



The Sword & the Stone

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I was never supposed to be the one. Just an orphan with no memories of my parents, a heart full of secrets, and a life spent as a thief just to survive. I thought I had it all figured out—until I accidentally yanked Excalibur from the stone. Suddenly, I was bound to a destiny that could shatter my world into pieces I never wanted to uncover.

With Excalibur in hand and the weight of a kingdom pressing down on me, I was thrust into a quest for the Holy Grail—a relic rumored to hold the power to save us all or doom us to darkness. And let's not forget the whispers about my lineage: half-fae, a child of ancient magic. That kind of power could either be my greatest blessing or my ultimate curse.

Then there were the knights—oh, the knights. Each one more dangerous and alluring than the last. And of course, there was Merlin, impossibly handsome and maddeningly secretive, who seemed to know more about my fate than he was letting on.

But as my quest spiraled deeper into darkness, I realized not all knights could be trusted. Mordred, the treacherous and illegitimate daughter of Uther Pendragon, was stalking us, determined to claim the Grail for herself. With every step closer, the lines between loyalty, love, and betrayal blurred, and I found myself questioning everything. Who could I trust when the shadows of my past threatened to swallow me whole?

A sword forged in legend. Five knights entwined by fate. A fae-born orphan with a kingdom to save—or destroy. And an ancient evil that would do anything to tear us apart.

These legends were never meant to be this twisted.

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Chapter 1

ARTHUR

I burst through the tavern door, Merlin hot on my heels, curses and clattering objects following us like a pack of hungry wolves. The first heavy drops of rain splattered against the cobblestones.

“Arthur, wait!” Merlin shouted, his voice dripping with that infuriating grin I could practically hear even as we sprinted into the night.

I glanced back, a smirk creeping onto my face. “Catch up, wizard boy!”

We barreled down the narrow alley, splashing through muddy puddles as the storm unleashed its fury above us. Thunder rumbled, low and all too threatening, as if the heavens were debating whether to swallow us whole.

We finally slowed, rain soaking us to the bone, my hair plastered to my forehead as I bent over, panting with my hands braced on my knees. Maybe three mugs of ale before running for my life wasn’t such a great idea after all.

“Do you think we lost him?” Merlin asked, pushing his drenched hair from his eyes. His blue irises were glowing slightly, making me glad we’d gotten out of the tavern in time.

“Not if we stop here,” I replied, gulping in the cool, damp air. I glanced up, the moon conspicuously absent, like it knew better than to show its face tonight. The rain fell

harder now. "Great. Now we'll need to find somewhere dry to wait out this monsoon. Home is definitely not an option."

Merlin tilted his head back, catching raindrops on his tongue like a child. "Why can't it rain ale instead? Now that would make this night worthwhile."

I snorted and shoved him playfully. "With our luck, it'd be horse piss instead of ale. Come on, there has to be somewhere we can stay for the night."

We jogged through the downpour until the tavern's warm glow faded into the murky shadows behind us. The road narrowed as the village thinned out, giving way to endless crop fields. Lightning forked across the sky, and I flinched, my heart racing; storms and I had an unspoken agreement to dislike one another.

As if the universe finally decided to throw us a bone, the outline of a ramshackle barn appeared, looming from the rain-soaked darkness. Its sagging roof and crooked door hung on rusted hinges, but it offered the promise of shelter from the rain, and that's all I needed.

"Well, this looks cozy," Merlin drawled as we approached.

I just grunted in response and shouldered open the door. The interior was dim, lit only by the occasional flash of lightning through the cracks in the walls. It smelled of rotting hay and damp earth. Home sweet home.

Merlin conjured a ball of druidlight and sent it hovering near the ceiling. I raised an eyebrow at him. He just shrugged. "What? No one's around to see."

"You're going to get caught one of these days, and I won't always be there to get you out of it."

I knew Merlin was too clever to let that happen, but it was fun to tease him. He'd been keeping his magic a secret for years, ever since we were scrawny orphans scraping by on the streets.

He just grinned at me. "I'll be careful, Wart. Promise."

The childhood nickname made me roll my eyes, even as a reluctant smile tugged at my lips. "You better be. I don't fancy having to break you out of the palace dungeons."

"I'd just magic myself out." Merlin wiggled his fingers, and the druidlight danced above us. "Or Gaius would just sweet talk the king into sparing my life."

"Cocky bastard."

"You love it."

Our gazes locked, and a familiar tug tightened in my chest—the kind I'd grown adept at ignoring whenever Merlin was near. I cleared my throat and turned my attention to the crumbling barn, forcing myself to focus on anything but the warmth blooming between us.

"Let's get a fire going," I suggested, glancing at the wall that shook with the wind. "We should wait it out and sleep off this damn ale."

Merlin nodded, already kneeling to gather some dry hay into a makeshift pile. With a flick of his wrist, the hay ignited in a vibrant blaze. The heat washed over me, a welcome relief against my rain-soaked skin. He expertly wove his magic, conjuring a dome of golden light that shielded the fire, letting only the warmth escape while dampening the smoke.

It was reckless to use magic so openly, even within the barn's sturdy walls. You could never be too careful—a lesson Merlin might never learn. King Uther had banned the use of magic ever since his daughter had attempted and failed to seize the throne with dark sorcery. Merlin was, quite literally, playing with fire.

I'd known about Merlin's magic the first time we'd met—the night a raging inferno swept through our village. He'd found me screaming and covered in soot, wrapping me in his warmth as we watched it all burn. His mother fell to the flames, along with my own parents. He'd kept me safe until dawn, when we were taken to the orphanage with the other survivors. I'd guarded his secret for two decades.

I settled beside the fire, stretching my legs out, willing the heat to seep into my chilled bones. My clothes clung to my skin, uncomfortably damp, but this was far better than braving the storm outside. I tried to comb my fingers through my tangled curls, but frustration got the better of me, and I settled for braiding what I could manage.

Merlin settled beside me, close enough that our shoulders brushed. A shiver ran through me that had nothing to do with the cold. Damn wizard, always throwing me off balance without even trying. It was infuriating. And a bit thrilling, if I was being honest with myself. Which I tried not to be, most of the time.

“Well, this was quite the adventure,” Merlin said too cheerfully, as if we weren't huddled in a derelict barn while a thunderstorm raged outside. “Fleeing angry barkeeps, desperately searching for questionable shelter, and you scowling at me. It brings back memories.”

I shook my head. “Memories of you getting me into trouble, you mean.”

That was a lie, and I knew it. Sure, he was a troublemaker, but I wouldn't pretend I didn't get a thrill from picking pockets and swindling fools out of their coins. It was

the best way we had to keep ourselves fed and clothed.

“Wasn’t it you who flirted with that poor barkeep for an hour before he finally took pity on you and poured you a free bowl of soup? I honestly pity the man.”

I inspected my nails, shrugging nonchalantly. “I don’t think I recall.”

The poor man hadn’t stood a chance, his pudgy cheeks flushing as I twirled my hair and giggled. The soup hadn’t been nearly as tasty as I’d hoped after that performance.

Merlin snorted, raking his fingers through his wet hair. “Still, it was my quick thinking that saved our skins back there.”

His “quick thinking” had involved juggling three pewter mugs with his magic, pretending it was pure skill while accidentally dousing a few surly-looking men—definitely mercenaries—in leftover ale. In the chaos that followed, we’d managed to slip away mostly unscathed. Mostly.

“You’re ridiculous, but I’ll give you that,” I conceded. “Just next time, warn me before you start enchanting the crockery. I nearly choked on my tongue when those mugs went flying.”

Merlin’s eyes danced with mirth in the firelight. “It was close this time, wasn’t it?”

I scowled at him, which only made him grin wider. Insufferable man. My insufferable man, a traitorous part of my mind whispered. I told it firmly to shut up.

A gust of wind rattled the roof, reminding me of the tempest raging outside our flimsy shelter. I sighed and tipped my head back, hoping the roof would stay intact until morning.

"Guess we're stuck here for the night. Might as well try to get some rest."

Merlin hummed in agreement, already shifting to stretch out on the hay-strewn floor beside me. His arm brushed against mine as he settled. I swallowed hard and tried to ignore the prickle of awareness skittering over my skin.

Outside, the storm raged on, the rain pounding relentlessly against the barn's leaky roof. But inside, cocooned by the crackling fire and Merlin's steady presence, I felt strangely safe. Content, even. It was a foreign feeling after years of scraping by on the streets, always looking over our shoulders.

I turned my head to study Merlin's profile, his angular features cast in dancing shadow and light. He had a smudge of dirt on his cheekbone and his dark hair curled damply against his neck and shoulders. But his eyes were vivid blue, his lips curved in that familiar crooked grin. He looked...beautiful.

Merlin caught me staring and quirked an eyebrow. "Something on my face, Wart?"

"Just a smudge of ugly," I shot back automatically, grateful for the dim light hiding my warming cheeks.

"And here I thought you kept me around for my devilish good looks."

"I keep you around because you're marginally useful. Occasionally."

"Ah, useful . Is that what we're calling it now?" He shifted onto his side to face me fully, head propped on his hand. The fire threw dancing shadows across the planes of his face. "I thought it was called sparkling wit and charming personality."

I snorted inelegantly. "In your dreams, wizard boy."

"You feature in my dreams quite often, Wart," he said, casual as can be even as my heart stuttered in my chest. "But I don't think you want to know what we get up to in those."

I swallowed hard, mouth suddenly dry. This was edging into dangerous territory, the kind we normally steered clear of. The kind I'd been trying very hard not to think about late at night, tangled in my bedroll and aching with want.

"Merlin..." It was a warning and a plea all tangled together. Something in my voice made his teasing grin soften into something more genuine, almost tender. It stole the breath from my lungs.

"Sorry, sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all. "I'll behave. Wouldn't want to offend your delicate sensibilities."

I huffed a laugh. "I'll show you delicate, you menace."

Merlin sent me a wide-eyed, innocent look. "Promise?"

I groaned and covered my face with my hands, trying to hide the helpless grin spreading across my lips. "You're fucking impossible."

Merlin chuckled, the sound rich and warm in the drafty barn. "But you love me anyway."

The words hung in the air between us, playful on the surface but laced with something all too real. I peeked at him between my fingers, my heart doing a complicated flip in my chest at the soft look on his face. His eyes searched mine, suddenly serious.

I lowered my hands slowly, pulse thrumming. "Merlin, I?—"

A crack of thunder rattled the barn walls, so loud it felt like the world was splitting open. We both jumped, the charged moment shattering. I let out a shaky laugh, running a hand through my hair.

"Guess that's our cue to get some shut-eye," I said, trying to sound casual even as my heart raced.

Merlin sighed, a rueful twist to his lips. "As the lady demands."

He shifted onto his back, close enough that I was aware of the heat of him but carefully not touching. I immediately missed the contact, even as I told myself it was for the best. We settled into silence, just the drum of rain and the pop of the fire filling the room.

I gazed up at the cobwebbed rafters, my thoughts swirling like a damn tempest. This was dangerous territory. Merlin and I had been through too much together to risk tearing it apart over inconvenient feelings.

And yet...

I turned my head just slightly, stealing a glance at him. His eyes were closed, dark lashes fanned across sharp cheekbones. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm, radiating a raw kind of sensuality that made something ache deep inside me.

"I can feel you staring, Wart," Merlin murmured, his voice low and playful, still not opening his eyes. A tiny smile danced on his lips.

Heat rushed to my cheeks, and I quickly redirected my gaze to the ceiling. "I was just checking to make sure you weren't drooling in your sleep. Wouldn't want you to drown."

Merlin chuckled softly. “How thoughtful of you.”

“I’m a giver, what can I say?”

We fell into silence again, but it was charged now. The air crackled with unspoken words—or maybe it was just the storm raging outside that made the barn feel impossibly small.

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing myself to sleep, to banish the thoughts of how easy it would be to roll over and press my body against the long lines of his. To tangle my fingers in that long dark hair and discover if his lips were as soft as they looked.

I exhaled sharply. Right. Sleep. Not...other things.

Beside me, Merlin shifted restlessly. His hand brushed mine, a fleeting touch that could’ve been accidental, then slid between my fingers in a tentative, teasing gesture. My heart leaped into my throat, and I squeezed his hand once in response.

Merlin exhaled, a shaky sound in the stillness. His thumb traced my knuckles slowly, mapping every ridge and valley. Each glide sent sparks skittering up my arm, pooling in my belly. I craved his touch everywhere, a single-minded desire to explore every inch of him until I could memorize the feel of his hard body. The body of the man he was. Not the boy. Not for a long time now.

“Arthur,” he breathed, the word barely a whisper.

I rolled to face him, our noses nearly brushing. Up close, I discerned the darker flecks in his irises, like shards of midnight sky. His gaze dropped to my mouth before flicking back up to meet my eyes.

I swallowed hard, my heart racing. This was the moment that could change

everything between us, for better or worse.

“Tell me to stop...” I cupped his jaw, my thumb brushing the corner of his mouth.

“Tell me you don’t want this and it’ll end here. Like it never happened.”

Merlin’s tongue darted out to wet his lips, and I tracked the movement hungrily.

“Why would I say something so damn stupid?”

A shiver ran through me, and I briefly closed my eyes, overwhelmed. “This—this could change everything.”

Slowly, giving me a chance to pull away, he leaned in. His nose brushed against mine, a gentle nuzzle, and I felt his breath ghost over my lips, the warmth of him seeping into my skin. My eyes fluttered shut of their own accord. I wanted to savor this.

Just as Merlin's lips began to graze mine, the barn door crashed open with a deafening bang.

We sprang apart like scalded cats, reaching for our weapons on instinct. I blinked the haze of desire away, trying to focus past the pounding of my heart. A hulking figure stood silhouetted in the doorway, rain lashing at its back. Something about the shape of it made my blood run cold.

"Well, well," a horribly familiar voice drawled. "Isn't this cozy?"

Ames and Reeno lumbered into the barn, their brutish forms blocking the doorway. Rainwater sluiced off their mud-splattered cloaks, pooling on the floor. Ames's beady eyes glinted with malice as he took in our too-vulnerable position. Reeno's lips peeled back in a feral grin, revealing crooked yellow teeth.

"Looks like we interrupted a tender moment," Ames sneered. "So sorry."

I scrambled to my feet, Merlin a beat behind me. My knife hissed as I drew it from its sheath. "Not sorry enough," I growled. "You should have kept walking."

Reeno cracked his knuckles, the sound like snapping bones. "And miss a chance to repay you for that little stunt at the tavern? I don't think so."

Merlin shifted into a fighting stance beside me. His eyes were already too bright, and any second now, the mercenaries would notice. "Stunt?" he asked innocently. "Oh, you mean when I made you wear your ale? Purely an accident, I assure you."

Ames snarled as his meaty hand dropped to the hilt of his sword. "The only accident here is that you're still breathing, boy. A mistake we intend to rectify."

"Bring it on, you overgrown sack of horse dung," I spat, adjusting my grip on my blade.

Ames roared and charged, his blade flashing in the firelight. I lunged forward to meet him, steel clashing against steel. He was stronger than me, his blows raining down like hammer strikes, but I was faster. I ducked and wove, looking for an opening. Fighting with daggers wasn't anything like fighting with swords, but I could manage.

Across the barn, Merlin and Reeno circled each other like snarling wolves. Reeno's fists were up, ready to pummel, but Merlin's hands glowed bright, arcane words falling from his lips. My heart sank to my feet. Now there was no choice but to kill these men. They'd run straight to the king with this information, and I couldn't allow that.

With a shout, Merlin thrust his palms forward and a blast of golden light slammed into Reeno's chest, sending him flying back into the wall.

I didn't have time to watch him. Ames pressed closer, his blade a blur of deadly steel. I parried frantically, arms trembling with effort. He was so much larger than I was. Our blades locked at the hilt and he bore down, his fetid breath hot on my face.

"I'm going to gut you like a fucking pig, then fuck your corpse, princess," he hissed through clenched yellow teeth.

With a headbutt, I felt the crunch of cartilage against my forehead. He reeled back with a bellow, blood pouring from his nose. Pressing my advantage, I rained down blows as fast and as hard as possible. Small in stature, my speed was my greatest asset. Survival depended on it.

Behind me, I heard Reeno roar in rage and the crackle of Merlin's magic. The air smelled of copper and singed flesh. I prayed to any gods listening that Merlin was holding his own, but I saw the strain on his face. Magic took its toll, even on someone as powerful as him.

I redoubled my efforts, hacking at Ames with a ferocity born of pure desperation. I had to end this quickly before we were overwhelmed. Before I lost the one person who meant everything to me.

Ames stumbled back, his sword arm hanging limp and bloody at his side. I darted in, aiming a thrust at his throat, but he lashed out with a hidden dagger that I hadn't noticed before. White-hot pain seared across my ribs. I cried out, faltering for just a second.

"Arthur!" Merlin shouted.

Fear rushed through me. He shouldn't have been watching me; he had bigger problems at the moment.

In his moment of distraction, Reeno landed a brutal punch to his gut. Merlin folded, gasping for air. Reeno kicked him savagely in the ribs, grinning like a maniac.

Rage turned my vision red. With a wordless snarl, I threw myself at Ames, knocking us both to the ground. We grappled in the dirt and moldy hay, his dagger slashing at my face. I caught his wrist and slammed it down once, twice, until the dagger skittered away.

Straddling his chest, I drove my fist into his jaw with a satisfying crack. His head lolled, eyes rolling back. I hit him again for good measure, blood and spittle flying. He went limp beneath me, finally unconscious.

I staggered to my feet, clutching at the gash in my side. Warm blood seeped between my fingers. Across the barn, Merlin blasted Reeno with another surge of magic, sending him crashing into the old horse stalls. Wood splintered and Reeno slumped as he was knocked out cold.

Merlin rushed to my side, his face pale and tight with worry. "Arthur, you're hurt."

"I'm fine," I gritted out. "We need to go before more of their friends show up."

As if on cue, shouts and pounding footsteps sounded from outside, barely audible over the raging storm. Reinforcements, no doubt summoned by the commotion.

Merlin cursed colorfully, slinging my arm over his shoulders. I leaned on him heavily, stars dancing at the edges of my vision from the pain. Together, we hobbled to the back of the barn, kicking open the ramshackle door there.

Rain and wind lashed at us the instant we staggered outside, the storm howling like a living thing. Lightning forked across the sky, illuminating the muddy field stretching before us and the dark line of woods beyond. If we could make it to those trees, we

might have a chance of losing our pursuers in the dense Kingswood. A slim chance, but it was all we had.

I grunted in pain, my hand pressed tight against the freely bleeding gash across my ribs. On second thought... "Woods are too far," I panted. "We'll never make it, not like this."

Merlin's face was grim, his eyes glowing still. "Then we head back into Camelot. Try to lose them in the streets." It was a desperate plan, but what choice did we have?

