

MERLIN'S CRUCIBLE

A LEGACY OF SHADOWS

An Essential Tale in the Next Life Series

A NOVELETTE BY
JAMES G. ROBERTSON



Next Life Universe

Next Life Publishing LLC, KS

CONTENTS

Prologue	V
1. Chapter I	1
A Sorrowful Goodbye	
2. Chapter II	5
Songs of Giants and Dragons	

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any references to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales should not be taken as fact.

Cover Artist Oleg Beloded.
Cover Design by Ummul Jubaida Esha.
Editor Macauley Kelly.
Print ISBN: 9781954638167

To contact the author and inquire personally, or for business, you may message them at <https://nextlifeuniverse.com/contact>

Written Work Completed Within the United States of America.

First Edition November 2023.

Copyright © 2023 James G. Robertson.

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

PROLOGUE

The die's cast, and this account of one of the most powerful mages your world has ever borne, is only one of many. I will not claim it is a happy narrative, dearest reader, and my task here is not to provide you with such. It is instead to help you understand the full puzzle—one piece at a time. These adventures are records from across worlds, dimensions. Some recent, some centuries ago, others... well, others are from a distant beat, a date before humanity's history began.

So who are your heroes? Your... saviors? Merlin? Arthur? They are but a single pair in a vast cosmos of countless others. And it is still unknown if your heroes will prevail, if they will earn the title of savior. Darkness is coming, no doubt about that. It looms on the horizon, an ominous presence with an unquenchable hunger for the light. And sometimes my friends, that darkness? Sometimes it devours even the brightest of stars.

CHAPTER I

A SORROWFUL GOODBYE

In a prominent kingdom many years ago, nestled on a misty blue orb within the Milky Way Galaxy, a man sat at the edge of a round table, his gaze fixed on the sparkling ink-colored skies. With one weathered hand, the man, clad in a cerulean frock and a smoky pointed hat, stroked his short gray beard. With the other, he nibbled a crisp apple, savoring the sweet juices.

As he took another bite, the man's eyes narrowed, noticing a section of the scattered clouds expanding. From the center, a distant object cut through the sky like a teardrop. He watched intently as it descended towards the surface, the humid air around it distorting, until it silently vanished beyond the hillside.

That time already, is it? he mused, twisting his beard. He took one last bite of the apple and tossed its core out of the embrasure. It fell, plopping onto the dewy grass below.

He shifted his gaze towards the archway, awaiting the unmistakable patter of footsteps drawing nearer as the stony corridor reverberated with the sound of a familiar voice calling his name.

"Merlin! Ya old Hermit, where are you?"

A wry smile played on Merlin's lips. *I hope he's ready to be without my guidance.*

"Merlin, I asked—"

"Yes, Arthur. I heard you the first time," Merlin interrupted, mischief twinkling in his eyes.

With a determined stride, Arthur turned the corner, his silky-blue nightclothes dancing in the breeze. He held a formidable dagger, its

hilt swathed in pure white fabric, a stark contrast to the dark, serrated blade with Roman numeral IV etched at its heart. A sleek silvery sheath completed the ensemble, a harmonious pairing that hinted at something deeper.

“What in the blazes are you doing out here?” Arthur asked, a touch of exasperation in his voice.

Merlin chuckled. “Always spot on with your wording without even realizing it, young Lord.”

“What are you talking about? Actually, never mind all that. I wanted to ask you about this dagger you gave me. I think it’s broken.”

Merlin raised an eyebrow, studying Arthur while waving a stray moth away from his face.

“Broken?”

“Yes, broken. I tried cutting a thin piece of stone with it earlier and it didn’t even mark the surface.”

Merlin let out a rough sigh, rubbing the center of his forehead. “Arthur...”

“What?”

“Arthur, I left you Carnwennan to keep at your side at the gods’ behest, not to cut stone. Think of the dagger as something you’re holding onto for safekeeping. Dear boy, isn’t there something else you should be focusing on instead?”

“And what might that be, my ever-cryptic adoptive uncle?” Arthur asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You and your nicknames.”

“My nicknames? Look who’s talking, *young Lord*.”

Merlin smiled. “True enough, but in my defense, I knew your birth father before you came into this world. Even prior to you pulling out that ceremonial sword from the stone, I kept my eyes on you. You may have grown into a fine king, but your age pales compared to my own. I’ll always see you as the little runt you were. As for what it is you should concentrate on, I believe it would be in your best interest to focus on your swordsmanship rather than your dagger skills. It won’t benefit you to rely on Excalibur to carry you through all your battles. You’ve been without it before, and there may come a time when you are without it again. And besides, I would certainly rest easier if you continued to work on your swordplay. If you work hard at it, you may eventually come close to matching the likes of Lancelot.”

