

K.M. SHEA



Smbark
KING ARTHUR
AND HER KNIGHTS

Embark
Book 4 of King Arthur and Her Knights

By: K. M. Shea



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Chapter 1

Guinevere's Arrival

Britt was wearing her best set of armor when Guinevere arrived. Not her gold armor, but the silver set that was emblazoned with the red dragon—her personal insignia, the symbol of King Arthur.

“They’ve arrived?” Britt asked, emerging from the castle keep with bright, blue eyes. Cavall, her apricot-colored mastiff, snuffled as Britt laid her hand on the dog’s head.

“The watchmen confirmed that Lady Guinevere and her escort have passed the outer gates of Camelot and are approaching the inner palace gates,” Sir Kay said, eyeing Britt with apprehension.

“Excellent! Thanks, Kay. You’re the best,” Britt said, leaving her foster-brother to make a beeline for a pavilion raised above the courtyard for such occasions.

“Is it time, My Lord?” Gawain—Sir Gawain now, as Britt had knighted him a little over a week ago—asked as he joined Britt at the base of the pavilion.

“Finally, yes,” Britt said, self-consciously checking her gold hair to make certain it was pulled back in a “manly” half ponytail. “I nearly forgot. Has Gaheris mended yet?”

Sir Gawain bowed. “I expect in a day or two he shall demand another go at riding a charger. Indeed, I don’t think the spill did much besides rattle his bones.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Britt said, stretching her mind to see if she could remember any Arthurian lore about Gaheris. For what felt like the hundredth time since she arrived in medieval England, Britt wished she knew more about the mythical King Arthur. That would make her job as the stand-in, counterfeit Arthur, easier.

Britt was an American girl from the twenty-first century. When touring England with friends, an ancient magic pulled her through time, plopping her in medieval London where Merlin explained that the real Arthur had run off with a shepherdess, and Britt was going to be the replacement.

“My Lord, you must be anxious to once again set your eyes on the delightful pinnacle of femininity that is Lady Guinevere,” another knight said, joining Sir Gawain at the base of the stairs.

Britt managed not to groan, but she couldn’t help the sneer that spread across her lips. “For the last time, Lancelot, Guinevere is *not* my lady-love,” she said. “She is staying in Camelot as a visitor—as many noble ladies do. I shall be her guardian of sorts—*not* her lover.”

As King Arthur, she made the unfortunate acquaintance of Sir Lancelot du Lac—the legendary figure Britt had despised from childhood thanks to his unscrupulous affair with Queen Guinevere, whom Britt had scarcely kinder feelings for.

Britt had reluctantly come to tolerate the idea of Lady Guinevere—or perhaps it was better to say she felt sorry for the girl since her father tried to use her as a bargaining chip to gather more money—but Britt’s hatred for Lancelot the swine still burned brightly.

“As you say, My Lord. But I have seen you trounce an evil duke for her. Indeed, your generous love knows no bounds. A knight such as I—who has traveled near and far to save fair damsels—would understand that,” Lancelot said with a winning smile before he bowed to a passing lady.

To Britt’s irritation, the lady giggled before hurrying on her way. Lancelot’s coal black hair and dreamy green eyes often had that effect on the women of Camelot, much to Britt’s disgust.

“It seems most of your knights are present, My Lord,” Sir Gawain said, recapturing Britt’s attention.

“Yes,” Britt agreed, her eyes sweeping over the hoards of men eagerly lining the courtyard. “Although I’m afraid I don’t understand why.”

“It’s no secret you’ve been looking forward to this day since we returned to Camelot weeks ago, My Lord,” Sir Gawain said, his lips creasing in a subdued smile.

Britt gave the younger knight a returning smile. “Perhaps.”

Lancelot looked back and forth between the two and, for quite possibly the first time since Britt met the self-inflated knight, said nothing. Instead, Britt and her two knights watched the servants scurry about, finishing last-minute preparations as heralds gathered at the base of the keep and knights assembled, making the courtyard a lake of glittering chainmail and armor.

When Lady Guinevere—daughter of King Leodegrance of Camelgrance—and her escort entered the courtyard, it was packed with all the typical signs of pomp and joy. Flags and standards flapped in the wind; the knights were dressed in their best armor; and several notes were sounded on horns and beaten on drums.

Guinevere dismounted her palfrey, a small, sweet-tempered mare. She stuck out even when her serving ladies joined her, her reddish-blond hair gleaming in the afternoon sun. Behind her were dozens of knights guarding numerous carts—some of which contained Guinevere’s belongs; the rest held a gift from the penny-pinching King Leodegrance.

Those from Camelot grew quiet when Britt swept down the stairs of the pavilion, a soft smile filled with longing twitching across her lips. Like a man in a dream, Britt walked down the pathway that opened up in front of her as her knights edged out of her way. She broke through the crowd, her smile growing wider and her footsteps quicker. Knights looked knowingly to each other and ladies tittered as they watched Britt—King Arthur—approach Guinevere and...pass her.

Those from Camelot stopped talking altogether as Britt approached a cart and twitched off an animal hide that was wrapped around what appeared to be a curved section of a rather scratched-up table.

“Finally, the Round Table has arrived,” Britt said, her voice filled with awe as she placed a hand on the table top.

“Are you *crying*?” Merlin asked, his sudden appearance at Britt’s side causing exclamations and startled yips.

“So what if I am? This is it, Merlin. The Round Table! It’s finally here—the legend can finally begin,” Britt said.

Merlin frowned. “You are too concerned with the legend of the future. A square table would serve you just as well.”

“No. It *has* to be the Round Table,” Britt said, pulling another hide off a different section of the Round Table—which was donut-shaped since it was so large it had to be pieced together like a toy train-track.

“That may be so. But you have neglected to welcome your guest,” Merlin dryly said.

“What?” Britt said.

Merlin tipped his head in Guinevere’s direction.

“Oh,” Britt said. “Right. Sorry.”

“By the Bells of Heaven—it’s a good thing you’re charismatic and charming when you choose to be,” Merlin said, his voice dripping with disapproval.

Britt reluctantly parted from the table, giving it one last look of longing before she pasted her King Arthur smile on. “Welcome, Lady Guinevere—daughter of King Leodegrance—and Knights of Camelgrance. May you be at peace here in Camelot and find your stay to be filled with rest and all things that are good as you wander from your home.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Merlin asked through his teeth that were clenched in an

uncomfortable-looking smile.

“It means they’re not staying here forever,” Britt muttered. Her words were also hidden behind a smile.

