



# *Embittered*

KING ARTHUR AND HER KNIGHTS  
BY K.M.SHEA



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Embittered  
Book 3 of King Arthur and Her Knights

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By: K. M. Shea



a Take Out The Trash! Publication  
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EMBITTERED

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# Character List

**Agravain:** the second son of King Lot and Queen Morgause of Orkney.

**Ban:** One of two kings who marched with Britt against Lot and his allies. He is from France, is well groomed, and is said to have a son who is an impressive knight.

**Bedivere:** A knight Britt met in London when she was crowned King. Britt chose him as her marshal on an impulse, without any input from Merlin. Bedivere is the only knight in Britt's close circle who does not know she is a girl.

**Bodwain:** Britt's constable and one of Merlin's Minions.

**Bors:** One of two kings who marched with Britt against Lot and his allies. He is from France, although he appears to be half bear. His two sons are said to be gallivanting around with King Ban's son.

**Ector:** the man who was selected to be Arthur's foster father. He has taken a similar role in Britt's life.

**Gaheris:** The third son of King Lot and Queen Morgause of Orkney.

**Gareth:** The youngest son of King Lot and Queen Morgause of Orkney.

**Gawain:** The eldest son of King Lot and Queen Morgause of Orkney.

**Griflet:** A young, ignorant knight who is related to Sir Bedivere and is close friends with Ywain.

**Guinevere:** The daughter of King Leodegrance whom Britt dislikes thanks to modern King Arthur stories and legends.

**Igraine:** Mother of the real Arthur. Uther Pendragon was her second husband.

**Key:** Britt's seneschal and supposed foster brother. He takes Britt's safety seriously and is often seen writing in a log book.

**Lancelot:** The only son of King Bors whom Britt despises thanks to modern King Arthur stories and legends.

**Leodegrance:** King of Camelgrance, one of Britt's first allies.

**Lot:** King of Orkney and Britt's worst enemy. He rallied kings and knights and led them to battle before Britt and her allies overthrew him.

**Maleagant:** A duke and friend of King Ryence.

**Merlin:** Britt's chief counselor who is also responsible for yanking Britt back through time. He openly uses Britt to accomplish his dream of uniting Britain.

**Morgause:** Daughter of Igraine and Arthur's half sister. She is married to King Lot of Orkney and has four sons: Gawain, Agravain, Gaheris, and Gareth.

**Nymue:** The beautiful Lady of the Lake who "gave" Excalibur to Britt.

**Pellinore:** A noble-looking king who attacked Britt with King Lot, King Urien, and King Ryence.

**Ryence:** A cowardly king who attacked Britt with King Lot, King Urien, and King Pellinore.

**Ulfius:** An older knight who once served Uther Pendragon and now serves Britt as her chamberlain. He is one of Merlin's Minions.

**Urien:** the brother-in-law of King Lot and a King in his own right, Urien fought with Lot, Pellinore, and Ryence against Britt but has since become Britt's vassal because he believes she holds his son, Ywain, hostage in Camelot.

**Uther Pendragon:** Considered to be one of the greatest kings of England. He is the real Arthur's father and died some years ago—leaving all of his lands and money to Arthur.

**Ywain:** The only offspring of King Urien. He swore loyalty to Britt after being captured by her men and has revered her ever since. Morgause is his aunt.

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# Chapter 1

## The Arrival of Lancelot

*“The sword he pulled, the crown he wore, and he just a fair-faced youth, hah! Fair-faced youth on my horse’s rear end,”* Britt said as she gnawed on a hunk of crusty bread and recited a line from the newest ballad echoing through Camelot.

Llamrei, Britt’s white mare, looked up from grazing.

“No offense,” Britt said.

The mare went back to eating.

“I’ve been here a year and a half. How old am I supposed to be now? Sixteen or seventeen? This ploy won’t last much longer,” Britt said. “Bedivere and his ilk have hinted since Christmas that I need to find a wife. Merlin won’t be able to distract that faction much longer, and even I have heard some of the disparaging rumors about my unwillingness to grow facial hair.”

It was, in fact, Bedivere’s hinting that drove Britt from her courts that fine afternoon. Bedivere had set his young cousin Griflet after Britt to sing songs about a rich king who did great deeds on behalf of his beautiful wife. Of course, whenever Griflet started a game of Badger Britt, Ywain—Sir Ywain now, Britt had knighted him at the New Year—was sure to join in as well.

Favorable things could not be reported of Ywain’s singing voice, so avoiding the duo became Britt’s greatest ambition.

Britt rolled onto her stomach so she could look at Camelot. The immense castle was well within eyesight, perhaps even within shouting range. Britt was splayed near the edge of the forest that impeded on Camelot’s land, surrounding about half of the castle.

Britt turned and waved, certain Sir Kay was watching her through a spyglass as he hadn’t sent a squad of guards after her...yet.

Britt finished her bread and smashed her face in the clover-covered ground. “I am pathetic. I’m a college graduate living off the taxes of others. I never thought my future career path would involve impersonating a teenage boy-king.”

Britt would never be able to forgive the real Arthur for running off with a shepherdess. Since Arthur eloped and disappeared, Merlin was forced to cast a spell on the Sword in the Stone so that the next person who touched the sword and would be able to pull it out—meaning they had the qualities the sword was looking for—would be brought back through time to be crowned King of England.

Britt was the unfortunate candidate the sword chose.

She arrived, American, female, and older than Sir Kay—Arthur’s older foster brother—but Merlin had faith in his spell and decided to use Britt anyway. It worked at first; Britt could pass off as a tall but slender 15-year-old boy, and to Merlin’s delight, Britt was extremely skilled in the art of swordsmanship thanks to her interest in Renaissance Mixed Martial Arts.

However, even with the rumor that Arthur/Britt had faerie blood—making her more elegant and beautiful than the average male—sooner or later, Britt’s cover would be blown. (After all, it was only a matter of time before Britt’s knights demanded that she marry and produce an heir for the good of the kingdom.)

“I hate tradition,” Britt said.

“My Lord?”

Britt pushed herself off the ground and had Excalibur unsheathed in the blink of an eye.

A knight stood a stone's throw away. He wasn't one of Britt's knights—Britt didn't recognize the coat of arms painted on his shield. He wore a helm, obscuring his face, but he had the kind of armor most knights who fancied themselves chivalrous preferred—serviceable but elaborately decorated.

"Can I help you?" Britt asked. A glance at Camelot confirmed her suspicions of Sir Kay and the spyglass: the gates were opening to let out a squad of mounted guards.