Arthur laughed, tapping the blade against his wrist, and then slid it into the sheath.

"Match the likes of Lancelot? High hopes you have for me there. I think you may have been hitting that wooden pipe of yours a bit too hard as of late."

Merlin chuckled. "I said come close to, not match, my young king. In any case, you have impeccable timing. I was about to inform you of my departure."

"Departure? You've only just returned. Are you already off to meet with the ladies of the lake again?"

"Mayhap I will, but before then I must see my master about some dreams I've been having."

"Your master? You mean...?"

Merlin shook his head. "I know what you're thinking, but no, not him. I would not ask my father for advice, even if it meant my demise."

"Forgive me Merlin, but if not him, then who is it you speak of? And what's this talk of death? Should I summon the knights?"

Merlin smiled, and Arthur watched him as he stood. The great mage's frock swung with him as he turned and gripped the king's shoulders.

"I'm terrible at goodbyes, Arthur."

"Goodbyes? What do you mean?"

"Remember these words: keep Excalibur close and watch your sister. Do not trust her. She only wishes harm upon you."

Merlin watched intently as the king, his brow furrowed in confusion, tilted his head. The expression on his friend's face weighed heavily on the elder mage's heart, causing a somber ache in his chest and a sheen to cross his eyes. Nonetheless, Merlin's gaze remained steady, unflinching, as he turned to retrieve his staff.

"Merlin, what do you mean? I order you to tell me what you're speaking of!"

The king moved after him, but Merlin gripped his staff, sending a powerful gale that pushed him back. With a final, pained look over his shoulder, Merlin vanished, leaving Arthur alone, his protests lost in the rushing wind.



From the hillside beyond the castle walls, Merlin's gaze met the lonesome king struggling to make himself heard. Though his lips moved fervently, the words dissolved over the vast expanse.

"Be well, Arthur," Merlin said.

He turned, leaving the crest of the hill behind, and found a pearl-scaled dragon staring up at him on the other side. Her eyes, a vibrant shade of green, held a glint of curiosity.

"What a peculiar turn of events," the dragon remarked. "Did you foresee my arrival, son of the demon spawn?"

Merlin shook his head, weariness in his voice. "I truly wish you'd cease with that nickname, Faris."

"Apologies, Merlin. Master Blaise sensed turmoil within you and bade me to bring you to her."

"Then let's not delay. There's much to discuss, and I fear time is fleeting before a great darkness engulfs this world."

With a bow—the dragon, scales shimmering like grains of sand under the moonlight—awaited Merlin's ascent. As he clung to her spiked scales, he felt the earth shift beneath her powerful claws.

"Hold on tight."

A thunderous beat of wings, and they were airborne. As the wind roared around him, the wizard stole one last glance at Camelot's castle. There was Arthur, barefooted and resolute, shoving his guards aside and sprinting out of the front gate towards where he had last seen him.

A pang of melancholy gripped Merlin's heart. A realization that this might be their final farewell settled heavily on him. With a tearful smile, he whispered: "Goodbye."

CHAPTER II

SONGS OF GIANTS AND DRAGONS

Further throughout the twinkling skies above, a dark spectacle of cumulonimbus cloud cover stretched far and wide. Faris, with Merlin astride, tore through the stormy turmoil. As the tempest gave way, they descended into the welcoming embrace of warm sea fog beyond the coast. Merlin closed his eyes, cherishing each breath he took as the mist tenderly caressed his skin. But the interlude was brief, and before long, they emerged from the nebulous shroud, venturing into the airspace of the next island.

Opening his eyes, Merlin looked beneath as the dragon carried them over the Hill of Uisneach. Her powerful wings beat steadily, propelling them through the magical veil and above the lands that concealed the clan of dancing giants. Colossal figures with red, flowing locks draping from heads the size of boulders slumbered in their customary circle on the ground below. Their bodies touched as they slept, the curly hairs from their nostrils fluttering with each snore. One giant was up and about, relieving himself as a golden liquid cascaded over the cliffside like a small waterfall. The full-bearded giant smiled at the pair above, giving a friendly wave as they passed overhead. Merlin leaned to the side and returned the greeting with vibrant light radiating from his staff. He knew this giant well. He was the clan's ruler—Drenzor—the former keeper of the stones that now make up Stonehenge.

