

## We Built This Kingdom

by Annmarie McQueen

The day she walks in to my classroom for the first time, I recognise her immediately.

She wears a different face, her eyes the colour of earth rather than the blue I remember, her hair dark instead of gold. She's shorter and skinnier than Arthur, delicate feminine features where his were rough and boyish. Her cheekbones are high and sharp, protruding like cliffs jutting out to sea.

She's a stranger to me, but when I meet her eyes I recognise something in them and know that we've met before.

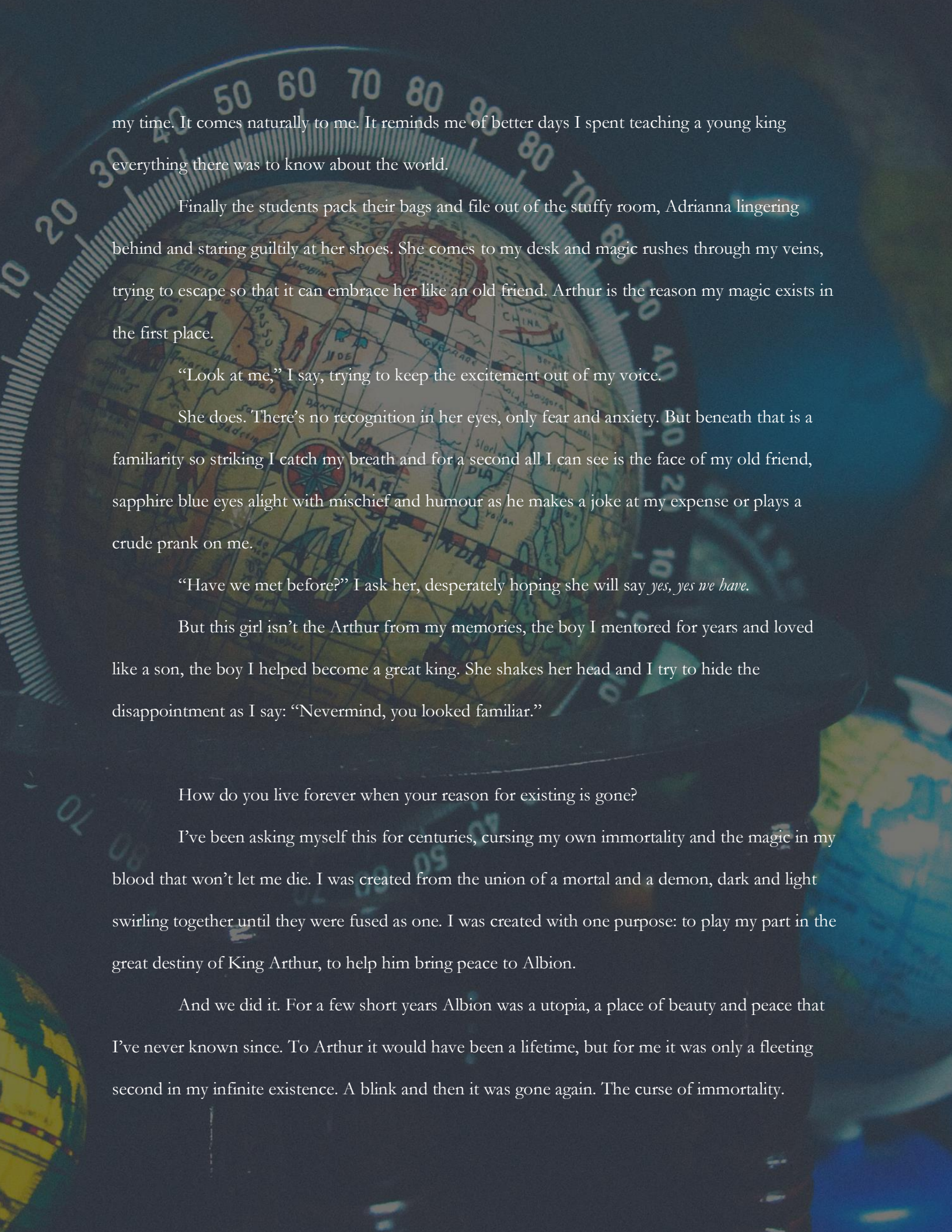
Though she looks young on the outside, her eyes tell a different story. Her soul is old, perhaps as old as mine, and there's an ancient pain buried there that the magic inside me calls out to. Is this the moment? Is that what I've been waiting all these centuries for? I'd spent so long scanning every crowd for a boy with golden hair. I'd never expected that it might be a girl instead.

