

## CAMELOT

When I stepped off the plane, I didn't know what to expect.

It was apparent to me that most of my knowledge of London, dubbed the 'sculpted city' by one of my friends, came from my examination of the ancient pseudohistory painstakingly committed to page by Geoffrey of Monmouth. *Historia Regum Britannia* had been my sole source of knowledge of the highlands forming the United Kingdom and its shining capital of London. I had barely deigned to look at a guidebook during my travels to London, choosing instead to preserve my vision of the lonely isle, misted over by legends and myths of heroes and chivalry. Their ghostly forms came back to me, names of old friends sprung from their paper prisons -- King Arthur, Robin Hood, William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

The fluency with which I recited their names was a gift unearthed to me by an old professor, whose eyes had held a benevolent twinkle whenever he bent his gaze upon me. 'King Arthur,' he said. 'He's the foundation of the whole matter of Britain, and yet people believe he wasn't real.'

'He's real,' I insisted. 'The characters we read about on the page end up being more real than the men we stand beside.'

'It's always more real when you stand upon the soil on which Arthur's legacy was defined.' My professor grinned. 'Stonehenge, just outside of London. A true fragment of England's story.'

His words had carried me far -- all the way to the banks of the River Thames, in a solitary cafe, where my seat gave me an uninterrupted view of rain-darkened London, the dazzling beauty of its architecture eclipsed by the cold shadow of an English summer storm. A query at the cafe's counter gave names to the structures that lay across the unrelenting waters of the Thames. There loomed Saint Paul's Cathedral, its argent dome outlined in a gold halo; in front of it stretched the Millennium Bridge, its silver frame balanced precariously across the tempestuous waters of the Thames. Not too far would be Westminster

Abbey, with its flying buttresses and stained glass, the lineages of kings and queens that have faded to dust raised and shaped again in the form of ancient tombs, its plaques proclaiming that the memory of the glorious bloodline would live forever. Above the historicity of the architecture towered the modern triumph of the Shard, its top piercing wisps of clouds billowing in shades of pink and white.

‘London looks beautiful, doesn’t she?’ said the waitress.

‘Perhaps.’ I took a sip of my coffee. ‘Maybe once the storm blows over.’

She laughed. ‘That is a vain hope. London weeps almost constantly.’

That phenomenon had become all too familiar to me. Barely a month ago, a photo had appeared in my mailbox, depicting my beloved professor, confined to a wheelchair, his eyes emptied of that vibrant shimmer I had loved so well. And for the days that followed, I had never managed to calm the tempest roaring through my thorax. It seemed only appropriate to me to honor my teacher’s legacy with a trip to the city of London, a world where the past became the present and memories of the old times resurfaces to fuse with the modern. My first destination, without a doubt, would be Stonehenge.

The rain finally relented as I set foot upon that soil wherein lay a millenia of history, the dark stormclouds retreating, its underside painted in shades of pink and white like a cow’s udder. I had timed my arrival well -- within minutes, the sun would rise, its light framing the arched stones in a reflection of Arthur’s glory.

The wind moved; it passed as softly through my hair, then stirred the slumbering blades of grass, topped by butter-yellow blooms that swayed gently. I advanced my booted feet into that circle, put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight, let my touch linger on the ancient soil. Beneath that soil, legend claimed, lay the bones of Uther Pandragon, father of King Arthur, in eternal slumber.

Within moments, the sun rose, a luminous orb that forced its way through the darkness. I heard the thudding of blood in my ears, my breath was abated, the hair rose on my arms. From that murky darkness, the Giants' Ring emerged, shadows of a bygone era lost to the ages. Their shapes were familiar to me, figures who had spent days in my imagination and nights within my dreams; I could say their names with the fluency given to me by my teacher, his soft voice whispering in my ear: King Arthur, Robin Hood, Shakespeare, Austen, the Canterbury Tales. A golden ray, like a stream of honey, hit the furthestmost rock upon the circle, and the illusion disappeared like dwindling smoke, reducing a mighty hero into a stone white fossil.

There was a perfect, glorious moment, when the sun shone through one of the archways, transforming that cold stone into a portal to heaven. How many times did Stonehenge's creators count their waking hours on this ancient calendar? How many times did they watch the sunlight fall upon that furthestmost rock? The golden light shone through, and I drank in its immortal elixir; the naked flame of the sun pierced the mysteries that shrouded the Giants' Ring. A line emerged from the foggy mists of my memory from my days in the classroom, my professor by my side: *'Don't let it be forgot/ That once there was a spot;/ For one brief, shining moment --'*

The last line refused to resurface from the dregs of my memory. As I watched, the pale circle of the sun floated above the memory of an ancient fairytale, and a jolt of shock rattled my spine. Was this over? Already?