Summoning the last dregs of my strength, I let Merlin haul me around. We stumbled through the mud, angling away from the main road and plunging into the warren of narrow alleys that made up the village proper.

The rain was relentless, turning the dirt streets into treacherous rivers of muck. My boots slipped and slid, Merlin's iron grip on my arm the only thing keeping me upright. Blood loss made my head swim, my legs feeling like jelly.

Behind us, angry voices echoed off the close-packed buildings, the orange flicker of torchlight dancing on the wet mud. They were close, too fucking close.

"In here," Merlin hissed, yanking me into a darkened alcove between two ramshackle houses. We pressed ourselves back into the shadows, hardly daring to breathe.

Heavy footsteps splashed past our hiding spot, accompanied by crude curses and threats. I counted at least five men, maybe more. Ames and Reeno's friends were out for blood.

My vision blurred, black spots dancing at the edges as I sagged against Merlin's side. His arm tightened around my waist, taking more of my weight. "Stay with me, Arthur," he whispered fiercely. "We're almost there."

Almost where? I wanted to ask, but my tongue felt thick and clumsy in my mouth. Merlin half-carried, half-dragged me onward, my feet stumbling over the uneven ground. The rain had lessened to a steady drizzle, but the chill had sunk deep into my bones. Or maybe that was just the blood loss talking.

Merlin's labored breathing sounded loud in my ear, punctuated by the occasional pained grunt as he shouldered my dead weight. Guilt clawed at my gut. He was running himself ragged, burning through his magic reserves, all to keep my sorry hide alive.

The thought startled a weak chuckle out of me, sending fresh agony lancing through my side. Merlin shot me a concerned look, brows pinched. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," I rasped. "Just...imagining the bards singing of your daring rescue one day. Hauling my ass out of the literal and metaphorical fire, as usual."

Merlin's lips twitched, a ghost of a smile. "Well, I did swear to be your sword and shield, didn't I? A regular knight protecting his beautiful princess."

I barked a laugh that turned into a groan, clutching at my side. Angry shouts erupted behind us, far too close for comfort. Merlin cursed under his breath and urged me to move faster, practically carrying me now as my legs turned to rubber.

We staggered into the village square, a wide open space dominated by a massive stone plinth in the center. Atop it, gleaming golden even in the weak predawn light, was the fabled sword. Excalibur.

Every child in Albion grew up hearing the stories—only the true ruler of Camelot, the Once and Future King, could draw the enchanted blade from its stone sheath. For generations, people had come from far and wide to try their hand, from farm hands to princes and kings. The sword had never budged.

I'd always scoffed at the tales, putting no more stock in them than any other fireside faerietale. But now, with Merlin's ragged breathing in my ear and the shouts of our pursuers ringing off the shuttered storefronts, that sword was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. An impossible chance at salvation.

Maybe if I pulled hard enough, I could snap the steel and use it as a knife. Or maybe losing so much blood was making me delusional.

"The sword," I croaked, my split lip oozing fresh blood as I spoke. "Help me get to the sword."

Merlin's eyes widened, flicking from my face to the sword and back again. "Arthur, you can't possibly think?—"

"Please, Merlin," I rasped, desperation clawing at my insides. "It's our only chance."

For a heartbeat, he looked torn, probably thinking I'd lost my damn mind. He shifted his grip on me, taking more of my weight, and together we stumbled towards the plinth.

Up close, the stone monolith was even more imposing, easily twice my height and wider than three men abreast. Intricate runes were carved into every inch of its weathered surface, the swirling patterns mesmerizing even to my untrained eye. And there, jutting proudly from the stone like a beacon, was the sword Excalibur.

Its golden hilt gleamed as if lit from within, the leather wrappings supple and unblemished despite years of exposure. The blade itself was a work of art, its polished length mirror-bright and sharp enough to split a hair. Power seemed to thrum in the air around it, raising the fine hairs on my arms.

Merlin helped me stagger up to the plinth, my blood-slick fingers scrabbling for

purchase on the cool stone. This close, I felt the sword's ancient magic thrumming through the rock, resonating in my bones like a struck bell. It felt...familiar...somehow, like an old friend welcoming me home.

I wrapped my trembling fingers around the hilt, the leather warm and supple against my palm. For a moment, I simply savored the weight of it, the rightness of it in my hand. Then, with a deep breath, I pulled.

At first, nothing happened. The sword remained stubbornly sheathed in stone, mocking my idiotic efforts. Behind us, the sounds of pursuit grew louder, the clatter of booted feet on cobblestones, the ring of steel being drawn.

We were going to die tonight.

"Arthur," Merlin warned, his voice tight with strain and barely leashed panic. His hands braced my shoulders, pouring his strength into me.

I clenched my jaw and tightened my grip, ignoring the white-hot agony searing through my side. Gritting my teeth, I threw every last ounce of my will into one final, desperate heave.

And the sword moved.

It moved.

It fucking moved!

It came free with a sound like a sigh, like a held breath that was finally released. Golden light exploded from the stone. It raced up the blade to wreath the hilt, dancing over my hands in warm, tingling waves. I felt it pouring into me, a rush of ancient power, heady and so fucking intoxicating. My hurts fell away and my wound knitted

back together instantly.

Merlin gasped behind me, staggering sideways. "Holy gods..." I turned to face him, the sword blazing in my hand. His blue eyes were wide with awe, lips parted in shock. "Excalibur chose you."

Before I could respond, a chorus of shouts rang out across the square. Ames and Reeno's reinforcements had arrived, a motley assortment of thugs and sellswords with murder in their eyes. They faltered at the sight of Excalibur pulsing with golden light.

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Chapter Two

ARTHUR

All around us, people began to emerge from their homes and shops, drawn by the commotion and the otherworldly glow. They gathered at the edges of the square, murmuring in shock and wonder. Shopkeepers and merchants, mothers with babes in their arms, grizzled old men leaning on gnarled canes—all staring at me with a mixture of reverence and disbelief.

"The sword!" a woman cried, her voice shaking. "It's chosen someone at last!"

"Impossible," a man hissed. "The sword could never choose a woman." But his eyes told a different story as he stared at me in disbelief.

A ripple passed through the growing crowd, building like a wave. More and more people poured into the square, heedless of the rain, their faces upturned and shining in Excalibur's light. Their awe was a palpable thing, pressing against my skin until I felt like I could barely breathe.

"Arthur," Merlin said cautiously. "We need to get out of here now."

Just then, dozens of palace guards emerged from the streets like a steel tide, their crimson cloaks billowing in the wind. They marched into the square in perfect formation, boots striking the mud in unison. At their head strode a towering figure in ornate armor, a plumed helmet tucked under one arm.

"Make way for the Captain of the Guard!" one of the soldiers bellowed.

The captain came to a halt before the plinth, his eyes raking over me and Merlin, lingering on Excalibur blazing in my grip. Up close, I could see the lines of age and experience etched into his weathered face, the silver threading his dark hair and close-cropped beard.

"So," he said, his voice deep and measured, but not unkind. "The sword has chosen."

I couldn't tell if it was anger in his voice or just confusion. The other guards surrounding him glanced at one another, then back at me as if they couldn't comprehend what they were seeing.

It was not a question, but I answered anyway. "I suppose it has."

The captain studied me for a long, weighted moment, assessing me and judging. I met his gaze squarely, chin lifted. Never in my twenty-four years on this earth have I let a man talk down to me, and it wouldn't be starting now.

Then, moving slowly and with great ceremony, the captain sank to one knee. He bowed his head, fist pressed to his heart in a gesture of fealty. "My lady," he said, the words with utter reverence.

All around him, the palace guards followed suit, dropping to their knees in a ripple of crimson cloaks and glinting armor. Their heads bowed as one, fists over their hearts, a sea of allegiance.

The watching crowd gasped and murmured, then slowly, hesitantly, they too began to kneel. Weathered knees and work-roughened hands sank into the muddy cobblestones as they paid homage. To me. Their future queen.

Holy gods...

I stood frozen, unable to comprehend what was happening. It felt like a dream, or maybe a nightmare. A day ago, an hour ago, I had been a nobody. A vagrant and a thief, scraping by on quick wits and quicker fingers. Now I held a legendary sword and a hundred people knelt at my feet, ready to pledge their lives to my cause.

But I had no cause. I was nobody.

A warm hand settled on the small of my back, startling me. But it was just Merlin. I glanced at him and found his eyes already on me, bright with awe. "Don't let them see you falter. They're hoping for it," he whispered, so low that only I could hear him.

The captain rose to his feet. He approached me with measured steps, his expression inscrutable. "My lady," he said again, bowing his head. "By the ancient laws of Camelot, we must bring you before the king. He will wish to see the chosen wielder of Excalibur with his own eyes."

My stomach clenched with nerves, but I nodded. "I understand."

The captain gestured to his men. "Form up! We escort the lady to the castle." The guards rose in a clatter of armor, falling into formation around me.

I glanced back at Merlin, suddenly desperate not to be parted from him. He was the only familiar thing in this strange new world I'd been thrust into. "Merlin..."

He squeezed my hand, his eyes holding mine. "Don't worry, Wart. I'll be right behind you. I promise I'll find you as soon as I can."

I clung to his words like a lifeline as the guards marched me away, the crowd parting

before us. We passed through the winding streets. The people pressed close to catch a glimpse of me, their faces alight with wonder and hope. Children darted underfoot, their laughter chasing me as they reenacted the moment I'd drawn the sword.

All too soon, we reached the castle gates. They loomed before us, wrought from the blackest iron, twined with vines of hammered silver. Beyond them, the castle rose in a sprawl of soaring towers and crenelated walls, its pale stone turned to molten gold by the rising sun. Crimson pennants snapped in the wind, the dragon of Camelot on their folds.

The guards led me across the lowered drawbridge, our footsteps echoing off the ancient stones. We passed through a labyrinth of courtyards and cloistered walks, past burbling fountains and gardens lush with herbs and flowers. Servants in the royal livery stopped to stare as we went by, their eyes wide.

At last we reached the keep, its massive doors carved with scenes from legend: the forging of Excalibur, the rise of the first kings, the coming of magic to the land. The captain raised a gloved hand, and the doors swung inward on silent hinges, revealing a cavernous hall.

I stepped inside and felt the weight of centuries pressing down on me. Tapestries adorned the walls, telling the story of Camelot in vibrant threads. My gaze was drawn to the far end of the hall, where a dais rose in three marble steps. And upon that dais was a throne hewn from a single block of gleaming obsidian, shot through with veins of gold.

The man who sat on that throne had a face both handsome and a bit terrifying, framed by a mane of silver hair that gleamed in the golden light. His eyes were the color of a winter sky. He wore robes of dark red, embroidered with the golden dragon sigil in shimmering thread. A heavy golden crown rested upon his brow, studded with sapphires the size of a coin.

Uther Pendragon was the High King of Camelot, the largest kingdom in all of Albion.

I stood on legs that trembled, forcing myself to meet his eyes. Up close, the lines of care and age that scored his face, the weariness that lurked behind the facade, were apparent. I wondered what Uther thought of me, a girl covered in mud and blood gripping Excalibur as if her life depended on it. And it very well might.

The massive doors at the far end of the hall swung open once more. A group of men strode in, their steps ringing on the flagstones. Each was clad in pitch black armor, with silken black cloaks swirling behind them.

The Knights of the Round Table. The men sworn to protect the wielder of Excalibur, to fight and die at their command.

They moved with the easy grace of the fae, honed over hundreds of years of their long lives. They were each impossibly tall and broad, a few of them with hair so long it reached past their shoulders, exposing pointed ears. As one, they knelt before the throne, fists pressed to armored chests.

"My liege," their leader said, his voice a deep, cultured rumble that had a slight, barely noticeable accent. "We came as soon as we heard. Is it true? Has Excalibur chosen?"

Uther inclined his head toward me. "See for yourself, Sir Lancelot."

The knight turned, his eyes widening as they fell on me and the sword blazing in my grip. Slowly, he rose to his feet; the others followed suit. I felt the weight of their gazes like a physical thing, assessing, weighing.

It took all I had in me to keep from bursting into a fit of laughter. This was absurd.

"You're the chosen one?" he—Sir Lancelot—asked.

I held out the sword, the blade shimmering with its unearthly light. The runes etched into the steel seemed to dance and twist before my eyes, ancient and unreadable, in some language of the fae, no doubt. Lancelot's eyes widened as he took in the sight of it.

"Impossible," he breathed, taking a step closer. His gaze raked over me, taking in my bedraggled appearance, my simple tunic and leggings still damp with rain. "The sword was not supposed to choose a woman."

Something hot bloomed in my chest, and I narrowed my eyes at the knight. Who said the sword wasn't supposed to choose a woman? Where was it written that a woman couldn't possibly be worthy?

"And yet, here we are," I said dryly, an eyebrow arching. "The last time I bothered to check, I was still very much a woman."

Lancelot circled me slowly, his steps measured and predatory. I turned with him, unwilling to let him out of my sight. The other knights watched in silence, their faces utterly devoid of any discernible emotion.

"Who are you?" Lancelot asked at last, coming to a halt before me. "What is your name?"

"Arthur." The word echoed through the hall. "My name is Arthur."

Lancelot's brows shot up. "Arthur?" he repeated, incredulous. "That's a man's name."

"Yes, I'm aware." I saw the question in his eyes and answered before he could ask. "I was raised in an orphanage. When I first came to them, I was so small and scrawny,

they thought I was a boy. They called me Arthur and eventually it just...was. I can't remember my given name."

Lancelot looked at me long and hard. I perceived the doubt and disbelief warring in his eyes, the struggle to reconcile what he saw with what he'd always been told. A woman wielding Excalibur?

But there was something else in his gaze too, something that made my breath catch in my throat. A flicker of admiration, of respect. As if, despite himself, he couldn't help but be impressed by the sheer audacity of it all. A scrappy orphan girl daring to claim a legendary relic.

"You're a halfling." His eyes darted to my pointed ears.

My face flushed, and I hated that he could see it. "I don't know which of my parents was fae, but I grew up among humans."

Halflings were common in Albion. During the war that took place between the courts in Avalon, fae from both courts fled through the portals to find safety with humans. Some stayed, mating with humans and raising halfling children. I never had the chance to know either of my parents. I could barely even remember their faces.

After a long moment, he gave a slight nod, as if to himself. "The king will decide if you're truly the chosen one."

"Yes," Uther agreed, rising from his throne. He descended the dais slowly, his steps heavy and booming through the silent room. The knights parted before him like water, bowing their heads in deference.

He came to a halt in front of me, his eyes like chips of ice in his stoic face. I had to crane my neck to meet his gaze, feeling suddenly...common and oh so ordinary.

"This kingdom has waited centuries for Excalibur to choose its champion, but I never thought it would be a mere girl covered in filth and the gods only know what else."

Slowly, I lifted my eyes. "With respect, Your Majesty. I might be a woman , but I'm far from mere ."

I had to pretend. At least until I was out of the room. Until I was alone and safe. I had to pretend that I was stronger than I was. That I was more than I was.

The guards in the room shuffled on their feet, and a low murmur filled the room, silenced only by Uther's sharp gaze. I met that gaze squarely, refusing to flinch or look away. Let him see me, all of me. The thief and the vagrant, the lost orphan girl and the woman I wasn't sure I could become. The woman Excalibur had seen fit to choose above all others.

"Bold words," Uther said at last, a hint of grudging respect in his voice. "But words are wind, child. It is actions that will prove your worth in the end." He strode around me in a wide circle. "You will perform a quest. Let it be the ultimate test. If you live, and return to me alive, then you, my dear, are truly my rightful heir, and will ascend the throne to be hailed High Queen."

I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry as dust. A quest. Of course there would be a quest. Some impossible task to prove my worth, my right to wield this sacred blade.

"What would you have me do, Your Majesty?" I asked, proud of the steadiness of my voice.

High Queen. Was this really happening? I wanted to laugh, but I had a feeling Uther wouldn't appreciate that very much.

"In the heart of the Wandering Wood—" His eyes lost focus as he stared at something

over my head, "there lies an ancient stone temple. A place of power, created by the old gods themselves. At its center stands an altar, and upon that altar, a golden chalice. The Holy Grail."

A murmur rippled through the assembled knights. I felt my heart stutter a beat. The Holy Grail. The myth of all myths, said to grant eternal life to any who drank from it. Men had searched for centuries and never found even a whisper of its whereabouts, or the path to the mythical Wandering Wood in the first place.

"Bring me the Grail. Prove yourself worthy of Excalibur and the crown. Do it and they both shall be yours."

What was the catch? Because there was always a damn catch .

I looked to Lancelot and to the knights flanking him. Their faces were unreadable still, but I sensed the weight of their expectations, their doubts. They didn't believe I could do it. Didn't believe in me. I wasn't sure I even blamed them.

"What are the terms?" I asked sharply. Another murmur went through the room at my lack of formality.

Uther nodded towards Lancelot. "You and your knights will complete this quest together, but it will be you and only you who will capture the Grail. If you fail, then your life is forfeit."

I released a slow breath, my mind racing. The terms were harsh—unforgiving even. But what choice did I have? If I refused the quest, I would be branded a coward, unworthy of the sword at my hip. And more than that, I would never know if Excalibur had truly chosen rightly. If there was more to me than the thief and the vagrant.

I didn't want this. Any of it. There were stories told by peasants of lowly men thrust up from obscurity, becoming a great hero who defied the odds. But I wasn't one of those men.

With all eyes on me, I had to make a decision. There was no time to deliberate. No time to weigh the odds. The king waited, but he wasn't known for being patient.

"I accept," I said finally, though it really wasn't a choice. "I'll bring you this Holy Grail, or-or I'll die in the attempt I suppose."

The odds of that eventuality were staggeringly high. It felt like someone else was talking in my place. As if I were merely a passenger in my own body. A small part of me considered that this might be a dream, and any minute now, Merlin would pour cold water on my face, jolting me from sleep in the ramshackle old barn.

Uther nodded, satisfaction glinting in his wintry eyes. "So be it. You have until the next full moon to complete your quest. Go now, and may the gods watch over you, Arthur."

I bowed my head, fist pressed to my heart in the gesture of fealty in the same way I'd seen the knights move. Then I turned on my heel and strode from the hall. Whispers followed me, and I ignored the eyes licking over my mud-covered form. Judging me.

In the entrance hall just outside of the main throne room, a group of women were waiting for me, clad in matching golden dresses with red sashes. They curtsied as one, skirts pooling on the flagstones.

"My lady," the foremost said, her voice sweet and welcoming. "We're here to escort you to your chambers, to prepare for your quest."

I blinked. "My chambers?"

"But of course, my lady," another said, her smile gentle. "As the chosen wielder of Excalibur, you are now heir apparent to the throne. Your chambers await you in the royal wing."

My head spun. Chambers in the royal wing, as if I were a princess out of a storybook. It seemed too fantastical to be real.

