# The Dark Knights

## A King Arthur Vampire Short

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Arthur hid in the shadows of moonlight watching Lady Guinevere pass with her chambermaids, his yearning greater than it ever was around other humans. This woman was different—the sway of her dress as she stepped delicately across the earth, almost floating, and the way her eyes took in the world with an excited innocence. The sight of her caused his long, sharp teeth to protrude in spite of himself. More than anything, he wanted to taste her blood.

But no, there was one thing he wanted more—to see that she was never harmed.

For him to be the one that brought her said harm, to sink his teeth into the soft flesh of her neck and drain her blood, tasting its sweet iron as it replenished him... there could be no worse fate for either of them.

That's why, aside from public appearances with her by his side, he kept his distance.

And he ordered his knights do the same. All worse than him, letting their cravings for human flesh get the better of them.

Not with her, because he was their king and had ordered it so. It probably helped that she was Merlin's niece, and if anyone harmed her, the wizard would certainly retire his robes for his old paladin armor and holy sword.

Stakes through the heart were nothing compared to the spells of a paladin.

"We're behind schedule," Lancelot, his most trusted Knight, hissed down from where he perched on a nearby rooftop. "If we're discovered—"

"Merlin's wrath. I don't need you to lecture me on such matters."

Lancelot swooped down, landing gracefully beside Arthur, his king. But the knight's eyes spoke nothing of loyalty, at times like this, and Arthur didn't fail to notice.

"My scars remind me of our duty," Lancelot said. "Perhaps you'd do well to have some of your own."

"Threatening your king?" Arthur scoffed, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "You forget your place."

"Not threatening, sire," Lancelot said with a bow of his head. "Simply, urging, us to move. Now."

Arthur breathed deep, letting the moment drift away and take his anger with it. Lancelot wasn't to blame for the agitation at their lot in life—vampires by night, forced like puppets to do the will of Merlin, the great magician to the public, the corrupt and conniving paladin to those who really knew him.

His spell held them to it—a fact that they meant to end this night.

"Yes, let's not be late," Arthur said, keenly aware of the fact that Merlin's watchful eyes were everywhere. Curse him and his magic. Any moment now the old wizard would notice the larger than normal number of vampire knights outside of his keep.

Arthur spun, red cape flowing behind him in the cool spring breeze, and led Lancelot back to the others where they crouched in the shadows.

"What news, sire?" Rodain asked. She stood at the front of her squad, twenty in all. A small number in the grand scheme of things, but her vampire knights were legendary for their ferocity and prowess. Of course, the fact that they were vampires was kept secret, as it was with all vampires. The lands couldn't know that their king and his knights were creatures of the night, kept in check and allowed to walk the light of day only because of Merlin's magic.

"She's out of harm's way," Arthur said. "We move now."

Another vampire scoffed. Geldring, the largest of his generals, and the most outspoken when it came to, well, everything.

"You have a problem with my leadership?" Arthur asked.

"My inability to understand how the starting time of the battle for our freedom should be determined by a mortal woman has nothing to do with whether or not I have issues with your leadership," Geldring said, his voice snapping like branches

in the wind. After a moment's silence, he added, "Means no, sire. I serve at your will."

Arthur would have to watch this one. Considering the insubordination Lancelot had just shown him, and the look in Rodain's and several other of his top generals' eyes, he'd better make this happen quickly.

"My knights of the roundtable," he said, addressing the generals and the rest as he added, "My guardians of the night, our time is at hand. For too long we've been cast aside as if we were no better than the cursed monsters that share similar characteristics but who are pure evil. We fight Morgana and her shifters, losing our lives, but for what? Because this magician, this corrupt paladin, tells us it's that or be cast out from his spell to never again see the light of day.

"I say to you that I'd rather have the freedom of life by night than slavery at all times of day and night. So tonight we fight, and we destroy the man who holds us all in his grasp. Attack!"