“I thank you, King Arthur, for your generous invitation that allows me to visit Camelot,” Guinevere said. Britt wondered at her sincerity, but after studying Guinevere’s bright eyes that were widened with wonder, she grudgingly accepted them.

“My father sends his best wishes and the table of King Uther as a token of his respect and esteem. He has also sent several dozen knights to serve in your courts.”

Britt and Merlin exchanged looks. King Leodegrance was a known coward. His knights were most likely of the same mold, which meant they would be little more than a decoration and a drain on the treasury.

“Oh,” Merlin said. “He shouldn’t have.”

Britt shrugged. “We already have Lancelot and his piggy cousins staying with us. What’s a few more mouths?” she whispered to Merlin before giving Guinevere a politician’s smile. “Your father is too kind to part with such stout knights. I hope you all find Camelot agreeable in your stay. If you wish to be directed to your quarters, please see Sir Ulfius. He is my chamberlain and will see to your needs. Tonight, we will have a welcome feast in honor of your arrival.”

Before Britt could continue, the Knights of Camelot broke into cheers at such a ringing volume, Britt could feel it in her chest. She waited for the roars of approval to subside before she said, “Furthermore, all day tomorrow we will celebrate, finishing with the establishment of the Round Table. Prepare yourselves, my knights. Tomorrow, you will be challenged.”

The Knights of Camelot cheered even louder at this, making the ground buzz with their energy.

“You’re lucky you have a bunch of warmongers in your court,” Merlin said as he and Britt pushed their way back into the crowd and Sir Ulfius, an older knight with a genteel air to him, took their place.

“We’ll see. I’m not sure how they will accept their oaths,” Britt grimly said.

“They’ll take them—out of sheer loyalty to you if for no other reason. The Round Table is a good plan,” Merlin admitted.

Caught off guard by Merlin’s rare praise, Britt blinked in surprise before she offered him a smile—not a King Arthur smile—but *her* smile—sweet and unguarded.

Merlin uncomfortably shrugged. “You best lead the way inside, lest all your knights stand here and gawk at Guinevere and her ladies like swine herders at a festival.”

“Right. I’ll do that,” Britt said, altering her direction to push towards the keep. Sir Gawain and Sir Kay popped up on either side of her as the keep doors opened in front of her. Several of Britt’s closest knights—Sir Bedivere, Sir Bodwain, Sir Ywain, and Sir Griflet among them—followed after her, starting the stream of knights who trickled into the keep, clearing enough room for servants to begin unpacking Britt’s precious table.

Sir Lancelot du Lac watched them go, his green eyes sharp as he leaned against the inner walls of Camelot, cloaked by shadows.

“You were right. Lady Guinevere is a pretty little thing,” Sir Lionel—Lancelot’s cousin—said, folding his arms across his broad chest. “Though she looks hen-witted.”

“Lionel,” Sir Bors said, frowning at his brother.

Sir Lionel shrugged. “You can’t tell me she’s as sharp as the Lady of the Lake.”

“No female is as conniving as the Lady of the Lake, with the exception of the wretched trio of Queen Igraine’s daughters,” Lancelot said, watching Guinevere giggle with her ladies.

Sir Bors shifted. “You mean Queen Morgause of Orkney, Queen Elaine, and Morgan—”

“Yes, them,” Lancelot said as he fixed his gaze on the doors through which King Arthur had

disappeared scant minutes ago. “I find I am growing tired of him.”

“Of Arthur? Why?” Sir Lionel asked, leaning against a horse hitching post. His giant hulk made the wooden post groan.

Lancelot narrowed his eyes. “He is too perfect.”

“I should think so. With Merlin holding his chain, I don’t think the wizard would let him be anything *but* perfect,” Sir Lionel said.

“That’s not it,” Lancelot snapped. “It’s the way everyone fawns over him. The mindless devotion his knights hold for him is sickening, and his unshakeable faith in them is even worse.”

“What is *their* devotion to you?” Sir Bors asked. “Who cares what his men think?”

Lancelot rested his hands on his sword belt and was silent.

Sir Lionel and Sir Bors exchanged looks. Sir Lionel shrugged and stretched. “Must mean it’s about time to head out then? We swore allegiance to him, but he has not officially recognized us like he did Gawain and Ywain. Even if we’re supposed to be his knights, we could go questing some more—perhaps stop in and see if the Lady of the Lake will house us again.”

“No,” Lancelot said, the word as unyielding as iron.

“Then what do you want?” Sir Bors prompted.

“I want to shake Arthur’s wretched faith. I want to rouse his suspicion and curdle some of that *fondness* he has,” Lancelot sneered.

“What do you have planned?” Sir Lionel asked, his eyes lighting with interest.

Lancelot smiled darkly.



When Guinevere was summoned to Merlin’s study—for a “private” welcome from Britt and the wizard—Guinevere shrieked with joy.

“Thank you, Arthur! It’s so wonderful here!” she said, launching herself at Britt before Merlin closed the door behind her.

“Right. You’re welcome,” Britt said, trying to wrench Guinevere off, but the young lady held on with the grip of a bear. The pair nearly backed into one of Merlin’s workbenches before the wizard peeled her off.

“See here, lady,” Merlin said, holding Guinevere away from him as if she were a dead mouse. “You cannot act this way in public.”

“Oh, I know! It’s a big secret, right?” Guinevere said, her eyes wide as she looked back and forth between Britt and Merlin. “No one is to know that Arthur is really a girl. What is your name? Your girl name, I mean. Surely Arthur isn’t your Christian name?”

“It’s—”

“You will never find out!” Merlin said, shaking a finger at Guinevere. “I can barely trust your father to hang onto his own kingdom. I *certainly* don’t trust you with such information as *that*. Heaven knows you’ll go spilling it everywhere through sheer dimwittedness,” the wizard grouched.

“Yes, sir,” Guinevere said, nodding her head emphatically. She wasn’t even offended by Merlin’s insult but hung onto his words like they were gems.

“None of this touchy-feely-female-camaraderie either,” Merlin went on.

Britt watched with an amused smirk—happy to see the wizard dominate someone besides herself so thoroughly. She had been entirely against ever speaking to Guinevere—much less bringing her Camelot—because she didn’t want to give any leeway to the King Arthur legends she knew, particularly the ones that blamed the downfall of Arthur and Camelot on Queen Guinevere and Sir

Lancelot.

But when Britt visited Camelgrance in the previous months and witnessed for herself the way King Leodegrance used Guinevere as a bargaining chip, Britt found enough strength in her heart to begrudgingly offer Guinevere the chance to visit her in Camelot. It helped that the empty-headed girl had learned that Britt—King Arthur—was really a girl.