"Please, come with us." The first woman beckoned me forward.

In a daze, I allowed them to lead me through a labyrinth of corridors, each more grand than the last. Soaring stone arches, intricate tapestries, gilded chandeliers dripping with crystal droplets. Everywhere, the dragon of Camelot reared in gold, crimson, and emerald green.

At last, we stopped before a massive oaken door, banded with wrought iron scrollwork. The women pushed it open to reveal a suite of rooms. A vast receiving room featured a vaulted ceiling adorned with intricate frescoes of dragons and knights. Tapestries depicting sea monsters and pirate ships hung on the walls.

A massive fireplace dominated one wall, the mantle carved with twining vines and delicate flowers. Before it, a plush rug in deep crimson so thick my feet sank into it with each step. The furniture was all carved of gleaming mahogany—a long dining table that could easily seat twenty, a sideboard laden with silver platters and crystal decanters, plump armchairs and settees upholstered in gold brocade.

Double doors led out onto a wide balcony overlooking the palace gardens, the scent of jasmine and roses wafting in on the breeze. The other doors led to the bedchamber, the dressing room, the study, and a small library. Each was more grand than the last, draped in silks and velvets, glittering with gilt and precious gems.

The bed was a vast expanse of carved wood, and the posts were twined with climbing

roses wrought in gold. The coverlet was cloth-of-gold, scattered with seed pearls and glinting with tiny mirrors.

"This...this is too much," I murmured, turning in a slow circle to take it all in. "I don't belong here. I'm not..."

"You're the chosen one," the first woman said firmly, her eyes kind. "This is exactly where you belong. Now come, it's time to get you cleaned up."

I peered down at myself and grimaced. I would have smelled my sleeve to see just how atrociously I'd appeared before the king, but I could smell the metallic, muddy reek from here. Maybe a bath was a good idea.

They led me into an adjoining chamber, where a large copper tub sat steaming before another roaring fire. The scent of lavender and rosemary wafted from the water. The women helped me undress, their hands gentle as they eased me into the bath.

I couldn't remember the last time I had been truly clean. As the women scrubbed me gently with soft cloths and fragrant soaps, I felt the grime of the city streets slowly melt away. They washed my hair with something that smelled of honey and summer rain, their fingers massaging my scalp until I thought I might drift off right there in the steaming water.

When at last they were done, my skin was pink and glowing, my hair a gleaming curtain of chestnut curls. They wrapped me in a robe of soft silk and led me back into the bedchamber.

There, laid out on the bed, was an array of clothing the likes of which I had never seen. Tunics of the finest linen, jerkins of supple leather, breeches cut from butter-soft doeskin. Boots of tooled leather, tall and sleek, polished to a shine.

Reaching out to touch them, I gaped at the feel of such finery beneath my fingertips, then I paused, frowning. No gowns... One of the women caught my eye and gave me a cheeky wink. My lips tugged up in response, meeting her smirk.

How did she know I was going to request men's style clothing? Maybe she was a sorcerer. Could she read my mind? I shuddered at the thought.

With nimble fingers, the women helped me dress in men's attire, lacing, buttoning, and buckling. Softer than anything I had ever worn, the linen tunic felt luxurious against my skin. Fitting like a second skin, the leather jerkin was both supple and sturdy, molding to the contours of my body.

I stood before the full-length mirror, barely able to recognize the woman staring back at me. Gone was the scrawny waif with hollow cheeks and haunted eyes. In her place stood a scrawny waif wrapped in a fancy costume. I looked good, but ultimately confused.

One of the women stepped forward, a slim circlet of silver in her hands. "A gift, my lady. From the king himself." She settled it on my brow, the metal cool and heavy against my skin. I touched it, feeling the intricate knotwork beneath my fingertips.

A knock sounded at the door, and a young page poked his head in, his eyes widening as he took in my transformation. "My lady," he stammered. "The king summons you to the Round Table. Your knights are waiting to meet you."

Your knights.

I had knights.

I followed the page through the twisting corridors of the castle, my heart pounding like a drum. The weight of Excalibur at my hip was a constant reminder of the fact

that I really could die in the coming days if I wasn't careful.

We emerged into a large vaulted chamber, its walls lined with soaring stained glass windows that cast dappled patterns of light across the flagstones. At the heart of the room stood a massive table, perfectly round, hewn from a single slab of stone. And around that table, seated in high-backed chairs carved with dragons and krakens, were the legendary Knights of the Round Table.

They rose as I entered, their faces a mix of curiosity and wariness. I recognized Lancelot, his shoulder-length golden hair gleaming in the light from the windows. He was the knight who commanded fire from his fingertips. That fire glowed in his golden eyes.

Beside him was Percival, the dark-haired, dark-eyed shadow knight, who could bend the darkness to his will. Damn, he was easy on the eyes. They all were, actually. But that was to be expected of fae males.

Galahad, the knight who spoke to creatures and whispered to the land, with flame red hair and a thick warrior-like beard and muscles on muscles, sat grinning at me, his brown eyes skimming up and down my body. He was a massive man, barely fitting in the chair.

Tristan sat next to him—the seer with long snow white hair that flowed like silk down his back, skin the color of the midnight sky, and eyes so silver they were almost colorless. He was so beautiful it was almost painful to look at him—both masculine and pretty at the same time.

Then there was Gawain, the ice wielder, with skin the color of fresh clay, black locks entwined with silver beads that reached his shoulders, held back with a small leather band, and gray eyes dancing with mischief. He had a thick black beard, with small braids woven through. He was nearly as large as Galahad, and just as handsome as

the rest.

I'd grown up listening to stories about these knights and their adventures, but I'd only ever seen them from a distance. Never in my life would I have imagined I'd be standing here in front of the Round Table itself, with their eyes pinned on me.

"Knights of the Round Table—" Uther's voice rang out, cutting through the silence. I looked up, watching as Uther stepped out onto a balcony that overlooked the room. "I present to you, your new champion. Arthur, first of her name."

Hearing it out loud was surreal, and again, I nearly laughed at the sheer absurdity of it all. First of her name...But what was my name? Arthur wasn't my given name, and I'd forgotten my family name a long time ago.

I expected the king to descend and join us, but to my shock, Uther turned and left the room, the door slamming behind him. The room felt heavy and still. I was trapped with five powerful fae warriors and no way to escape, even if I tried. Not that I planned on running. I didn't. I fully intended to see this through to the bitter end.

I lifted my chin, meeting their eyes squarely. I wouldn't cower before them, would not give them the satisfaction of seeing me flinch.

"I know what you're thinking," I said. "You're wondering if this is some kind of trick."

What was I doing speaking to the Knights of the Round Table this way? It would take less than a breath for Percival to send his shadows to silence me for good. But I had a suspicion that this was a test in itself. To see how the future queen handled herself in a room full of men.

I drew the sword from its new sheath in a whisper of steel, the blade shimmering in

the dappled light of the candles. The knights' eyes widened, a few hands going instinctively to the hilts of their own swords.

“But unfortunately for you lot, I never back down from a challenge. I’ve been told it’s one of my most annoying traits.” My lips pulled into a grin, and I could have sworn Gawain smirked. My eyes bounced between them, one by one.

Lancelot stepped forward, his eyes narrowed. "You may have drawn the sword, but that does not make you worthy of it yet.”

"You're right. Drawing the sword doesn't make me worthy. But neither does being born with a cock between your legs."

A few of the knights shifted on their feet, exchanging glances. Both Gawain and Galahad were outright grinning now, and there was a glimmer of amusement in Tristan’s eyes.

"Worthiness is proven through deeds, not words," I continued, sheathing Excalibur with a decisive snap. "And that's exactly what I intend to do. If King Uther wants the damned Holy Grail, then I’ll go get it for him.”

I was saying all the right things, I hoped. I really hoped and prayed I was.

"And how do you propose to do that?" Lancelot asked, arching a golden brow.

" That , my surly golden friend," I said, perching a hand on my hip and pointing a finger his way, “is what I need to figure out.”

He scoffed, sitting back in his chair. “I should have known.”

I shot him a flat look. "Just five hours ago, I was fighting off mercenaries in a

rundown barn after ditching a drink tab, with two silver coins to rub together and only one friend in the world. So forgive me for not having an elaborate plan for finding the Holy Grail ready to go." I gestured to the Round Table. "Shall we sit and discuss this like civilized folk? Or would you prefer to keep posturing?"

Lancelot's jaw tightened, but after a moment, he inclined his head. "As you wish, my lady." There was a hint of mocking in the title, but I let it slide.

The knights took their seats around the table, each moving with the grace and power of the fae. I settled into the grandest chair, the one directly opposite Uther's vacant seat. Lancelot sat to my right, Gawain to my left. The others arranged themselves in the remaining chairs, all eyes fixed on me.

"Right then." Leaning forward. I braced my elbows on the table. "The Wandering Wood. What do we know about it? It's in Avalon, if the stories are true, right?"

Lancelot held up a hand. "You're getting ahead of yourself. Before you can even think of entering Avalon, you'll have to pass a series of trials in Albion first. Each trial will lead you to the next, getting harder as they go."

"The trials are designed to test every aspect of a would-be ruler. Strength, courage, wisdom, virtue. Only the worthy will be able to pass through to the Wandering Wood," Tristan added, speaking for the first time. His voice was melodic and deeper than expected.

"Sounds delightful," I drawled with a sigh. "I don't suppose any of you strapping lads would care to offer some advice? Seeing as you're all so very ancient and wise."

Gawain barked a laugh, his gray eyes dancing. "Careful, little faerie. Some of us are older than the very stones of this castle. I'd wager we've forgotten more than you'll ever know."

I shot him a small grin, liking him already. "Ah, but the key word there is 'forgotten'. Meanwhile, my mind is as sharp as Lancelot's cheekbones."

Lancelot sputtered, his golden skin taking on a distinct flush. Even Percival, silent and watchful but brooding, cracked a smile.

"In all seriousness, though. I'd really appreciate any wisdom you could share. The fates think I'm the 'chosen one,' but honestly, this whole thing feels way over my head. I've never quested anything more important than my next meal."

Percival leaned forward, shadows seeming to cling to him like a second skin. "The trials will test you in ways you can't possibly prepare for. They're unpredictable. What worked for one ruler may kill the next one."

"Well, that's reassuring."

Galahad stroked his beard thoughtfully. "The key is to trust your instincts. Excalibur chose you for a reason. The sword doesn't make mistakes. It knows what it wants from its wielder, and what you can do."

"Easier said than done. My instincts are more attuned to picking pockets than passing divine tests." I was good at being unseen and unheard, but something told me this quest would be quite the opposite of that.

Gawain leaned back in his chair, propping his booted feet up on the table. "Then you'd best start honing some new instincts. The trials won't care about your sordid past."

I shot him a withering look. "Thank you, Sir Obvious. Any other dazzling insights you'd like to share?"

He just grinned, completely unrepentant, and opened his mouth, probably to say something idiotic.

Lancelot cut him off. "You're the first to search for the Holy Grail while also wielding Excalibur. Before that, it was only young kings with delusions of grandeur. I'm afraid we might all be out of our depth with what to expect this time around. What we can tell you is that the first trial will appear to you when you're least expecting it. A clue should present itself, but you won't know until it's staring you in the face. We'll travel to the Kingswood to start with, and from there, Excalibur's magic will take hold."

"And what role do you all play in this quest then?" I eyed each of them skeptically.

The knights exchanged glances, a silent conversation passing between them. "We're bound by the goddess Odessa to serve the wielder of Excalibur, and to protect and guide them on their path to the throne. But the trials themselves? Those you'll ultimately face alone. We cannot interfere with the trial."

I exhaled slowly. Alone. Because of course. Because becoming the ruler of a legendary kingdom couldn't possibly be easy. "Right then," I said, squaring my shoulders. "I suppose we should set out at first light?"

Lancelot nodded. "The sooner we begin, the better. The trials have a way of...accelerating matters."

That sounded ominous, but I pushed the thought aside. One impossible thing at a time.

As I glanced around the table, I met each knight's gaze one by one. "Clearly, I'm not what you expected. I'm not some noble-born warrior maiden or a powerful sorceress. I'm just...Arthur." Lifting my chin, a flicker of defiance ignited in my chest. "But

Galahad said the sword doesn't make mistakes."

Lancelot held my gaze, his molten eyes seeing too much for my comfort. "For all our sakes, I hope the sword chose wisely."

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Chapter Three

MERLIN

I slipped through the shadowed corridors of the castle, my footsteps silent on the worn flagstones. The weight of the day hung heavy on my shoulders, the image of Arthur standing on the stone, covered in blood, wielding Excalibur seared into my mind.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost didn't notice the figure detaching itself from the shadows ahead of me. Then a familiar voice spoke, low and amused. "You're losing your touch, Merlin. I could have stabbed you thrice over by now."

I looked up, a wry smile tugging at my lips. "Gaius. I should have known you'd be skulking about."

Gaius, the king's private sorcerer and my oldest friend, stepped into a shaft of moonlight, his face breaking into a smile. "Someone needs to keep an eye on you, especially now."

"You know, then?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, my eyes darting to the side. "About the sword and Arthur?"

He nodded. "I felt the magic shift when she pulled Excalibur from the stone. The prophecies are coming to life. The once and future king is back to unite the realms."

I rubbed my forehead. "I thought I'd have more time to prepare. She's so young,

Gaius.”

“As a halfling, she’ll have centuries to figure it out,” Gaius said gently. “Arthur will have to grow up fast if she wants to survive what’s coming.”

“And what exactly is coming?” I asked, dreading the answer.

Gaius glanced around to make sure we were alone before continuing. “I’ve heard whispers from beyond our borders. Mordred is gathering her forces. She’s aiming straight for Camelot.”

My blood ran cold at the mention of that name. Mordred—the king’s estranged daughter, a powerful sorceress cast out of Camelot years ago for dabbling in dark magic. I always knew she’d return one day, seeking revenge and her birthright.

“How long do we have?” I asked, already mapping out plans in my mind.

Gaius shook his head, his face grim. “It’s hard to say. Mordred is good at hiding her movements. But the signs are there for those who know how to see them. The crows are gathering, Merlin. War is on the way, and it’s sooner than we’d like.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, the weight of the realm settling on my shoulders like a leaden cloak. For centuries, Camelot had awaited the coming of the Once and Future King, the one destined to unite Albion and Avalon and usher in an age of peace and prosperity. I had always assumed it would be a man, a great warrior and leader, born to privilege and power.

Never in all my wildest dreams had I imagined it would be my best friend.

"Then we have to be ready," I said, my voice steely. "Arthur will need us now more than ever. We have to make damn sure she's equipped to face what the crown will

mean for her.”

Gaius nodded, his expression softening with understanding. "Of course, my boy. I will do all in my power to aid young Arthur, just as I once aided you." He reached out, gripping my shoulder. "She is lucky to have you by her side. Your bond with her is a powerful thing. It will see you both through the dark days ahead."

I swallowed against the sudden lump in my throat, my heart swelling with a fierce rush of love and protectiveness. My Wart, my...queen. I would walk through fire for her. I would lay down my fucking life to keep her safe.

"I failed her, Gaius," I said softly, the old guilt rising up to choke me. "When we were children, when the village burned, I promised her I would always protect her, and I failed."

"You were a child yourself," Gaius said firmly. "You did all you could. And look at her now, Merlin. Look at the strong, brave, incredible woman she has become. That is in no small part thanks to you and your love for her. But there's something else you need to know." He tightened his grip on my shoulder. "The king has given Arthur a quest to prove she's worthy of wielding Excalibur and taking the throne."

I felt a chill run down my spine, a knot of dread forming in my stomach. "What kind of quest?" I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

Gaius's eyes were grave in the flickering torchlight. "Arthur has to travel to the heart of the Wandering Wood and fetch the Holy Grail from the ancient stone temple. Only then will Uther recognize her as his true successor."

My breath caught in my throat, my mind racing. The Grail. The most sacred relic, rumored to grant eternal life and healing to anyone who drank from it. People had been searching for it for centuries, often losing their minds or their lives in the

process. King after king had failed, even Uther himself. And now Arthur, my Arthur, was expected to succeed where so many had failed.

“But that’s...that’s impossible,” I whispered, shaking my head. “The Wandering Wood is like a maze of magic and illusions filled with creatures. And even if she makes it to the stone temple, the Grail is poison to anyone it deems unworthy. How can Uther expect her to survive all of that?”

Gaius sighed, his weathered face reflecting my horror. “I’m worried Uther might be setting Arthur up to fail,” he said. “There are plenty of people at court who don’t think a woman should take the throne. They see it as going against the natural order of things. By sending her on this impossible quest, Uther’s giving them the perfect chance to question her worth.”

A surge of white-hot anger shot through me, and I clenched my fists at my sides. How could they? How could they try to bring Arthur down before she even had the chance to show what she could do? Excalibur chose her, and she had courage and strength that far surpassed her years. Yet they were ready to dismiss her just because she was a woman.

“I won’t let that happen,” I said, nearly growling it. “I’ll go with her and use every bit of my magic to protect and guide her. When we come back victorious, they’ll have no choice but to recognize her as their true queen.”

“Good.” Gaius nodded, as if that was exactly what he’d been wanting to hear from me.

I left Gaius in the shadowed corridor, my mind churning with plans and possibilities as I made my way through the labyrinth of passages in the castle. I reached the ornate door to Arthur's new chambers, feeling for her familiar presence, as I always did.

The guard posted outside was looking the other way, so with the wave of my hand, I sent a spell towards him. It took effect immediately, and he slumped against the stone wall, asleep. With another wave of my hand, the lock slid open, and I slipped silently into the room, the heavy oak door swinging shut behind me with a muffled thud.

The chamber was bathed in the warm glow of flickering candles and the dying embers of a fire in the hearth. Tapestries depicting scenes from Camelot's history adorned the stone walls, their rich colors muted in the dim light.

And there, standing in front of a full-length mirror, was Arthur. My breath caught in my throat at the sight of her, in a tunic of deep crimson, the color of the Pendragon crest. Black breeches clung to her long, muscular legs, tucked into knee-high boots of supple leather. Her hair, usually a wild tangle of curls, had been tamed into a single braid that snaked down her back.

My cock hardened the way it always did when I looked at Arthur.

As she turned to face me, her large brown eyes widening in surprise, I felt my heart constrict with a fierce rush of pure desire. "Merlin," she breathed, a relieved smile playing at the corners of her full lips. "I didn't hear you come in."

Her face was flushed, her cheeks a light rosy tint and made the singular dark brown freckle under her right eye more prominent. It was the reason I'd started calling her Wart when we were kids, because I loved to tease her about it, despite it being my most favorite feature of hers. How many years had I imagined placing a kiss right there under her eye?

"I have my ways," I said, stepping further into the room. The air between us felt charged, as it always did when we were alone together. "I just spoke with Gaius."

