more than I do."

He smiled when she ate it in two bites then rinsed it down with the last of her tea as she glanced at the clock.

"We have to get moving, or we're both going to be late. You remember that I have to work a double at the diner today, right?"

Mason nodded, his mouth full of food.

She pulled her dark hair back into a messy bun at the nape of her neck. "I promise I'll be home by 8:30, and we'll have your birthday dinner then."

"You don't have to do anything special." Mason knew it was useless to even try. It was his thirteenth birthday. Of course, she would plan something.

"I've already invited Mr. Harrington," she told him, hurrying to grab her coat. "He'll be here to keep you company when you get home from school, and he'll stay for dinner."

"Mum, I'm thirteen now," Mason whined around another mouthful of bacon. "I don't need a babysitter."

"It makes me feel better to know someone is here for you when you get home, and God knows the poor man needs someone to feed him now and then." Her tone brooked no argument.

"The old wanker needs the pole removed from his backside," Mason muttered.

"What was that, young man?"

His mother could go from smiling to stern in an instant, even in the process of putting on her ridiculous yellow stocking cap.

"You'd better not have said what I think you did. It's impolite to talk about people that way,

especially your elders. You know the rule—if you don't have anything nice to say, smile and shut it."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's just...this place is falling apart, and he doesn't do anything about it. He sits out front watering his dead garden while something new breaks every day."

"Sweetheart, I know it's tough, but there aren't any other places we can afford. I've checked. Mr. Harrington hasn't raised our rent since we moved in, not once. He may not be the matt maintenance man, but he's given us a place to call home for nearly thirteen years." She buttoned up her coat and smoothed out the wrinkles. "I'm sorry we can't live somewhere nicer."

"No, Mum, stop. It's not about the money," he said, swallowing a bite of his breakfast. "I don't care about that. He seems a bit cracked, though, doesn't he? Have you ever tried talking to him? Every conversation is about whatever part of his body isn't working."

His mom stifled a laugh. "Well, when you've reached his age, you've earned the right to complain a little bit."

"I don't want to hear about his organ failings over birthday cake. He's creepy, too. I swear he stares at me whenever he's outside."

"He *stares* at you? Don't be silly. Why would he..." She looked at him, cocking her head to the side before taking a step to stand in front of him. Reaching up, she brushed the hair out of his face. Her eyes were wet as if she were about to cry, and there was a bittersweet smile on her face.

"What is it, Mum?"

"You look different," she said, still studying him, "older maybe."

"Well, I should. I'm a teenager now." He wanted to pull the sleeves of his uniform down so she wouldn't see how much shorter they were, but each of his hands held a half-eaten bacon sandwich.

"My boy. My little miracle. How can you be thirteen already?"

He smiled, knowing exactly what she would say next.

"Do you feel any different, now that you're a whole year older?"

"No, Mum, I feel the same as yester..." he stopped in the middle of the stock answer he'd given her for years. Something did feel different. There was a sizzle in his blood that he'd never felt before, like an itch for adventure. "You know what? I think I do feel different."

"Really?" she asked, her expression changing. If he didn't know better, he'd say she looked scared. "Different how?"

"I don't know...different. Stronger maybe. Ready to take on the world."

"Only you would turn thirteen and think you can take on the world," she sighed, opening her arms for a hug.

Mason felt he was getting a little too old for them, but he stepped into her arms anyway. She held him longer than usual—until he was afraid that he'd drip brown sauce on her coat.

"Uh...Mum...you all right?"

She kissed his cheek and pulled away, rubbing her eyes with the backs of her wrists as if she didn't want him to know she was crying.

"I'm fine," she said, but there was still worry lingering in her expression. "I know you're going to want to spend some time with Rhys after school, but please make sure your home by five. Mr. Harrington will be waiting."

“Okay, I’ll be here.”

Rhys Lear was Mason’s best friend. They’d known each other since primary school.

“Oh, and don’t think I didn’t notice that your uniform is too small. We’ll worry about *that* later. Have a great day, sweetheart, and happy birthday.” She blew him a kiss as she hurried out the door.

Mason finished off his last sandwich before grabbing his bag and following her. He walked past a maintenance closet—which Mason assumed must be the least used place in the whole building—down the stairs past the empty second floor and out the main entrance of the building. Mr. Harrington had forgotten to turn the outside lights off again, like he did every morning.