The vampires ran past him, surging forward like bats out of hell. Some leaped on hands and feet like the beasts those lower vampires often were, others ran in their charge, while the few more powerful ones flew forward in bursts of darkness. The flapping of bat wings and growling of blood-thirsty vampires filled the night.

Arthur turned, pulled down his king's helm, and joined the charge. Only, instead of running, he walked, confidently, with the air of a returning champion here to claim his rightful place.

Each step clanged out in the night, as did that of his three most powerful generals, who walked at his side—Lancelot, Geldring, and Rodain. It wasn't that he trusted them above the rest, it was that if he were to be attacked with them at his side, there wasn't a force he knew of that could stop them.

Although, he had never attempted to take down Merlin.

Screams filled the night, and Arthur thought they were coming from the soldiers he saw being thrown from the battlements as vampire knights overtook them.

Then the screams turned higher in pitch, too high for any human voice, and he saw the light piercing a whole section of his army. Rays of sunlight were streaming from the fortress windows, knocking back any vampire that attempted to enter.

"Send in the sewer rats," Arthur commanded Geldring, who nodded, and then veered off to give the signal.

"He knew we were coming," Lancelot said.

"There's rarely anything he doesn't know," Arthur replied.

"And yet you lead us to the slaughter?" Rodain asked. "Those are our soldiers dying up there."

A rage swirled in Arthur and he wanted to throttle Rodain for her insubordination, but he knew she was right. Instead, he'd use that anger against Merlin.

He charged, certain his knights would follow close behind. While he'd sent the mass of the army for the main assault, some above, some below, he would make a different approach and end the source of their problems by his own hand.

Their path took them through the secret entrance Guinevere often used to leave the castle. She didn't think anyone else knew about it, but his obsession with her meant he noticed things such as how she exited the castle. He had to ensure her safety, and he couldn't very well do that with her disappearing on him.

As he'd hoped, she'd taken her guards with her, so the way was clear. The darkness didn't bother them, as their vampire eyes could see better in the dark than in the light. Yet, when they'd come out into Guinevere's chambers, Rodain somehow managed to knock over the mirror, so that it shattered with a crash that echoed through the castle.

"Clearly the meaning of a sneak attack is lost on you," Lancelot said, spittle flying at her.

"Yelling won't help your case," a voice said, and all of them froze as mist filled the room. A flash of light caused them all to pull back, and when their vision cleared, Merlin stood in the center of the room, his gnarled wooden staff raised in one hand, still glowing with its sky blue light, his paladin sword held at the ready in his other. "Well, here I am. Get it over with, if you dare."

Arthur motioned to Lancelot and Rodain to attack as they had discussed, but Rodain simply smiled and took a step back. Lancelot moved in for the attack with Arthur, but a blast from Merlin's staff and a slash of his sword sent Lancelot back, clutching at his burnt face, and gave Arthur a steaming cut across his sword arm.

"Attack, damn you!" Arthur shouted to Rodain.

She drew her sword, but stepped up to Merlin's side.

"Rodain isn't as foolish as you'd think her to be," Merlin said. He stood tall, his white cloak flapping around his white armor even though the castle walls protected them from any wind. Shouts of the ongoing battle past these walls sounded, growing closer.

"Traitor," Lancelot said, teeth bared. His face slowly began to heal.

"We don't need her," Arthur said, holding out a hand to his knight. "Merlin, we've come to inform you that our slavery has come to an end. Cast down your staff and leave this kingdom, or we'll destroy you."

"Is that so?" Merlin asked. "You forget, King Arthur, I created this kingdom, with you at its head. Without me, you'd be nothing but a lowly vampire, sulking in the dark corners of Morgana's empire. Because of my help, you've had all the niceties a king could desire. You walk under the sun, by my magic. Would you give this all up, in the name of freedom?"

"We won't be your slaves," Arthur said, his voice shaking in anger. "No more wars at your command. No more lives taken simply so you can grow this kingdom that you pretend I rule. I don't know how you persuaded Rodain, but our vampires are defeating your forces as we speak. Surrender!"