“You are to remain dignified and elegant when you dine with Arthur. Arthur is a *male* King. You must act accordingly in public,” Merlin continued with his rant.

“But in private, I can speak my mind, yes?” Guinevere asked, almost bouncing with excitement.

What would we have to talk about? Britt wondered. Just because she was allowing Guinevere to stay didn’t mean she liked the girl.

Merlin must have similar thoughts, for he furrowed his eyebrows. “This is not a wedding party, Lady Guinevere. You are free to fill your days as you please, but Arthur will not be available at your beck and call. She has a *kingdom* to run.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Guinevere said, jutting her lower lip out in a pout.

Merlin folded his hands together and squeezed them until his knuckles turned white.

“Does the Lady of the Lake know your secret, too?” Guinevere asked Britt.

“She does,” Britt confirmed. “But what Merlin is trying to emphasize, Lady Guinevere, is that secrecy is absolutely critical. You cannot allow anyone to even ponder the truth of my identity, and if you make a mistake, we will send you back to Camelgrance, immediately. Do you understand?”

“Of course,” Guinevere scoffed.

“In that case, will you excuse us? I’m sure you want to prepare for the feast,” Britt said.

“I really should. I have this delightful new dress. It’s a shade of blue that’s just so *perfect*—”

“Thank you, Lady Guinevere,” Britt said, offering the young lady a flat smile before she opened the door.

“We will see you when we dine—you sit with Arthur as a guest of honor,” Merlin said.

Guinevere clapped her hands in excitement. “Until then,” she bid before she disappeared through the doorway.

“I’m surprised,” Britt said, closing the door. “Usually, you are odiously kind to foreign dignitaries.”

“Since visiting Leodegrance, I realized I over-estimated his importance. Frankly, I don’t care a fig for him. It would be our good fortune if we were not his ally. Someone else can defend his lands for all I care,” Merlin drawled. “I would still be kind to the girl—ill-treatment of her would reflect badly on Camelot, after all—but my biggest concern is to make sure she doesn’t spill your secret. I will do whatever it takes to wedge that concept into her head.”

“She isn’t the brightest girl,” Britt said.

“She’s worse than your menagerie of animals...and your greenest knight,” Merlin said. “I have absolutely no faith in her. If she doesn’t share your secret with someone before the week is out, I’ll be impressed.”

“What will we do if she does?” Britt asked.

“It depends whom she tells. I might be able to cover it up with a bit of magic, but we shall see,” Merlin said. “If she tells too many people, it will be beyond my powers. But we need not worry about it until it happens.”

“I can’t believe *I’m* the one saying this, but she may not tell anyone. She really wanted to get out of Camelgrance—so much so that she might remember to keep her mouth shut,” Britt said.

“We shall see,” Merlin grimly said. “Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“It’s just feasting, isn’t it?”

“Of course...not.”

“Dang it.”

“Pull up a chair, lass, and I will outline your day.”

“I hate it when royalty visits,” Britt grumbled before doing as the wizard directed.

Chapter 2

The Order of the Round Table

The following day's celebration was deemed a marvelous success. However, Britt was more than a little off put that everyone seemed to be under the impression that the reason for the celebration was *Guinevere* and not the Round Table.

"They'll understand eventually, My Lord," Sir Kay said, standing with Cavall next to Britt's throne.

"I hope so," Britt sighed, looking at the throne room that was filled with standards, knights, and peasant folk. Merlin proclaimed that Britt had to spend the day granting boons to the peasants of the area to further good will. As such, Britt was stuck on the throne, listening to people who had come to complain to her. Sir Kay was her appointed babysitter as she was less likely to squirm away under his watchful eye than under any of Merlin's minions. "Next petitioner," she said.

One of her guards (the burly one who talked with a Scottish accent) led a tall, mountain of a boy forward. He looked like he was in his late teens—perhaps 18—but was built like an ox. He was taller than Britt—taller than Sir Kay, in fact—and had the shoulder breadth of a defensive lineman in the NFL. He also, Britt noticed with interest, held an empty scabbard.

"What is your name?" Britt asked.

"Tor, My Lord," the mountain of a boy said. "I am the youngest son of Aries the cowherd."

"And what is your request, Tor?" Britt asked.

"I would like to be made a knight of Camelot," Tor said.

The constant murmur of conversation the prevailed the throne room faded at his declaration, but Britt propped her arms on her knees and leaned forward in interest. "And why would you want that?"

"I love the sword, and I want to fight for the helpless. Everyone says you're the best in Britain, and if I could be a knight, I should like to serve a King who is known to be just. Also, I make a horrid cowherd," Tor admitted.

"Do you have your father's blessing?" Britt asked, curious.

Tor nodded. "He said my head is daft from fairies, and I'll be lucky if I'm not thrown out, but I might ask you anyway."

"I see. You said you love the sword, but have you used it before?"

"I practiced whenever I could, though I don't know if I'm any good," Tor said, holding up his empty scabbard. "I have a sword, but the guards took it when I entered the keep."

As Britt studied Tor, the whispers were renewed with vigor.

"Sir Gawain, Sir Bedivere," Britt finally said.

The two knights emerged at the base of the dais on which Britt's throne was placed.

"My Lord," Sir Bedivere said with a sweeping bow. Gawain mimicked him.

"I want you to test young Tor. I would like you, Gawain, to engage him in a sword fight at the practice grounds while Sir Bedivere watches and judges his skill," Britt said.

"Yes, My Lord," Sir Bedivere and Sir Gawain chorused.

"Will you agree to this test, Tor?" Britt asked.

"Of course, My Lord," Tor said, bending forward in a deep bow before he hurried after Sir Bedivere and Sir Gawain.

Britt shifted her attention back to the petitioners. “Next,” she called.

Although Britt focused on the new requests and petitions, the knights and ladies whispered—amongst themselves. Several knights motioned in the direction Tor and the testing knights had gone. They spoke, all while giving Britt speculative looks.

Britt settled a dispute over a cow, granted a chicken keeper a new bag of corn, and blessed three babies before Sir Gawain, Sir Bedivere, and Tor returned.

“Well? What did you find?” Britt asked, hefting her long frame out of her throne so she could stand on the top stair, Sir Kay at her side.

“He lacks the grace of a knight, My Lord, but he was no sapling,” Sir Bedivere said. “Some time spent with a trained master could fix the worst of his stance, although he has the strength of an ox. Should he ever learn to use a lance, I think he would be a worthy opponent.”

“I see. Sir Gawain?” Britt asked.

“His blows were powerful,” Sir Gawain admitted. “I would not like to face him with a shield. He could crush one’s arm through sheer force.”