He could still see his mother walking briskly toward the center of town in the direction of the Commons where most of the businesses in Caerleon were located. Even though they had a beat-up Volkswagen Polo hatchback, she always walked to work. Walking saved on gas, which meant extra money for food. Besides, the car didn’t work well to begin with.

Mr. Harrington was outside watering what was left of his garden—a few rotting pumpkins and the remnants of a tomato plant that had never bloomed. Why the old man bothered, Mason didn’t know. His time would be better spent fixing something inside the building.

“Hello, Mr. Harrington,” Mason said, hoping his mom could hear how polite he was being.

Mr. Harrington looked over, squinting behind round glasses with thick frames and even thicker lenses. Reaching back, the man pulled up his plaid pants beneath his red cardigan. His salt-and-pepper hair (much more salt than pepper) was covered by a thin beanie cap the same chocolate brown as his skin.

“Good morning, young Mason. You know, it’s strange,” Mr. Harrington said, scratching the back of his neck, “when I woke up this morning, I couldn’t feel either of my feet.”

“I bet that made getting out of bed difficult,” Mason mumbled under his breath, walking to where his bike was chained as Mr. Harrington continued talking. He’d moved on from his feet to the state of a boil on his knee.

“Happy birthday, Mason.”

Mason looked up to see the last person he expected to be at his building this early on a school day: Elizabeth Covington.

She was a year older and stood a head taller than Mason. At least, she usually did. Standing next to her, Mason realized he’d almost caught up to her in height. She was wearing jeans and a light purple sweater, which seemed to highlight her creamy, coffee-colored skin and dark-as-night hair she had swept back into a ponytail.

He’d had a crush on her since he was five when she’d come down from London to visit her grandfather. And every time he’d seen her since then, he seemed to do something incredibly embarrassing and stupid.

“Elizabeth?” His voice squeaked, and he cleared his throat before saying her name again.

“Have you grown?” she asked, giving him a one-armed hug he wasn’t prepared for. She smelled good, like oranges and vanilla. “You seem different,” she observed.

“I feel different,” he admitted. “But what are you doing here? Usually you only come to visit Mr. Harrington for Christmas.”

“Well, obviously, I’m here for your birthday,” she said brightly.

“Really?” He stood a bit taller, not able to believe his luck. She’d come to wish him a happy birthday. Dreams did come...

“No, not really. Sorry, Mason,” she added with a shrug. “My mum was worried about Granddad, so she sent me to check on him. It’s a lucky perk that I get to be here for your birthday as well.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” he said, trying to hide his disappointment by pulling the lock off his bike. “How long are you visiting?”

“Just tonight. Mum doesn’t want me missing too much school.”

“...then something was leaking from my elbow.” Mr. Harrington continued, evidently still on about his list of calamities even though Mason wasn’t listening.

“My mum tells me you will be coming over for dinner tonight?” Mason said to Mr. Harrington while dodging his moldy elbow.

“I will?” Mr. Harrington looked confused for a minute, then his face brightened. “Oh, yes, I guess I will.”

“You’re coming, too?” he asked Elizabeth.

“No, Mason,” she said, rolling her eyes, “I’m going to eat alone in this nutter’s apartment while you three are having a proper birthday party.”

“It was just a question. I’d better get going, some of us have school today. I’ll be back by five. See you then,” Mason said, stealing one last glance at Elizabeth before jumping on his bike and heading for school.

Chapter Two

Friends, Enemies, & Legends

Mason pedaled along the road where a small forest separated him from the winding waters of the river. The sky was a dull gray, threatening the usual rain shower before noon, and the air was brisk and smelled of the sea. Within five minutes of riding, another cyclist turned a corner and fell into place beside him.

“Hey, Rhys,” Mason said, glancing at his best friend. Rhys was about a foot shorter and thirty pounds heavier than Mason, with sandy blonde hair and freckles splattered across his cheeks. He huffed and puffed as he pedaled, trying to keep up.

“Happy birthday,” Rhys said between breaths. “Are you in a hurry today? You’re really pushing it.”

Mason didn’t think he was going any faster than usual, but when he looked down, he saw that the ground was whizzing by under his wheels. He wasn’t even winded, but Rhys was now three bike lengths behind him.