"Not all of them," Rodain said. "In fact, my vampires will have likely taken care of a large portion of your army, by now."

Arthur felt his fangs biting into his lip in frustration. This was all falling apart. He saw now that there was no way about it—Merlin had to die.

Snarling, Arthur drew his sword and moved at Merlin in a flash. But before either had a chance to strike, a yelp froze Arthur in his tracks. Instead of attacking him, Rodain had moved to the far door, where she pulled Guinevere into the room and stood with blade to neck.

"Stop!" Arthur demanded, hand out to ensure Lancelot didn't move. He turned to Guinevere. "You... you were gone. I saw you leave."

"Simply an illusion," Merlin said.

"I was bathing," Guinevere said, her voice quivering with fright. "Then I heard the fighting and ran back as fast as I could. I'm... sorry."

"How pitiful," Merlin said. "But every man has a weakness. Even undead men, it would seem."

"You wouldn't kill your own niece," Arthur said, weighing his options.

"No? Maybe not... but Rodain's been given orders to take her life should mine be forfeit."

"Kill them all," Lancelot said to Arthur. "Finish what we came for."

But Arthur couldn't do it—he couldn't take the risk. A world without Guinevere was no world at all.

"We'll not stay here, though," Arthur said, sword still at the ready. "You live, but without us as your puppets."

"Oh, I don't think so," Merlin said with a wry smile. "In fact, after tonight I'd say you'll require extra spells to keep you in line."

Arthur closed his eyes tight, trying to figure out his next move. Every direction pointed in defeat. He was about to surrender, when Lancelot charged Rodain.

Merlin struck, but Arthur couldn't let his closest friend die. He leaped into the blade's path. His sword barely deflected the blow, but he was close enough to see the fury in Merlin's eyes. The old man's mouth moved, and with it came a horrible burning.

"Avoid his gaze!" Lancelot said.

Arthur broke free, stumbling back, but smoke was rising from his skin. A thudding of feet signaled people were approaching, and soon half a dozen vampires burst into the room. For a moment, Arthur's heart filled with hope, until he saw they were Rodain's followers. He was their king, but her betrayal meant he could be sure her followers had been persuaded to turn on him as she had.

They attacked, and Arthur and Lancelot found themselves pushed back through the tunnel. It was narrow, so only one or two of his former followers were able to attack at a time, but they were the elite, and held their own.

A burst of flame rose up and over the vampires, exploding close to Arthur's head.

"We won't survive in here," he shouted to Lancelot. "Not with them and Merlin against just the two of us."

"I'll fall at your side, if needed," Lancelot said, cutting down the first of their attackers only to be pushed back by two more.

"Not today," Arthur said. "Today, we retreat."

They each pushed back their attackers and ran, but when they exited the castle the sight froze them in their tracks. Dead vampires lay scattered across the field, others fleeing, and even as they watched, the sun appeared in the night sky temporarily, casting it's rays down and causing the fleeing vampires to burst into flame.

"The spell has broken," Lancelot said.. "Merlin's protection has been lifted."

And then the sunlight hit them, too. It was blinding and suffocating. Their skin boiled and all sense of self was absorbed by pain and suffering.

Then there was simply Nothingness.

Chanting started, low at first and growing louder, until it was right in front of Arthur and his eyes shot open to reveal Merlin standing above him, as he was on

his back still outside the castle. Merlin waved a hand over Arthur, and a last word in the chant brought a cooling wave of healing over him.

A giant breath told him he was still alive, if you could call a vampire alive.

Someone was coughing nearby, and Arthur turned to see Lancelot, still smoldering, but also beginning the healing process. Charred flesh fell like a snake skin, leaving behind a younger, healthier version of his friend.

Rodain stood behind Merlin, her and nine of her remaining elite vampires.

"The rest are dead," Merlin said. "The last of you shall continue to serve. Twelve in all."

"Why not just kill me?" Arthur asked, his voice still hoarse. "Be done with it."