“Hmm. Call for Merlin,” Britt said, twisting to look for a page boy.

“No need; I am already here,” Merlin boomed, appearing mysteriously behind Britt. The ladies and knights of the room gasped in surprise, although it was obvious he had popped out of the small room—the entrance of which was hidden by a thick tapestry—located behind Britt’s throne.

Merlin’s Gandalf-rip-off-cloak swirled around him, making his dazzling blue eyes look stormy as he swept up to Britt’s side. “I know what you are thinking,” he murmured. “And I agree. It was one of *my* people who sought Tor out to tell him you were granting boons.”

“Great. I’ll knight him now?” Britt asked, reaching for Excalibur—which was leaning against her throne.

“My Lord, you can’t possibly be considering this,” a knight said. He approached the dais with a scowl, the colors of his armor marking him as one of Leodegrance’s flunkies. “He is the son of a *cowherd*. The position of knight is an *honor* given to noblemen.”

“Perhaps it was in Camelgrance, but that is not how it is in Camelot,” Britt said, unsheathing Excalibur. “I value things like integrity, honor, and just actions. I care little for pedigrees and bloodlines.”

“Pedigrees?” Leodegrance’s knight asked.

Merlin discreetly—and sharply—elbowed Britt for the mistake.

Britt hastily continued, “Sometimes those of great character come from the least of places. I will knight Tor, but let it be known that any knight who obstinately acts without honor and without remorse will *lose* his shield and be exiled from my courts.”

“Lass,” Merlin warned as the crowd gasped. “*That* I did not agree to.”

Britt walked down the steps to get out of elbowing-range. “Kneel, Tor,” she said to the boy, who was so overcome with joy his shoulders shook.

“Tor, son of Aries the cowherd, you are to be the first knight who swears the oath of the Round Table. Never murder, and flee treason. Don’t be cruel, but give mercy to those who ask for it. Always give aid to ladies—”

“My Lord, you forgot part of the oath,” Merlin said, eyeing Britt as he joined her in front of Tor.

“So I have,” Britt reluctantly said. She had worked out the oath with Merlin weeks ago, but she still didn’t agree with all the parts he insisted that she add. “Don’t be cruel, but give mercy to those who ask for it upon pain of forfeiting their lordship to me, King Arthur, forevermore. Always give aid to ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen, and let no man do battle in a wrongful quarrel for no law, or for any worldly object or tradable good. You are charged to ride abroad redressing wrongs, to speak no slander nor to listen to it, to honor God, and finally, to love one maiden only and to worship her

through the years by noble deeds until she has been won. Do you swear to do all of these things?"

"I do," Tor reverently said. Britt got the feeling that he was more misty-eyed over being made a knight than over the idea of serving her, but, as she touched his shoulders with Excalibur's blade, she could see kindness in his face and decided he would probably be one of the most just knights in her service.

"Then rise, Sir Tor. Welcome to the service of Camelot," Britt said.

She was grateful when Sir Gawain and his younger brother, Agravain, started cheering. "Sir Tor!"

Tor grinned shyly as several of Britt's closer knights took pains to give the cowherd's son a warm welcome, in spite of the frosty looks Leodegrance's knights were giving him.

"I wish Leodegrance hadn't sent knights with the table," Britt said to Sir Kay and Merlin as they retreated back up the stairs, heading for Britt's throne.

"You'll never please everyone, lass. It's better to learn that now," Merlin advised.

"Yeah, I know," Britt sighed as she crouched in front of Cavall, smiling when he pressed his wet nose to her cheek.

"Cheer up, My Lord. Tonight, all your knights will take such an oath," Sir Kay said.

"Yes," Britt agreed. "Finally."



When evening came, Britt assembled all of her knights in the grand hall where the Round Table of King Uther was assembled in a ring. The ladies of the court and any noblemen who were not knights directly under Britt's charge were not present, but were at a separate celebration for Guinevere.

There was no food, although drinks were already placed on the scratched table. Plain, wooden chairs with undyed, linen cushions were crowded around the table perimeter. There was one chair that was a little more ornate, having flourishes carved into its surface. The back was emblazoned with what Merlin *claimed* to be letters that spelled out "King Arthur." Britt couldn't be sure, though, as she couldn't read the terrible spelling and letter formation of old English.

Britt stood behind her chair and allowed Merlin to sift through the knights, deciding where they sat. She was a little disappointed. The Round Table was the ultimate symbol of King Arthur's court. It stood for chivalry and good deeds. Most of Britt's career as the false King Arthur had been seeped in secret political agendas. She had hoped to make the Round Table the one fair place in her life by leveling the playing-field—which was what inspired the oath and the Order of the Round Table.

Merlin had crushed that dream by demanding to draw up the seating arrangement for the table. ("I will not undermine your rosy picture of chivalry, lass. The truth is, everyone is going to fight to sit closest to you, and you might accidentally put together men who can't stand each other. There will be nothing political beyond that. I promise.")

Britt didn't trust his vow. Things were *always* political with Merlin.

Britt watched with true pleasure as Sir Ector—her supposed foster-father—Sir Kay, Sir Bedivere, Sir Bodwain, and Sir Gawain were given chairs near her. Sir Ywain and Sir Ulfius were not much farther down, as were—unfortunately so—Sir Lancelot and his cousins: Sir Lionel and Sir Bors. Britt was surprised to see an empty chair that was only one seat away from her. She was about to call attention to it when King Pellinore busted into the hall with a noble smile and quick pace.

"I apologize, King Arthur. For once it was not the questing beast that caused my late arrival, but my wife. She wanted to be certain she had an appropriate gift for Lady Guinevere. I am glad I arrived before you started," King Pellinore said, giving a slight bow to Britt.

"King Pellinore," Britt said, at something of a loss.

“I thought we agreed you would call me Pellinore?” the table, noble man said.

“Indeed, we did. But only if you agreed to call me Arthur,” Britt said with a sly smile. King Pellinore had, at one time, been one of her loudest nay-sayers. Now, Britt was glad to call him her friend.

King Pellinore chuckled. “As you say, Arthur.”

“King Pellinore, I am so glad you could make it,” Merlin said, swooping between them.

“Indeed, I would not miss it. It is my pleasure to declare loyalty to Arthur,” King Pellinore said, bowing in Britt’s direction.

“What?” Britt said, a smile stuck on her face.

“Your presence at the Round Table will be celebrated. Here is your chair,” Merlin said, indicating to the empty chair.

“Thank you,” Pellinore said, taking his seat with grave honor.