She always loved Gaius. The moment we realized I could wield magic, Gaius took

me under his wing. Arthur made it her mission to make sure I was in good hands. Gaius was amused by Arthur and sometimes even allowed her to sit in on a lesson or two.

Arthur's smile faltered, and she looked away, her shoulders tensing beneath the fine fabric of her top. "The king thinks I need to prove how worthy I am."

I crossed the room in a few long strides, grasping her shoulders and turning her to face me. "You have nothing to fucking prove. Not to me, not to anyone. You are worthy. You always have been."

She swallowed hard, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "He chose the Grail for a reason. He thinks it's impossible. Even he failed when he was our age, and so did his father and his father's father."

I tightened my grip on her shoulders, my heart aching at the pain and self-doubt I saw in her eyes. "Listen to me, Wart. You are not Uther, or his father, or any of the kings who came before them. You are something entirely new. Something Camelot has never seen before. A queen, yes, but more than that. A leader who will rule with compassion and wisdom, who will unite the land in a way no one else could."

Her eyes suddenly shone with familiar mischief, and her pink lips quirked up on one side, sending my heart once again racing. "Does this mean you're coming with me then?" Her lashes fluttered dramatically.

A slow grin spread across my face as I looked down at her, my hands still gripping her shoulders. "Of course I'm coming with you, you idiot. Did you really think I'd let you go off on some deadly quest without me?"

She laughed, a sound that never failed to make my heart soar. "I don't know, Merlin. You're getting a bit old. Might slow me down."

I scoffed, releasing her shoulders to place a hand over my heart in mock offense. "Old? I'm three years older than you. I'll have you know I'm in the prime of my life."

She snorted, shoving at my chest playfully. "I can still pick pockets faster than you."

I caught her hand, bringing it to my lips to press a soft kiss to her knuckles. "I'm sure you can, Wart. But I'd slay a thousand fucking dragons and go on endless deadly quests just to keep up."

Something in her expression softened, the teasing glint in her eyes replaced by a heat that made my breath catch. "Merlin," she whispered, her fingers tightening around mine.

Yes... Yes, yes, yes.

Suddenly she was kissing me, her lips soft and insistent against my own. I groaned into her mouth, my hands coming up to tangle in her braid as I pulled her flush against me. We'd almost kissed back in the barn, and being interrupted by those mercenaries had ruined years of tension that had been ready to combust between us.

I'd dreamed of kissing Arthur this way, of having her pink lips pressed against mine. I dreamed of feeling her supple skin under my calloused palms as I did things to her that would have her writhing for me.

Her tongue slid against mine as the kiss deepened, sending sparks of desire racing through my veins. I walked her backwards until her thighs hit the edge of the ornate four-poster bed, our lips never parting. With a gentle push, she fell back onto the plush covers, her braid coming undone as I pulled off the band, the curly strands spilling across the pillows.

I crawled over her, bracing myself on my forearms as I hovered inches from her face.

"You are so beautiful," I breathed, trailing my fingers down the side of her face. "I've wanted this, wanted you , for so long."

"You should have taken what you wanted then," she teased, nipping at my bottom lip playfully.

A low growl escaped my throat, and I captured her lips in a searing kiss. My hands roamed her body, sliding beneath her tunic and jerkin to caress the smooth skin of her stomach. She arched into my touch, a breathy moan escaping her lips as I cupped her breast through the thin fabric of her top.

"Say yes," I gritted out through my teeth between kisses. My cock was so hard it wanted to burst. "Say it?—"

"Yes..." she said with a moan.

With a muttered word and a flash of golden magic, her clothes vanished, leaving her bare and flushed beneath me. I sat back on my heels, drinking in the sight of her. "We don't have nearly enough time for what I've wanted to do to you."

My eyes flitted to the chamber door. They'd come for her soon. The quest was to start immediately, and we'd be leaving the moment the sunlight touched the horizon.

Arthur gazed up at me, her eyes dark with desire. "Then we'll just have to make the most of the time we do have, won't we?"

She fisted her hands in my tunic and pulled me back down to her. Our lips crashed together in a kiss that was all teeth and tongue, hunger and desperation. I ground my hips against hers, my hardness pressing insistently against her thigh.

"Fuck—" I groaned, breaking the kiss to trail my lips down the column of her throat.

I nipped and sucked at the sensitive skin, reveling in the breathy little moans that escaped her.

My hands continued their exploration of her body, mapping out every curve and plane. I palmed her breasts, rolling her nipples between my fingers until they pebbled under my touch. She arched into me as her nails dug deliciously into my shoulders.

I kissed my way down her body, pausing to lave attention on her breasts before continuing my descent. I settled between her thighs, breathing in the heady scent of her arousal. "You smell so fucking good," I murmured, nuzzling against her inner thigh. "I bet you taste even better."

A breath later, my mouth was on her, my tongue parting her folds to flick against her clit. She cried out, her hips bucking up to meet me. I slid two fingers inside her slick heat, groaning at how tight and wet she was. I pumped my fingers in and out, curling them to hit that sensitive spot inside her as I lapped and sucked at her clit.

"Merlin, oh gods," she moaned, her fingers tangling in my hair, holding me to her. I noticed her thighs began to tremble, her inner walls fluttering around my fingers as she climbed towards her peak.

I redoubled my efforts, determined to make her come undone. My tongue swirled and flicked, my fingers thrusting faster, deeper. Her moans grew louder, more desperate, until finally she shattered with a cry of my name, her body shuddering with the force of her release.

I worked her through it, gentling my touch as she came down from her high. When the last aftershocks had passed, I kissed my way back up her body, claiming her lips in a deep, sensual kiss.

"That was..." she panted when we finally parted, a blissful smile on her face.

Suddenly, she frowned and raised her head up, eyes meeting mine. "Why haven't we been doing that the whole damn time?"

I chuckled, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Because you were a bit busy picking the pocket of every wealthy man in Camelot, and I was a bit busy making sure you didn't get yourself killed in the process."

"Well, we've clearly been missing out." She leaned up to kiss me again, her hands sliding beneath my tunic to caress the muscles of my back.

I groaned into her mouth, my body responding instantly to her touch. But even as I lost myself in the taste and feel of her, a nagging thought tugged at the back of my mind. With great reluctance, I pulled back, looking down at her with a seriousness that made her brow furrow.

Softly, I brushed a stray curl from her face. "We need to talk about what this means. For us. For the future."

She frowned. "What do you mean? I-I love you, Merlin. I have for years. And now we can finally be together."

My mouth went dry and my heart clenched painfully at her admission, at the open adoration shining in her eyes. At the words that I laid awake at night for years imagining I'd hear falling from her lips. But the reality was far more complicated.

"Arthur," I said gently, "you're going to be queen of Camelot. And as queen, you'll be expected to take a consort. A king." I swallowed hard, the words like ashes in my mouth.

Arthur's eyes flashed with defiance, her jaw setting in that stubborn way I knew all too well. She sat up fully, and the sheets pooled around her waist as she glared at me.

"I don't give a damn about expectations. I'm not going to let some archaic tradition dictate who I can and can't love."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair in frustration. "It's not that simple. The court, the nobles, they'll expect you to marry a prince. They'll never accept a queen who takes a lowborn sorcerer as her consort. They'll see it as a weakness, a sign that you're unfit to rule."

She scoffed, crossing her arms over her bare chest. "Then they're fools."

I couldn't help the surge of warmth that flooded through me at her words, at the fierce conviction in her voice. But I knew I had to make her see reason. "Think about this logically. You're about to embark on a quest to prove your worthiness for the highest throne in all of Albion. How do you think it will look if you return with me as your chosen consort?"

Her eyes narrowed, a flicker of hurt passing over her face. "Are you saying you don't want to be with me? That you'd rather I marry some pompous princeling who cares more about wealth and status than he does about me? If that's?—"

"You know that's not what I'm saying. It doesn't mean we can't... indulge , but I don't know how it can ever be more." I cringed as the words fell from my lips like poison.

"Give me back my clothing," she clipped, her eyes looking past me. My chest filled with pressure as I snapped my fingers, and golden magic sparkled around her body that was instantly clothed again.

She was off the bed in a flash, heading to where she'd left a small table laden with various daggers, small pouches, and a sack of what I assumed were provisions. She wouldn't look at me.

“Don’t feel obligated to come with me, Merlin,” she said finally. “This is my quest, and I won’t ask you to risk yourself for me.”

“You can’t stop me,” I said, standing from the bed and striding towards Arthur. “We’re not done discussing thi?—”

A sharp knock at the door had us both going utterly still. I met her eyes in the mirror, filled to the brim with so many words we hadn’t said. As the door began to open and several servants let themselves inside, I waved a hand, and with a shimmer of golden magic, I was cloaked enough to slip past them and back out the door into the castle.

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Chapter Four

LANCELOT

"Lance, wait!" Gwen's melodic voice rang out behind me, stopping me where I stood. I drew in a deep breath, steeling myself before turning to face her. I'd just finished my evening patrol and was due at the table, but I had a feeling I was going to be later than I expected.

She approached, golden hair shimmering in the fading light. The sight of her beauty, once welcomed after a rough day, now only served to twist the knife of guilt deeper into my chest.

"Lady Gwenevere," I nodded. "What brings you out so late?"

"I had to see you." Her blue eyes searched mine imploringly as she came to a winded stop, breathing heavily. "We've hardly spoken in days."

I averted my gaze, unable to bear the hope and longing reflected in her eyes. The words I had rehearsed turned to ash on my tongue. How was I supposed to crush the heart of this kind woman who wanted nothing more than for me to love her as much as she loved me?

"Gwen... You knew what this was before it began. I never led you to believe otherwise." Every word was another knife. I could see each one of them slicing into her. Tears gathered in her eyes.

"I don't understand. Have I done something to offend you? Lance, I'm so?—"

I turned, cutting her off before she could beg me not to leave. Taking in a deep breath, I looked up at the castle, at the flickering glow of the windows that dotted the towers.

"I warned you from the start," I said as I slowly faced her again. "I am not a man who believes in love. When I took you to my bed, it was with the mutual understanding that I could walk away at any moment. No strings, no expectations. You agreed to that."

She flinched as if I had struck her. "But I thought...I thought things had changed between us. The way you looked at me, the way you held me..."

"You saw what you wanted to see. I'm not the man you want me to be, Gwen. We both know I'll never be him. I treated you well. The way a man ought to treat the woman in his bed, but if you imagined anything beyond that, then I'm sorry, but that's not my fault."

She took a step back, her hand pressed to her heart as if to keep it from shattering. Tears streamed down her face. As hard as it was to see her tears, every word out of my mouth was the truth. I didn't love Gwen. I liked her, sure. Even considered her a friend. But my feelings had never gone beyond fondness.

A pair of amber brown eyes, long chestnut curls, and a smirk that made my entire body heat flashed in my mind for the briefest moment. I shook her away, running my hand down my face. Now wasn't the fucking time.

"You deserve so much more than I can ever give you. You deserve a man who will love you with his entire being, who will cherish you and treat you like the treasure you are. That man isn't me."

I paused, letting my words sink in. The evening breeze carried the scent of honeysuckle, a cruel reminder of the sweetness that life could offer, but not for me. I was a man haunted by my own demons, unable to give myself fully to another.

"I know it hurts now, but in time, you'll see that this is for the best. You have so much love to give, Gwen. Don't waste it on someone who can't return it." Gwen's tears glistened in the moonlight. "From this moment forward, there can be nothing between us but friendship."

I watched as Gwen's face crumpled. She backed away from me, shaking her head like she no longer recognized me. She turned and fled, her sobs echoing through the courtyard. The sight of her retreating form, golden hair streaming behind her, sent a pang of guilt through my chest. I knew I had hurt her deeply, but it was a necessary pain. Better to cut ties now than to let her cling to false hope. In the end, I was fae, and she was human. It was a match doomed from the start.

With a heavy sigh, I turned and strode towards the castle, my boots echoing against the cobblestones. The weight of the night hung over me like a dark cloud, but I pushed the feeling aside. I had more pressing matters to attend to.

The round table stood at the center of the war room. My fellow knights were already seated, their faces bored. I took my place, nodding as I settled into the chair.

"Forgive me," I said with a sigh as Galahad slid a goblet of wine my way and I grabbed it gratefully. "I was unavoidably detained." I winced and couldn't even attempt to hide it.

Gawain leaned back in his chair, a mischievous glint in his steel-gray eyes. "Unavoidably detained, eh? Let me guess, a certain golden-haired maiden needs consoling after you broke her pretty heart?"

I shot him a withering glare, but it only seemed to fuel his amusement. Galahad, ever the peacemaker, placed a calming hand on my shoulder. "What Gawain means to say is that we understand, Lance. It's never easy to let someone down, especially someone as kind-hearted as Gwen."

I grunted, taking a long swig of the rich, full-bodied wine. The warmth spread through my chest, easing some of the tension that had settled there. "It had to be done. Better to get it done now, before things become complicated."

Gawain chuckled. "Well, look on the bright side. With Gwen out of the way, you're free to pursue other... interests ." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively, and I felt a flush creep up my neck.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I growled, but the memory of those amber eyes and chestnut curls flashed through my mind once more. I shook my head, trying to dispel the image.

Tristan's silver eyes suddenly flashed an eerie, glowing white that contrasted strikingly with his deep, night colored skin. The room fell silent as we all turned to stare at him, the air suddenly heavy with tension. I felt a chill run down my spine as I watched him, his body rigid and his face contorted in a mask of concentration.

Tristan hailed from the Unseelie Court of Avalon, from a long line of seers and mind magic. There might even be a bit of druid blood in his line, but we weren't sure.

The seconds ticked by, each one feeling like an eternity. Galahad and Gawain exchanged worried glances, but I kept my gaze fixed on Tristan. I'd seen him have visions before, and it ever failed to make me uneasy.

Just as suddenly as it had begun, the glow faded from Tristan's eyes. He blinked, his shoulders sagging as if a great weight had been lifted from them. His gaze darted

around the room, taking in our concern.

"What did you see?" Percy asked.

Tristan inhaled deeply, his hands gripping the edge of the table. "Mordred," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I saw Mordred."

The name hung in the air like a curse, sending a ripple of unease through the room.

Gawain leaned forward abruptly. "What about that bitch?"

Tristan shook his head. "She was in a dark place, and all I could hear was the sound of hundreds of crows. She was in pain. Screaming, but there was no sound coming from her lips."

Dread filled me instantly and sobered every knight in the room. Mordred was dangerous, and Uther had let her run amok in Camelot for far too long before her exile. She craved the throne and would stop at nothing to get it, even going so far as to use dark magic to force the sword from the stone and steal it for herself.

If Tristan was seeing her in his visions, then it meant nothing good for us.

Nothing good for Arthur either.

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Chapter Five

ARTHUR

I sat tall in the saddle, my heart racing with a mix of excitement and nerves as I looked out at the sea of faces in front of me. The castle gates loomed ahead, and beyond them, the cheering crowd stretched as far as the eye could see. Their voices blended into a wild mix of good wishes and hopeful shouts, filling the air with a buzz.

Next to me, the five fae knights were on their horses, their black riding clothes replacing their armor. Gawain shot me a cheeky grin, his dark locks tied behind his head. Percival looked serious and cold, his pale skin and night-black hair shrouded under a hooded cloak.

Galahad's amber eyes were filled with excitement and humor as he waved to the crowd, chest puffed up, while Tristan's gaze was far away, like he was lost in a different moment in time. And there was Lancelot, his long dark golden hair waving in the gentle breeze while his golden eyes searched the crowd. He was always on alert, with his hand hovering just over the hilt of his sword.

I took a deep breath, taking in the scent of leather and horse mixed with the sweet smell of wildflowers on the hillside. My horse, a stunning chestnut mare, was pawing at the ground, itching to get going. I ran my hand along her neck, feeling her strength just beneath that shiny coat.

A woman emerged from the crowd, her long golden hair flowing behind her like a river of molten sunshine. She moved with a purposeful stride, her emerald green

dress hugging her curves before cascading to the ground in a waterfall of shimmering fabric.

The crowd parted for her, whispers rising like a gentle breeze as she approached Lancelot's horse. He stiffened in his saddle, his hand tightening on the reins. I watched, curiosity piqued, as they locked eyes, a silent conversation passing between them.

The woman's face was a mask of emotions—sorrow, longing, and something else I couldn't quite place. Tears glistened in her eyes, catching the light like tiny diamonds. She reached out a delicate hand, as if to touch Lancelot, but pulled back at the last moment, her fingers curling into a fist.

Lancelot leaned down from his saddle, his voice low and urgent. I strained to hear, but their words were lost in the murmur of the crowd. The woman shook her head, her hair dancing around her shoulders. She cast a glance in my direction, wariness etched into the lines of her face, before turning away, her skirts swirling around her legs as she disappeared back into the sea of people.

I turned to Lancelot, a thousand questions burning on my tongue. But the look on his face stopped me cold. His jaw was clenched, his eyes stormy with a maelstrom of emotions I couldn't even begin to untangle.

I tore my gaze away from Lancelot, pushing the mysterious woman to the back of my mind as the castle gates creaked open. It was time. With a deep breath, I urged my mare forward. The knights fell into formation behind me as we rode into the courtyard. King Uther stood at the top of the steps, his silver hair glinting in the sun. His face was lined with age, but his eyes sparkled with power as he looked down at me.

"Arthur," he said, his voice carrying across the courtyard. "Today, you ride out to

claim your destiny. May the gods watch over you and guide your path."

I inclined my head, gritting my teeth against the urge to shout something back at him that might earn me some chains on my wrists. Then I remembered my own position, and how the wind had changed in my favor. I wasn't just a girl anymore. I was the rightful heir to the throne of Camelot. The thought made me grin back at Uther.

With a final bow, I turned my horse towards the gates. The crowds pressed in on either side, their voices rising in a cacophony of cheers and shouts.

"Long live Queen Arthur!" they cried, tossing flowers at my mount's feet. The sweet scent of roses and lilies filled the air, mingling with the sweat and dust of the city.

But not all of them cheered. Some of them sent curses my way, some spat on the cobblestone as we trotted by. I sensed their glares boring into my back, their hatred and resentment seeping into my skin like poison. I tried to ignore them, to focus on the adoring faces and the shouts of support, but it was like trying to ignore a dagger pressed against my spine.

As we rode through the winding streets, I caught snippets of whispered conversations, hissed accusations that made my blood run cold.

"She's not fit to be queen," one woman spat, her face twisted with disgust. "A peasant girl, raised in an orphanage? What does she know of ruling a kingdom?"

"Uther has lost his mind," a man muttered, shaking his head. "Naming a girl as his heir? It's madness."