Jolted by the shifting wind, the wizard redirected his attention to the front.

“Prepare yourself,” Faris said. “We are about to enter the dimensional intersection.”

Merlin looked on as Faris arched higher. The forceful gusts from her thrashing wings traveled across the rocky hillside, forcing him to tighten his grip on his staff. As they ascended higher into the heavens, Merlin’s arm muscles strained.

The air beat against him. His frock billowed behind while his hat teetered precariously. Merlin clamped his thighs against Faris before releasing his grip on the dragon, catching his hat just as it leaped from his head. He placed the pointed cap under his rump and clutched the scepter with both hands, its casing scraping against his calloused palms as it swayed in his grip.

With the air thinning, Merlin clenched the ancient rod tighter, sending a lustrous energy up the staff. The silvery white light stopped at the top, filling the focal sapphire orb, and he whirled it overhead. Blood surged through his veins as he finished the rotation, and a mystical shimmer surrounded him. By tapping his staff against the sheen, magical threads began interlacing with one another, surrounding him with a translucent barrier until the wind that had been blasting him diminished altogether.

A thunderous crack sounded around them as they broke into the mesosphere. The world below and the surrounding clouds blended together, and then, Merlin witnessed it all fall away. There was no light, no stars, no moon remaining; only a bitter darkness shrouded them, stretching as far as the eye could see. With Earth’s gravity gone, Merlin’s body relaxed. He grabbed his hat from underneath and gave it a good fluff before placing it back on his head. Once more, the silver-haired mage clutched Faris’s back with his free hand and took a deep breath, centering his mana. Warm heat, like the embers of a smoldering fire, circulated throughout his core, and he released a stuttering exhale; the tepid air escaped his lungs like an icy mist.

The only lights he saw in this obscure domain was the pale shimmer from Faris’s scales, along with the light of his staff and barrier. He blinked, rubbing his eyes. As they adjusted to the nebulous realm, he scanned the area once more. In the far distance, he now saw the faint sparkling of hundreds of other creatures soaring through the darkness.

Faris turned her head to the side and looked at him with one radiant eye.

“How are you doing, young Merlin?”

“I’ll survive, but let’s hurry.”

The dragon nodded. “As you wish.”

Faris’s body glowed brightly, and she turned her attention below, compressing her wings. She first tilted up and then plummeted downward into the dark abyss like a whale taking a nosedive into the ocean’s depths. Merlin’s heart leapt in his chest before crashing back into position, and the pair rotated in a descending spiral. Down, left, and right; they twisted every which way. His hands ached as the scepter trembled from the strain of the velocity. The expert mage’s barrier bent inward at the front, and he squeezed the staff harder in response, sending out another wave of mystical force. Like a bubble from a murky swamp, the encasing barrier expanded back outward and stabilized.

Spreading her wings, Faris leveled herself, and as the spiraling ceased, Merlin, together with Faris, watched a larger dragon with seven tails and charcoal-black scales pass by. She turned her head and roared, and the dragon responded in kind. One of its three heads snapped at her as its onyx teeth reflected the light of her scales before it turned and moved away. Faris kept one eye on the dragon until it was out of sight.

A moment later, Merlin felt a soothing warmth spread throughout Faris’s scales, and then they shot forward. The surrounding void cracked, and a newly formed rift with alternating lusters forced Merlin to shield his eyes. Squinting, he watched the spectacles dance around them, and then a bright green flash overtook everything at the front. The dark isolation vanished, and the pleasant heat of a familiar dimension washed over Merlin, erasing the cold spots from his skin.

He looked around, enjoying the sight of blue orbs like giant dandelion bulbs filling a pale apricot sky. The bulbs’ radiance shone from the heavens and brushed parts of the small world below with a magical glow as sakura petals scattered across the winds. Thousands more of those bright, blooming flowers filled an enormous tree on top of a mound at the world’s epicenter. It was a sight like no other. A beautiful realm he once called home. Its colorful character was something he could only compare to an aquatic dimension filled with coral reefs.

With a light flex of his forearm, Merlin swirled his staff overhead, and the protective barrier dispersed. His chest rose as he inhaled, and his grin widened as he stood upon Faris’s back.

“The air here is always so pleasant,” he said.

The dragon took a deep breath and turned to him.