Britt grabbed Merlin by the throatlatch of his cloak and dragged him to the side. “Nothing political besides the seating arrangement, you said. You *liar!*”

“What? You *like* Pellinore,” Merlin snorted.

“Yes, but he’s a *king*. He’s not my *knight*. The whole point of the Round Table and the order and oath are to teach knights how to act as my vassals! I can’t make him swear an oath of fealty to me!”

“He already has.”

“*When?*”

“When you were officially made allies in early summer.”

“He did no such thing. He only acknowledged me as King of Britain!” Britt hissed, glancing over her shoulder to make sure no one could hear them. Thankfully, the knights were too involved in inspecting their new positions around the Round Table to take notice of her conversation with Merlin.

“Yes, that was when he swore fealty,” Merlin said, speaking slowly, as if Britt were stupid. “By acknowledging you as *King of Britain* he acknowledged that you are sovereign above him. It’s perfectly reasonable that you should call him one of your knights.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I knew you wouldn’t like it. You’re too aware of what you perceive to be his honor to see that he’s not making himself a lesser. Besides, is your Round Table not about equality and making the least on the same level as the greatest? Hmmm?” Merlin asked.

Britt groaned. “You are unbearable.”

“If it helps, I was anxious to get Pellinore in your order for more logical reasons. He’s a seasoned warrior, and you need him on this table of greenhorns. Your older knights—like Sir Ulfius and even Sir Bodwain—aren’t likely to go out on these quests you dream of. They must stay close to Camelot due to their positions. And the last thing you need to do is release a hoard of young idiots on the country, right?” Merlin asked.

“I guess,” Britt said.

“Good, now sit down and begin your grand speech,” Merlin said, nudging Britt to her chair.

Britt gave the blonde-haired man a dirty look but did as she was told. When she sat, the knights—everyone from the newly knighted Sir Tor to the seasoned knights like Sir Bedivere, and even King Leodegrance’s knights—fell silent.

Britt took a moment to appreciate the silence...and the event. For a long time, she had asked after the Round Table. At first it was because she knew it was part of the legend, but as time passed, Britt realized that she wanted to use it to give the knights a guide for their behavior. That was why she and Merlin had spent weeks making the oath, because it wasn’t just a piece of the legend but a code of conduct. And now, after weeks of waiting, Britt would finally have a way to hold her knights—and herself—accountable.

“Men, tonight I am establishing the Order of the Round Table,” Britt said. “The Round Table is symbolic. It has no corners, no place that is higher than another. Here, everyone has equal value, and everyone has equal say. At this table, there are princes, lords, and kings among the knights—and all of you may have the same authority...even cowherds,” she nodded to Tor. “I am still your King. But here, I am of the same worth as you,” Britt said. She waited, looking around the table to gauge reactions. Some knights were grinning; others looked thoughtful.

“However, to be part of the Order of the Round Table, one must prove to be a knight of excellent character. It is an honor, *not* an expectation, to sit here. You must take the oath I presented to Sir Tor earlier today,” she continued. “Anyone who chooses not to take the oath of this Order may leave now and I will not think less of him.”

Everyone remained sitting.

“In that case, I require all present to take this oath: Never murder, and flee treason. Don’t be cruel but give mercy to those who ask for it upon pain of forfeiting their lordship to me, King Arthur, forevermore. Always give aid to ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen, and let no man do battle in a wrongful quarrel for no law, or for any worldly object or tradable good. You are charged to ride abroad redressing wrongs, to speak no slander nor to listen to it, to honor God, and finally, to love one maiden only and to worship her through the years by noble deeds until she has been won,” Britt paused to catch her breath. “Will you swear it?”

Sir Bedivere was the first to stand. “I will never murder, and will flee treason,” he started.

Sir Ywain leaped to his feet. “I will not be cruel, but give mercy to those who ask for it—”

“Upon pain of forfeiting their lordship to King Arthur, forevermore!” Sir Griflet said, almost knocking his chair over in his glee.

Sir Kay, Sir Gawain, Sir Bodwain, King Pellinore, and Sir Ulfius joined them, as did Sir Lancelot, Sir Lionel, and Sir Bors.

The hall throbbed as the knights—just a few short of 120 or so—raised their voices and declared the oath.

Britt smiled as she also stood and repeated the oath. When they finished, they sat back down—the sound of chairs scraping the ground drowning out most words.

“All for one and one for all,” Britt declared.

“I beg your pardon, My Lord?” Sir Kay asked.

“Nothing,” Britt said, placing her arms on the table in front of her. “The first order of business: questing.”

“Questing, what a joyous occupation of time. Doing good deeds is a worthy and just cause,” Lancelot said.

“Yes. Thanks for that,” Britt said, eyeing the knight. “As a member of the Round Table, you will be asked to ride out for a part of the spring and summer season to go questing,” Britt said before she leaned back in her chair and waited for the buzz of conversation to die down.

Sir Kay smoothed his moustache in great joy. As Britt’s seneschal, the knights’ feeding and upkeep had caused a constant drain on her coffers that he didn’t appreciate. He had heartily approved of the plan to send knights out when Britt and Merlin first discussed it.

“You see? I told you the young ones would like the idea,” Merlin murmured to Britt.

“Leodegrance’s knights aren’t thrilled,” Britt whispered.

“Of course they aren’t. This will require them to risk their lives. Forget those old swine. It appeals to your younger knights—the rowdy ones who *need* to be aired out to play,” Merlin said before he raised his voice to speak to the crowd. “Arthur asks this because I have foreseen the great things you will do. Ladies will be saved; mythical creatures will be slain, and kingdoms shall be won!” he boomed, lying through his teeth.

The crash course on the order of the Round Table went on until late in the evening. When even Merlin could hear Sir Ywain's stomach growling, he released them to a celebration feast in the main hall.

There, they joined Guinevere and the ladies and knights who would not be in the Order of the Round Table.

Chapter 3

The Quest of the White Hart

As usual, Britt was seated at the head table in the feasting hall. Only Merlin and Guinevere sat with her, although a steady flow of knights passed by the table to give their compliments to Guinevere and make eyes at her, or to ask Britt (and Merlin) a question about the Round Table.

“I hope you have found your first day at Camelot to be pleasant, Lady Guinevere,” Merlin said in one of the few lulls.

“There are so many great knights,” Guinevere giggled.

“Yes,” Merlin cautiously agreed, giving Britt the evil eye as she leaned back in her chair, feeding Cavall bits of meat. Britt ignored the look, leaving him with the job of speaking. “Have you made friends?” Merlin asked.