“I don’t want to be late,” Mason explained as he slowed to allow Rhys to catch up. “Mr. Troyer will have our butts if we’re tardy again.”

“What? You think so?” Rhys looked honestly confused. “We’ve only been late two or three...”

“Twelve. We’ve been late twelve times, and it’s only October.”

Rhys cursed, using a word his mother would be astonished he knew.

“All right. I see your point. We’d better move.”

Mason cut across a field to their left, passing an empty playground and zooming between twin brownstone houses. The grass was already a dull tan over hard-packed dirt. Luckily it hadn’t rained yet or they’d have had to take the long way around to avoid the mud. As he took the turn onto the street, Mason was moving so fast that his bike skidded on the loose gravel lining the road.

Behind him, Rhys followed at a much safer speed. “Slow down!” he called. “You know you’re going to wait for me anyway.”

He had a point. Once again, Mason reduced his speed until Rhys caught up. They pulled up to the school with five minutes to spare, and Mason hurried to clip on his tie while Rhys attempted to lock their bikes together.

Unfortunately, Dawson Lynch—a boy who had bullied Rhys as long as Mason had known them—parked his bike right next to theirs.

“Hey, Chubster,” he laughed, deliberately leaning his bike so it fell onto Rhys. “Having some

trouble? Can't get your fat fingers to work the lock?"

Rhys ignored the comment and the bike on his back. He focused on the lock in his hands while his cheeks turned crimson.

"Lock up my bike while you're down there, Chubs," Dawson continued. "And you better have my homework done for Science class."

"Why don't you leave him alone?" Mason said, pulling Dawson's bike off Rhys' back and straightening it in the stand. "He's not doing your home..."

Mason stopped, stunned as he watched Rhys reach into his bag and silently hand Dawson some sheets of paper and a small flash drive.

"Next time, email it to me, okay, Chubster? Then I won't be seen talking to you." Dawson walked inside the building, chuckling to himself.

"You're doing his homework?"

"Well, his mum asked me to tutor him in maths, but he has training, so he can't get his work done. I'm helping him during rugby season and...yeah...I'm doing his homework," Rhys trailed off, hanging his head as he finished locking the bikes.

"You know you're going to have to stand up to him someday."

"Yeah, well...not today," Rhys sighed. "Come on, we need to get to class."

They entered the building to find Dawson entertaining his usual squad of tall, stupid-looking friends by doing an exaggerated impression of Rhys running in gym class. Mason felt his jaw tighten and fists clench.

"Leave it," Rhys said, his voice quiet. "They're not worth you getting in trouble. It doesn't matter anyway. The joke's on him."

"Why is that?" Mason opened the door to the classroom and let Rhys walk in ahead of him.

"I'm rubbish at Science," Rhys smiled.

Mason and Rhys took their spots at the front as the bell rang. Bad luck the one time they weren't late, their teacher wasn't even in the room. Mason glared at Dawson, who lounged at the back of the class with his feet propped on the table in front of him. When he saw Mason's icy glare, Dawson smiled mockingly. Mason felt his blood boil. He wanted to wipe the smirk off the bully's face.

The fluorescent lights above his head began to flicker.

"Good morning, class," Mr. Troyer said as he strode into the room.

Although Mason looked up, no one stopped their conversations long enough to respond.

Troyer dropped a thick textbook onto the desk with a loud boom. "Good morning, class."

"Good morning, Mr. Troyer," the class halfheartedly intoned, the last few stragglers moving toward their seats.

"That's a little better anyway," Troyer said as he set his battered, brown briefcase on his desk and placed a Royal Historians Society mug beside it.

Mr. Troyer didn't look like a teacher, and Mason knew from the way the girls talked about him after class they all had a crush on him. He was younger than the rest of the teachers at the school; Mason would eat his stupid clip-on tie if the man was over thirty-five. His dark brown hair was slightly mussed, like he ran his fingers through it a lot, and he always had a short growth of beard as if it refused to be

shaved no matter the time of day. In his blue suit jacket and khaki pants, he looked more suited for the television than the classroom.

“Since we finished the French Revolution the last time we met, I thought we might move on to something a little closer to home. Perhaps you’ll have a bit more interest in this subject than beheaded monarchs.” Mr. Troyer rubbed his hands together, making a dry rasping sound. “Our new topic is Caerleon.”