"You're too valuable for that. Besides, the land needs her king. But should you try anything like this ever again, it will be the end of Vampires."

Rodain gave Merlin a concerned look, but he didn't seem to notice and was already walking back toward the castle gates. He used his staff like a walking stick, old and worn after his use of magic. The perfect time to strike, really, if Arthur wasn't himself practically crippled and his whole army decimated.

He struggled to sit, and saw Guinevere looking down at them from one of the battlements. Seeing he was alive, she retreated from sight.


"We had him," Lancelot said, watching the stable boy strap his saddle onto his horse. "You gave up the lives of all of us, for an infatuation with a human."

"She's what matters in this life," Arthur said. "Nothing more."

Lancelot stared at him and for a moment Arthur wondered if his old friend would strike—his anger could pass through the air like waves of intense heat. Arthur turned from the horses, holding the vampire's gaze. He would not back down. The choice had been his, as king, and he wouldn't pull away from it. Yes, his decision had meant the lives of many vampires had been forfeit, and that fact would forever eat at him. But if anything should ever happen to Guinevere, this world would be as good as over, as far as he was concerned.

With a grunt of disgust, Lancelot spun on his heels and stormed out of the stables.

"Check on the knights, ensure they're ready for the siege on Morgana," Arthur commanded.

"I *live* to serve," Lancelot said without looking back.

Arthur sighed and glanced at the stable boy, an instinct pulling at his desire to taste the young blood flowing through the boy's veins. But no, he hadn't fallen to that urge in many years—not since Merlin had taken them in and cast his spells. Those spells were both their bonds and keys to freedom all in one.

"Anything else, sire?" the stable boy asked. He'd finished saddling both horses, Lancelot's and King Arthur's, and they looked magnificent.

"That'll be all," Arthur said. When the boy had left, Arthur approached his mare and ran his hand along her neck, staring into those wide eyes where once he'd seen his reflection, back before his transformation. He had snippets of memories, little things like being able to see a reflection, or the laugh of a woman that he supposed to be his mother, but that was the extent of it.

"One day, I'll ride you out of here and we'll find out who I was," he said to the horse, and she whinnied in response.

He looked outside to see the sun at its peak. Vampires normally burst into flame at times like that, if the sunlight touched them, but not while they were under Merlin's spell. That was why it was the perfect time to attack Morgana—her vampires would all be asleep or hiding in the shadows, her shifters, no match for Arthur.

This was a recruiting mission, now that their numbers had been depleted. They'd take soldiers and transform them, and the vampires that dreamed of walking in daylight would join their ranks with the mere forfeiture of freedom. Some thought it was a price worth paying, as Rodain and her elite knights had proven.

Now Arthur was surrounded by these traitors, his knights of the roundtable, with Lancelot being the only one he could trust. Percival and the others had fallen in the battle, and though he was sure Merlin had the power to revive them, the old man chose the knights of the roundtable to best fit his needs.

Arthur was about to mount his horse and check on his knights when a hand brushed against his. He leaped back, startling the horse, and hissed.

But it was her—Guinevere.

"I'm sorry," she said, blushing and trying to hide her fright. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"You shouldn't be here," he said, but meant she shouldn't be here with him. The longing for her was too great—he wasn't sure he could fight it.

"It's all because of me," she said. "That's what I hear, anyway. Your defeat..."

"Don't listen to rumors."

"Rumors or not," she stepped forward again and took his hand in both of hers, "we both know there's a way where my life wouldn't ever be at risk again. Not truly."

He bit his lip, feeling the pulse of her blood as it coursed through her. They'd never touched before, and her warmth covered him like a warm bath.

"You don't know what you ask of me," he said. "Your life would be over the moment I granted your request."

"So I could live among you. As one of you... at your side. I'm willing to make that sacrifice."

"I cannot!" he said, dropping her hand and mounting his horse.

"Give me the gift!" she shouted, anger flashing in her eyes. "You have no right to go on like this! I am your queen and demand you give it to me!"