I start the class on autopilot, trying to tear my gaze from her, and demonstrate a basic experiment with hydrochloric acid. Soon the class has paired off and is setting up their own bunsen burners, chattering amongst themselves. I use the opportunity to find her in the second row and ask her name.

"It's Adrianna," she murmurs, refusing to meet my gaze. Is it possible that she recognises me, too?

"Stay behind after class please, I'd like to speak to you," I say. A scared look flashes across her face like she assumes she's in trouble.

The fifty minute lesson seems to last for hours, the time dragging on. Most days I like teaching chemistry. Chemistry is the modern form of alchemy, which I've always found fascinating. And in the eternity I've spent waiting, teaching has proved to be the least objectionable way to pass



my time. It comes naturally to me. It reminds me of better days I spent teaching a young king everything there was to know about the world.

Finally the students pack their bags and file out of the stuffy room, Adrianna lingering behind and staring guiltily at her shoes. She comes to my desk and magic rushes through my veins, trying to escape so that it can embrace her like an old friend. Arthur is the reason my magic exists in the first place.

“Look at me,” I say, trying to keep the excitement out of my voice.

She does. There’s no recognition in her eyes, only fear and anxiety. But beneath that is a familiarity so striking I catch my breath and for a second all I can see is the face of my old friend, sapphire blue eyes alight with mischief and humour as he makes a joke at my expense or plays a crude prank on me.

“Have we met before?” I ask her, desperately hoping she will say *yes, yes we have*.

But this girl isn’t the Arthur from my memories, the boy I mentored for years and loved like a son, the boy I helped become a great king. She shakes her head and I try to hide the disappointment as I say: “Nevermind, you looked familiar.”

How do you live forever when your reason for existing is gone?

I’ve been asking myself this for centuries, cursing my own immortality and the magic in my blood that won’t let me die. I was created from the union of a mortal and a demon, dark and light swirling together until they were fused as one. I was created with one purpose: to play my part in the great destiny of King Arthur, to help him bring peace to Albion.

And we did it. For a few short years Albion was a utopia, a place of beauty and peace that I’ve never known since. To Arthur it would have been a lifetime, but for me it was only a fleeting second in my infinite existence. A blink and then it was gone again. The curse of immortality.



*Arthur will rise again when Albion's need is greatest.*

Two world wars, a divided country, a breakdown of morality and a dying planet. All of this and still Arthur hadn't come. I began to lose hope that I'd ever see him again, began to think the prophets had been wrong after all. But now he's back, in a different body, a different life. Why?

I try to find ways to spend more time with Adrianna, using tutoring as a pretext. The other students know that there's something between us; they call her teacher's pet and make disgusting jokes about the nature of our relationship. I ignore it, though. The more time I spend with Adrianna the more she seems to relax around me, making jokes and snarking back instead of submitting to my authority.


As I get to know her the similarities become more obvious. Something about her gait, the way she talks, the way her eyes light up when she laughs, reminds me so strongly of Arthur that it elicits a sharp, bitter pang of grief in my chest. I want so badly to ask her again: *are you sure I don't seem familiar? Are you sure you don't remember me?*

I can't, so I give her a book instead. It's a beautiful, illustrated edition of the Arthurian legends. The story of her own past, though she doesn't realise it.

"It's been gathering dust on my shelf for a while," I say softly, offering the girl a smile, willing some form of recognition to appear in her eyes. "I thought you might like it."

She thanks me, cheeks flushed with wonder and excitement as she gazes down at the ornate drawings of knights and dragons. No flash of recognition, though. I try not to be too disappointed. I go to place a hand on her shoulder but she flinches back suddenly like a startled deer, panic flashing through her eyes.