I clenched my jaw, my fingers tightening on the reins until my knuckles turned white. I wanted to whirl around, to shout at them that I was more than just a peasant girl, that the sword had chosen me, not the other way around. But I knew it would be

useless. They had already made up their minds about me.

Galahad must have sensed my unease, because he urged his horse forward until he was riding alongside me. "Ignore the rabble," he said, waving them off. "They just like to have someone new to hate."

I held my tongue, but gave him a thankful smile.

As we left the city behind, the noise of the crowds faded away, replaced by the gentle rustle of leaves and the chirping of birds. The sun filtered through the canopy of trees, casting dappled shadows on the forest floor. I inhaled deeply, savoring the earthy scent of moss and damp soil.

We ventured deeper into the woods and the trees grew taller, more ancient. Their trunks were gnarled and twisted with age. The air hummed with a strange energy, a prickling sensation that danced across my skin like invisible fingers.

I shivered, pulling my cloak tighter around my shoulders. There was magic here, old and powerful. I felt it in my bones. This side of the Kingswood was neutral lands, and was generally seen as safe for humans. But once we crossed the boundary into the wilds, we'd be vulnerable to all the ancient creatures who dwelt there.

Suddenly, a shadow passed overhead, blocking out the sun for a moment. I looked up, my hand instinctively reaching for my sword until I saw him. Merlin, perched atop a magnificent creature with the body of a lion and the wings and head of an eagle. A griffin.

The creature's feathers gleamed like bronze in the dappled sunlight, its eyes a piercing amber that twinkled back at me. It landed gracefully in front of our procession, and I heard the slide of steel as all five of my knights drew their weapons.

My heart gave a lurch as Merlin lowered his hooded cloak, revealing his shoulder length dark hair and familiar blue eyes. He smirked at me, and my body flushed, suddenly remembering the way those lips had felt between my thighs only hours ago.

I raised my hand, signaling for the knights to stand down. "Put away your damn weapons," I commanded, slicing through the tense silence. "This is Merlin—my friend. I trust him."

The knights hesitated for a moment, their eyes darting between me and the cloaked figure atop the griffin. Then, slowly, they lowered their swords, sliding them back into their scabbards with a soft hiss of metal on leather.

I nudged my horse forward, closing the distance between myself and Merlin. As I drew closer, I could see the mischief dancing in his eyes, the way his lips twitched as if he were holding back a laugh.

"Your Highness," he said, inclining his head in a bow that managed to be both respectful and playful at the same time. "I trust your journey has been uneventful thus far?"

"As uneventful as a ride through the city streets with a mob of angry peasants can be," I replied dryly, raising an eyebrow at him. "But I suspect you already knew that."

Merlin leaned forward, resting his arms on the griffin's feathered neck. "I may have heard a few particularly scathing jabs from the skies, but I have faith in your ability to win them over."

Percival urged his horse forward, his dark eyes narrowing as he looked up at Merlin. "You're a sorcerer... Only those trained in the druid arts can command a griffin."

The forest around us suddenly grew darker and colder, as if all the sunlight and

warmth were being sucked away. I watched Percival, realizing that darkness swirled around him while light fled.

I knew the fae possessed magic. They were the only ones who were allowed to wield it aside from King Uther's personal sorcerer, Gaius.

Merlin's playful expression sobered, and he met Percival's gaze steadily. "I've been trained in the ways of magic since I was a boy."

"And who, pray tell, trained you?" Percival pressed as his hand fisted around what looked like a ball of pure darkness. "Sorcery is forbidden in Camelot, punishable by death."

Merlin nodded, his dark hair falling into his eyes. "I'm well aware of the laws, Sir Percival," he said, his eyes glinting as Percival's shoulders stiffened at the familiar use of his name. "Gaius himself trained me. He recognized my gift from a young age and took me under his wing."

A tense silence stretched between us, broken only by the rustle of leaves in the breeze and the occasional snort from the horses. Percival's ball of darkness pulsed and swirled in his hand, casting eerie shadows across his face.

"Gaius might have trained you, illegally, I might add, but that doesn't change the fact that sorcery is a crime in Camelot. How do we know you won't turn your magic against us? Against the queen?"

The queen.

I was the queen....

Hearing it out loud sent a wave of dizziness through me, and I was glad I was sitting.

Merlin's eyes flashed with anger, and for a moment, I thought I saw a hint of gold in their blue depths. "I would never betray Arthur. I promised to protect and serve her until my last fucking breath."

I held up my hand, silencing the knights before an argument could erupt. "Merlin's right. He's been by my side since we were children, scraping by in that orphanage together. I trust him with my life." I looked at each of the knights in turn, holding their gazes. "You've sworn an oath to protect me, and I'm grateful for that, but Merlin has made that same vow, even if it wasn't in front of a court or king. Merlin's magic has saved my life more times than I can count."

I took a deep breath and looked at each of the knights in turn. "You five share a bond of brotherhood, built over years of serving Camelot together. You trust each other completely and would lay down your lives for one another without a second thought. Merlin and I share that same bond. We might not have been knighted together, but we've faced challenges that could break lesser men."

I thought back to our childhood in the orphanage, remembering those long nights when we huddled together for warmth and the days we spent scavenging for scraps of food. "When the other children shunned him for his strange dreams and visions, I was there for him. I fought them off and was punished for it every time."

A smile crept onto my face at the memory. "And when I was sick with the sweating sickness, it was Merlin who stayed by my side day and night, feeding me broth and slowly healing me with what little magic he knew."

Lancelot's eyes searched mine, his brow furrowed as he wrestled with his thoughts. The sunlight glinted off his golden hair, casting a halo around his head. Finally, he let out a heavy sigh, his broad shoulders sagging slightly. "We'll trust your judgment then, but know that I will be watching the sorcerer closely. If he makes one wrong move, if he even hints at betraying you, I will not hesitate to strike him down."

Merlin inclined his head, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. "I would expect nothing less from the queen's most loyal knight."

Lancelot's jaw clenched, but he simply nodded stiffly before turning his horse back towards the path. The other knights followed suit, falling into formation around me once more.

A gust of wind rustled through the trees, carrying with it a cold whisper that chilled me to my bones. I glanced over my shoulder, peering into the shadowy depths of the forest, half-expecting to see glowing eyes or glistening fangs peering back at me. But there was nothing. Just the gentle sway of branches and the distant call of a raven.

Merlin flew ahead, his griffin's wings beating a steady rhythm against the sky. Every so often, he would swoop down low, his eyes scanning the forest floor for any signs of danger. I found myself watching him, admiring the way his body moved in perfect sync with the creature beneath him.

As if sensing my gaze, Merlin glanced back over his shoulder, his blue eyes locking with mine. A slow, wicked smile spread across his face, and I felt heat bloom in my cheeks. Memories of last night flooded my mind—the brush of his fingers on my skin. I shivered, my thighs clenching involuntarily around the saddle.

I tore my gaze away from Merlin, trying to focus on the path ahead. But my mind kept wandering, replaying every heated glance, every brush of skin on skin. It was maddening, the way he could unravel me with just a look. This change in dynamic between us was all so new. We'd had years to cross that threshold. Why had we waited until the day my life changed forever?

Galahad rode up beside me, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "You seem distracted, my lady," he said, his voice light and teasing.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, fighting a smile. "I was just...lost in thought."

Galahad raised an eyebrow, a knowing smirk tugging at his lips. "Of course. I'm sure your thoughts were purely innocent and not at all related to a certain dark-haired sorcerer who can't seem to stop staring at you like he wants to eat you."

"Careful," I warned playfully. "Or I might just have to challenge you to a duel to defend my own honor."

Galahad let out a hearty laugh, the sound echoing through the trees. "I would be honored to face you in combat," he said, giving me an exaggerated bow from atop his horse. "But I'm afraid I wouldn't stand a chance against your legendary sword." His eyes bounced to Excalibur at my hip.

I couldn't ignore the damn thing if I tried. Even sheathed, the blade called to me. It felt like a gentle hum of magic brushing against my thigh every so often, as if the sword wanted to remind me it was there.

"Maybe it would help if I knew how to use it," I muttered, almost to myself, but he heard. I knew how to fight when I needed to, but my training was nowhere near what I needed if I was going to be crowned queen once this quest was completed.

"From what I hear, you handled your own before pulling the sword free." Galahad looked me over deliberately slow. "Rumors have been swirling about you all night in Camelot, I'm afraid. The tiny woman who nearly killed two mercenaries." I scrunched up my nose at the memory of trying to scramble away from those awful men. Galahad laughed, and the deep rumble of it warmed me a little. "Maybe we can carve out some time between camps to teach you a thing or two about swordplay, hm?"

I felt a flush of excitement at Galahad's offer. The prospect of learning how to wield Excalibur properly from the fae knights themselves was thrilling. "I'd like that very much. Thank you, Galahad."

He grinned, the sun catching on his fiery hair. "It would be my pleasure. We can't have our queen going into battle unprepared now, can we?"

Battle. Was this my life now?

As we rode on, the air grew cooler, mist curling between the ancient trees. The back of my neck prickled, and I glanced around warily. These woods were different than the ones surrounding the city of Camelot—wilder, more untamed. I could feel the ancient magic thrumming in the earth, taste it on my tongue with each breath.

We came to a small clearing, and Lancelot held up a hand, signaling for us to halt. He swung down from his saddle in one smooth motion, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword as he scanned the tree line. "We'll make camp here for the night."

I looked around in confusion, watching as Merlin and his griffin circled above. "Why so soon? We still have daylight hours left."

"The wilds are a dangerous place. Before we go any further, we'll need to ward you," Lancelot said, and then nodded at Galahad. "Maybe you can use the few hours we have before the sun sets to begin her training. The gods know she needs it."

I scowled, but I had nothing to say to that, because unfortunately, he was right. As the knights set about unpacking bedrolls and kindling for a fire, Merlin landed his griffin at the edge of a tiny clearing. He slid from its back and murmured something in its ear before it took off again, disappearing into the darkening sky.

Merlin strode over to me, his cloak billowing behind him. He stopped inches away,

close enough that the heat radiating off his body caressed me. "Before we go any further, there's something I need to do."

I swallowed hard, my heart pounding. "What is it?"

He reached out, his fingers brushing against my cheek with a gentleness that made me shiver. "I need to place a protection ward on you." Lancelot's head turned and he narrowed his eyes on Merlin, but said nothing. "The magic in these woods is ancient and unpredictable. I won't let anything happen to you."

I leaned into his touch, my skin tingling where his fingers met my flesh. "Do it," I breathed. "But we still need to finish our conversation. I'm still irritated with you, so don't think I've forgotten."

Merlin's lips thinned, and he nodded. Then eyes flashed gold, and he began to chant in a language I didn't understand. The words were guttural and harsh, yet somehow beautiful. I sensed the power building around us crackling in the air like lightning.

He placed his hand over my heart, and I gasped as a surge of energy raced through me. It was like liquid fire in my veins, burning and freezing all at once. I squeezed my eyes shut, riding out the sensation until it gradually faded to a gentle hum just beneath my skin.

When I opened my eyes again, Merlin was watching me intently, his brow furrowed with concern. "Are you alright?" he asked, his hand still resting over my heart.

I nodded, feeling a little dazed. "I think so. That was...intense."

"Protection spells usually are. But it will keep you safer than if we sent you into these woods with nothing. If anything with magic threatens you, it should repel it back at them."

He let his hand fall away, and I immediately missed his touch. It was ridiculous, really. We'd spent our entire lives together, but suddenly every casual contact felt charged with something new and exhilarating.

I cleared my throat, trying to regain my composure. "Thank you, Merlin. For always looking out for me."

His eyes softened, and he reached out, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "Until the bitter end. You know that."

"Until the bitter end," I echoed.

There were so many things left unspoken between us, but I think we both knew it wasn't the time for it. Merlin had a lot to answer for.

Galahad's booming voice broke the moment. "If you two are quite finished making eyes at each other, perhaps we could begin Her Majesty's training?"

I felt my cheeks flush, and I stepped away from Merlin, shooting Galahad a withering glare. He simply grinned, unabashed, and tossed me a wooden practice sword.

I caught it deftly, the weight of it familiar in my hand. I may not have had formal training, but I knew how to handle myself in a fight. Growing up in the orphanage, I'd learned to scrap and brawl with the best of them. But swordplay was a different beast entirely. I gripped the wooden hilt tightly, squaring off against Galahad as he twirled his own practice blade with casual ease.

"First lesson," he said, circling me slowly. "Don't grip the sword so tightly. It needs to be an extension of your arm, not a separate entity." I forced my fingers to relax slightly, adjusting my stance to mirror his. Galahad nodded in approval. "Good. Now, come at me."

I lunged forward, swinging the wooden sword in a wide arc. Galahad parried easily, the clack of wood on wood ringing through the clearing. He danced back, his movements fluid and graceful.

"Don't give away your strikes. Keep your opponent guessing."

We went back and forth, both Gawain and Tristan occasionally calling out tips and corrections as we sparred. Sweat beaded on my brow and my muscles burned, but I relished the challenge. There was something invigorating about the dance of combat, the adrenaline singing through my veins.

As the sun dipped below the tree line, painting the sky in shades of orange and red, Galahad called a halt to our session. "You're a quick study," he said, clapping me on the shoulder.

Warmth spread through me. It helped that I already knew the basics, having had no choice but to fight my way out of some sticky situations in the past. But it felt good to have this warrior notice.

"Does seeing into the future help you in a fight?" I asked, my eyes meeting Tristan's silver ones over my shoulder. He leaned against a tree, watching us.

"It has its advantages," he said with a shrug. "But the future is always in motion. It's always changing with each decision we make, so there's no real guarantee. That, and I have no control over what I see and when I see it."

I nodded, considering. The idea of seeing so many potentially horrible futures and being unable to do anything to change them was terrifying. I didn't envy him in the slightest.

"Did you see me coming?" I asked breathlessly. I was winded, and my legs felt like

jelly. "Did you know I would be the one to pull the sword from the stone?"

Tristan's gaze turned distant, but he shook his head. "I saw many possible outcomes. Many paths that could have led to the Grail. But you actually caught me by surprise."

"What, because I'm a woman?" I asked flatly.

"No, not because you're a woman. Actually, Avalon is a matriarchal realm, the crown passing from mother to daughter, so none of us are strangers to taking orders from a female."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. It hadn't occurred to me before, but it made sense. The fae world was divided into two courts, each with a queen that ruled for hundreds of years. I always assumed that the crown was passed down through the next of kin the way it did with humans.

"So what you're saying is, Lancelot was just being an arse?"

Tristan laughed, and Lancelot cast us both a glare. "Lancelot's always an arse, I'm afraid. I believe the ladies like to call it 'brooding.'"

I sighed, tossing a rock into the fire idly. "The quest business sounds like a lot of riddles and prophecy nonsense. It would help if you could just see into my future and tell me which way to go."

"I wish it was that simple," he said. "The visions can be annoyingly vague. I do know one thing though—your path and ours are now suddenly entwined, and I can't say I'm all that disappointed."

I returned his knowing smile.

Percival strode into the clearing, his dark cloak swirling around him. "The wards are set. We should be safe for the night, but I'll take the first watch just in case."

Lancelot nodded, already beginning to lay out bedrolls near the crackling fire. "We'll sleep in shifts. No one wanders off alone, understood?"

Everyone nodded their agreement, and I shook off the feeling of unease, sinking down onto a fallen log. The heat felt good against my aching muscles and I let out a small sigh, rolling my shoulders to ease the tension.

Galahad plopped down next to me, offering a water-skin. "Drink up, my lady. We can't have you getting dehydrated on your first day as royalty."

I accepted it gratefully, taking a long pull of the cool, clean water. It soothed my parched throat, and I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand before passing it back. "Just Arthur is fine, you know. We're going to be spending a lot of time together. Might as well drop the formalities."

Galahad grinned, his amber eyes dancing in the firelight. "As you wish, Just Arthur."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't help the smile tugging at my lips. Galahad had an easy charm about him, a lightness that was almost infectious.

Gawain settled on my other side, reaching out to snag a chunk of bread from the provisions pack. He tore it in half, offering me a portion. "You'll need to keep your strength up. The wilds have a way of sapping your energy if you're not used to the magic here."

I accepted the bread, my stomach growling at the sight of food. I hadn't realized how famished I was until now. "Is it always like this? The heaviness in the air and the feeling of being watched?"

Gawain nodded. "It actually gets a lot worse from here."

I groaned, taking a bite of the bread. It was dense and nutty, studded with dried berries that burst tart sweetness on my tongue. "Fantastic. I just love that."

Galahad chuckled, bumping his shoulder against mine. "Chin up. You've got five strapping fae knights to protect you. What could possibly go wrong?"

"Don't tempt fate," Gawain warned, though his gray eyes glimmered with amusement. "Though he's right about one thing. We wouldn't let anything happen to you."

I smiled gratefully. "Let's hope we don't have to put that to the test too soon."

As the last rays of sunlight faded, giving way to the inky blackness of night, I found myself drawn to the warmth and light of the campfire. The dancing flames cast a soft, flickering glow across the faces of my companions as we settled in. The crackling of the burning wood became a soothing backdrop to the chirping of crickets and the distant hoots of an owl.

Galahad lounged next to me, his long legs stretched out towards the fire. The golden light played across his features, highlighting the angles of his cheekbones and the mischievous glint in his eyes.

He smiled at me, a playful quirk of his lips. "So, Just Arthur, tell us something about yourself. We've heard the rumors, of course, but I want to hear it from your pretty lips."

"Gal..." Lancelot warned, giving Galahad a look that said more than words ever could.

I laughed, shaking my head. "I'm afraid the rumors are probably more interesting than the reality. We grew up in an orphanage in Otterford after a fire destroyed our village." I glanced over to where Merlin was deep in conversation with Tristan, their heads bent close together. "It's where I met Merlin. I was too young to have any real memory of the village, but Merlin does, and it makes me feel closer to my parents."

My parents ... An aching sadness settled into my bones as Merlin glanced over at me, smiling softly. My stomach flipped, and my skin heated as flashes of last night came back to me.

Gawain leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "And how did you end up in so much trouble last night? Either you're exceptionally lucky, or the fates have been leading you here for a long time."

I chuckled, poking at the fire with a stick, sending sparks dancing into the night sky. "Exceptionally lucky? More like exceptionally foolish, with a dash of fate thrown in for good measure." I glanced over at Merlin again, catching his eye.

He grinned, clearly remembering the same story I was about to tell. He beat me to it, and I leaned back happily and listened as he said, "It all started with too much ale and not enough coin?—"

Gawain chuckled, shaking his head. "A tale as old as time."

We wound down for the night, and my eyes grew heavy. I listened to the forest around us, so much louder now that we were so far away from a village. I heard animals scurrying around and the trees rustling in the wind.

Lancelot caught my gaze, and he nodded to my hip. "Keep Excalibur next to you at all times, even while you're sleeping. Gal showed you the basics, but the magic should do the rest if you're attacked."