Mason tried not to roll his eyes. *Local history? Really?*

“But sir,” said Sally Pritchett, a pretty girl with dark hair to her waist, belatedly putting her hand in the air, “you told us we’d be studying the Napoleonic Wars next.”

“Yes, Ms. Pritchett, I know I did,” Mr. Troyer rubbed the back of his head and looked at the floor. He opened his mouth to speak, but Sally cut across him.

“I’ve read three extra books about the Napoleonic Wars to prepare for this lesson.”

“And that preparation will most certainly come in handy as we will be covering them in great detail in a few weeks. However,” he added, glancing at Mason as if to avoid Sally’s glare. “I’ve decided to take on the rich and fascinating history of Caerleon.”

“But Mr. Troyer,” someone whined from the back of the class. “We learned this three years ago. We even went to the National Roman Legion Museum and everything.”

“We all know Caerleon is an old city,” Mr. Troyer went on as if he hadn’t heard the complaint. “Because of its position on the River Usk and being so close to the Bristol Channel, it’s always been a likely place to settle. The Romans were here, of course, and I’m sure you’ve all seen or heard of the baths, the amphitheater, and the soldiers’ barracks.”

“Don’t forget the city walls,” someone called from the back.

“Naturally. Sometimes it seems like there are bits of the Roman Empire around every corner. However, they left this area around 400 of the Common Era, or CE. What do you think happened to the people left behind?”

Mason hoped some hands were raised behind him because he had no idea how to answer that question.

Mr. Troyer scanned the room before waving a hand in the general direction of the class and calling on Ava, a stout girl with her hair in two braids.

“If the Roman way worked, wouldn’t they keep using it?”

“I like how you’re thinking. At first, that’s exactly what they did,” Mr. Troyer said before going to the wall and pulling down a large rolled-up map of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales that showed the division of tribes around 500 CE. The grungy dust-caked map looked like it hadn’t been used in centuries.

The students in the front row coughed a little, and Mr. Troyer waved a hand in front of his face to disperse the dust. Those in class not covered in dust laughed.

“That’s what I get for using this antique instead of having you all pull it up on your tablets. Probably a fire hazard at this point, but, anyways, the chieftains and the tribes of...” he turned to the map where Mason saw names like Brychennogg and Glwyssing, “...the area got along fine for a while running on the Roman standard. Then the chieftains around Caerleon began to struggle for power. In addition, the

Saxons attacked. Can anyone tell me who the Saxons were? Mr. Lear?”

“Weren’t they German?” Rhys’ response sounded more like a question.

“Yes, they were! Good guess, Mr. Lear.”

Rhys let out a relieved sigh.

“The Germanic tribes living along the North Sea came across in their longboats and began conquering England.”

Mr. Troyer walked away from the map to take a quick sip from his mug. “The Saxons pushed across the country, forcing the Britons to retreat until they reached Wales. It wasn’t until sometime around 500 to 550 CE that the Britons ceased fighting amongst themselves and banded together to stop the Saxon advance.

“To the people in Caerleon, the Saxon invaders must have seemed like barbarians. They didn’t live the same way the Romans had, they didn’t fight in Roman formations, and they didn’t have the same religion. Everything the Britons had become accustomed to was being destroyed. They were afraid and needed a strong leader to help them fight back. Who do you think that leader was?”

Mr. Troyer scanned the room, looking for volunteers. When no one raised their hand, his eyes fell on Mason. “Mr. Gideon,” he said, walking directly in front of Mason’s desk. “Who do you think this leader of the Britons could have been?”

“Uh...” Mason racked his brain, feeling his face heat up and knowing his cheeks were turning bright red. He could feel everyone’s eyes on him, and he knew he’d have to come up with something. But what? Who else had lived here besides the Romans? There was something he remembered being mentioned once in primary school, but it was only a myth. Still, he had to say something or Mr. Troyer would stare at him expectantly all day. “I don’t know, wasn’t there something about King Arthur?”

“That’s exactly right!” Mr. Troyer beamed. “According to many notable scholars, Caerleon—also known as the ‘City of the Legion’—was the location of a crucial battle for King Arthur and his knights and also believed to be the site of Camelot itself.”

“Wait a second.” Sally raised her hand as she spoke, and Mr. Troyer turned his attention to her. “You’re saying, in *History* class, that Caerleon was where King Arthur lived? As in *the* King Arthur with the Round Table and Excalibur and everything?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Mr. Troyer replied.