Her shoulders slump apologetically a second later and she returns to admiring the book, but it's enough to raise my suspicions. I've noticed the bruises on her arms by now, been a teacher for long enough to recognise the signs.



My magic flares protectively, as it used to do whenever Arthur was in danger, but this time there's nowhere for it to go. No dragon or enemy soldier to fight off, no poison antidote to locate, no evil witch to defeat. Things have changed. It's become harder to know who the enemy is these days.

I rarely dream anymore, but when I do I dream of Albion.


I dream of the lush, rolling hills and forests where the druid colonies built their camps, the turquoise lake where Excalibur still lies, the bustling village market where you could wander along cobbled streets and buy fresh bread or meat, the grand palace where I lived as advisor to the king.

I dream of a boy with hair like molten gold running through those marble halls, practising with a wooden sword, then later a young man in chainmail and a red cloak riding through the forest on a white mare.

Seven hundred years hasn't changed my love for the kingdom that Arthur and I built together. It was my first and only home, a home that I can never return to because despite all my powers I have never been able to time-travel.

I wake from these dreams feeling young again, like only days have passed rather than centuries. Leftover feelings of hope and optimism for the future blossom in my chest, only to fade again when I look in the mirror and see my aged, greying face.

The sight of my own gaunt eyes staring back at me is a reminder of the reality I don't want to face, so I put the glamour back on and wear the appearance of the young secondary school teacher I spend my days as. Sometimes the illusion is convincing enough that I can forget the truth of my own identity and pretend that I really am a normal teacher, that this is what I've always been. It's a temporary relief in the same way others might turn to drink or drugs.



I remember Arthur, on the night of Morgana's defeat, saying to me: "we've done it, Merlin. We've united Albion, we've fulfilled our destiny. But now what? What comes after this?"

He was desperate, injured and grieving for the friends he'd lost in the battle, unsure of his own abilities as a ruler. His eyes were wild with panic and he'd turned to me for wisdom and guidance, as he'd done so many times before.

"Now we live," I soothed him, perhaps not understanding then the true weight of those words. "We enjoy the peace and prosperity that we've brought to this land, to our people. We built this kingdom together, Arthur. We've earned it."