My travels to London and beyond would be forever fixated in my soul. As I set foot upon renowned landmarks whose names would forever be engrained in British history, I witnessed the extraordinary depth to Britain's historicity. Bath was home to the spreading tree under which Jane Austen wrote her many stories; Canterbury was the birthplace of Chaucer's tales; Stratford-upon-Avon claimed the honor of being Shakespeare's birthplace. The abbeys rose with their tapering spires that stretched towards the oblivion of the azure English sky; the flowering gardens before red-bricked cottages were explosions of colour.

And yet a haunting loneliness held my soul prisoner, to the point that I saw the entirety of the beauty of London through a white gauze. I knew that temperament well; loneliness had been my constant companion since that photo had appeared in my mailbox two months ago, when I had gazed into my professor's eyes and saw within a reflection of loss and legacy. His withdrawal from the world had sent me spinning wildly with no direction in mind, and when I finally stopped, the world was changed and filled with unknown landscapes; in every direction there was a new horror, a new challenge, and without his familiar words of comfort and encouragement I was helpless to navigate it.

It was only on my voyage upon the steel-grey, turbulent waters of the Thames that I found a reflection of my sorrow. I ascended the gangplank onto the white boat that would bear me away to the town of Greenwich on my last day in London, finding with fascination an uncanny resemblance of that tumbling river to the intrinsities of life itself. The boat rose and fell with the waves, borne upon gentle waters, then rough ones. The sun shone with a blinding glare through the white circle of the London Eye, then made its sudden departure behind the spires of Tower Bridge. The wind, as soft as a mother's hand, whipped up with alarming ferocity, tugging with invisible fingers at my clothes. Above the clamour of tourists, the guide's voice boomed, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we are approaching Greenwich and the Prime Meridian -- also known as the heart of the universe.'

The heart of the universe -- that title bore a trace of magic, as if it had taken the form of some spell. That enchantment guided me up the twisting river and the paths beneath linden-trees, until there stood gleaming beneath the sunshine Greenwich Observatory, and at its feet the Prime Meridian that cleaved the world asunder into two halves. Were they speaking the truth, then, that we found balance when we saw the world through its heart? I advanced my feet upon that fabled golden line.

What did I see then, there, looking at the universe through its heart? Upon the golden horizon there was the dark shadow of a thundercloud. Sunlight shot through it and the land beneath it glowed. The immortal city of London lay in

that light, an image of the splendour of kings and queens and battles long endured, in glory undimmed before the breaking of the world. A ghostly halo wreathed that city like an imperishable cloud, and I saw within that city a world reborn from the ashes of lost memory. At the heart of the universe, I looked at the world through its center, amid the countless clocks that ticked away to the time in a different country, a different world with its own history; midnight in New York, dawn on the prairies of Africa, noon in China. For a moment, one brief, shining moment, I felt like I was where I meant to be, and the road ahead was already laid before my feet. In the heart of the universe, I found my place, looking down upon the ruins and the triumphs of a city named London.

I returned to that small, solitary cafe that day, just before my flight. The thundercloud that had loomed ominously over the horizon now dominated the London sky in all its rage and ferocity. The rain lashed against the windows with a newfound violence, but I found an electric dissonance between the warmth of the cafe and the cold rage of the storm. After all, even the worst storms had their ending, and the tears wept by the heavens would be carried away by the unrelenting waters of the river.

A stray newspaper fluttered, borne upon the wings of wind, then plunged into the waters of the Thames, where the unrelenting waters left it coming apart like snow. That river flowed as irresistibly as the stream of time, sweeping up everything that had seen the light of day and plunging it into the utter darkness of oblivion. London stood, a searing portrait of the most tragic and glorious moments of human history, and still the sands of time wore it down. In the end, nothing escaped that irresistible, perpetual flood, whether it be deeds of no significance or deeds worthy of commemoration; not my beloved professor, not myself, not even the immortal city of London. There was only one way to erect a bulwark against those unrelenting waters, one that my professor had fashioned in the form of his gift to me -- a glorious, shining legacy that he had created, left behind in the memories of all who had loved him.

*Don't let it be forgot*

*That once there was a spot;*

*For one brief, shining moment*

*There was Camelot.*

‘Back again, traveller?’ said a voice behind me. I looked around to see the waitress, smiling at me, as the storm howled with rage beyond the cold glass.

‘Yes,’ I said, smiling back. ‘London looks beautiful.’