“Why?” Rhys asked as the buzz in the classroom grew louder. “I mean, wouldn’t he want to be in a big city like Cardiff or Newport?”

“Today, that might be true,” Mr. Troyer nodded his agreement to Rhys’ doubt. “But think about how this city would have looked back in 550 CE. Instead of ruins, it had functioning Roman baths and a large amphitheater, plus buildings like the barracks to house knights and an easily defendable hill fort north of the city limits.”

“But Mr. Troyer.” Sally was practically jumping out of her seat to make sure she was heard. “Aren’t there dozens of cities across the country that claim they were the real Camelot? What makes Caerleon any different?”

“What makes it special? You mean, besides the fact that I teach here?” he paused, chuckling to himself as the class groaned at his attempt at a joke. “Right. Moving on then. The reason this city is different, and

the part that makes some historians consider Caerleon as a prime candidate for Camelot, is the legend surrounding Arthur's death and the prophecy that he will come again."

"You mean how he went to Avalon?" Sally scoffed. "Don't tell me the isle's here, too."

"Of course not!" Mr. Troyer looked appalled that she would even suggest it. "Some historians believe Avalon is near Glastonbury. What I'm referring to is the Arthurian legend based here in Caerleon."

"What's the legend?" Rhys asked, leaning forward in his seat. Mason could tell Mr. Troyer had hooked him and wondered how much of Rhys' allowance would be spent buying books about King Arthur.

"As some of you may know, Arthur is called the 'Once and Future King,' but can anyone tell me why?" No one in the class answered while Mr. Troyer paused dramatically before continuing. "The story goes that when our country is in its darkest hour, King Arthur will return, rally his Knights of the Round Table, and save us all. They say that somewhere in the woods around here is a burial chamber where Arthur's soldiers sleep, waiting for their king's return."

"That's mental!" Thanks to the silence of the room, Mason's voice was far louder than he had intended, and everyone broke out laughing at his reaction.

"Excuse me, Mr. Gideon? Would you like to explain your comment?" Mr. Troyer was smiling. Mason sighed in relief. At least his teacher wasn't mad.

"You have to admit that it does sound a little crazy. I mean, you're saying that somewhere there's a crypt of soldiers who are going to wake up and fight for a dead king. No disrespect, Mr. Troyer, but it's like Sally said; this is all a legend, not history."

"In a sense, that's true, but the further back we go in history, the more the lines between fantasy and reality become blurred." Mr. Troyer sat on the edge of his desk and took a moment to consider his response. "This is what makes history so fascinating and yet so *frustrating*. Remember, the history we hear about is written by the victors. The losers rarely get to tell their side of the story."

"Is that why we don't learn about the American Revolution?" someone shouted from the back of the class.

"I'm afraid I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about."

The class laughed at Mr. Troyer's response, but then his face grew serious as he appeared to pick his next words carefully. "Historians try to study what happened. Manuscripts, archeological findings, anthropological studies, letters, grave markings... all these things are just the beginning. They use every tool and resource at their disposal, anything to give them documented evidence that tells the story of our past."

"But what about oral history?" Sally chimed in. "Stories like *Cinderella* or *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*? They're considered part of our history, but we can't tell where they began."

Mr. Troyer jumped to his feet, his excitement showing as he paced the room. "That's exactly what I'm talking about! Go to your cinemas, libraries, or comic book shops, and you will hear the story of King Arthur told in many ways. Because those stories are different, does it mean that they didn't happen? That King Arthur didn't live? Perhaps the only difference is in the perspective of the storyteller.

"In the end," Troyer added as he stopped pacing and looked over the entire class, "whether you believe in the Round Table or Excalibur or Avalon or not, something happened back in 550 CE to unite

the people of Briton. Together they fought off the invaders. To do something of such magnitude, they would have needed a strong leader. My bet is on King Arthur.”

Mason wanted to ask more, but the bell rang, and everyone began gathering their things.

“Your assignment, due Monday, is an essay,” Mr. Troyer raised his voice to be heard over the rustle of the papers and chatter from the students. “I want three double-spaced pages on a knight of your choice from the Round Table. Be sure to cite your sources.” He checked his notes then hurriedly added, “Tomorrow, we will begin to separate myth from historical fact.”