"I was only wondering if you were well," the knight said. "You seem burdened."

"I'm fine, thank you," Britt said, relaxing her stance but not sheathing Excalibur. "I'm no more burdened than any other man."

"That's hardly accurate, My Lord. As King, you have a great many more burdens," the knight objected.

Britt walked to Llamrei and patted the mare's neck. "And how do you know me to be a king?"

"I have seen you before, My Lord. We met once in the woods when you found a lost girl, and saw you when you first pulled the Sword from the Stone in London," the knight said.

"I remember the girl," Britt said. "She was the one who inspired me to build public bath houses in Camelot."

"That is so, My Lord," the knight said, bowing slightly at the waist.

"From whose courts do you hail?" Britt asked, glancing at the incoming soldiers. They set the pace at a canter and would be on Britt soon. Britt raised an arm and signaled that all was well. The soldiers slowed their mounts to a walk but kept coming.

"My father's, I suppose, but I have pledged my allegiance to none yet. Do you desire to run me off your lands?" the knight said.

"You aren't stirring up trouble are you? Badgering my subjects, stealing food and such?" Britt asked, confident he would answer no. Her people would have let her know if recreant knights were terrorizing them. During the past fall, the first, and only, knight who ever plagued her people refused to let anyone pass over a bridge. Britt arrived with an escort of knights two days after he set up camp. Sir Bedivere trounced the man in a joust before Britt beat the snot out of him in a swordfight. The knight repented and now worked as a guard under Sir Kay's watchful eye, but all heard of the tale, and Britt's lands stayed curiously clear of rebel-rousers.

"No, My Lord. I travel with my cousins, performing deeds for the wellness of mankind," the strange knight said.

"In that case, I don't care," Britt said, nodding to her guards as they spread around her in a fan formation, not intruding on the conversation but drawing close enough to spring into action should the need arise.

"I thank you for your generosity, My Lord," the knight said, pulling off his helm.

Britt was amused to see that he was handsome and young, falling somewhere between Gawain's age of 18 and Kay's age of 21. His black, curly hair was just a little shorter than Britt's, falling almost to his shoulders. He had dreamy green eyes and thick lashes most women would kill for. His jaw line was curved and his facial features angular. Had he been American and from the twenty-first century, Britt could have mistaken him for a celebrity.

Britt was delighted to see his face—and not because he was handsome, as he was too young for her taste—but because of one very important fact.

He was beardless.

The young knight shaved, unlike the majority of Britt's court. Even Griflet and Ywain were trying to grow scrawny beards with ill success. Britt and Merlin were the only clean-shaven officials in the whole castle.

Britt chuckled and sheathed Excalibur before she gathered Llamrei's reins.



“Is something the matter, My Lord?” the knight asked, puzzled.

—“No. Nothing at all. I have suddenly been struck by a capital idea. It was good to talk to you, sir. As long as you remain on the path of the chivalrous, should you find yourself in need of anything please come to Camelot,” Britt said before she boosted herself onto her mare’s back.

“I thank you for your kindness and generosity. May all be well with you, King Arthur,” the handsome knight said.

Llamrei chomped on the bit as Britt swung her in Camelot’s direction. “Thank you, and you as well,” Britt said, cuing Llamrei into a swift trot.

Britt’s guards surrounded her in an instant. “Where to, Milord?” the guard captain asked.

“Back to Camelot. I must speak with Merlin and our associates immediately. I have the most brilliant plan!”



When Britt entered Merlin’s study, the attractive wizard was sitting in a comfortable armchair yawning. Sir Ulfius was with him, looking at the ceiling with a great amount of dread. Sir Ector nursed a glass of wine and avoided Britt’s eyes as she slammed her open hand on one of Merlin’s wooden tables, making a loud crack.

“I have it.”

“You have what?” Merlin asked, gesturing for Sir Kay to close the door behind him when he slipped in after Britt.

“A way to make my knights accept the notion that I shave,” Britt said.

Merlin frowned. “You are King. You do not need a reason.”

Britt shook her head. “As long as you and I are the only supposed males in this castle with beardless faces, there is going to be suspicion,” she paused. “Where is Sir Bodwain?”

“Keeping Sir Bedivere busy so he doesn’t poke his head in the study just as we’re discussing your feminine nature,” Sir Ulfius said.

Merlin crossed his legs at the ankles and sighed. “Alright, let’s hear your idea, My Lord,” he said without any expectations.

“Rather than attempting to explain it, why don’t we make it a court fashion for men to be clean-shaven?” Britt asked.

Sir Ector choked on his wine.

“My Lord,” the normally well spoken Sir Ulfius started. “Facial hair is, well, custom. Once a boy becomes an adult—like a squire getting knighted or an apprentice becoming a master—it is a sign of manhood to grow facial hair and it aids with...um...heat retention and...”

“What Ulfius is trying to ask is do we have to?” Sir Ector said, his face turning the same fetching shade as a crimson tomato.

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean the older knights. Heavens, no. Some things should not be seen by the light of day. No, I meant the younger knights. Perhaps all knights who are unmarried,” Britt said.

Sir Kay shifted, the thick mustache on his upper lip twitching.

“With some exceptions of course,” Britt amended.

Merlin rubbed his chin. “It is an interesting proposal, and it certainly holds promise. But how do we make it a court fashion?”

“The church could make a proclamation that all unmarried knights must shave,” Sir Ector suggested.

“Yes, they could, and they would be willing to, but what would they tell the people when asked

why they're making the proclamation?"

"It is an, erm, idea from God?" Sir Ector said.

"One would have more luck making it common if the knights adopted the practice in their own will," Sir Ulfius said.

"To make it fashionable, it would take a man everyone loves," Merlin said. "Right now, there are no such knights in your court. You are the favorite of all."

"It can't be me," Britt said. "I'm already beardless, and no one is following my example. Our fashion icon must be a man that knights imitate out of admiration or jealousy," Britt said.

"A fashion icon?" Sir Ulfius asked.

"The court favorite," Merlin supplied.

"I see. We must have a beloved knight take the first step and shave, is that it?" Sir Ector asked.

Merlin looked to Sir Kay.

Sir Kay raised his brows and shook his head no.

"Agreed," Merlin said to Sir Kay's silent refusal. "No one much likes you anyway since you keep a tight guard around Arthur."

Britt sighed and sank into an open chair. "The knight who gave me the idea would have been perfect. He was clean-shaven and as handsome as they come."

"Who was it?" Merlin asked in interest.

"I didn't ask," Britt said.

"Britt, you should know better. Names and relations are important," Merlin scolded.