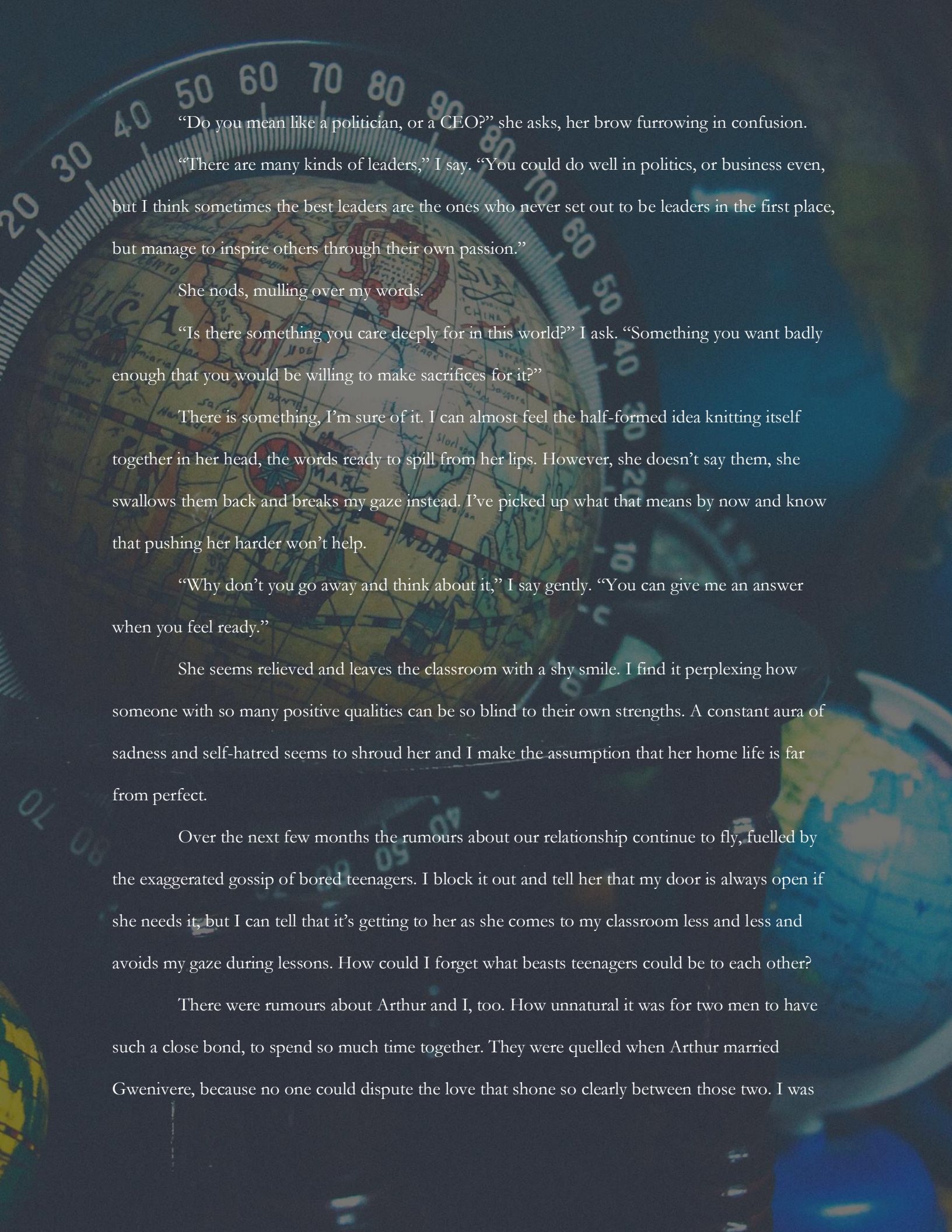
He was right, of course. What comes after Albion? What happens after you've made all your dreams a reality? That's something the legends don't talk about, because if the story has to end somewhere then surely, it's better to end on a good note.

At school I notice that Adrianna has started to seek me out more often, spending her lunchtimes doing homework in my classroom, sometimes even coming after school and reading a book while I grade papers.

I enjoy our companionable silences, the occasional conversations we have about science, the world, the mundane parts of our lives. Though she's quiet and shy during class, when it's just us she brightens a little and her eyes shine with the same sharp intelligence and compassion that I used to admire in Arthur.

For her age, she's surprisingly open-minded and wise when discussing societal matters and can hold her own in a debate. I have no doubt that one day, with the right mentorship and a confidence boost, she might make a great leader too.

I tell her so, meaning it as a compliment but perhaps also hoping to plant the seed of an idea in her.



“Do you mean like a politician, or a CEO?” she asks, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“There are many kinds of leaders,” I say. “You could do well in politics, or business even, but I think sometimes the best leaders are the ones who never set out to be leaders in the first place, but manage to inspire others through their own passion.”

She nods, mulling over my words.

“Is there something you care deeply for in this world?” I ask. “Something you want badly enough that you would be willing to make sacrifices for it?”