I couldn't stop the prickle of paranoia as I looked out into the darkening woods. The wards shimmered faintly at the edge of the clearing, a gossamer veil of magic that separated us from whatever lurked in the shadows. Despite the protection spell Merlin had placed on me, I felt vulnerable, exposed. Like a rabbit trembling in its warren, knowing the fox prowled just outside.

Galahad stretched lazily, the muscles beneath his tunic shifting as he did. "All this talk about swordplay has me itching for a real challenge," he said, his amber eyes sparkling mischievously in the firelight. He turned to Gawain with a playful grin. "What do you say, brother? Want to show our queen how it's really done?"

Gawain's steel-gray eyes lit up at the idea, a slow smirk spreading across his face. "I thought you'd never ask." He stood up smoothly, his hand already resting on the pommel of his sword. "But why settle for those flimsy wooden sticks? Let's give her a proper show, shall we?"

I leaned in, intrigued. "You mean a duel with real swords? Isn't that dangerous?"

The two knights exchanged a look of pure delight, like kids up to absolutely no good.

Gawain strode from the fire, clapping Galahad on the shoulder. "I assure you, the only thing in danger here is Galahad's pride."

Galahad snorted and drew his sword with a flourish. The blade glinted in the firelight, its edge wickedly sharp. "Bold words from a man who once lost a fight to a particularly aggressive goose."

Gawain narrowed his eyes. "That goose was clearly enchanted." The two knights circled each other, their movements fluid and graceful. "Probably by you whispering into its little goose ear."

Gawain lunged forward, his sword a silver blur in the firelight. Galahad parried the blow with a resounding clang, sparks flying as steel met steel. I'd never seen anything like it.

"Is that the best you can do?" Galahad taunted, his fiery hair wild as he spun away from Gawain's blade. "I've seen drunken tavern wenches with better footwork!"

Gawain laughed. "Yes, as they try desperately to get away from your smelly arse!"

I watched, mesmerized, as they fought. Their movements were so fast, so precise, it was like watching lightning dance across the sky. The firelight caught on their blades, casting strange, flickering shadows across their faces.

Galahad ducked under Gawain's swing, popping up behind him with a cheeky grin. "Too slow, old man! Perhaps it's time to hang up that sword and take up knitting instead?" He leapt backwards, the tip of Gawain's blade missing him by a hair's breadth as Gawain rounded on him. "Ooh, close one! Did you feel that breeze, Gawain? Or was that just your ego deflating?"

Gawain's response was a wordless roar as he charged forward, his blade a silver blur in the night. Galahad met him head-on, their swords locking at the hilt. For a moment, they stood there, straining against each other, neither willing to give an inch.

Then, with a twist of his wrist, Galahad disengaged and spun away, leaving Gawain off-balance. He stumbled forward, nearly face-planting into the dirt before catching himself at the last second. He never let go of his sword, but just barely.

"Oh ho!" Galahad cackled, his amber eyes dancing with mirth. "It seems the mighty Gawain has forgotten which end of the sword to hold! Shall I draw you a diagram, brother?"

Lancelot sighed heavily, shaking his head as he watched Gawain and Galahad's antics. "And here I thought we might actually have a peaceful evening for once," he muttered, his voice a mix of exasperation and fondness. "But no, these two idiots always have to turn everything into a spectacle."

"Are they always like this?" I asked, turning to Lancelot with a grin.

It was Tristan who answered as he prepared tea over the fire. He looked up, laughter dancing in his silver eyes. "Only for the last seven hundred years."

The sound of laughter interrupted Tristan's words, followed by a loud thud. We all turned to see Gawain and Galahad laying on the ground, both panting heavily but playfully throwing incredibly half-hearted punches and kicks at each other. I couldn't resist shaking my head; those two were going to be trouble, I could already tell.

"I suppose," Gawain panted, "we could call this one a draw."

Galahad nodded, still chuckling. "Agreed. Though I maintain that I would have bested you if not for that conveniently placed tree root."

"Sure, Gal. That's what happened. A draw it is then," Gawain said, extending a hand to help Galahad up. "We all know I had the upper hand before that treacherous root intervened."

Galahad grasped Gawain's forearm, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. "Keep telling yourself that, brother. Whatever helps you sleep at night."

The two knights made their way back to the fire, their heavy breathing gradually slowing as they settled onto logs on either side of me. The scent of pine and sweat mingled with the smoke from the fire, creating an oddly comforting aroma that settled me.

Galahad ran a hand through his tousled red hair, his amber eyes twinkling as he turned to me. "So," he said, a mischievous grin playing at his lips. "Be honest. Who looked the handsomest out there?"

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Chapter Six

TRISTAN

I sat back against a gnarled tree trunk, my eyes drifting over the others. Arthur looked pensive, her brow furrowed as she stared into the fire. The orange glow highlighted the freckles dusting her cheeks and the bridge of her nose, making her look younger and more vulnerable.

It was easy to forget that beneath the prophecy, magic, and crown, she was still just a girl thrust into a role she never asked for. She was a beautiful woman, and I never gave that compliment lightly. I had no interest in human women, and the last seven hundred years in Albion hadn't done much to soften me towards them.

But Arthur was fae. Well, she was half fae, but the half that was seemed to be dominant. Her ears were as delicately pointed as any of ours, and her eyes were just slightly larger than a human. She was also lithe and graceful. Probably how she managed to become a skilled pickpocket.

Gawain had moved to lay beneath the stars, away from the fire, so Merlin sat close beside Arthur now, his shoulder brushing hers, and I didn't miss the way they seemed to gravitate towards each other, like two stars caught in a shared orbit. There was a history there. A bond that ran deeper than just friendship. The thought made my stomach sour a bit, and I didn't feel like exploring the reason why.

The other knights, my brothers, were scattered around the fire, their faces half in shadow. Lancelot was sharpening his blade with long, sure strokes, the rasp of stone

on steel a familiar rhythm. Gawain was whittling a piece of wood, his deft fingers coaxing a shape from the grain that only he could see. Percival had his eyes closed, but I knew he was far from asleep, his senses attuned to the slightest rustle or snap in the distance.

Galahad was busy tending to the horses, murmuring soft words as he checked their hooves and brushed out their coats until they gleamed like polished chestnuts in the firelight. Sometimes I wondered what they murmured back to him.

As the night deepened and the stars winked to life overhead, a comfortable silence settled over our small band, broken only by the occasional pop and hiss of the burning logs. The scent of wood smoke and damp earth filled my nostrils, mingling with the sweet notes of the wildflowers that carpeted the forest floor.

Arthur shifted, drawing her knees up to her chest and resting her chin on them. "Tell me about Avalon," she said softly. "I've heard stories, but nothing from the source."

A small smile tugged at my lips as memories of Avalon surfaced, vivid and bittersweet at the same time. "Avalon is much more beautiful than the human realm. It's a land of perpetual twilight, ruled by two queens, one for each half of the realm. Queen Maeve of the Unseelie Court, and Queen Tatiana of the Seelie Court."

Arthur's eyes widened slightly, and I saw the flicker of both fear and fascination in them.

"Maeve was a warlord in the ancient days. Percival and I were knights of the Unseelie Court before coming to Albion. Queen Tatiana, the Seelie Queen, is warm and kind, but still strong. Her people are devoted to her." I paused, lost in the memories of the two queens, their faces as clear in my mind as if I had seen them only yesterday.

“There was war in Avalon, even before the queens came to power. The war raged for centuries between both fae courts. Excalibur once belonged to the goddess Odessa, the bringer of the dawn and bestower of peace. It was stolen from the Unseelie vaults and taken to the human world. The thief thought he could rule Albion with its god power, and that the sword would secure his place as high king.”

Arthur scooted forward, enthralled. “I’ve heard the myths, but I always thought they were just stories. So you mean it’s all true? Excalibur turned on the one who stole it?”

I caught Percy’s eye, noting the way his shadows coiled tighter around him. “It tricked him. Made him think he was plunging it into the human king’s back, when in fact it was a cursed stone created by the god Wrath, to capture the blade and hold it. Excalibur buried itself so completely that men for centuries tried to pull it free, but ultimately everyone failed, making fools of themselves. Especially the kings.”

“Odessa herself sent the five of us to this realm to find the one who could wield Excalibur. She ordered Maeve and Tatiana to end the war between courts, and hand-picked their best warriors. We swore an oath to watch over the sword until a new wielder appeared.”

“You’re serving different queens then?”

“We serve one queen,” Percy said sharply. All eyes went to him as he stared at Arthur. “We serve the One and Future Queen now.”

I felt a pang of sympathy for Percy. His cousin, Davian, had been the one to steal Excalibur from Avalon all those centuries ago, a betrayal that had shaken the very foundations of our realm. The courts had been baffled when Odessa chose Percy as one of the sword’s protectors.

For Percy, the weight of his family's disgrace shadowed every step he took. He now

dedicated his life to finding and serving the true heir, determined to restore honor to his bloodline. As if sensing my thoughts, Percy's gaze met mine across the flickering flames. I nodded, understanding how much it still bothered him.

"I was never allowed to know the fae part of my heritage," Arthur finally said. Merlin, who sat beside her, slung an arm over her shoulders as she leaned into him for warmth. "I don't even know which of my parents was fae and who was human. Both of them died before I was old enough to ask them about it."

I watched the shadows play across Arthur's face. My heart clenched at the vulnerability in her eyes, the unspoken longing for a connection to a part of herself that had always been denied.

"Your fae heritage is your birthright," I said. "No matter which of your parents carried that blood, it flows through your veins, as much a part of you as your human side."

She sighed. "But I don't know the first thing about being fae. I grew up in the human world, with human customs and beliefs. What if...what if I'm not fae enough? What if I can't live up to what's expected of me?"

"Your human upbringing gives you a unique perspective, actually. A compassion and understanding that a lot of full-blooded fae lack. It's what makes you special. When you've lived for as long as we have, you start to feel less empathy. It's hard to go on caring about the suffering of the world when you watch humanity repeat the same mistakes of their forefathers time and time again. Eventually you become numb."

Merlin nodded, his arm tightening around her shoulders. "Tristan's right. Your duality is your strength, not a weakness. It's what will make you an incredible queen, one who can bridge the gap between our worlds."

Arthur's lips curved into a small, grateful smile. "I sure hope you're right."

Lancelot's voice cut through the warmth of the moment like a blade of ice. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Being half-human might give her a unique perspective, but it also means she's untested and completely untrained in our ways. She's a liability until proven otherwise."

Arthur flinched, her eyes narrowing at Lancelot. I felt a surge of anger rise in my chest on her behalf. Merlin cursed, and Galahad scoffed. Percy just laid his head back down and closed his eyes again.

"Count on you to be the pessimist, Lance," I hissed. "She's done nothing to deserve your attitude. She's been thrown into this role with no warning or any preparation. You dishonor yourself with your quick judgment."

"I dishonor nothing. Blind faith is a stupid gamble. She still needs to prove herself before we pledge our lives for her cause."

The tension crackled between us, the air thick and charged. The other knights shifted uneasily, their eyes darting between Lancelot and me like spectators at a joust, waiting for the inevitable clash.

But it was Arthur who broke the stalemate, rising to her feet with a quiet dignity that I had to admire. "I'm tired. I think I'll get some sleep while I can."

With that, she turned on her heel and strode off towards the edge of the camp, where we'd laid out the bedrolls among the rustling ferns. I watched the sway of her hips, the proud set of her shoulders, and felt a swell of admiration for the small woman.

Lancelot stared after her, a muscle ticking in his stubbled jaw. For a moment, I thought he might call her back, challenge her again, but he just shook his head and

returned to sharpening his blade with renewed focus. Merlin rose and followed after Arthur, and I didn't miss the warning look he shot Lancelot over his shoulder.

When they were out of earshot, Gawain said, "Do you think they're fucking?"

The question had a bark of laughter falling from Galahad, and even Percy cracked his eyes open with a raised brow. I groaned, running a palm over my face. But the sudden image of Arthur, naked and writhing in pleasure, flashed through my mind. My cock thickened, and all I could do was groan, shaking my head at Gawain.

Galahad tossed a twig at Gawain's head. "You've got the subtlety of a charging boar, my friend. But it wouldn't surprise me in the least."

Gawain ducked, grinning unrepentantly. "What? Like we weren't all thinking it. They've got history. Any fool can see that."

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "Their personal lives are none of our concern. Our duty is to protect and guide Arthur, not gossip about who she fucks."

Gawain was probably right though; I had to admit it to myself at least. I saw the way Arthur and Merlin looked at each other. The tension between them was palpable. Then again, I'd seen her giving a similarly appreciative look to Gawain earlier in the day.

Did that mean she was unattached?

The prospect sent a thrill through my body, and my eyes followed Arthur's dark form as she readied for bed in the shadows. She was braiding her long hair while Merlin leaned against a tree. They spoke in hushed voices, too far away for any of us to make out.

Lancelot made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. "A fine job we're doing of that. Letting a half-trained girl and her pet sorcerer lead us on a fool's errand."

I rounded on him, my patience fraying. "I'm getting tired of your nastiness tonight, Lance. The sword chose Arthur, which means she was literally chosen by fate itself. Who are we to question that?"

His eyes flashed my way. "Fate can be misread. Prophecies can be misinterpreted. Until I see proof of her worth with my own eyes, my reservations stand."

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Chapter Seven

ARTHUR

I woke with my heart pounding hard enough to hurt. For a moment, I couldn't remember where I was. The canopy of leaves overhead and the earthy scent of damp moss filled my senses as it all came rushing back—the quest, the sword, the fae knights.

Something had pulled me from sleep, but what? I lay still, my breath shallow as I strained my ears against the heavy silence of the forest night.

There it was again—a faint rustling—a whisper of movement.

Then I felt it. Tiny, delicate footsteps, like the patter of raindrops, dancing across my skin.

I bolted upright, my eyes wide as I scanned my surroundings. The campfire had burned down to glowing embers. The knights were sprawled around it, their chests rising and falling in the steady rhythm of deep sleep. Even Percival, who was meant to be keeping watch, was propped against a tree, his head lolling to the side.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I saw them. Tiny, luminous shapes flitting between the trees, darting in and out of the shadows like fireflies. Giggles and whispers floated on the breeze, musical and mischievous.

I rose slowly, careful not to make any sudden movements. The little creatures seemed

to grow bolder.

As I stood there, hardly daring to breathe, the tiny creatures emerged from the shadows, their curiosity seemingly overriding their caution. They were no bigger than my hand, with delicate, gossamer wings that shimmered like stained glass in the faint light. Their skin had a luminous quality, as if they were lit from within by starlight.

Some had hair the color of spun silver, others had locks of pale gold or rich chestnut. They wore garments that seemed to be made from flower petals, leaves, and the finest spider silk, in shades of forest green, petal pink, and soft lavender.

I watched in wonder as they flitted closer, their movements graceful and fluid, like dandelion seeds on a breeze. They circled around me, leaving trails of glowing dust in their wake that smelled of honeysuckle.

Just as I was about to work up the courage to reach out my hands and touch one, Galahad chose that moment to sneeze. The sound was so loud and jarring that the trees nearly shook. The luminous creatures scattered like leaves in the wind, and the forest went dark again.

I groaned, deciding I wasn't ready to go back to sleep just yet. Instead, I sat on a log next to the still burning embers of the fire, letting the gentle warmth comfort me. I wondered what other creatures we might find prowling this forest. I also wondered how in the gods' name they'd gotten past the wards. Weren't they meant to protect us?

The soft crunch of footsteps approached and I tensed, my hand instinctively going to the hilt of my sword. The sword that wasn't there, but laying wrapped in my bedroll. I relaxed when I saw Merlin's familiar form materialize out of the shadows.

He settled down beside me, his shoulder brushing against mine as he leaned forward

to warm his hands. For a moment, we sat in companionable silence, listening to the gentle crackle of the embers and the soft snores of the sleeping knights.

"You saw them, didn't you?" Merlin asked softly, his voice barely above a whisper. "The sprites."

I nodded, still half-convinced I had imagined the whole thing. "Is that what they're called? I've never seen anything like them before."

Merlin's lips quirked. "They're forest sprites. Mischievous little things, but generally harmless. They're drawn towards magic."

"So...they were drawn to me? Because of my fae blood?"

"Partially," Merlin said with a shrug. "But also because of Excalibur, and not to mention the protection spell I placed on you. It's like a beacon to creatures of magic."

I frowned, a flicker of unease stirring in my gut. "But if these sprites could sense it, couldn't other, more dangerous creatures sense it too? The wards were supposed to keep them out."

Merlin's brow furrowed, his blue eyes turning thoughtful. "The wards are designed to repel dark magic and malevolent beings. But sprites are creatures of pure magic—neither good nor evil. They exist in a gray area."

I shivered, hoping he was right. As if reading my thoughts, Merlin reached out and took my hand, his long fingers intertwining with mine. "I won't let anything happen to you, Wart. None of us will, and I'd bet my left foot you're safe with these fucking barbarians."

That had me grinning. He tugged me closer, wrapping an arm around my shoulders

and pulling me into the warmth of his side. I went willingly, resting my head against his chest and listening to the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath my ear.

Just as I was about to drift off, a loud snort from one of the knights jerked me back to full alertness. I sat up, blinking owlishly as I realized it was Percival who had made the noise. He was shifting in his sleep, his brow furrowed as if in the throes of some dark dream.

As I watched, shadows began to gather around him, swirling and eddying like ink dropped in water. They seemed to be emanating from Percival himself, seeping from his skin and clothes to pool on the ground at his feet.

I nudged Merlin, my eyes wide. "What's happening to him?"

Merlin frowned, leaning forward to get a better look. "It's his shadow magic. It responds to his emotions, his subconscious. When he's agitated, it can manifest like this, even in his sleep."

The shadows began to take on shapes—grasping hands, gaping maws, twisted forms that seemed to writhe and contort. A chill of dread raced down my spine as I watched them grow and multiply, their edges sharpening until they almost looked solid.

"Should we wake him?"

Merlin hesitated. "It could be dangerous. He's very powerful, so there's no telling how he might lash out."

I bit the inside of my cheek. On one hand, the shadows looked terrifying, like something out of a child's worst nightmare. But on the other hand, I couldn't stand the thought of leaving Percival trapped in whatever dark dream had him in its clutches.

Stupidly, I rose to my feet and approached the sleeping knight, Merlin close at my heels. The shadows seemed to sense our presence, writhing and hissing like angry serpents. I swallowed hard, fighting the urge to turn and run.

Kneeling beside Percival, I reached out a tentative hand and placed it on his shoulder, giving him a gentle shake. "Percival," I called softly, my voice sounding small and frightened to my own ears. "Percival, wake up. You're dreaming."