"I didn't ask on purpose. As soon as I knew who he was, I would have to worry about offending whatever second or fifth cousin of his lives in my courts," Britt said.

Sir Ector muffled a crowd of laughter as Merlin scowled.

"If I might venture to change the subject," Sir Ulfius said.

"I suppose—as long as we have no model knight, my idea isn't much good. What's on your mind, Sir Ulfius?" Britt asked.

Sir Ulfius pressed his fingers together. "I have located the Round Table you so greatly desire."

"Really? That's fantastic!" Britt said, flashing the older knight a brilliant smile.

Britt had always disliked stories about King Arthur—she hated Lancelot the back-stabbing best friend with a vengeance and found the courtly romances to be trite—but as one of her close friends in future America was an avid fan, Britt wasn't able to entirely escape stories about the famous king. As such, she knew vaguely of some of the more famous parts of Arthurian lore, like the Round Table.

"I suppose so," Sir Ulfius reluctantly said.

"You don't give yourself enough credit, Sir Ulfius. The Round Table is a big deal. Thank you for finding it. Where is it?"

Sir Ulfius shifted and avoided looking at Britt. "I have discovered that it was given to King Leodegrance by Uther Pendragon. He still has it."

"Leodegrance? That's even better news. He's been our ally since I was crowned king, and he owes us after Sir Bodwain and King Ban and King Bors saved him from that weasel King Ryence," Britt said. "He'll let us buy it off him. Have you asked what he wants for it?"

"I know you have your heart set on the table, so I had one of my comrades from Uther's court make an inquiry on your behalf," Sir Ulfius said.

"And?"

Sir Ulfius sighed. "His requirement is that you would take his daughter, Guinevere, as your wife."

"Not an option. Ask him how much gold he would like," Britt said.

Sir Ulfius shook his head. "He informed my comrade marriage was the only way he would see

the Round Table removed from his halls.”

—“Doubtless he’s figured out how important the Round Table is to you,” Merlin said, finally chiming in. “He is an unimportant ally compared to King Ban and King Bors, and having you as a son-in-law would be the greatest boon he could ever ask for. If you marry his daughter, he’ll be able to lean upon you even more. We will tell the prig to bugger off, and that will be the end of it.”

Britt frowned. “I want the Round Table, Merlin.”

Merlin threw his hands in the air. “Why? We’ll make you your own blasted round table!”

“It wouldn’t be the same.”

“No, it would be better. It wouldn’t be stained and scratched up like this cumbersome thing Leodegrance has,” Merlin insisted.

“Do we know for certain that it is the Round Table?” Sir Kay asked, smoothing his mustache.

“No,” Sir Ulfius said. “My comrade never saw the table; it is in storage. King Leodegrance only brings it out for great feasts and such.”

“Good riddance,” Merlin said. “It’s probably a nasty, half-destroyed piece of furniture. Uther was a rough man. I can’t imagine any table of his has fared well.”

“Merlin...I really want that table,” Britt said.

The young wizard met her gaze, and the two stared at each other for several moments. “Blast. Fine,” Merlin said, mussing his blonde hair as he scratched the top of his head. “Have it your way. Kay, send an official courier to Leodegrance from Arthur inquiring about the price of the table. Make it absolutely clear that desires for marriage are intolerable.”

Sir Kay bowed and left the room as Merlin planted his chin on his hand.

“Happy?” Merlin snarked.

“Abundantly so,” Britt smiled. “Thank you, Merlin!”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “I still do not understand your fascination with circular tables,” he said as Britt seated herself in the chair next to him.

“It’s part of the legend,” Britt said.

“You *are* the legend. You can make up your own legends,” Merlin complained, raising his hand to acknowledge Sir Ulfius and Sir Ector as they rose and left the room.

“Maybe, but some things have to happen,” Britt said.

“Like owning the Round Table?” Merlin asked.

“Like owning the Round Table,” Britt echoed.



Two weeks passed without any new revelations. Couriers were sent back and forth between Merlin and King Leodegrance without any successful bargains being struck. The usually affable king was quite stubborn in his demands.

“I’ll go without the Round Table before I see Guinevere in Camelot,” Britt said. Her intense hatred of Lancelot was matched by her disdain for Guinevere, King Arthur’s unfaithful wife.

Cavall, Britt’s giant apricot-colored mastiff, a guard dog given to her by Sir Kay, whined at her feet.

Britt leaned over the armrest of her wooden throne and affectionately scratched her dog’s side. “It’s nothing, my fine boy. Don’t worry.”

Cavall set his head on the ground and sighed.

Britt patted him once more and raised her gaze to her courts. It was mid-afternoon on a cool spring day. As most of her knights had little to do since they were, surprisingly, at peace with not even

a hint of war on the horizon, most of them chose to sit in Britt's throne room and chatter as Merlin's Minions ran the kingdom.

Britt considered her knights. "We need to make things more efficient. We have all these knights with no work to do. Talk about a waste of manpower," Britt said, sitting taller when Sir Kay approached her throne.

"There is a foreign knight that wishes to speak to you, My Lord," Sir Kay said.

Britt scratched the back of her neck. "What for?"

"He claims he recently spoke with you, and you instructed him to seek you out in Camelot should he need anything," Sir Kay said. Although he spoke no chiding words, his displeasure of Britt's generosity was made obvious by the slant of his mustache and the rebuke in his eyes.

Britt waved Sir Kay's unspoken concern off. "Oh! Him! Don't worry, Kay. He's not a nut or a covert killer. He's the fancy-pants knight that gave me the shaving idea."

"Still, one should be cautious when extending hospitality to an unknown knight," Sir Kay grumbled.

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry. I should have let you look him over before I made any invitations. Send him in, please?" Britt said.

Sir Kay bowed and swept out of the room.

Moments later, the handsome, dark-haired, clean-shaven knight entered the hall.

His entrance raised some notice from Britt's knights. Several of the men clustered closest to Britt's throne fell silent as they watched the young knight approach Britt.

"Welcome to Camelot," Britt said as she stood and glided down the stairs of the dais upon which her throne was perched.

"Thank you, My Lord," the knight said, bending over in a perfectly executed bow.

"What brings you here today?" Britt asked.

"I approach you to ask for living quarters for myself and my two cousins. We grow weary of making our beds under the stars and would like to rest for a time before setting off in search of more adventures."

"There are just three of you? I don't think that will be a problem," Britt said, glancing to Merlin, who was crouched over an abacus and parchment.

The wizard flapped his hand without looking up. "Go ahead. Adopt any number of vagabond knights. We have enough room," Merlin said.