"We both know this is just a show," Arthur said as he rode past, unable to look at her. "And we are merely his puppets."

The ride back to the room of the roundtable was a long one, filled with self-hatred and doubt. He wanted more than anything to feel the warmth of her touch again, to leave all of this behind and simply be what legends among the simple folk proclaimed them to be—the valiant King Arthur and his Guinevere. But no, he knew that could never truly be the case.

At the end of the day, they'd simply be two cursed souls, destined to carry out the whims of a paladin turned sorcerer. Merlin and his corrupt heart would see to

it that Arthur never truly saw happiness, not until the lands as far as the farthest seas were part of their empire.

Overhead, birds chirped and the clouds parted to let down scattered rays of sunlight. This sight, this calming sensation, would be what he would have given up had he defeated Merlin. Maybe… He believed they'd find a way to either cast off the curse that had made them vampires in the first place, or convince a noble paladin to protect them under his spell—one without the hidden darkness of Merlin.

Arched marble rose at the entrance to the great hall and its roundtable. Here Arthur tied up his horse with a glance back toward the stables and then to the endless rolling hills and trees. Dark clouds were beginning to roll over the hills, streaking the far off sky in gray.

The raid would be a wet one.

Each footstep echoed off of the stone walls that led to the great hall. This would be the first time that he'd address his newly appointed knights of the roundtable, the first time that he'd see if those left alive by Merlin would serve him or stab him in the chest with a stake the first chance they got.

As of now, he didn't trust a one of them aside from Lancelot.

Rodain had the seat beside Arthur's grand chair, and the rest of the knights were seated, waiting in silence. All but one seat—the one to the right of Arthur's.

"Why isn't Lancelot here?" Arthur asked, glancing around the great hall as if expecting to find his old friend lurking in the shadows.

Rodain sneered, but said, "He went looking for you, he said. Something about the grove."

"He knew I wasn't training," Arthur said. "This is no time for—" A sudden realization hit home, and he darted back down the stone hall, untied his horse, and then rode as fast as he could. He had to reach the grove as quick as possible, to stop Lancelot.

But when he got there, it was too late.

Guinevere was in Lancelot's arms, his face pressed tightly to her neck.

Her eyes lit up when she saw Arthur, then closed as she moaned with a mixture of pain and delight.

"Not her!" Arthur said, flinging himself from the horse and charging Lancelot. In his rage he flung the knight like a kitten. Lancelot hit a tree and fell to the ground, where he pushed himself up with a groan, and then started laughing.

"You're too late, sire," Lancelot said, and his laughter was replaced by a wicked smile, blood trickling down his chin.

"No…" Arthur fell to his knees beside Guinevere, his worst suspicions confirmed. Two red marks marred the perfection of her neck, that rosy flesh that had once pulled at his cravings was now destroyed, by his best friend, his trusted knight.

He picked her up, and she looked at him with longing before the look faded into a dead stare of nothingness.

"What have you done?" Arthur said, closing his eyes.

"Only what you were too weak to do yourself," Lancelot said, and Arthur opened his eyes to see the knight flash over, not two feet away now and with his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"You had no right."

"And yet, I had no other options." Lancelot saw his king wasn't going to attack, so turned toward the castle and started walking. Over his shoulder he said, "Perhaps now you'll be able to focus your attention on being our king."

It was everything Arthur could do not to cast her aside and tear his old friend limb from limb, but Guinevere deserved better than that.

So instead he found a tree on the outskirts of the grove, and began to dig. His arms moved fast, his vampire strength giving him what he needed to push through in spite of his grief.

When he had a hole large and deep enough, he lifted Guinevere's body and carried her into the hole.

He set her down, gently, and then turned to leave.

A gasp of breath caused him to jerk, and then he saw her, eyes open and staring at him with a redness unnatural to any living eyes. He hadn't noticed the smudge of blood beside her mouth until now—she'd drunk of Lancelot. The red slowly faded, and she smiled to reveal sharp fangs.