Percival's eyes snapped open, but they were unfocused, unseeing. Inky blackness swallowed the white. His hand shot out, quick as a striking viper, and suddenly, a tendril of shadow was wrapped around my throat, as solid and cold as steel. I gasped, my hands flying up to claw at the shadowy bonds, but my fingers passed right through, finding no purchase.

The tendril tightened, cutting off my air. I choked, spots dancing in my vision as I struggled for breath. Dimly, I was aware of Merlin shouting, his hands glowing with arcane light as he tried to pry the shadows loose. Golden magic battered at the shadows, but they were unaffected.

The other knights were awake now, jolted from their sleep by the commotion. They leapt to their feet, their faces a mix of confusion and alarm as they took in the scene.

"Percy!" Lancelot roared, his sword drawn. "Release her, now!"

But Percival was still in the throes of his nightmare, his eyes wild and unseeing. His shadows lashed out, striking Lancelot across the face and sending him stumbling back.

Galahad and Tristan circled warily, their weapons at the ready, but hesitant to strike out at their brother. Gawain was chanting something under his breath, his hands weaving intricate patterns in the air as he tried to counter Percival's magic with his

own. Shards of ice poured from his fingers, fissures of frost climbing up his arms. But the ice couldn't penetrate the shadows.

Black spots danced in my vision as the shadowy tendril tightened around my throat, cutting off my air. I clawed at it desperately, my nails scrabbling uselessly against the inky blackness. It was like trying to grab hold of smoke.

A tear leaked from my eye, then drummed down my cheek. For a moment, the tendril loosened, and I sucked in a desperate gasp of air. But Percival convulsed, a low moan escaping his lips, and the shadows surged with renewed strength.

"Percival, wake up!" Lancelot shouted, his sword slashing through the writhing shadows to no avail. They simply reformed, darker and more turbulent than before. "You're dreaming! It's not real!"

Galahad tried to get closer, but a whip-like shadow lashed out, forcing him back. Gawain's chanting grew louder, the ancient words thrumming with power, but Percival's nightmare magic was too strong, too chaotic.

"You're going to kill her if you don't let go!" Tristan shouted.

My lungs burned and my head felt like it was about to burst. Tears streamed down my face as I fought for each shallow, wheezing breath. The world began to dim around the edges, the concerned shouts of the knights fading into a distant buzz.

Just as I thought I would pass out, Merlin let out a roar of fury and raw, guttural desperation. His eyes blazed gold as he thrust his hands forward, unleashing a blast of golden magic directly at Percival's chest. The force of it slammed into the knight hard enough that the tree branches around us blew back.

Percival's eyes cleared, the black retreating from the whites, the fog of sleep and

nightmare clearing in an instant. He blinked, his expression morphing from confusion to horror as he took in the scene. Me, clawing weakly at the shadowy tendril around my throat, my face turning purple; the other knights, shouting and slashing at the writhing shadows; and Merlin, his hands still glowing with residual magic, his face a mask of fear and rage.

"Fuck..." Percival choked out, his voice rough with sleep and shock.

With a wave of his hand, the shadows dissipated, slithering back into the dark corners of the forest. I collapsed to my knees, gulping in air, my throat raw and aching. I gagged, and I tried to suck in air. Merlin was at my side in an instant, his hands gentle as they skimmed over my neck, his magic a soothing balm on my bruised skin.

The other knights crowded around, cursing and muttering. Lancelot reached out to help me up, but I flinched away instinctively, my heart still pounding. Something that might have been hurt flashed across his face before he could hide it, but he withdrew his hand, giving me space.

Percival stared at his own hands as if they belonged to a stranger, horror and self-loathing twisting his features. "I'm so sorry, Arthur," he whispered, his voice shaking. "I never meant to—Fuck, I would never?—"

I swallowed, wincing at the pain in my throat. "I know," I croaked, my voice hoarse. "It was an accident. You were having a nightmare."

Merlin helped me to my feet, his arm wrapped around my waist to support me as I swayed. I leaned into him, grateful for his solid presence. The other knights hovered anxiously, their eyes darting between me and Percival.

"Are you alright?" Galahad asked softly, his face more serious than I'd ever seen.

I nodded, not quite trusting my voice. Tristan handed me a water-skin, and I took a grateful sip, the cool liquid soothing my raw throat. Merlin's magic had calmed most of the pain down to a dull throb.

Percival cursed, a low and vicious sound that seemed to echo through the suddenly silent clearing. Self-loathing and shame rolled off him in palpable waves as he stared at his hands, at the shadows that still clung to his fingertips like wispy remnants of a bad dream.

With a snarl of rage and frustration, he whirled around and slammed his fist into a nearby boulder. Tendrils of shadow lashed out, engulfing the rock and shattering it into a thousand obsidian shards that glittered like dark stars in the firelight.

The knights flinched, but none of them made a move to stop him as Percival stormed off into the trees, his cloak billowing behind him. The shadows seemed to swallow him up, then he was gone, leaving only a heavy silence in his wake.

I stared after him, my heart aching for the torment I had seen in his eyes. I knew all too well the weight of guilt, the sickening sensation of causing harm to those you cared for, even unintentionally.

Merlin's arm tightened around my waist. I leaned into him, taking a shaky breath as I reached up to touch my throat gingerly. The skin felt tender and swollen, and I couldn't suppress a wince at the contact.

Tristan approached, his silver eyes filled with concern as he gently tilted my chin up to examine my throat. His fingers were cool and soothing against my inflamed skin.

"I have a touch for healing," he murmured, nodding at my neck. "May I?"

I nodded, not quite trusting myself to speak. Tristan placed his palm against my

throat, his touch feather-light. He closed his eyes, his brow furrowing slightly in concentration.

A moment later, I felt a pleasant tingling sensation, like the brush of a cool breeze against my skin. The pain and swelling began to recede. I released a soft sigh of relief, my shoulders sagging as the tension drained from my body.

Tristan opened his eyes, a smile playing at the corner of his lips. "Better?"

"Much," I whispered, my voice still a little hoarse but no longer painful. "Thank you, Tristan."

He inclined his head, his silver hair falling forward to frame his angular face. "It is my pleasure to serve, my lady."

Lancelot cleared his throat, drawing our attention. He stood a few paces away, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, his expression unreadable. "We should move camp," he said, his tone brusque. "This location has been compromised."

I arched a brow skeptically. "How do you figure?"

His eyes didn't bother meeting mine as he scanned the trees. "When Percy uses his shadows to that extent, the magic signature it leaves behind is significant, and it might draw in all kinds of creatures towards our camp. It's safer if we head out now. Besides, the sun is rising in just a few hours."

As we rode on through the day, the trees grew thicker, their branches intertwining overhead to form a dense canopy that blocked out the sun. The air felt heavy and still, like the forest itself was holding its breath. Even the chirping of the birds and the rustling of small creatures in the underbrush seemed muted, as if they, too, were wary of disturbing the eerie quiet.

I shifted in my saddle, my muscles aching from hours of riding. The events of the previous night still weighed heavily on my mind—the sprites, Percival's nightmare. This quest wasn't starting out on a good footing.

As if sensing my unease, Merlin urged his mount closer to mine. "Alright there, Wart?" He'd opted to keep his griffin on the ground today. I suspected he didn't want to let me out of his sight after last night. I nodded and tried to smile, but it felt strained.

"So," I said, breaking the oppressive silence. "Does anyone want to fill me in on this Holy Grail we're meant to be finding? All I know is it's some kind of magical cup that supposedly grants immortality. I never believed any of it myself, but I don't think King Uther would have searched for it if there wasn't some sliver of truth in there somewhere."

Lancelot, riding at the head of our little procession, glanced back at me over his shoulder. "The Holy Grail isn't just a cup . It's a sacred artifact of immense power, crafted by the gods themselves and imbued with the very essence of life."

I raised a skeptical eyebrow. "And it just happens to be lost and in need of finding? Who would lose such a thing?"

Galahad, riding beside me, chuckled. "The cup wasn't lost. It was hidden . It was placed in the Wandering Wood on purpose."

"What do you mean it was hidden on purpose? By whom?"

"The Holy Grail was hidden away centuries ago by the druids of the old religion. They were a brotherhood sworn to protect the cup and keep it out of the wrong hands. Legend says they built a secret temple deep within the Wandering Wood, and only those deemed worthy can find the path," Merlin explained.

"But why hide it away at all? If it's so powerful, wouldn't it be better to use it for good?"

"Power like that is too great a temptation," Lancelot said grimly. "In the wrong hands, the Grail could be used to become a conqueror. Entire kingdoms could fall, the very balance of life and death could be disrupted."

A chill raced down my spine at the thought. I thought of my own fae magic, the way it sometimes felt like a wild thing inside me, straining to break free. If a simple cup could grant actual immortality...

"So how are we supposed to find this secret temple?" I asked. "Do we have a map? A magic compass? A wise old guide who speaks only in riddles?"

Merlin snorted softly beside me. "Nothing quite so convenient, I'm afraid. The temple's location is a closely guarded secret, passed down through generations of Archdruids. But there are certain signs and portents that are said to guide the way for those who are worthy."

I rolled my eyes. "Let me guess. Cryptic rhyming clues carved into ancient standing stones? Hidden messages in the stars? Talking woodland creatures who give directions in exchange for a shiny trinket?"

Galahad laughed, the sound bright and warm in the gloom of the forest. "You've been reading too many faerietales. The signs are subtler than that. A forked path where there was none before. Or a stream that runs backwards. A gnarled tree in the shape of a chalice. Things that are easy to overlook if you don't know what to look for."

"And I suppose you lot know all the signs by heart?" I asked, glancing around at the knights.

Lancelot shook his head. "Not all of them. The knowledge was fragmented and scattered after the fall of the old religion. There's a chance it might manifest in other ways too. We've never encountered a chosen one before, so who knows?"

"Well, that's just brilliant," I muttered. "A scavenger hunt through a magical forest with only half a clue to go on. I'm sure this will end splendidly."

Chapter Eight

GALAHAD

I glanced over at Arthur, trying not to grin as her brow furrowed in frustration as she tried to make sense of everything that'd been tossed her way. Despite the weariness and dirt of travel, she was still breathtakingly beautiful. All fiery attitude and wild curls escaping from her braid. I had to force myself to look away before my thoughts could wander down paths they shouldn't.

Closing my eyes, I reached out with my mind, searching for the familiar presence of a hawk I'd seen flying overhead. I found her soaring high above the treetops, her keen eyes scanning the forest below. Through the temporary bond, I saw what she saw—the dense green canopy stretching out in all directions, broken only by the thin ribbon of the path we followed.

At first glance, nothing seemed odd. But as the bird banked and circled, I caught a flicker of movement at the edge of her vision. A shadow darting between the trees, too large to be a deer or boar. My pulse quickened.

I urged the hawk lower, trying to get a better look. She dove, her wings tucking close to her body as she plummeted towards the forest floor. The wind rushed in her ears, and the trees blurred into a green smear. At the last moment, she snapped her wings open, pulling out of the dive mere feet from the ground.

And there, in a small clearing just ahead of our party, stood a figure cloaked in black. Even from a distance, I detected the malevolent energy radiating from them, a dark

aura that made her feathers stand on end.

The figure's head was bowed, their face hidden deep within the shadows of their hood. But I caught the glint of eyes, cold and calculating, tracking our progress along the path. I severed the connection abruptly, not wanting to alert the stranger to my magical surveillance. Blinking away the lingering disorientation, I turned to the others.

"We're being watched," I said quietly, not wanting my voice to carry. "There's someone up ahead, just off the path. They're cloaked and hooded, but I could sense dark magic around them."

Lancelot's hand immediately went to his sword hilt, his posture tensing. "How close?"

"A quarter mile, maybe less. Definitely waiting for us."

"I don't like anything that skulks in the shadows," Tristan muttered.

Merlin held up a hand, his eyes unfocused as he extended his own magical senses. After a moment, he shook his head. "I can't get a clear reading. Whoever they are, they know how to shield their presence. But the fact that they're hiding at all suggests they don't have friendly intentions."

I glanced at Arthur, noting the way her hand had drifted to Excalibur's hilt. She met my gaze, her brown eyes hardening. "So what's the plan? We can't exactly turn around."

Lancelot nodded grimly. "We press on, but cautiously. Spread out a bit so we're not such a clustered target. Merlin, can you cloak our approach at all?"

The sorcerer tilted his head, considering. "I can try to dampen our magical signature,

make us harder to sense. But if this stranger had dark magic, it might not fool them for long."

"Do it," Lancelot ordered. "Anything to give us an edge." He turned to me. "Galahad, keep your hawk circling above. We need her eyes."

I nodded, already reaching out to the hawk once more. She caught an updraft and soared higher, sharp gaze scanning the forest below.

We advanced slowly, the usual clomp and jingle of the horses muffled by Merlin's magic. The air felt thick and heavy, the eerie silence broken by the occasional birdcall and the creak of leather.

As we neared the spot where I'd seen the figure, I held up a hand, signaling a halt. The others reined in their mounts, hands hovering near weapons as we peered into the shadowed tree line.

At first, I saw nothing, just the endless vertical bars of the trees and the shifting patterns of dappled sunlight on the forest floor. Until a shadow detached itself from the deeper gloom, resolving into the cloaked figure I had seen through the hawk's eyes. They stood unmoving, facing our party, their stance relaxed but radiating coiled menace.

"Who goes there?" Lancelot called out, his voice echoing. "Show yourself and state your business!"

A low, rasping chuckle emanated from the depths of the black hood, sending chills skittering down my spine. "My, my," a voice mused, sounding more amused than threatened, "such bravado from the handsome faerie."

Slowly, almost lazily, a pair of hands emerged from the figure's sleeves, rising to

push back the concealing hood. A man's face was revealed—gaunt and angular, with skin as pale as bleached bone. His eyes were the color of emerald, glinting with cruel amusement as they raked over our group.

A thrill of recognition and dread shot through me as I stared at the man's face. I knew those eyes, that cruel twist of lips. I'd seen them before, on the body of another.

But it was Tristan who spoke the name, his voice hard as flint. "Mordred. Your disguises might fool some, but I see through them clear as day."

Mordred chuckled. "Clever faerie. But you always were the perceptive one, weren't you, seer?"

As he spoke, his form shimmered and blurred, like a reflection in a disturbed pool. His features melted and reformed, sickly skin morphing to a rich porcelain hue, eyes bleeding to a vivid bright green. Black hair lengthened and curled, turning the color of spilled blood. In the space of a heartbeat, the gaunt man was gone, and in his place stood a woman of stunning, terrible beauty.

I heard Arthur's sharp intake of breath beside me, felt Merlin's magic surge and crackle in the air like an oncoming storm. Lancelot had drawn his sword, the steel rasping against the scabbard.

Mordred, the exiled daughter of King Uther himself. He'd banished her from Camelot after she tried and failed to force the sword from the stone using twisted, dark magic. My eyes shot down to her right arm, and sure enough, gnarled scars and pockmarked skin still mottled her once flawless beauty. A sign that the sword had fought back against the dark magic.

"Ah, so the prodigal daughter returns," Gawain said, his voice dripping with disdain. "I thought we'd seen the last of you when you fled Camelot in disgrace."

Mordred's green eyes flashed with malice as she flexed her scarred hand. "A temporary setback. One that will soon be rectified once I claim the Grail."

Her gaze slid to Arthur, a predatory smile curving her lips. "Hello, little sister. It's been far too long."

I watched in stunned disbelief as Arthur reeled back in her saddle, and her face drained of color. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly, like a fish gasping for air. The shock and confusion in her eyes mirrored my own.

"Sister?" she finally managed to choke out, her voice barely above a whisper. "What are you talking about? My father was a farmer before he and my mother were killed. I'm not..." She trailed off as a flicker of uncertainty crossed her features.

Mordred threw back her head and laughed, the sound harsh and mocking in the stillness of the forest. "Oh, you poor, naïve little thing. Did you really believe the faerietale that you were just some ordinary girl, plucked from obscurity by chance?"

Yes. Even I had believed it. What other explanation was there?

She shook her head, tutting softly. "You're so much more than that. The blood of kings flows through your veins. You're the daughter of Uther Pendragon and the fae whore who tempted him from my mother's marriage bed."

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Chapter Nine

ARTHUR

Had Uther known?

Had he fucking known?

I wanted to scream, to lash out, to unleash the storm of rage swirling inside me. I wanted to scratch Mordred's eyes from her skull but to wipe the smirk off of her face.

She took a step closer, her emerald eyes boring into mine. "Embrace it. Embrace your true bloodline—your birthright. We could rule Albion together, you know. Uther would never know what hit him. We could bend the very fabric of the realms to our will if we bring the sword and Grail together with my dark magic. Think about it..."

"She's lying to you, Wart," Merlin warned.

Mordred's eyes flicked to him, and her grin spread even wider. A sick feeling coiled in my belly. "Merlin. I've missed you in my bed."

What—

No, no, no...

I felt like I'd been punched in the gut, all the air rushing out of my lungs.

My eyes snapped to him, searching his face for any hint of denial, any sign that this was just a cruel lie. But Merlin wasn't looking at me. His gaze was locked on Mordred. There was a storm swirling in those blue eyes—anger, guilt, regret. And I knew, with a sickening certainty, that she was telling the truth.

"It was a long time ago," Merlin said finally through gritted teeth. "Before she was exiled. We were young and stupid. It was the biggest mistake I ever made."

I didn't know what to believe. Every word out of his mouth was poisoned now. A potential lie. A calculated lie. Tears pricked at my eyes but I held them back with rage.

Mordred laughed, the sound grating against my raw nerves. "We were more than that. Drive us some credit, Merlin. We were glorious together; our magic intertwined, our bodies tangled in the sheets. Don't you remember?" Her eyes flicked to Arthur. "I always loved that little thing he did with his tongue?—"

"Enough!" Merlin growled, sending a spark of white hot magic her way. It missed.

I felt bile rise in my throat, hot and acrid. The thought of Merlin, my Merlin, in the arms of this viper? It made my skin crawl, made me want to scream and rage and cry all at once. She was enjoying this.

"Poor little Wart ," she crooned, her voice dripping with false sweetness as she pouted her bottom lip. "So lost, so alone. Did you think Merlin didn't know?" She shook her head, tutting softly. "He's always known who you really were—Uther's bastard daughter. He kept you close. Molded you into his perfect little pawn. And now he wants to fuck you too. It's hilarious, really."

"Tell me she's lying. Tell me you didn't know."

Merlin's face was ashen, his eyes haunted. For a long, agonizing moment, he said nothing. And in that silence, I felt my world shatter.

"I suspected," he said finally, each word sounding like it was being dragged out of him. "But I never knew for sure. Don't let her twist things, Arthur. It's what she wants."

I forced myself to take another deep breath, and ignore the churning mess of feelings to focus on the threat at hand. "I don't care who my father is. I'm not Uther's pawn, and I sure as hell am not yours, Mordred."