Britt nodded in satisfaction. "There you have it. You and your cousins may seek refuge in Camelot as long as you like. We can speak to Sir Kay, who will make the proper arrangements."

The young knight smiled. "I thank you for your generosity, My Lord."

"Name," Merlin said.

Britt winced. "I must beg you to forgive my poor manners, for I do not know your name,"

"It is I who must beg your pardon, My Lord, for I never thought to introduce myself. My cousins are Lionel and Bors, the sons of King Bors. I am Lancelot du Lac, the son of King Ban."

All of Britt's good cheer left her. She forced her lips into the shape of a smile that held no warmth. "Lancelot?"

Merlin looked up in alarm, hearing the frigid edge to Britt's inquiry.

"Yes, My Lord," Lancelot said, bowing again.

"If your name is indeed Lancelot, you can go—," Britt was cut off when Merlin hustled to her side.

"Lancelot, welcome to Camelot. You know who Kay is, yes? He's the man with the unfortunate face and the intimidating mustache who showed you in. Talk to him, and he will show you and your cousins to your rooms. If you will excuse us," Merlin said, yanking Britt out of the throne room.

They stumbled past Sir Kay and a squad of guards and nearly ran into a gaggle of servants before Merlin hauled Britt into an unused bedroom.

"I want him *OUT* of Camelot, right now," Britt snarled.

Merlin folded his arms across his chest and stood in front of the door, barring the way. "Why?"

"Because he's a back-stabbing, spineless worm who destroys Camelot and ruins Arthur."

"Is that in the Arthur legends from the future?" Merlin asked.

"Yes."

"What happens?"

"He worms his way into the position of Arthur's best friend and has an affair with Arthur's wife, Guinevere," Britt spat. "The two rip Arthur's kingdom to shreds."

Merlin didn't even blink. "I see. You fail to realize one thing."

"What?"

"That is a legend from the future, Britt, but right now *you* are the legend," Merlin said.

"What do you mean?"

"It is your decision to marry. You decide who your closest knight is. You are in control. It is your decision whether or not you wish to put Lancelot in a position of power."

"Exactly, which is why I'm kicking him out of Camelot," Britt said.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"Did you hear anything he said after he gave his name?"

"No."

Merlin sighed. "I thought as much. He said his father is King Ban."

"So?"

"King Ban is your ally, and his cousins' father, King Bors, is as well. They were the pair who rode to your rescue when King Lot and his allies attacked you. Don't you remember?"

"I do. So what?"

"We cannot kick out the sons of our closest allies."

Britt groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. "This is why I didn't want to know his name. Now we have to be afraid about offending all of his relatives. Bother feudalism!"

"It's worse than that, I'm afraid," Merlin said.

"How? How can it possibly be worse?"

"As long as he stays, he and his cousins will have to be seated in positions of honor."

"*What?*"

"They are princes and the offspring of your closest allies. Naturally, they will sup with you at your table," Merlin said.

"You mean I'll have to interact with Lancelot?"

"I do."

"Being a king sucks. You can't do anything you want," Britt sighed.

"Well done. Now you're starting to get it."

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## Chapter 2

### A Quest

Britt tipped back the remaining wine in her goblet before letting a page refill it.

Merlin, seated at her side, leaned in and whispered, "I do hope you're not going to tolerate the young princes' presence by consuming as much alcohol as you did during Queen Morgause's stay?"

Britt spoke through clenched teeth as she smiled at Lancelot when the handsome knight glanced at her from further down her dinner table. "If my methods work, I see no need to correct them."

Normally, Merlin invading her personal space made her squirrely. Today, she was too angry to notice.

Merlin patted her shoulder. "Cheer up. At least these three won't be here long, and they're not trying to kill you."

"Fantastic," Britt said, stabbing a radish with her knife.

Britt's attention was redirected by a dust-covered courier who hurried up the steps. "This is for you, Milord: a correspondence from King Leodegrance," he said, passing over an envelope sealed with wax.

Britt carelessly passed the letter to Merlin—she couldn't read old English writing—and took another slug of her wine as the wizard opened the letter and read it.

"What is it?" Britt asked.

"You're never going to guess," Merlin said, shaking his head in disgust. "King Leodegrance's lands are about to be invaded."

"Again?"

"Again."

"By whom?"

"Duke Maleagant."

"Who's that?"

"One of King Ryence's allies."

"We should attack Ryence's lands and be done with it. I thought Lot was annoying, but Ryence is proving to have more perseverance," Britt said, slumping in her chair.

"I'm not much inclined to help him," Merlin said, folding the letter. "We've already bailed him out once. If we lose him as an ally, I suppose it is not the worst thing in the world. You have prince Gawain and prince Ywain in your halls. If they had to, King Urien (and perhaps even King Lot) would ride to your aid, so you are not in any danger."

"Yeah," Britt said. She stared out at her dining knights and watched them eat, drink, and roar with laughter. "Wait a second," Britt said. "If Maleagant and Leodegrance do make an alliance, my chances of getting the Round Table are ruined, aren't they?"

"Undoubtedly."

Britt thought for a moment before she stood and declared, "It is not right to let an ally face an enemy alone. We must help King Leodegrance. My honor is staked on it," Britt said.

"Bravo," Lancelot clapped.

Merlin rolled his eyes at the foreign knight's antics and muttered, "You just want to save your precious table."

Britt ignored the observation and slowly turned to face Lancelot, a stiff smile molded on her face. “Were you listening in on our private conversation, Lancelot?”

“Only a bit. I admire the stoutness of your loyalty, My Lord. You are truly worthy of being the King of Britain,” Lancelot said, rubbing his chin.

On either side of him, his hulking cousins shoved food in their mouths like it was their last meal for the week.

“Hmm,” Britt said before forcibly turning her body back to Merlin. “It doesn’t matter what motives are. What is clear is that we must ride to King Leodegrance’s aid.”

Merlin sighed. “It’s not that easy. If you save him, he’s going to insist you marry his daughter.”

“So, we help him without his knowledge,” Britt said.

“Go on—I am intrigued,” Merlin said.

“A small party of our best knights could easily enter King Leodegrance’s borders. They could pillage and plunder Maleagant’s forces,” Britt said.

“Pillage and plunder? What happened to honor and chivalry?” Merlin asked.

“They flee the moment I sense my table is in danger,” Britt said.

“There is some intelligence in what you say. Maleagant will not be able to amass the army Ryence did. At the very least, the knights could scout the land as we prepare the army.”

“We. We could scout the land.”

Merlin shook his head. “You are not going with them.”