“Certainly. Lady Blancheflor and Lady Clarine first greeted me when I arrived. They were very kind and complimented me on my dress,” Guinevere said, rattling off the other ladies who greeted her as Merlin grew a vacant expression.

Britt hid her amusement—*Merlin*, entering in girl talk!—behind her wine cup before she took a mouthful of a beef pasty.

“Have you met King Pellinore’s wife, Queen Adelind?” Britt asked, nodding to the table directly in front of the dais, where King Pellinore and his lovely—and brilliant—wife sat with Sir Kay, Sir Ector, and a number of Britt’s closest knights.

“No. Is that bad?” Guinevere asked, quickly turning away from Merlin to stare wide-eyed at Britt. “I’ll go introduce myself right now,” she said, standing so fast she stepped on the hem of her dress.

“Guinevere, it’s fine,” Britt said, catching her by the wrist.

Guinevere shifted and looked ill. “Are you certain?”

“Yes, I’ll introduce you in a bit,” Britt said, cocking her head as she took in the younger girl’s worry. “You don’t have to worry about offending me, you know.”

Britt knew she guessed correctly when Guinevere shivered.

“Look,” Britt said, glancing at Merlin for assurance. “I’m not a jerk. I know we warned you about...*talking*, but I’m not going to kick you back home just because you haven’t met everyone yet.

“Indeed,” Merlin said. “As long as you don’t make too much work for the servants or cause rebellion among the knights, you may stay as long as you please.”

Britt was not fooled. She could see the cranks of his mind working behind Merlin’s innocent expression. Already he was pondering ways to use Guinevere’s presence for their advantage.

“But the *moment* I find you taking liberties—claiming to be my lady or love or something else equally as stupid—you’re going back to Camelgrance. If you never do that, we’re good,” Britt said. “Although I want my table back to myself in a few days.”

“Hear, hear,” Merlin grumbled.

Britt noticed, with a stormy countenance, that Lancelot seemed to be working his way in their direction. He probably intended to spill more poetry at Guinevere—who was all too easily impressed.

Fortunately, the entire banquet was interrupted when the doors to the hallway banged open. A white stag ran into the room, his antlers gleaming like ivory as he jumped tables and knocked over two servants and a knight. A white hound, baying like a beagle, nearly skid out as it too ran into the room.

chasing after the deer.

Britt watched the crazed parade with narrowed eyes before she studied her wine glass. “We should ask Sir Ulfius who brewed this stuff. It’s potent,” she said.

“You are not seeing visions, Arthur. The hart and hound are real,” Merlin said, standing with a thoughtful look.

“Seriously? What’s a hart?” Britt asked, rising out of her chair.

“The deer,” Merlin said, watching as the hound almost caught the stag but missed—its jaws snapping shut on air. The hart pranced out of the room, and the dog followed, colliding with a foreign knight at the door. The knight picked the dog up—quite the feat as it wasn’t a small canine—and hurried from the room.

The room was silent for several moments, until Britt broke it with the unkingly observation of, “What just happened?”

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than a beautiful lady *riding* a white palfrey—a *horse*—indoors, entered the room. “My Lord, be merciful and address my grievance! The hound that was just stolen from here is mine. Please send someone to retrieve it—no!” the lady shrieked when another unknown knight—*also* riding a horse, but his was a courser, a warhorse—stormed the room and grabbed the lady off her horse. He tossed her over the front of his saddle and urged his steed from the room. “No! My Lord, help me! Please,” the lady called as she fell out of hearing range.

No one moved—except for Britt. She climbed down the dais steps and picked up the reins of the abandoned, white horse. “How did they get a horse in the keep, and why didn’t anybody *do* anything?” Britt said, eyeing her tables and tables of knights.

The knights sheepishly looked at each other as Britt patted the horse on the neck.

“‘Tis a quest!” Merlin declared.

“How?” Britt frowned, handing the horse off to a page boy.

“The signs are unmistakable. The hart and the hound—even the lady’s horse are all white—the color of holiness,” Merlin said. “The damsel is now in distress and must be rescued—as should her dog.”

“And the hart?” Britt asked, approaching the dais again.

“And the hart,” Merlin agreed. “It is obvious. This is a quest the heavens have delivered to glorify the Order of the Round Table, that a select few knights may be honored.”

“Right.” Britt looked at him quizzically. He eyed her back. “So, who volunteers to go out on this quest?” Britt asked, turning to face her men.

“I will,” Sir Tor said, standing by his seat in the back of the room. He was stationed near the door that the unusual party-crashers had used. “If you will give me your leave, My Lord,” he added.

“Of course, Sir Tor,” Britt acknowledged. “You shall pursue...”

“The hound,” Merlin whispered.

“The hound,” Britt repeated, her voice loud enough for Sir Tor to hear.

“I will go forth as well, should you wish it, My Lord,” Sir Gawain said.

“Me, too!” Sir Ywain was quick to add.

“Gawain is the best choice for the deer—the hart. You will use the two tracking hounds I gave you at Christmas?” Britt asked.

Sir Gawain bowed. “It will be my pleasure, My Lord.”

“As for Ywain,” Britt hesitated. Sir Ywain was young and eager to please, but Britt wasn’t sure he was the best choice to send after a kidnapped lady. He was brash and tended to take large risks—a trait that wouldn’t mix well with the task of rescuing someone.

“I would be honored to go—either with Sir Ywain or alone,” King Pellinore said, standing.

“Really? I mean...” Britt snapped her mouth shut to hold her words in as she looked to King

Pellinore's wife.

Queen Adelind was famous for running Pellinore's lands whenever he was off chasing after the questing beast—which was often. She was even more famous, though, for sending Pellinore scathing notes for being absent for so long.

Queen Adelind, who was beautiful in a soft, subdued way, tucked the elaborate braid her long, brown hair was coiled in over her shoulder. "It would be an honor to Anglesey if my husband would take up this quest and refrain from running off, should he happen to see the questing beast," she said with a smile that was beautiful but as firm as a shield of stone.

"I don't want to send Ywain alone, but do he and King Pellinore get along well?" Britt whispered to Merlin.

"Well enough, but I doubt he could keep Pellinore's pace," Merlin said.

"Ah," Britt said before raising her voice. "Of course. In that case, I ask that King Pellinore would retrieve the genteel lady who was taken before our very eyes."

"My Lord," Sir Ywain objected as Sir Griflet patted his shoulder in commiseration.

"You're still too bad at jousting to go questing, Ywain," Sir Griflet said.

"You aren't any better than I am," Sir Ywain scoffed.

"Yes, but I wasn't fool enough to ask to go out on a quest, as terrible as I am," Griflet pointed out.