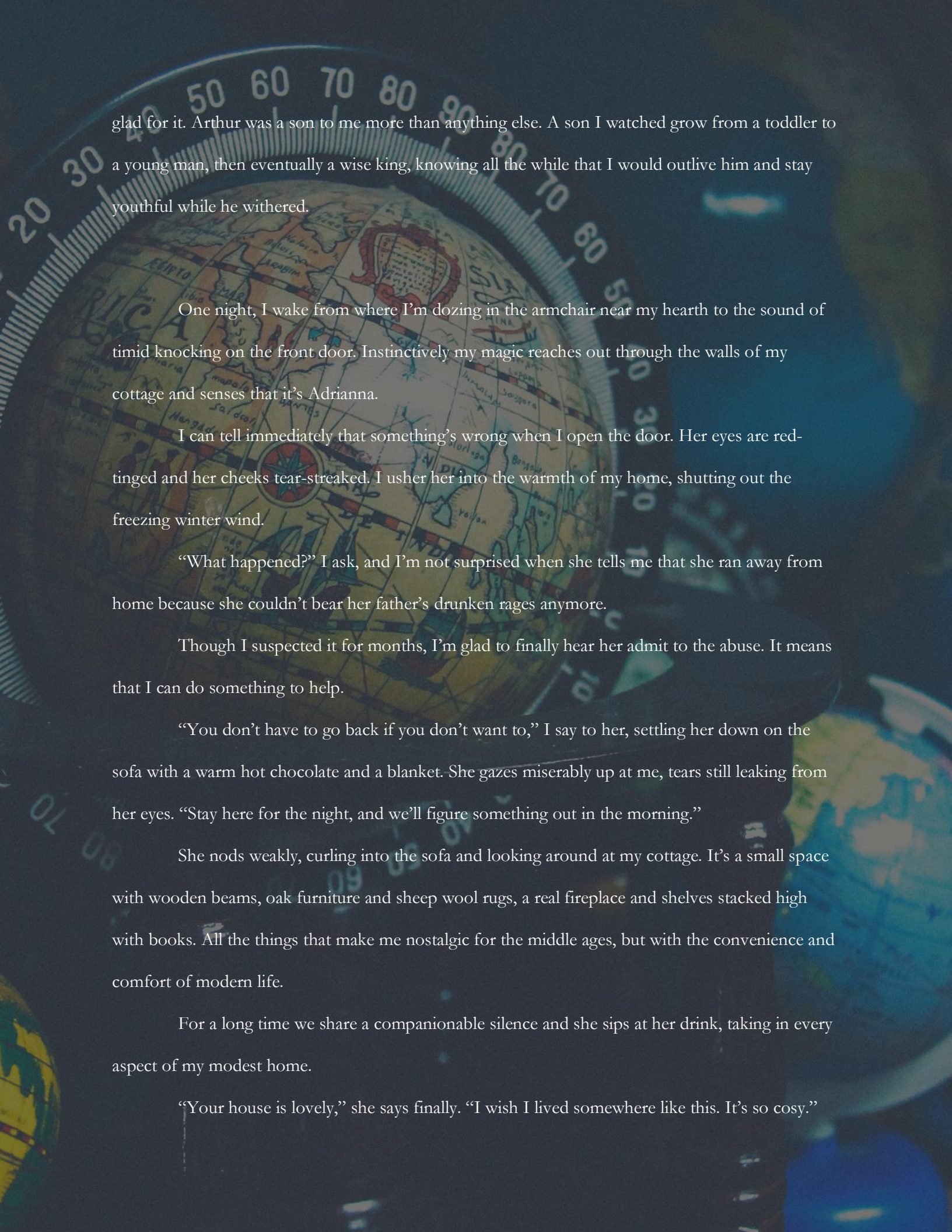
There is something, I’m sure of it. I can almost feel the half-formed idea knitting itself together in her head, the words ready to spill from her lips. However, she doesn’t say them, she swallows them back and breaks my gaze instead. I’ve picked up what that means by now and know that pushing her harder won’t help.

“Why don’t you go away and think about it,” I say gently. “You can give me an answer when you feel ready.”

She seems relieved and leaves the classroom with a shy smile. I find it perplexing how someone with so many positive qualities can be so blind to their own strengths. A constant aura of sadness and self-hatred seems to shroud her and I make the assumption that her home life is far from perfect.

Over the next few months the rumours about our relationship continue to fly, fuelled by the exaggerated gossip of bored teenagers. I block it out and tell her that my door is always open if she needs it, but I can tell that it’s getting to her as she comes to my classroom less and less and avoids my gaze during lessons. How could I forget what beasts teenagers could be to each other?

There were rumours about Arthur and I, too. How unnatural it was for two men to have such a close bond, to spend so much time together. They were quelled when Arthur married Gwenivere, because no one could dispute the love that shone so clearly between those two. I was



glad for it. Arthur was a son to me more than anything else. A son I watched grow from a toddler to a young man, then eventually a wise king, knowing all the while that I would outlive him and stay youthful while he withered.