“Yes, I am. I want to see the Round Table,” Britt said, folding her arms across her chest.

“You cannot. Not only would it be asinine to send a *king* on a scouting trip, but looking at the blasted table would mean getting into Camelgrance, King Leodegrance’s castle.”

Britt leaned into Merlin and whispered. “You just made me welcome the man I hate most on Earth in *any* century *and* his cousins into my castle. I. Am. Going.”

Britt sank back into her chair as Merlin raised an eyebrow. “Very well, I suppose I should let you win occasionally. Besides, I doubt there’s much danger if we head out immediately.”

“We’ll call a meeting after dinner?”

“Yes, of course.”

“My Lord,” Lancelot said, making Britt stiffen. “My compliments on your bountiful table.”

“Yes, it’s certainly a good thing that it is bountiful,” Britt said. Her gaze did not waver from Lancelot, and his cousins continued to eat with great enthusiasm.

Lancelot laughed. “I must say, My Lord, I find your kingdom both unusual and beautiful. I have never met folk half as clean nor well fed as the subjects of Camelot. ‘Tis a charming kingdom, and all can see that you have the blessing of your faerie neighbors. They guard your forests and do mischief on your enemies, leading them astray in the woods and such.”

“Perhaps, but I think lately they have failed in that area,” Britt said.

Merlin choked on his wine and gave Britt a dirty look, but Lancelot did not catch the implied slight and laughed.

“Careful with your words,” Merlin growled.

Britt smiled triumphantly. “Always.”



“Ywain and Gawain should come. Gawain has become quite adept in combat, and Ywain will never allow us to bring his cousin and not him,” Merlin said, tucking his hands into the sleeves of his

robe.

“The three younger Orkney princes will remain behind,” Sir Kay said.

“Naturally. This isn’t an outing; it’s a scouting party,” Merlin said.

“You will be the one to tell them they are remaining behind,” Sir Kay said.

Merlin grimaced. “Fine,” he said.

“When we split into two groups, Gawain and Ywain should travel with My Lord,” Sir Bodwain said. “My Lord will be able to keep them safe.”

Britt snorted. “I fear you over estimate my abilities, Sir Bodwain.”

Sir Bodwain shook his head. “You are the best swordsman in all of Camelot, and your jousting has much improved since last year. You do not give yourself enough credit, My Lord.”

Next to Sir Bodwain, Sir Bedivere nodded in agreement.

Britt gave the pair a pained smile before looking to Merlin in a plea for help.

The wizard avoided Britt’s gaze.

“If you say so,” Britt finally said.

When Britt first came to England, Sir Bodwain, one of Merlin’s star Minions, tolerated Britt. He had no belief in her combat skills or her intelligence. His opinion of her changed greatly during the war with Lot. Now, however, Britt couldn’t help but wish he retained some of his disbelief.

Sir Bedivere’s reaction was not a surprise as he always had a saint-like belief in Britt. He was the only knight in an administrative position who did not know the truth of Britt’s gender and origins. His estimation of Britt was already undeservedly high, but when Britt broke off an enchantment Queen Morgause—her one-time enemy and now her pigeon correspondence pen pal—had cast over all her men (Bedivere included), Bedivere’s esteem of Britt reached uncomfortably new heights.

“Kay and I will ride with Arthur’s party,” Sir Ector said, slapping his pot belly.

“No,” Britt said. “You will remain behind, Sir Ector.”

“What, what?” Sir Ector said, his round face wrinkling with the force of his frown.

“Arthur is right,” Merlin said. “Someone needs to stay with Sir Ulfius and see to the administration of Camelot. As Kay has *insisted* on coming along, you are the natural candidate, Ector.”

“I say, that’s not fair,” Sir Ector grumbled. “Why does Kay get to go?”

“Because he asked first and held a sword to my throat as he did so,” Merlin said.

Sir Kay smoothed his mustache to cover his smirk.

“With the addition of Gawain and Ywain, we still should send one more knight with My Lord,” Sir Bodwain said.

“Do you have any suggestions?” Merlin asked. “And no, Bedivere, we cannot bring Griflet. We will have enough untrained knights to watch the way it is.”

Sir Ector scratched his dry scalp. “Shall you take another one of your men, Merlin?”

Merlin shook his head. “With Bodwain, Bedivere, and Kay out of the castle, you will need all the help you can get. My...associates will remain behind to aid you and Ulfius.”

“Who else is gifted in arms and combat?” Merlin asked.

“We don’t know. We haven’t had any jousts or tournaments since My Lord came to Camelot. We only know My Lord is the most skilled swordsman because no one has beaten him in practice fights,” Kay said.

“Perhaps you should take a hunter with you? Not a knight but a forestman skilled in tracking and such. It may be useful,” Sir Bedivere said.

“Perhaps,” Sir Bodwain agreed.

Britt pressed her lips together. “There is someone I wish to bring.”

“Who?” Merlin asked.



Britt briefly closed her eyes, unable to believe what she was about to say. “Lancelot du Lac.”

“He is a fair choice. He is certainly gifted in arms,” Sir Bodwain said.

“I doubt his cousins would insist on going. They are enjoying their stay here,” Sir Bedivere added. “They have been with us for five days and show no signs of wishing to leave.”

“He’s a good lad,” Sir Ector said.

Sir Kay was the only knight who did not look pleased.

Merlin leaned close to Britt and whispered, his breath tickling her neck. “What are you planning? You *hate* Lancelot.”

“I do,” Britt acknowledged, gritting her teeth. “But as much as I hate him, I would rather die than leave him in Camelot without supervision.”

Merlin chuckled and said, “That’s my lass,” before pulling back with a handsome grin. “It’s settled then. Lancelot du Lac will join us, should he be willing. We will leave two days hence. Remember, when recruiting the knights, we must be subtle. All of Camelot must believe we are going on an extended hunting trip.”

“Aye,” Sir Bodwain said, barely able to conceal a smile as he rubbed his hands together.

Sir Bedivere’s grin stretched across his face. “Ready your gear and your weapons in secret. We are setting out on a quest.”

Britt was not quite so giddy. She was looking forward to the trip, but she wasn’t about to forget that Lancelot would be coming with them. “It will be interesting,” she said.

“It’s not fair. This is the first adventure since Morgause left last summer. I want to come,” Sir Ector objected. “Kay, we should switch. I will go with Arthur; you stay here.”

“I respectfully decline, Father. I will accompany My Lord.”

“You little urchin. It’s not fair, I tell you!”

“Yes, Father.”