"Now we can truly be together, my love," she said.

The meaning of her words hit him hard. "You... you did this."

"Yes, Lancelot took some convincing. But I made him, for us."

She reached for him, but he pulled away from her touch. He was disgusted with this monster that had once been Guinevere.

"My love," she said, hand out, eyes begging. "Come, we have an empire to conquer. King Arthur, his Guinevere... and our dark knights."

It was the final straw.

Everything inside of him wanted to explode. He wanted to shout out, both destroy her and take her in his arms at the same time—so instead, he ran. Not like this, he told himself. When she'd been pure, alive, he could fight knowing there was a reason to all this madness. But not anymore.

His legs kept on moving, even when he felt the anger and madness clouding his mind until he couldn't think anymore. It wasn't toward Lancelot for revenge that he ran, but to simply escape it all. To leave this life behind, in any way possible.

So he ran for the barrier—where he'd seen other vampires before him burst into flames as they tried to escape. Merlin's spells made sure you either fought for him, or were destroyed. It was this very destruction Arthur sought now.

When the first wave of pain hit him, he collapsed. His eyes bulged with the pressure and he thought they'd burst forth from his head. A pressure like a dozen horses pressed on his chest, and his skin burned as if it was being peeled off one layer at a time.

But he pressed on, crawling now, for the pressure was too great.

Then the flames came, bubbling up from under his skin, consuming him. But he pushed on. It was unending, this suffering... and glorious. He pushed farther, craving it, loving the torture and the meaning behind it—that he would soon be gone from this horrible world. A world where Guinevere served the night.

Rage churned inside him and drove him onward.

A final scream and explosion of pain sent him lurching forward, and then he was rolling down a grassy hill. And it was over.

Only... he wasn't dead.

The sunlight was burning his skin, smoke rising and pain shooting through his body. But it wasn't from the spell that had kept him under Merlin's watch—it was the sun! That could only mean that he was free. He'd done it, he had broken free from that paladin with the evil heart, and now... now...  Now he was burning and had to get to the shadows!

He flung himself over, eyes searching, and saw a small village nearby. Already drained of energy, he stumbled forward, almost there... and then he collapsed. He hadn't made it. All of that effort, wasted.

Each breath came harder than the last, the fire eating at him.

The world was moving beneath him—wait, no, people were dragging him! The fire was gone and he was in the shade, and then a house. Everything was hazy, like a far off vision barely visible through a thick fog.

And then he felt it, the pulsing of blood, and before he knew it he tasted the warm liquid, was consuming it with vigor.

Energy was surging through him, his senses sharpening. He closed his eyes, enjoying the tingling of life as it filled him with purpose.

"Enough!" His eyes burst open and he shoved the man away, the man he'd been feeding on this whole time. "I—I'm sorry."

"No, don't be." The man was weak, but the look in his eyes conveyed strength. Several men and women stood around him, two helping him to stand. "I offered myself freely, so that you could walk among us once again."

Arthur stood tall, back to his old self. But something the man had just said brought the fog of confusion.

"I'm not sure I understand," Arthur said. "It sounded like you just said, *again.*"

"You see, he doesn't remember," a woman at the man's side said to him, then turned to Arthur. "We've waited a long time for you to return to us, brother."

"And now," the weakened man said with an excited grin, "you can remember who you are. Fight with us, so that Merlin will set our people free."

Arthur couldn't believe it at first. But as he took a step closer and assessed these men and women, he realized they looked familiar. Yes, the woman had a strong look to her, those fierce eyes were familiar from a time when he'd worked a field alongside her. The man too, something about him... Playing together as boys beside a stream, before his life had been taken in exchange for this curse of the night. These people had been his family.

"So, brother," the man said, "are you with us?"

Arthur wanted to run, to take the easy way out. Instead, he held out his hand and clasped forearms with his former brother and said, "If it means taking down Merlin, then I'm your man."

"Not our man," his brother said. "Our king."