"No, I suppose you learned your lesson the first time," Sir Ywain grunted.

"What did you say?" Griflet demanded.

Britt ignored their scuffle and addressed the three knights. "I imagine you wish to start your quest tonight, lest the trail becomes cold—or lost?"

"It would be for the best, My Lord," King Pellinore said, his hands clasped and his lips folded in a smile. He was looking forward to the chase.

"Very well. Let us end the festivities for tonight. It seems there is some clean-up to be done. Knights, I wish you well in your endeavor. Good evening," Britt said to all those present.

"I have words of wisdom to share," Merlin said, approaching the three knights. "Especially to you, Sir Tor."

When Britt was assured the young wizard was fully distracted, she slipped from the feasting hall—making her apologies to Guinevere—and made a beeline for her room, Cavall padding faithfully behind her.

"Send for Roen—have him saddled. For a long ride," Britt said to a servant girl she found finishing the preparations in a visitor's room.

"Yes, My Lord," the girl said, curtseying before she ran away.

Britt hurried to her room, shutting the doors behind her.

"This time, you're coming with," Britt said to Cavall as she dug out two saddle bags. One saddle bag was already filled with all the things she would need for camping outside for a day or two. (On one occasion, Merlin had spirited her out to the forest to give her a much-needed break from her kingly duties. Since then, Britt made it a habit to have a bag prepared. Just in case.) Britt shoved a leather leash for Cavall and a spare collar in the second bag. She slung the packs over her shoulder—intending to fill the second bag with food for her dog—and walked for the door. She tripped on her backpack—one of the few items she had left from her life in the twenty first century—sending the contents of the bag sprawling across the floor.

"Dang it," Britt breathed.

"And where do you think you're going?" Merlin said from the doorway.

Britt looked up and set her packs aside, scooping items—like clothes and a travel book—back in her backpack. "Nowhere. I just have a few items I want to give to Gawain, Tor, and King Pellinore." Merlin looked unconvinced. "A likely story," he said.

“Whatever. Could you grab my iPod?” Britt asked, nodding at the iPod touch that had flown from the bag and was now a foot or two away from Merlin.

“Your *what*?”

“The white and black thing,” Britt said, pointing as she zipped up her backpack.

“I see. Arthur, we need to talk,” Merlin said, glancing at the door that was barely cracked.

“About?”

“Earlier today I received word from one of my men. He’s heard rumors,” he said, grunting when he stooped over to pick up Britt’s iPod.

“About?” Britt repeated.

Merlin pursed his lips. “An attempt against your life,” he finally asked.

Britt blinked. “Oh,” she said, her muscles going slack for a moment. “From whom? King Ryence? King Lot?”

Merlin shook his head. “No names, only a whisper that someone from the north seeks to harm you.”

Britt snorted. “That isn’t a surprise. Someone is *always* out to get me.”

“Perhaps, but one should never take spoken rumors lightly,” Merlin said.

“You told me I should never take rumors seriously either,” Britt said.

“That, too,” Merlin agreed. “Either way, it is best to be paranoid at all times and in all things. Are you paranoid in all things?”

“Maybe it’s Lancelot. If Lancelot tried harming me, could we exile him?” Britt asked with a dreamy smile.

“It’s not Lancelot,” Merlin sourly said before he looked down at the device he held in his hands. “Say, what *is* this?”

“It’s an iPod. It plays music. Or, it used to play music. The batteries were drained ages ago, and it’s not like you have an electrical socket I can plug it into.”

“Is it like some sort of thin music box?” Merlin asked.

“Yes, only this can play hundreds of songs instead of one,” Britt said. “Wait, they *have* music boxes already?”

“Good heavens, *no*,” Merlin said, turning the iPod over in his hands. “But I’ve heard from other wise men about that—men who can see the future. Like Blaise, my master. This is a marvel,” Merlin said, studying the mp3 player—even though the screen remained blank.

“I thought you didn’t approve of knowing about the future. You said you were more concerned with the present,” Britt said.

“I am. I care not about future *events*. But the advances in tools and industry can be fascinating,” Merlin said.

“Mmm. Did you need anything else?” Britt asked.

“No, but something should be done about the death threat. It is against *you*, so we must take some kind of action. We would be fools not to,” Merlin said frowning and glancing at the door. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Nothing,” Merlin said.

“Have you told Sir Kay?” Britt asked.

“And the rest of our core group, yes. Sir Ector suggested we march north and sweep across the entire country,” Merlin dryly said.

“Then do what Kay recommended and tighten up the castle defenses,” Britt said.

Merlin eyed Britt. “How do you know he said that?”

“It’s Kay. He’s quite predictable,” Britt said.

“Perhaps,” Merlin agreed. “What are the packs for?”

“Gawain and Tor.”

“Oh?” Merlin suspiciously asked, holding out the iPod.

“You can keep it, if you want,” Britt said.

“It is a keepsake from your home,” Merlin said.

“Yeah, but...not quite. It’s not working—it won’t play music ever again unless I can get it hooked up to a power source. You may as well have it.”

“I...thank you,” Merlin said, surprisingly pleased with the gift.

“You’re welcome,” Britt said, smiling fondly at the wizard’s excited look. She shifted in irritation when Merlin gave Britt a smile, making her heart thump oddly.

“I’m going to my study. Don’t wander too far,” Merlin said, weighing the small machine in his hands as he left the room.

“Of course,” Britt cheerfully replied. She waited until his footsteps retreated down the hallway before hurrying from her room, Cavall padding after her. She needed to make herself scarce before Kay started looking for her. Merlin always knew when Britt was thinking of something that might remotely affect one of his King plans, but *Kay* seemed to have a built-in radar that activated only when Britt was about to put herself in a position that did not have her swaddled and coddled like a baby. Granted, he was growing more understanding—provided that she tell him of her schemes and plans and allow him to come with her. But what Britt had planned for tonight? There was no way Kay was going to allow it.

Britt wove her way to the back hallways—stealing her way down the wing that housed the pages and squires. She stopped in a room that contained only a cot and a set of white, unadorned armor. Moving quickly, she slipped on a hauberk, essentially a tunic made of chainmail, and grabbed the basic pieces of the white armor set—the cuirass, which was a chestplate; the plackart, which reinforced the cuirass around her belly; faulds, the flaps of armor that covered her thighs; and a gorget, which covered her throat. For Britt, these pieces of armor were not only the most important as they covered her vitals, they were also the pieces that made her appear bulkier and hid her lack of male development.