Britt started to regret her decision to bring Lancelot immediately after they set out. The young knight, of course, accepted the invitation— “I would never refuse to come to the aid of a king such as you, My Lord!”—and since they set out early in the morning, he had done nothing but grate Britt’s nerves.

To begin with, he aligned his horse next to Britt for the day, never straying from her side.

Hourly, he felt the need to share a “rousing story” in which he always had the starring role, usually defeating a blackguard knight, a giant, or a serpent. He filled the day with mindless chatter and observations, remarking on everything from bird songs to tree foliage.

Britt almost wished she had brought Cavall along so she could tell the massive dog to bite him.

In the twilight hours, Kay signaled the party to halt for the night.

“This journey is going to be more painful than I thought,” Britt said, loosening Llamrei’s girth.

“Are you alright, My Lord?”

Britt turned to find Ywain behind her, his head tilted as he studied her with concern.

Britt blinked. “Yes.”

“Your old wound isn’t hurting you, is it?” Ywain asked, wringing his hands.

Britt laughed. “My thigh wound healed last summer, Ywain. It didn’t even leave a scar.”

“Yes, but I thought it still might twinge. You haven’t made a long ride like this in some time,” Ywain said.

“I am fine, but I thank you for your concern,” Britt smiled.

The young knight nodded. "If you need anything at all, My Lord, do not hesitate to call," he said before seeing to his horse.

Britt barely had enough time to slip the saddle off Llamrei before she was again interrupted.

"Do you need any help, My Lord? Shall I fetch water for your horse?"

Britt set the saddle down. "I appreciate the offer, Gawain, but I should be the one to care for my mount."

"Can I help you with your armor then? Do you need anything unbuckled?" he offered.

"No," Britt said, swapping Llamrei's bridle for a rope halter. "I think I can manage, but thank you," she said.

Shimmying out of her armor was a tricky thing. Britt usually didn't bother to wear a full set, but she wore several pieces (the cuirass, pauldrons, faulds, and gorget—which covered her chest, upper legs, and throat.) to bulk up her form. She was tall—for both her century and this one—but too slender for a boy. The armor gave the illusion of broader shoulders, thighs, and chest.

Everyone assumed Britt's new bulk was maturity. If they helped her remove the armor, they would notice she was still as slender as ever. Kay or Merlin could help if she needed it.

"I see," Gawain said.

Britt leaned against her horse and studied the Orkney prince. "Tell me, how goes your lance training? Agravain told me you were seeking to improve your skills."

Gawain placed his saddle packs on the ground and began unpacking. "I have improved some. I have gotten a better feel of where to aim. Previously, I was content just to hit my opponent on the shield with as much force as I could muster, but some parts of the shield make a man yield easier than others. I fear Kay can still unhorse me though," Gawain said.

Britt winced in sympathy. "Kay could unseat a knight tied to his mount. The man is a nightmare as an opponent."

Gawain sat down, his gear spread around him. "You practice with him?"

"From time to time," Britt vaguely said. In truth, she had been practicing with Kay ever since she pulled the Sword from the Stone. The stony knight was pleased with her swordsmanship skills and was determined to make her a passable knight. He took it upon himself to train her in the use of a lance and spear. (He gave up on her archery skills after a brief stint of practice revealed she had no aptitude for the weapon.)

"If you're looking to beat Kay, I suggest you ask Sir Bodwain for help," Britt said.

"Sir Bodwain? Why?"

"Before he took up the position of my constable, he was a particularly fierce knight. He was quite a terror to battle in his younger days, I've been told. I am certain he would be able to help you," Britt said, brushing Llamrei's broad back.

"I never knew," Gawain said.

"I'm not surprised. I don't think much information about any of my knights would travel as far as Orkney. But it was why Merlin advised I select him as my constable," Britt said.

"I shall ask him to train me, in that case," Gawain said.

Britt smiled. "I'm sure the request will please him. I need to water Llamrei. Did you already water your mount?"

Gawain nodded and went back to organizing his gear. "There's a river just a stone's throw north from here."

"Excellent. Thank you, nephew," Britt said, leading her horse from the camp.

"My pleasure, My Lord," Gawain said.

When Britt turned to acknowledge the comment with a wave, she noticed Lancelot intently watching her.

The handsome knight made no movement to cover up his stare. Instead, he twisted his lips into a thoughtful frown.

Britt was distracted from his odd behavior when Sir Kay joined her. “Good evening, Sir Kay. Watering your horse?”

“Yes. You shouldn’t go alone,” Sir Kay said.

Britt chuckled. “Of course. Thank you for accompanying me.”

“Yes.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Yes.”

“You remain as enigmatic as ever, brother.”

“Thank you.”



The following morning, Britt knelt at the riverbed and splashed water on her face in an effort to wake up. Since arriving in ancient Britain, Britt had been infected by a horrible case of insomnia, making mornings a bear to get through.

Britt rocked back on her heels in a squatting position and considered the riverbed. There were a number of strange tracks on the moist banks. Britt studied them with a frown, looking up when she heard the pounding of horse hooves.

A knight dressed in black armor and riding a sturdy horse crashed through the underbrush, popping out a few feet away from Britt.

“You there, knight. Have you seen anything—like a strange beast—pass this way?” the knight demanded.

“No,” Britt said, stifling a yawn.

“Did you hear anything? Perhaps a noise that is not unlike the baying of hounds?”

“No, we’re in the Forest of Arroy, faerie lands. There are no dogs in these parts,” Britt said, boosting herself into a standing position.

“Oh, I say, Arthur, is that you?” the knight asked.

Britt studied the black armor and ventured a guess. “Pellinore?”

“At your service,” King Pellinore said, flipping up the visor of his helm.

“What are you doing here? Your lands are far from this forest,” Britt said.

“Does it displease you to find me near your kingdom?” Pellinore asked.

“No, I told you before that you could pass through whenever you wish so long as you don’t disturb my people,” Britt said.

“I thank you for your generosity. I am on a noble adventure, for I am chasing the Questing Beast.”

“The Questing Beast? I remember you mentioning that when we argued about your Sable Knight title. What exactly is a Questing Beast?”

King Pellinore removed his helm and patted his horse on the neck. “It is a great creature that has the head and neck of a serpent, the body of a leopard, the haunches of a lion, and the feet of a stag. A great noise emits from its belly, sounding like thirty or so baying hounds.”

“Really,” Britt said.

“You don’t believe me?”

“No, it’s more that I suspect we have a miscommunication—like the fact that you wear black armor and call yourself the Sable Knight,” Britt said, placing her hands on her hips.

Pellinore frowned. "You are an odd boy."

"Perhaps. How far have you chased this beast?"