“I’ve found this dimension contains some of the highest quality oxygen, perhaps the greatest from any realm I’ve visited. Now, Master Merlin, shall I announce your arrival?”

“I rather think there’s not much point to it. You know as well as I that unless something has happened, Master Blaise already knows that we’ve reached this realm. No Faris, I think I will leave you for now and meet with them. Until later, my friend.”

Merlin jumped from the dragon’s back and floated down, landing on the orb closest to him. The warm-softness he felt from the pappus reached past the soles of his sandals and moved between his toes, greeting him like a fuzzy blanket. As he enjoyed the many sensations by rubbing his feet throughout the smooth surface, he felt something tug upon his back robe. Merlin turned, only to be greeted by a large firefly twice the size of his head.

“Poncho!” he exclaimed. “I missed you boy!”

Merlin touched his forehead to the gentle creature and scratched its neck as he blew tenderly. The cheerful fellow pulled away and sailed through the air, releasing a vibrant purple light as it dashed from side to side. The wizard jumped after it, hopping from sphere to sphere as his friend brushed against him. As he moved across the orbs, they released pungent clouds of pollen in his wake. Poncho turned, diving through towards the surface. Merlin followed, plunging through the swirling vapors with watery eyes. He took a troubled breath, then one harsher, and then—

“ACHOO.” The wizard let out three hearty sneezes as he floated gently toward the ground and landed on the grassy plains near the battle platform he and his master had trained on many years ago.

“Old friend, I still don’t understand how those pleasant orbs can release a pollen that smells and tastes like fresh onion powder.”

The creature tittered and nuzzled against him before flying off beyond the tree’s branches.

Merlin moved his hand across the surrounding pillars; rocky chalk dusted his palms as he looked at the enormous tree’s trunk shaded by vast limbs full of sakura petals. He peered ahead. With the gentle light of the realm not impeding his gaze, he spotted the tree-hole entrance, his childhood home. And so he moved, approaching at a steady pace

while feeling the wind kick his robe behind him. The great mage eyed the square doorway surrounded by cobblestone blocks as a puffing smoke vented from a log protruding from the dwelling's backside.

He stopped, reaching a field full of various tulips. Eyeing them with suspicion, he swept his finger across their smooth bulbs and petals.

With a click of his tongue, Merlin pulled his finger back as sharp pain jolted him to his senses. Scarlet blood dripped from the tip as he sucked it clean.

Things truly never change around here, do they? Same lights, same sky, and same prickly flowers from a distant past cutting me like a fine razor.

Gently pulling back a petal from the multi-gradient tulips blocking the entrance of the tree's canopy, he found barbed stripes of twisted yellows and blacks, adorning the undersides like a swarm of angry bees.

Thump, thump. Merlin tapped his staff on the ground. The bushes rustled as a soft breeze rushed over the fields, pulling the thorns from the sprouting meadows and carrying them onto the grandiose tree. Sharp, vine-like structures formed, hanging from swaying branches safely out of reach. The great mage wiggled his nose and adjusted his pointed hat before treading through the fields ahead. Flowers, once covered in barbs, now brushed against his waist as tender blooms. Merlin grazed his palms against their moistened bulbs as he passed and clenched his fists. The dewy perspiration seeped into his flesh, lathering it with comforting relief.

Beyond the field of flowers blanketed by cerulean light from the orbs above, he entered the shade of the tree. With each step forward, the sound of water rang closer, and bright cherry blossoms danced all around him. The warm air began to dampen, and he soon found himself staring at a large stream. It flowed as far as he could see in either direction. Smirking, he did a quick stretch and then hopped across on small, platform-like stones until he found footing on the other side.

He pressed forward, wrapping around the bend and towards the entrance. The stairs of the hill creaked as he ascended. Cool, brittle wood greeted his hand as he gripped the small ladder at the top of the steps. Merlin climbed, rising to the peak of the mound. He gazed at the tree's entrance, studying the door's intricate carving of a prominent

flame. The great mage smiled at it, almost in a daze, but then came back to reality. Merlin had a lot to say, but he didn't know where to start and was hesitant to do much else.

The ever-loyal Poncho must have sensed this in his old friend, as he fluttered down from the branches above and gave him a nudge.

Merlin nodded.

"You're right. Best to get it over with."

The mage took a deep breath, steeling himself for the conversation ahead. As he approached the door, he felt a surge of mixed emotions, a cocktail of anticipation and apprehension. Standing firm, he gave a solid, deliberate knock. The sound echoed through the ancient tree.