Prelude — The Last Night of Camelot

The smoke of Camelot clung to the air like a curse.

Vivienne’s boots struck stone slick with blood as she ran through the shattered corridors of Arthur’s hall. Once these walls had held laughter, the bright clash of feasting cups, the oaths of knights who believed the world could be remade in honor’s image. Now the same stones groaned under fire and falling timber, while the Round Table lay in splinters across the throne room floor.

Arthur was gone. The king who had been her compass, her brother’s lodestar, lay fallen on the field where kin had slaughtered kin. The dream of Camelot had cracked, and in the shards lay the ruin of everything she had served.

She should have fallen beside them, she thought. Better to die with the dream than to walk through its ashes. Yet her sword still clung to her hand — Fidelis, the gift her brother had pressed into her palms years ago. Its edge dripped red in the torchlight, proof she had not faltered. Proof she yet lived.

“Vivienne.”

The voice stopped her. It was not shouted above the chaos but whispered, low and steady, carrying more weight than the screams of dying men. From the shadows of the collapsing hall, Merlin emerged. His cloak was tattered, his beard streaked with soot, but his eyes burned with an ageless fire that no ruin could touch.

“You should not be here,” she said, voice raw from smoke. “Arthur is gone. The dream is ended. What use is there for me now?”

Merlin studied her, and for the first time she saw not a prophet, not a conjurer of kings, but an old man weary of seeing the same tragedy played again and again. Yet beneath that weariness flickered something sharp — a secret lit from within.

“The dream is not ended,” he said. “Not while the world still turns. Not while men can choose between honor and despair.”

She laughed once, bitter. “Honor? Look around you, old man. Camelot burns because men swore oaths they never meant to keep. My brother’s name is sung in every hall, yet it is his sin that broke Arthur’s heart. I am no savior. I am no legend.”

Merlin stepped closer, smoke curling around him like living shadow. His hand, gnarled and trembling, lifted to touch her shoulder.

“It is because you are no legend that I choose you,” he said. “The world will forget these names in time. Arthur. Guinevere. Lancelot. Their stories will twist, break, and scatter like leaves in the wind. But there will come an age when the world needs not a king, nor a saint, nor a lover. It will need a knight whose strength lies not in glory, but in resilience. One who does not bend to fame, nor to desire, but who endures.”

His eyes burned into hers. “That knight is you, Vivienne.”

The hall shook with the thunder of falling stone. Vivienne’s throat tightened. “You would tear me from my brother’s side? From my king’s grave? For what? To wander a world that will never know my name?”

“For what lies ahead,” Merlin whispered. “When honor has been forgotten, when truth lies buried beneath smoke and steel, you will rise. Not as a savior of kings, but as a shield for the lost. Remember this.”

She tried to protest — but his hand clenched tighter, and the world ripped apart.

The flames of Camelot stretched into streaks of light, the screams of dying knights turned into a deafening roar, and then — nothing.

Only darkness. Silence.

Until Vivienne opened her eyes, and the stars above her were drowned in the orange haze of smog. Towers of glass loomed where castles should stand. Strange beasts of steel howled along rivers of black stone.

The city of Los Angeles sprawled before her, endless and alive.

She staggered to her feet, sword still in her hand, heart pounding with the memory of Camelot’s fall.

“Then,” she whispered to the choking sky, “I am too lateA shriek split the air. Not battle cries, but the rising wail of sirens — a piercing keening that rattled her skull. She turned, sword raised, searching for the source. Down the black river of stone, lights flared — red and blue, flashing like beacons of war. A chariot of steel thundered past her, its wheels screaming, its driver encased in shining armor of glass. Another followed, and another, until the night blazed with light and noise.

Vivienne stumbled back, pressing against the stone wall of some alien building, her breath ragged. The clang of steel and the crash of timber she could endure, but this world’s chaos struck stranger than any battlefield.

A man’s voice rang out across the street: “Hey! Lady, you okay?”

She whirled, blade flashing. The stranger froze. He wore no helm, only a hood and shoes of white leather, his hands raised in fear. The glow of some rectangular talisman lit his face with cold light.

Vivienne lowered her sword only an inch, eyes narrowing. “What sorcery is this place?”

The man blinked, then laughed uneasily. “Yeah… you’re lost.”

But Merlin’s words still echoed in her bones. When honor has been forgotten…

Vivienne tightened her grip on her blade, staring at the city sprawled before her like a battlefield without banners. Whatever this place was, it stank of chaos — and somewhere in its shadows, she could feel the same ancient darkness that had devoured Camelot.

The age of legends was gone. But her war had only just begun. shriek split the air. Not battle cries, but the rising wail of sirens — a piercing keening that rattled her skull. She turned, sword raised, searching for the source. Down the black river of stone, lights flared — red and blue, flashing like beacons of war. A chariot of steel thundered past her, its wheels screaming, its driver encased in shining armor of glass. Another followed, and another, until the night blazed with light and noise.

Vivienne stumbled back, pressing against the stone wall of some alien building, her breath ragged. The clang of steel and the crash of timber she could endure, but this world’s chaos struck stranger than any battlefield.

A man’s voice rang out across the street: “Hey! Lady, you okay?”

She whirled, blade flashing. The stranger froze. He wore no helm, only a hood and shoes of white leather, his hands raised in fear. The glow of some rectangular talisman lit his face with cold light.

Vivienne lowered her sword only an inch, eyes narrowing. “What sorcery is this place?”

The man blinked, then laughed uneasily. “Yeah… you’re lost.”

But Merlin’s words still echoed in her bones. When honor has been forgotten…

Vivienne tightened her grip on her blade, staring at the city sprawled before her like a battlefield without banners. Whatever this place was, it stank of chaos — and somewhere in its shadows, she could feel the same ancient darkness that had devoured Camelot.

The age of legends was gone. But her war had only just begun.

The bells above the glass door jingled as Vivienne pushed it open with the hilt of her sword. The smell hit her first — roasted beans, sweet milk, something bitter yet inviting. She paused, squinting at the glowing menu written in a language she mostly understood but couldn’t quite parse.

> Latte. Cold brew. Matcha. Pumpkin spice.

She read them aloud, slowly, like they were battle formations.

The barista — a young man with a man-bun and an apron covered in pins — cleared his throat. “Uh… welcome to Bean Voyage. What can I get started for you?”

Vivienne stepped forward, breastplate catching the light, sword still sheathed but very visible. “A flagon of your strongest brew, black as midnight and untainted by sorcery.”

The barista blinked. “So… just… coffee?”

“Yes,” she said firmly, then leaned in, lowering her voice as if discussing strategy. “And none of this… pumpkin enchantment. I’ll not be ensorcelled by gourds.”

The woman behind her in line snorted into her phone. “Is this, like, a Ren Faire thing? Because the sword’s really selling it.”

Vivienne ignored her, standing tall as though in Arthur’s court. The barista rang up the order. “That’ll be four ninety-five.”

Vivienne frowned. “Four… ninety-five what? Pennies? Groats?”

“…Dollars?”

She blinked. “What manner of kingdom strikes coin called dollar?”

The line behind her shuffled impatiently. Finally, she drew from her pouch a golden coin, stamped with a faded crest of Camelot, and dropped it into the tip jar with a ringing clang.

The barista’s jaw dropped. “Okay… uh… your coffee’s on the house.”

Vivienne accepted the steaming cup with a knight’s solemn bow. She sipped, burned her tongue, and then muttered, “By the Grail… that is vilely delicious.”