One night, I wake from where I'm dozing in the armchair near my hearth to the sound of timid knocking on the front door. Instinctively my magic reaches out through the walls of my cottage and senses that it's Adrianna.

I can tell immediately that something's wrong when I open the door. Her eyes are red-tinged and her cheeks tear-streaked. I usher her into the warmth of my home, shutting out the freezing winter wind.

"What happened?" I ask, and I'm not surprised when she tells me that she ran away from home because she couldn't bear her father's drunken rages anymore.

Though I suspected it for months, I'm glad to finally hear her admit to the abuse. It means that I can do something to help.

"You don't have to go back if you don't want to," I say to her, settling her down on the sofa with a warm hot chocolate and a blanket. She gazes miserably up at me, tears still leaking from her eyes. "Stay here for the night, and we'll figure something out in the morning."

She nods weakly, curling into the sofa and looking around at my cottage. It's a small space with wooden beams, oak furniture and sheep wool rugs, a real fireplace and shelves stacked high with books. All the things that make me nostalgic for the middle ages, but with the convenience and comfort of modern life.

For a long time we share a companionable silence and she sips at her drink, taking in every aspect of my modest home.

"Your house is lovely," she says finally. "I wish I lived somewhere like this. It's so cosy."



“It is, I’ve been here a long time.” I don’t tell her that by a ‘long time’ I mean the past few hundred years.

Her eyes alight on a rusted, bronze helmet kept behind a glass cabinet in the corner: Arthur’s helmet. Something like recognition seems to enter her eyes and my heart leaps with excitement.

“Something about this place, about you, feels...familiar,” she says, sounding uncertain of herself. “Like something I dreamed about once.”

I wait for her to elaborate, but she doesn’t, and the silence is excruciating.

“Did you read the book I gave you?” I ask finally, unable to hold it back any longer. “Did it...bring up any memories?”

She laughs, a beautiful tinkering sound like wind chimes. “Of course not, why would it? It was about knights and dragons and rescuing fair maidens.” She pauses, considering me. “The Merlin character sounded a bit like you, though. Kind and wise. He was my favourite.”

It warms me to hear that, but I want to laugh at the irony. If only she knew.

“That book is special to you, isn’t it?” she asks, her eyes bright and observant.

“Yes. It was a gift from someone very important to me.”

“What happened to them?”

“They died a long time ago.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” She averts her gaze and picks at a fraying hem on her skirt, clearly regretting bringing it up.

“It’s okay,” I say, trying to dispel the awkwardness. “I gave you the book because you remind me of him quite a lot. In fact, I’m quite sure that he’d like you to keep it. There’s a lot to learn from the past.”





“Sometimes all I want is to go back to the past, back to before my dad lost his job and started drinking. Things were better then.”

Her words reach that broken part of me that wishes the same. Time, which once felt like a gift, has become my greatest curse.

“You can never go back,” I say. “You can only move forwards. But sometimes, life gives you another chance and something good comes along. And those things are usually worth waiting for.”

She holds my gaze, her brown eyes wide and innocent despite the pain shimmering there. The look she gives me sends goosebumps down my spine. For a second I see a young Arthur glaring back at me, in that annoyed and determined way of his. A look that says ‘don’t test me Merlin, I will fight you on this.’

He was born to be a fighter. I see that same spirit in Adrianna, too. Not a fighter in the sense of swords and physical brutality, I’m certain she’ll find other weapons, but I see that spark inside of her that will make her great one day. She will lead the way Arthur did, with sharp wit and kindness, a vision that brought a kingdom together.

That future can wait, though. It’s late and we’re both tired. I show her to the guest room and then give her some privacy, heading back downstairs to knock back a whiskey in front of the fireplace. Tomorrow I will suggest she stay a little longer, and if she agrees I will broach the subject of adoption with her.

I know instinctively that this is what the universe wants for us, that it brought her here tonight for that purpose. To start the cycle again, after so many centuries of silence. I was born to be her mentor, to guide her towards her destiny, just as I did for her previous incarnation.

Something like hope kindles to life inside me.

“After all this time,” I whisper to the crackling flames, raising my glass in a silent toast.

“I’ve finally found you again.”