“Can you imagine?” Rhys asked as they slowly moved closer to the exit amid the throng of students leaving the classroom. “King Arthur could’ve lived here. Maybe he lived near my house!”

“He certainly didn’t live near mine,” Mason said as he glanced back where Mr. Troyer sat at his desk then at the dusty map on the wall. Myth or not, something stirred inside him, and he was burning to know more.

Chapter Three

A New Chance for an Old Vow



Sir Augustus Blackthorne adjusted the diamond cufflinks on the sleeves of his crisp black suit and stared across the long mahogany table. His attention waned as the men on his senior advisory board droned on. Rain pattered against the windows, and he felt the muscles in his left eye begin to twitch from the annoyances around him.

Another day exactly the same as the day before. He ran his fingers through his dark, perfectly coiffed hair and rubbed the short growth of beard on his face. They were still talking like he cared about them or what they had to say. The business was only necessary to fund his projects. He didn't have time for this. He had a world to run. *The eagle cares not about the housefly.*

Blackthorne held up his hand, and the room went deathly still.

"You're giving me information I already know. Tell me, if your jobs are to keep me informed about developments in my empire, but there has been no change, what is the point of me keeping you in my employ?" Blackthorne stood, and the others immediately followed. "You will do better tomorrow, or I will replace you with those who won't waste my time."

He pushed a button on his desk, and the boardroom door swung open. Knowing they'd been dismissed; the men began filing out of the room. When the door clicked shut behind the last man, Blackthorne walked to the window and gazed at the rain-drenched city beneath him.

"London," he growled, his breath momentarily fogging the window in front of him. "How I hate thee."

From his skyscraper, he could see the Thames winding through the city. *My city*, he thought bitterly. Blackthorne had watched it grow into this from nothing except a group of huts huddled next to the water, and he could think of nothing better than being here to watch it fall. The rain blurred the streetlights below, and the clouds darkened the streets, making it feel much later than it was.

People drove along the ramshackle streets and creating a raucous cacophony that pulled at his last nerve. He was weary. He had everything any person could ever want: money, power, glory. Nothing was out of his reach. Yet, as he turned his back on London, he knew that wasn't entirely true. There was one thing he couldn't obtain with any amount of money or power.

Her face flashed before his eyes, and longing crept into his heart.

At a knock on the door, he sighed in frustration as he pressed the button to allow whoever was there to enter. A tall man in a silver suit strode into the room, his long, brown hair and wild beard a direct contrast to the elegance of his clothing.

“What is it, Draig?” Blackthorne demanded.

“We’ve found the infant, sir.” The man spoke with the hint of an Irish accent.

“I’ve heard that before. Many times. What makes you so certain you’ve succeeded where others have failed?”

Draig stood unnaturally still, like a snake in the reeds waiting to strike.

“How long have you worked for me, Draig?” Blackthorne asked, steepling his fingers in front of his face and staring at them instead of the man who was his second in command and the only wizard he could find in this cursed century with any magical talent.

“Nearly twelve years, sir.”

“You’ve heard what happened to the last wizard who said they detected a surge of Merlin’s magic?” Blackthorne looked back out the window, remembering thirteen years ago when he had been told to search in Glastonbury. “Would you be willing to bet your life on this one being the child I’ve been searching lifetimes to find?”

Draig spoke slowly and carefully, his deep voice resonating with self-assurance. “The Elfennau has confirmed it. This magic is ancient, sir. Possibly, even older than you.”

Blackthorne rolled his eyes as his gaze fell on the Tower of London in the distance. Draig had no idea how old he was. He had been old before the first stone was placed to build that accursed tower. The thought was laughable, but Blackthorne didn’t find humor in much anymore.

“The *Elfennau*,” he spat. “Those witches see magic in the dregs of their tea. Where did this utterly ancient magical experience happen?”

“Caerleon.”

Blackthorne whipped his head around and stared at Draig, his eyes flashing. “What did you say?”

“Caerleon, sir. In Wales.”

“I know where it is,” Blackthorne snapped. Thoughts and memories of times better off forgotten moved to the forefront of his mind. *Could it be? After all this time?*

“Surround the city. No one gets in or out. Shut down the traffic and monitor the trains. If anyone resists, bribe them. If that doesn’t work, kill them. This is your only priority, Draig. Keep me informed. I want to know everything happening in... that place. Have someone monitor the NSPCC as well. I don’t want to lose the infant because of the stupid government.”