Britt slipped on her leather, knee-high boots—the first of their kind. Britt had worked for *weeks* with the royal cobblers to get them made, as boots weren’t really a thing yet—and grabbed her packs. She hooked the lighter pack on Cavall and carried the other, as well as her necessary pieces of armor, before she left the room and slipped out a side entrance that dumped her near the dimly lit stables.

Britt sighed in relief when she saw King Pellinore on his horse, studying the plump, nice-looking horse Sir Tor was to ride. Sir Gawain was nowhere to be seen.

“Didn’t Kay and Sir Ulfius get you properly geared up as a knight, Sir Tor?” Britt called as she made her way across the stable yard, Cavall on her heels.

“Good evening, My Lord,” Sir Tor said with a pleasant voice and an unassuming bow. “They did. They gave me new weapons and an armor set, My Lord.”

“That is kind of you, Arthur. Most Kings make their knights pay for their equipment. *I* make my knights pay for their equipment—meaning no disrespect to you, Sir Tor,” King Pellinore said.

“No offense taken,” Sir Tor said with an easy-going smile. “Sir Kay said as much and informed me I better be worth the cost.”

“It isn’t normal for me to hand out armor, but I would hate to send you off on a quest with improper gear, like the horse. They didn’t get you a charger?” Britt asked, dumping her packs on the ground and nodding her thanks to a stable boy who led Roen—Britt’s black-as-night destrier. The big gelding nickered when he saw her and lipped her palm before sniffing Cavall.

“I told them I already had one. Father said I could keep Mud if Camelot would have me—though

"I'm not sure he really expected it to happen," Tor added.

Britt whistled and caught the attention of a stable boy. "Saddle up one of the spare chargers for Sir Tor, please."

"Yes, My Lord," the stable boy said, plucking the reins of Sir Tor's horse from his hands.

"It's unnecessary," Sir Tor started to say.

"Nay, you'll kill that little mare if you ride her for days like you'll need to on this quest," King Pellinore said.

"More than likely, you'll trounce a recreant knight while you're out and win his armor and horse. Then you can return all of your gear, and no one will lose. Except the blackguard knight," Britt said as she started securing her bags to Roen.

"Are there many recreant knights, then?" Sir Tor asked.

"I haven't seen many, but Pellinore has a regular collection of shields from knights he has trounced," Britt said.

Pellinore grinned widely. "I use them to decorate my weapons hall. Adelind won't let me hang them in the keep."

"I should think not," Britt grunted, unhooking the mostly empty pack from Cavall.

"Need provisions for the dog, My Lord?" a hostler asked.

"I do."

"I will handle it, My Lord," the man said, taking the pack and heading past the stables to the kennels.

King Pellinore leaned back in his saddle and rested his hands on his sword. "I am reluctant to enquire, Arthur, but what are you doing?"

"I'm coming with you," Britt said. She briefly considered tying Excalibur to her saddle before tossing the idea aside. It was better to have it attached directly to her side as Excalibur's scabbard was magical and would keep a person from bleeding out.

"Oh, I see," King Pellinore said, easily accepting the answer.

Sir Tor's new horse—a chestnut gelding that was not as fine as Roen or King Pellinore's horse, but would suit the new knight well—arrived just as Gawain, mounted on his steed, entered the stable-yard with three leashed dogs.

"Good evening My Lord, King Pellinore, Sir Tor," Gawain said, his armor twinkling in the torchlight.

"Hello there, Gawain," Britt said, stopping to pet the large scent hounds. "You're borrowing Agravain's dog as well?" Britt asked.

"Yes, My Lord."

"Just as well. I imagine three hounds are better than two—thank you," Britt said to the man who gave her back her pack—now filled with provisions for Cavall, as well. "We're all assembled. Shall we go—er, depart?" Britt asked, swinging onto Roen's back.

"You are coming with us?" Sir Gawain asked.

"Yes," Britt said, patting her horse.

"Do you need to secure your dog, My Lord?" Sir Tor politely asked.

"No, he'll stay with me," Britt said, smiling at her pet from her perch.

"Then I think it is time we leave. The trail grows cold," King Pellinore said.

"Right. This way," Britt said, leading the way.

Chapter 4

Traveling with Sir Tor

When they passed through the inner walls of the palace and then the outer walls of Camelot, the guards stationed there stared hard at Britt—who had no doubts that Sir Kay would hear of her adventure as soon as she was out of sight—but did nothing to stop her from leaving.

“Anyone know how to track our objectives?” Britt asked.

“Our what?” Sir Tor asked.

“Our quarry,” Britt said.

“I took one of my hounds to the feasting hall to get the hart’s scent. She should be able to pick up the trail out here,” Sir Gawain said, nodding to one of the hounds—who had her nose planted on the ground.

“We may as well follow you for a time,” King Pellinore said—holding above his head a torch he had swiped from the last set of guards. “I imagine whatever the story is behind the hart, it will also involve the kidnapped lady and her hound.”

“Seems logical,” Sir Tor said.

“I would like to keep her leashed. If she runs off, she’ll be hard to track down again,” Sir Gawain said, letting the hound lead him into the meadow surrounding Camelot, taking a path that would lead to the Forest of Arroy—which hemmed around Camelot in an arc.

“It’s just as well. If we go galloping off into the darkness, who knows what footing our horses will encounter,” Britt said.

“It is true,” King Pellinore acknowledged as he moved his horse to the head of the line so it walked side by side with Gawain’s leashed hound. Sir Tor took up the rear, leaving Britt and Sir Gawain to ride together.

“My Lord,” Gawain said, his words hesitant, “If I may inquire...”

“Yes?” Britt asked, patting Roen’s thick neck. She had missed the warhorse—Kay rarely let her ride him, preferring that she would ride Llamrei, her white mare that was trained to flee rather than fight.

“Why have you come with us?” Gawain finally asked.

Britt was quiet as Roen’s sauntering walk rocked her back and forth. “I wished to be free of my courts,” she finally said.

Behind her Sir Tor snorted. “You’ll have to do better than that, My Lord,” he said, his voice just as cheerful and open as she expected.

Britt grinned and glanced at Sir Gawain. His expression was thoughtful, but he said nothing more.

“That’s a reason I can sympathize with,” King Pellinore said from the front of their small party as they entered the forest. “There’s nothing worse than being cooped up with a bunch of goat-footed knights hemming and hawing at your every move.”

Britt laughed. “I rather like my knights. Most of them, anyway,” she amended, thinking of Lancelot.

“We’ll see. Now that King Leodegrance’s fools have come to your halls, you might think differently,” King Pellinore said.

“That’s a harsh judgment,” Britt said.

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