*The smoke-laden air stung Artoria's eyes as she picked her way through the rubble of Camelot's cathedral. Shattered stained glass crunched underfoot, the once vibrant frescoes now smeared abstracts on the piles of masonry. Her stomach turned at the sight of fallen knights in crimson cloaks strewn amid the destruction - loyal friends like Gawain, Lancelot, Bedivere, cut down by her own hand.*

And there lay Merlin, the look of shocked betrayal frozen on his bloodied face forever. "Forgive me, old friend," Artoria whispered, kneeling beside him.

She grasped the hilts of Excalibur and Avalon, the legendary blades grotesquely protruding from her own body. Gritting her teeth, she pulled them out in one harsh motion, droplets of crimson arcing across the ruins. Her vision swam as she watched her life's essence leaving in pulsing streams.

Yet she could not succumb, not yet. Artoria fixed her gaze on Avalon, the scabbard with the power to heal any injury. But she had no intent to use it for her own mortal wounds - it was far too late for that. Instead, a desperate plan took shape as she watched her blood trace ripples across the ancient relic's surface, following the paths of causality.

If only she had heeded Merlin's warnings all those years ago... If only she had never drawn Caliburn from the stone... If only she could have shed the weight of her crown, just once, to know a lover's tender embrace... The regrets went on and on, the tragedy of her reign. Artoria felt death descending. With her last breath, she whispered the words of an old magic: "Let the cycle be unbroken. Give me a chance to undo what cannot be undone."

*Power flared in the scabbard with a blinding light, the world dissolving into swirling colours and sounds. When her senses returned, Artoria found herself in a sunlit courtyard, somewhere in the castle she knew better than her own skin. Cherry blossom petals drifted on the breeze like pale pink tears.*

"My lady? Are you well?"

The achingly familiar voice made her whirl around. Standing there with a look of bewildered concern was young Merlin, his face smooth and unlined, and every inch the gangly adolescent she remembered from decades past. Glancing down, Artoria saw her hands, long fingered and delicate... unmarked by sword calluses or battle scars. These were the hands of the wilful teenage princess who had pulled Caliburn from the stone, igniting the powder keg that would ultimately consume her kingdom in fire and fury.

But as of this moment, that was all still to come. For now, Camelot remained the great shining dream it was always meant to be, its future unwritten.

Tears of profound relief and joy stung Artoria's eyes as she rushed forward to embrace her old friend. "I am more than well," she laughed through the dampness on her cheeks. "Everything is going to be different now..."