Draig nodded and turned, leaving Blackthorne alone with his thoughts.

Caerleon. He’d searched for the child all over the world and burned more cities to the ground than he could remember. He had started wars and revolutions all in vain as he’d searched for a child who had never appeared. He had learned time and again not to get his hopes up.

Still, if it were true... It would be quite fitting if the site of his greatest failure would also bear witness to his greatest success.

Standing, he made his way to the opposite side of the room where a large wooden bar was stocked with several well-aged bottles of scotch. He placed his finger on the wall underneath one of the glass shelves. The sound of two electronic beeps was followed by a quiet click and a small hiss of air as the bar pushed inward to reveal a short passageway lined with highly polished stainless steel.

The hidden doorway closed behind him as he stepped up to a lone rectangular black plate. He placed

his right hand on the plate, allowing the sensor to scan his prints. The wall next to the panel slid away, revealing an elevator.

Blackthorne stepped inside, placing his hand on another panel. The doors closed and the elevator began to rise. While he waited to reach his destination, he allowed the memories he'd tried to hold at bay wash over him.

He'd failed to protect her son, Mordred, at the Battle of Camlann. Her grief was immeasurable and only temporarily sated when he told her the secret he'd uncovered: Guinevere was with child.

Morgan had tasked him with finding the child and granted him immortality to complete his quest no matter when or where the boy was hiding.

"It will be done." He knelt before her, saluting her with a hand over his heart as he bowed his head in a gesture of servitude. "I won't rest until I have what you desire."

Even then he managed to fail her. Centuries had passed, but Blackthorne could still remember their final night together like it was yesterday...the rain pouring down around him, the smell of the wet earth and electricity in the air, and the four hundred hired men he'd commanded. Morgan Le Fay sat behind him astride a snow-white mare.

She'd warned him Merlin was near, but he'd been sure he could take the small convent with ease and kill everything inside.

But when he thought he'd achieved victory, Merlin had thwarted him, hiding the boy and imprisoning Morgan. Hundreds of years had passed, and Blackthorne still hadn't succeeded. It was imperative for him to find the child who was the key to the sword. Only then could she be released.

The memory of this vow and failure echoed through his mind as the elevator dinged and announced his arrival. He stepped out onto the top floor of the building, which he'd converted into a two-story apartment. His steps echoed on the polished marble floors as the shadows of the cloudy sky penetrated the extra-large windows surrounding his flat.

An older man in a perfectly tailored suit approached Blackthorne, who stopped him with a raised finger. "I'm leaving, Harold. Prepare the car. I'll call when I'm ready."

"Very good, sir," his butler said.

"Until then, I'm not to be disturbed by anyone."

"Understood."

Blackthorne continued down the main hall, passing paintings by DaVinci, Van Gogh, Rembrandt, and Picasso without a single glance.

He entered his study, the only room in the house where no one else was allowed. He ignored the museum-quality pieces he had collected through the years, walking directly to the back wall where a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf held dusty leather-bound tomes.

Wordlessly, he reached for a book by Geoffrey of Monmouth, tilting it until it balanced on the edge of its spine. A distinct click echoed throughout the study, and the bookshelf slid inward, revealing yet another secret room, this one containing only a few items.

In a clear case on the left was a highly polished suit of charcoal-gray armor. The cool lighting reflected against its gleaming surface and highlighted the nicks and scratches.

Across from it rested a large sword, its pommel engraved with a crown. The hilt was carved into

intertwined dueling snakes, one silver and one gold, and the blade was etched with symbols and letters in a language long forgotten by most of the world.

Blackthorne ignored these relics from his past, his eyes drawn to the full-length painting of a woman in the place of honor at the center of the room. He knelt before it, like a knight greeting his queen, and gazed up at her. With her full lips, sleek black hair, and skin as white as snow accentuating her stormy gray eyes, she looked like a character from a storybook rather than a woman of flesh and blood.

“Forgive me, my queen,” Blackthorne said quietly. “I haven’t come to see you in some time. I had lost hope that the child would ever be found and was ashamed of my failure. Perhaps our time has finally come. If this is the child, I will soon free you from your prison, and we will rule this land for all eternity.”