"From my castle. I have sought it my entire life, although it often eludes me. It roams Britain like the winds. I lost its trail some days ago."

"But?"

Pellinore laughed as he dismounted. "You are odd but just as sharp as Merlin. I lost its trail, but I am not much enthused by the prospect of returning home. To say my wife was not pleased at my departure would be a vast understatement."

"I see."

"What has dragged you from the paradise of Camelot, King Arthur?" Pellinore asked as he led his horse to the river's edge, letting it drink.

"A small party of knights and I are on our way to Camelgrance."

"King Leodegrance's lands? I received word that Duke Maleagant is approaching his borders. You aim to help him?"

"Partially. We mean to spy on Maleagant's forces so we know what army I must amass. King Leodegrance does not know of our party, for we mean to keep things secret," Britt hesitated. "Would you care to join us?" she asked on a whim.

"Come with you to Camelgrance, you mean?"

"Yes."

King Pellinore thought for a moment before a smile broke the stoic look on his noble face. "I would be delighted! Does Merlin ride with you?"

"Naturally," Britt said. "Has your horse drunk its fill? I can lead the way to our camp."

Pellinore looked at his mount, who stopped lipping the water and shook like a dog. "She is well. Lead on, Arthur!"

Britt led the way back to camp, calling when she grew close enough, "Merlin, Sir Kay? I have brought us another companion."

Kay looked up from the logbook in which he was writing, and Merlin almost choked on the carrot he was chewing. "King Pellinore, welcome to our camp," Merlin said.

"It is my honor. King Arthur spoke of your mission to scout Maleagant's forces," King Pellinore said.

"If it pleases you, Sir Bodwain, Sir Bedivere, Sir Kay, and I would like to hear your thoughts on our plan," Merlin said.

"It would be my pleasure," King Pellinore said, joining Merlin at the nearly burned out campfire.

Britt watched with a fond smile before she took a squashed, stale piece of bread from Gawain to serve as her breakfast.

"I don't understand, is King Pellinore not your enemy?"

Britt glanced at Lancelot, who joined her at the camp edge. She gave him a false smile. "He was when he joined King Lot and fought against me, but I have since made peace with him. He is noble and quite likeable—something I cannot say of all who are present."

"You are kind to your enemies," Lancelot said. "You include Prince Ywain and Prince Gawain in your company when they are the sons of men who sought to kill you."

Britt tried to act serene instead of snapping at Lancelot that for King Arthur, it was really his *best friend and wife* he had to worry about than the sons of his onetime enemies. "Both Sir Ywain and Sir Gawain have proven their loyalty to me. I have no reason to question them, for I know *their* allegiance is boundless."

Lancelot frowned. "My father was once forced to flee his kingdom by Claudas. I do not know

if I could treat Claudas as you have treated King Pellinore.”

—Britt fixed a smile as sweet as poison on her lips. “Perhaps that is why the Sword in the Stone chose me,” she suggested. “If you’ll excuse me, I must prepare for our day.”

“Of course, My Lord.”

Britt thought nothing more of the conversation, and it would have surprised her to learn that Lancelot, on the other hand, dwelled upon it for a long time.



A few more days of riding brought Britt and her knightly escort to King Leodegrance’s lands.

“This is where we part,” Merlin said, swinging his spindly legged horse to address Sir Bodwain. “You take the main company and scout Maleagant’s camp. Sir Kay, Sir Gawain, Sir Ywain, Sir Lancelot, King Pellinore, King Arthur, and I will move ahead to Camelgrance. We will meet at the mill south of here this evening.”

“As planned,” Sir Bodwain nodded. His horse pranced a few steps until he stood directly in front of Britt. “Good luck, My Lord. God’s speed and safety,” he wished, bowing from the saddle.

“I look forward to your return, My Lord,” Sir Bedivere added. Behind him, the remaining knights of Camelot bowed their heads in reverence.

“Thank you, I wish you luck with your part of the quest,” Britt said.

As Sir Bodwain and Sir Bedivere rode off, leading the larger party of knights east, Merlin turned to the remaining group. “Now then, we set out on a ridiculous quest to break into our ally’s castle to look upon a nasty table. We must go silently, which means we shall have to leave behind some of our equipment,” Merlin said, staring at Britt and Llamrei.

Britt’s armor and clothes were liberally embroidered with the image of a red dragon. Even Llamrei had a red dragon with its wings thrown open embroidered on her saddle blanket and burned into her leather tack. “What?” Britt blinked.

“You couldn’t have chosen less obvious equipment?” Merlin scolded.

“You were the one who declared my symbol would be a red dragon and went crazy decorating all my things with it,” Britt said.

Merlin rolled his eyes. “Either way, we will have to part with any equipment that bears a personal symbol. Someone shall have to remain behind with horses and things to make sure they are not plundered by thieves,” he said, eyeing Ywain.

The young knight violently shook his head. “Not I, I’m staying with My Lord,” he informed the wizard.

Merlin narrowed his eyes. “Would you like to bet on that?”

“I will remain behind,” King Pellinore said. “King Leodegrance and I are not on excellent terms. It would be better for the party if I remained away from Camelgrance.”

“Are you certain, King Pellinore?” Britt asked. “I did not ask you to come with us so you could serve as a hostler.”

King Pellinore dismounted. “Of that I am sure. Do not concern yourself with me, Arthur. I do not desire to see Camelgrance, but I would not mind routing any thieves or recreant knights in the area,” he said with a fiendish grin.

“Excellent, we thank you for your cooperation, King Pellinore,” Merlin said before he too dismounted. “We shall enter Camelgrance on foot in the plainest clothes we have.”

“What?” Sir Ywain squawked. He wore a suit of fancy armor, intricately designed and completed with a large, red plume on his helm.

“Yes, Ywain, you shall have to change out of your odious armor,” Merlin said.

~~“We wish to avoid detection,” Gawain said.~~

“A handful of foreign knights would at the very least raise interest, if not suspicion,” Lancelot added.

“Exactly,” Merlin said.

“That sounds ideal. We’ll be able to slip into the castle keep easier if we are dressed as servants or merchants,” Britt said, sliding off Llamrei.

“Sir Ulfius did not know where the Round Table is kept. We will have to inquire further when we enter Camelgrance,” Merlin said.

“Is it wise to go as one group? Six strange men wandering in the inner courts of Camelgrance might raise suspicion, regardless of the station we adopt,” Sir Kay said, stroking his mustache.

“I am astounded, Kay. For once I find myself agreeing with you,” Merlin said.

“Do not take it to heart. I am certain before the hour is over, you shall change your mind,” Sir Kay said.

“Perhaps you should enter in pairs,” King Pellinore suggested, slipping his horse a shriveled carrot.

“Yes, but the question is who travels with whom?” Merlin asked, narrowing his eyes as he studied the party.

Britt was filled with a sense of dread. “Kay and I should enter together. We can truthfully say we are brothers,” Britt said, hoping to cut the wizard off.

Merlin snorted. “Such a statement would be like saying the finest destrier and a pack mule are siblings. No, Sir Kay will go with young Ywain, as he is able to keep the lad on a short lead.”

“I beg your pardon,” Ywain sputtered.

Britt’s stomach plunged. “Merlin, no,” she said.

Merlin smiled sweetly. “It would be the polite thing to do.”

“No.”

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## Chapter 3

### Scouting Fun

Britt sourly stared directly in front of her as she slumped against a stone wall. Her eyes were narrowed, and her mouth was an unbecoming and deeply displeased slant.

“It is my honor to be paired with you, My Lord. I have heard a great deal about you. I am flattered to be selected as your guard during this expedition,” Lancelot said.

Britt slowly turned her neck to stare at Lancelot, her unpleasant expression still in place.

The talkative knight did not notice. “I imagine Merlin selected me as your companion because I am the most experienced knight—having gone on many quests and adventures in my youth.”

“He placed me with you because he wants me to suffer,” Britt said through gritted teeth.

“I do not understand what you mean, My Lord.”

Britt’s features morphed into an insincere smile. “No, I imagine you don’t.”

“In any case, as we have safely arrived in the inner sanctum of Camelgrance, we should inquire after this table you seek.”

“Of course,” Britt said, pushing off the keep wall. Her eyes combed through the bustling castle innards. She did not see Merlin and Gawain, nor Kay and Ywain. They were likely in a different part of the castle, suffering less than her and having a great deal more fun.

Lancelot, dressed like Britt in a tunic of muted colors, waited for a few moments before he sauntered in the direction of a female servant who was struggling to carry a sack of flour.

“If I might take a moment of your time, My Lady?” Lancelot asked with an appealing smile.

“What? Oh, h-hello,” the servant said, her eyes widening when she got a good look at the handsome knight.

“Greetings, fair lady. It is great fortune that has brought you, maiden with eyes of morning dew, across my path,” Lancelot said.

The young woman grappled with her sack of flour and stared wide-eyed at Lancelot. “Thank you,” she said.

Behind Lancelot, Britt rolled her eyes. “I apologize for my companion’s lack of decorum. It is entirely rude of us to speak with you while you carry such a burden. Please, allow me,” she said, taking the sack from the maid. She slung it over her shoulder and offered the maid a full smile.

The young woman’s arms went slack as she stared at Britt, a blush spreading across her cheeks.

“Where shall I carry it?” Britt asked.

“This way,” the maid said, tottering off to a side door of the castle keep.

Britt and Lancelot followed in her wake, slipping into the bustling kitchens. The maid led them to a pantry, where Britt placed the flour on a shelf.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I am pleased to have been able to help you,” Britt said. “I ask that you forgive our ignorance but my *friend* and I are looking for a storage room. We’ve been told to fetch a spare table for some outdoor business, but as we are servants for our visiting master, we are not versed with the castle Camelgrance,” Britt said.

“I think the storage rooms are on the second floor. I’m a kitchen girl, so I don’t properly know. Sorry,” the young woman said.

“There is no need to apologize. You have sent us down the right path. Thank you,” Britt said,

offering the girl another smile before she bent forward in a slight but stately bow.

“We are in your debt,” Lancelot added.

The girl turned bright red and attempted a curtsy.

“Come, *friend*. We should find a table,” Britt said, grabbing Lancelot by the shoulders and steered him from the pantry.

Britt and Lancelot slunk from the kitchens, wandering until they found a servants’ stairway to the second floor.

“Great, we’ll need to find more detailed instructions. This corridor alone has twenty doors. If someone sees us going through all of them, they’re going to notify a guard,” Britt said.

“Let us peer beyond the corner and see if there is someone who might be able to help us,” Lancelot suggested.

Britt shrugged and followed the younger man. They rounded a corner and found a girl jumping up and down, grabbing at a ledge. A white cat was perched on the ledge, watching the bouncing girl with feline interest and a twitching tail.

“Wyne, come down here, you foolish cat! If My Lady finds out you’ve run off again, she won’t be happy,” the girl pleaded with the cat.

“I beg your leave, My Lady, but if we could speak to you for a moment?” Lancelot called.

The girl whirled around. She was young, probably 15 or 16, and wore markedly better clothes than the kitchen girl. She was probably a lady in waiting based on her braided hair and clean face.

“Good afternoon,” she said, bobbing in a curtsy as she smiled at Lancelot.

“Good afternoon to you, beautiful maiden,” Lancelot said.

“What did you want to discuss?” the girl asked, shyly clasping her arms behind her back.

“I find myself in the gravest need of your sage advice and knowledge, My Lady,” Lancelot said, batting his long eyelashes.

The girl held a hand to her mouth to cover her grin. “Oh?”

“Indeed. The stars have aligned to bring us together, so that you may have mercy upon me, your lowly servant, and help me in my time of need.”

Britt heaved her eyes to the ceiling as Lancelot beat around the bush. “What he means to say is that we are in need of some direction,” Britt said, walking around Lancelot to draw closer to the ledge. She extended her hand and reached the cat on the ledge. She let it sniff her hand before she picked it off the ledge and held it against her chest. Britt briefly rubbed under its chin, getting a purr from it, before she offered the cat to the girl.

“We have been sent to gather a table from a storage room for our master, who is visiting. Sadly, we are not familiar with Camelgrance and have been woefully unable to find such a room,” Britt said as the girl took the cat.

When the ladies maid looked up at her, Britt flashed the girl with her most charming smile.

“Oh,” the girl said.

Britt waited patiently for several moments. When a reply was not forthcoming, she ventured, “Do you know, perhaps, where a table may be stored?”

The girl shook herself. “For certain. This way, if you would,” she said, holding the cat with one arm as she led the way. She stopped in front of a plain-looking door and opened it. Light from the hallway pierced the darkness of the room, letting Britt see stacks of wooden furniture.

There were roughly cut benches, square tables, chests, wall hangings, and stools. There was not one circular or round table.

Feeling the young woman’s eyes on her, Britt flashed another smile. “Perfect. We thank you for your assistance.”

“It was my pleasure,” the girl said, stroking the cat and showing no signs of leaving.



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