Mordred's eyes narrowed, her lips twisting into a sneer. "You're a fool, little sister. You could have had everything—power, glory, a kingdom at your dainty little feet. But you choose instead to align yourself with these pathetic relics of a bygone age and a street rat sorcerer."

She gestured dismissively at the knights, who had moved to form a protective barrier in front of me. Lancelot stood at the center, his sword leveled at Mordred's heart. Galahad and Tristan flanked him, weapons drawn and ready. Even Percival, still shaken from the events of the previous night, had placed himself firmly between me and the threat, shadows swirling around his clenched fists.

Merlin stood slightly apart, his hands crackling with barely restrained magic, his eyes never leaving Mordred's face. I noticed the tension radiating off him, the coiled readiness to strike at the slightest provocation.

Mordred let out a theatrical sigh. "Very well. You've clearly made your choice. I offered you a chance to join me and stay breathing. To claim your birthright by my side. But if you insist on being stubborn, I'll just have to take what I want by force."

Her eyes flicked down to the sword at my hip, a covetous hunger burning in their

emerald depths. "Excalibur," she breathed, the name falling from her lips like a prayer and a curse. "The key to my kingdom. Wasted on an ignorant little whelp."

She took a step forward, her hand outstretched, fingers curling like claws. Shadows gathered around her, writhing and twisting like living things. I felt the darkness of her magic, cold and oily against my skin, seeking to worm its way inside me.

Mordred surged forward in the blink of an eye, moving faster than any human could. Instead of clashing with their swords and their magic, Mordred erupted into a cloud of hundreds of black crows and disappeared into the darkened forest.

I stared at the spot where Mordred had disappeared, my heart thundering. The crows' harsh caws still echoed in my ears.

"She's gone," Merlin said, his voice tight with tension. "For now. But she'll be back."

I turned to face him. "I don't want to hear another word from your lying mouth, Merlin."

The hurt in his eyes was almost enough to pierce through the haze of rage and betrayal that clouded my mind. Almost.

"Arthur, please," he said softly, reaching out a hand as if to touch me. I flinched away, unable to bear the thought of his skin on mine. Not now, not after learning of his past with Mordred.

"Don't," I snapped, my voice shaking. "Just—just don't."

I turned away from him, facing my knights instead. I forced myself to take a deep breath, to push down the roiling emotions and focus on what was important.

"We have to keep moving," I said, my voice sounding strange and distant to my own ears. "The Grail is our priority. Everything else..." I swallowed hard, not daring to look at Merlin. "Everything else can wait. With Mordred out there, we have to prioritize speed."

Lancelot, surprisingly, gave me a curt nod, and shouted, "You heard the lady!"

We rode for hours, the forest around us deepening into an abyss of shadows, each mile dragging us deeper into an unsettling chill. The vibrant greens of the leaves that once danced with sunlight faded into a sickly gray, like the color drained from a long-forgotten dream. The trunks of the trees twisted and contorted, their gnarled shapes resembling skeletal fingers clawing at the dimming sky, as if trying to escape the encroaching darkness.

The air turned frigid, biting into my skin. Each breath escaped from my lips in a ghostly mist. I shivered, instinctively pulling my cloak tighter around my shoulders, the fabric a thin barrier against the creeping cold that seemed to seep into my very bones. With every passing moment, an unsettling sensation gnawed at me. It felt as if a thousand unseen eyes were lurking in the shadows, watching our every move with a malevolence that sent chills racing down my spine.

As the last slivers of light struggled to pierce the thick canopy above, we stumbled upon a clearing that made my blood run cold.

Bones littered the ground, the remains of countless creatures, their once-lively forms now reduced to a macabre display. The skeletal remains were sun-bleached and weathered with time. Skulls leered at us from atop piles of femurs and ribs, their empty sockets seeming to track our every movement, mocking us in silent accusation. It was as if the very soil held secrets.

"The Boneyard," Lancelot murmured, his voice barely above a whisper, as if the very

air were listening. “We’ve reached the border.”

I dismounted my horse, and the ground crunched beneath my boots. Each crackling sound sent a shiver of revulsion up my spine. The clearing was a graveyard of bones, remnants of lives long since extinguished, and I stepped hesitantly into the maw of decay. The air hung heavy with a putrid stench, a vile mixture of rot and something darker. An almost sickly sweet tang of ancient magic that curled around my senses and twisted my stomach in knots.

“This place is cursed,” Tristan said, his gaze unfocused, as if he were peering through the veil of time to witness horrors that lay far beyond our immediate reality. “Centuries ago, a battle was fought here. Dark druids ruled the wilds before Camelot even existed. Their magic was unruly, and they slaughtered each other.”

His words conjured memories of the tales Merlin spun for me as children. Stories that had once seemed like silly faerietales, designed to entertain wide-eyed youngsters by the fire. Tales of necromancers wielding death magic, of armies of the undead rising at their command, had filled my dreams with shadows.

But now, standing among the grim remnants of that ancient slaughter, I could almost hear the echoes of their screams weaving through the air.

A glint of something caught my eye, pulling my gaze to a small, intricately carved wooden box nestled among the bleached bones scattered across the ground. Its surface was decorated with symbols that seemed to shift and shimmer in the fading light, as if they held some ancient magic trapped within their designs.

I knelt down, careful not to disturb any more of the grim remains around me. Gently, I brushed aside a skull, its hollow eye sockets staring vacantly into the void. As I reached for the box, I felt an unexpected weight to it; it was heavier than I had anticipated. The wood was smooth to the touch, surprisingly warm against my skin

despite the icy air that surrounded us.

With a mixture of trepidation and excitement, I lifted the lid. A soft, ethereal glow spilled forth, illuminating the clearing and casting ghostly shadows that danced across the bones at my feet. The light felt almost alive.

Inside the box, resting delicately on a bed of black velvet, lay a small silver key. Its surface gleamed like a distant star, reflecting the soft glow from within the box. Next to the key was a scrap of parchment, yellowed with age and covered in spidery script that twisted and curled in a way that made it difficult to read.

I picked up the parchment, my heart racing as I tried to decipher the faded ink. For a moment, as I tilted my head to the side, the words began to shift, slowly becoming more legible.

"In the heart of the wood, where shadows grow deep, A secret lies hidden, for seekers to reap. Speak the words of the ancients, in the tongue of the fae, And the path will be opened, to light your way. But beware, fair questers, for not all is right, In this realm of magic, where darkness and light, Intertwine like lovers, in an eternal dance, And the price of knowledge, is a perilous chance."

I read the words aloud, my voice sounding small and thin in the oppressive silence of the Boneyard. As the final syllable left my lips, the surrounding air seemed to thicken, the shadows deepening and twisting in unnatural ways. A low, eerie hum rose from the ground, vibrating through the bones and setting my teeth on edge.

"What's happening?" Galahad asked, his hand tightening on his sword hilt as he scanned the tree line warily. His wide eyes met mine. "Arthur, when did you learn the language of the fae?"

Fae? I glanced down at the words again, but the ink was suddenly gone, and all that

was left was a blank parchment.

Before I could respond, the key in the box began to glow, pulsing with an inner light that grew brighter with each passing second. It rose from the velvet, hovering in midair as if suspended by invisible strings.

Suddenly, a beam of light shot out from the key, cutting through the gloom like a blade. It illuminated a narrow path leading deeper into the woods. The ground, littered with bones and gnarled roots, seemed to writhe and reach for us as we watched.

"I guess that's our invitation," I said, trying to keep my voice steady despite the unease churning in my gut. "The path to the first trial."

Merlin stepped forward, his eyes fixed on the eerie trail. "Arthur, I don't like this."

I shot him a withering glare, my anger still simmering slowly. "Now you want to be cautious? After keeping secrets from me for years? Spare me your concern, Merlin."

I snatched the key out of the air, feeling its weight settle heavily in my palm. The glow dimmed as my fingers closed around it, but the humming in the air only grew louder, more insistent.

"We're wasting time," I snapped, not looking at Merlin. "Leave the horses here for now. We keep moving." I locked eyes with Lancelot, daring him to challenge me.

He didn't.

Smart man.

I strode forward, my boots crunching on the bones as I followed the illuminated path.

After a moment's hesitation, I heard the others fall into step behind me, Merlin bringing up the rear.

The woods closed in around us as we walked, the twisted branches seeming to reach out like grasping fingers. With each step, the air grew colder until my breath was puffing out in icy clouds. Shadows flickered at the edges of my vision, there and gone again before I could focus on them.

We walked in what felt like circles. I could have sworn I'd seen the same tree three times already. Just as I was beginning to wonder if we were trapped in some sort of enchantment, the trail ended abruptly at the mouth of a cave.

The entrance was low and narrow, jagged stone teeth jutting down from above. Runes were carved along the arched stone, glowing with the same eerie light as the key in my hand. I held it up, comparing the symbols. They were identical.

I took a step forward, but Lancelot's hand shot out, gripping my arm. "Wait," he said, his eyes narrowed as he studied the cave mouth. "Those runes...They're wards, meant to keep out the unworthy."

"Unworthy?" Gawain echoed, a note of unease in his voice. "What does that mean?" I met his steel colored eyes, and he forced a smile. "Not that you could be unworthy, my lady."

I rolled my eyes, fighting a smirk. "Of course not."

Tristan examined the runes too. "Only those pure of heart and strong of will complete the test. I suspect if you fail, your soul will join the shades that haunt this place."

I felt a flicker of uncertainty, remembering Mordred's taunting words. Was I worthy? After learning of my true parentage, of the lies that had shaped my life, I wasn't so

sure anymore.

“How many trials are there between us and the Grail?” I asked the knights.

They shared a heavy look. “It’s different for every person. Some only have one and fail, while others face as many as ten,” Percival said.

I swallowed hard, my grip tightening on the key until its edges bit into my palm. Ten trials. Ten chances to prove my worth, or to fail and be cast aside like the unwanted bastard I apparently was.

"Well then," I said. "Let's get started, shall we? The faster we get through these trials, the faster we can claim the Grail and be done with this godsforsaken quest."

I marched forward, ignoring the prickle of unease down my spine as I crossed the threshold of the cave. The moment I stepped inside, the runes flared brightly, and a gust of icy wind whipped past me, tugging at my hair and cloak.

The cave was dark, the air heavy with the scent of damp earth and something else, something ancient and musty. I heard the drip of water echoing in the distance, each plunk seeming unnaturally loud in the stillness.

Merlin summoned a wisp of druidlight, the pale gold glow casting eerie shadows on the rough-hewn walls. I pointedly didn't look at him as we moved through, my boots scuffing against the uneven ground.

We hadn't gone more than a dozen paces when the passage opened up into a vast chamber. Towering stone pillars rose up into the darkness, their surfaces covered in more of those glowing runes.

In the center of the chamber stood a massive stone altar, its surface stained dark with

what I could only assume was blood or tar. A sense of dread settled in my gut as I approached it, the key in my hand pulsing in time with my racing heart.

"I think I know what this is," Merlin murmured, his voice hushed with reverence and a hint of fear. "I think this is the Wraithstone Cavern. Where druids in the old religion were sent to test themselves before being accepted into their sect. When you read that riddle aloud, you weren't speaking the common tongue. You spoke the old language of the fae. I think you opened a doorway to this cavern for a reason."

I shot him a sharp look. "And what does that mean, exactly?"

Before he could answer, the chamber filled with a swirling mist, cold and clammy against my skin. Ghostly figures took shape within the haze, their features twisted with anguish. I could vaguely make out human-like shapes, but they writhed and changed. I backed up several steps, my fingers twitching with the urge to grab Excalibur.

"Arthur Pendragon." The voices seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, echoing off the stone walls. "You who seek the Holy Grail, step forward and face your reckoning."

My legs felt like lead as I forced myself to approach the altar, each step a battle against the instinct to turn and flee. I was used to running from danger, not seeking it out. This was a new world, and if I didn't dive in head first, I'd probably end up failing my first trial.

As I drew closer, the mist parted, revealing a familiar face. Horror ratcheted through me, and I felt a strangled sob building in my throat. Tears pricked my eyes, but I shook my head, telling myself it wasn't really her.

"Mother?" I whispered, my voice cracking.

She looked just as she had in my earliest memories, before the fire had stolen her away. But her eyes...they were hollow, accusatory.

"You are no daughter of mine," she hissed, her voice dripping with venom. "You are the bastard child of a fae whore and a false king. A mistake. An abomination."

I recoiled as if slapped, tears stinging my eyes. "No," I whispered, shaking my head. "No, that's not true. You loved me."

"How could I love a creature like you?" Her beautiful face twisted into a sneer. "I cursed the day you were born, cursed the day you arrived at my doorstep. You ruined my life, stole my future. I died hating you, despising the very sight of you."

A sob tore from my throat, raw and wretched. I sank to my knees; the key tumbled from my numb fingers to clatter against the stone. This couldn't be real. It had to be some sort of trick, some cruel illusion conjured by the cave's ancient magic.

But deep down, an insidious voice whispered that it was true. That I had always been unloved, unwanted. A burden and a blight on the lives of those around me.

"You will fail, Arthur Pendragon." My mother's shade loomed over me, her words dripping with malice. "You are unworthy of the Grail, unworthy of Excalibur, unworthy of the crown you covet. Abandon this quest before it destroys you, as you destroyed me."

I pressed my hands over my ears, trying to block out her poisonous words. But they echoed inside my skull, bouncing off the walls of my mind until I thought I might go mad with it.

Through the haze of pain and self-loathing, I heard Merlin's voice, distant but insistent. "Arthur, listen to me. This isn't real. It's the altar. It's showing you your

deepest fears, your darkest doubts. You have to fight it!"

I shook my head, tears streaming down my face. How could I fight this? How could I fight the truth of what I was, of the curse I had brought upon those I loved?

I wanted to give in, to let the despair and self-hatred consume me until there was nothing left. It would be so easy to just surrender to the pain. To accept my mother's words as the bitter truth. I dropped to my knees with my face in my hands, wanting to scream, but held it in. I wanted to sob, but choked it back.

"You cannot win, child," she sneered. "You are nothing, a mistake that should never have been born. The Grail will never accept a wretched creature like you."

For a long moment, the chamber was silent save for the distant drip of water and the rasp of my breath.

Then, slowly, I began to laugh.

It started as a low chuckle, bubbling up from some hidden pocket inside of me. But it quickly grew, building into a full-throated guffaw that echoed off the stone walls and made the ghostly figures flicker and waver.

The shade of my mother stared at me, her expression shifting from contempt to confusion to anger. "What is this?" she hissed, her voice rising to a shrill pitch. "You dare to mock me, you insolent brat?"

Still laughing, I wiped the tears from my cheeks. "Oh, I'm not mocking you," I said, sucking in a deep breath. "I'm mocking this whole fucking charade." I gestured around at the chamber, at the eerie glow of the runes and the swirling mist. "Did you really think I'd fall for this? That I'm some naïve little girl who left Camelot with stars in her eyes and a head full of faerietales?"

I took a step forward, then another, closing the distance between myself and the altar. The shade of my mother stood her ground, but I saw the uncertainty flickering in her hollow eyes.

Staring the apparition down, my laughter faded to a wry chuckle. "You almost had me, I'll give you that. For a moment there, I was actually kind of afraid of you. My parents weren't perfect, but they loved me. For the short time I was with them, they loved me. They took me in, protected me, gave me a home when they didn't have to. And that's more than you, with all your smoke and mirrors, can ever take away from me."

As I spoke, I felt a warmth blossoming at my hip, a gentle heat that pulsed in time with the fierce beat of my heart. Excalibur, the blade that had chosen me, was responding to my resolve.

I sighed, my shoulders dropping as I looked back over my shoulder, meeting the eyes of my five knights. "I was expecting this to be cleverer than this."

With a metallic ring that echoed through the chamber, I drew Excalibur free. The blade shone with a brilliant, almost blinding radiance, the polished steel reflecting my face back at me.

But it was not the face of a lost little girl, a frightened orphan playing at being a queen. No, the face I saw in that shining blade was one of rage.

I raised Excalibur high; the runes etched into the fuller pulsed with ancient power. The shade of my mother hissed, her form wavering as the holy light washed over her. She raised her hands as if to shield herself. Her face twisted with a mockery of fear and loathing.

"No!" she shrieked.

"Fuck your magic tricks," I spat, and I swung Excalibur in a shining arc, the blade singing as it cleaved through the air. The moment it touched the shade, she exploded in a burst of sickly greenish light, her final scream fading into silence.

I stood there, chest heaving, as the last wisps of the ghostly figure vanished. The altar stood cold and dark before me, its surface now clear of the accusing specters.

When I lowered Excalibur, the sword suddenly heavy in my grip, the adrenaline began to fade. My hands trembled slightly as I slid the blade back into its scabbard, the runes dulling to a faint shimmer.

I took a shaky breath, trying to center myself. The trial had taken more out of me than I wanted to admit, dredging up painful memories I wasn't ready to even attempt to sort through yet.

Tristan approached cautiously, his eyes searching my face. "Arthur," he said softly, "are you alright?"

I let out a huff of humorless laughter. "No," I admitted, my voice raw. "But I will be. I think..."

"You completed the first trial. You should be proud of yourself," he said, smiling.

"Does it get easier from here then?" I asked, hating already dreading the answer.

"Oh, absolutely not," he said with a laugh. "The trials are designed to test you, to push you to our limits and beyond. They will challenge everything you think you know about yourself."

I swallowed hard, a flicker of fear sparking in my gut. If this was just the beginning, how was I supposed to survive the rest if this was the easy part?

Chapter Ten

GAWAIN

Tristan carried a sleeping Arthur out of the cave and into the somehow even more unsettling boneyard. The poor girl had been through quite the ordeal tonight. She'd pretty much collapsed from exhaustion halfway through the cave.

I couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy, as the selfish part of me wished I could be the one cradling her against my chest. Purely for her comfort and protection, of course.

As we picked our way through the scattered skeletal remains, I found myself marveling at the sheer variety of creatures that had met their grim end in this charming little spot. There were the expected human skulls and femurs, sure. But I also spied the unmistakable antlers of a primordial stag, the massive vertebrae of what must have been quite the impressive serpent, and unless my eyes deceived me, the withered husk of a dragon wing. Delightful.

I glanced over at Merlin, who was trailing behind us with a glare that was even more broody than usual. I sidled up to him, keeping my voice low so as not to wake our slumbering royal beauty.

"So, you and the wicked witch, huh?" I wagged my eyebrows suggestively. "I can't say I'm surprised honestly. She used to be quite the catch before she turned her back on all that was good and decent."

Merlin shot me a withering glare, his blue eyes flashing with irritation. "Now is hardly the time, Gawain."

"Oh, I disagree. I think now is the perfect time. We're traipsing through a haunted forest, our fearless leader is comfortably unconscious, and you've just been revealed as the dark mistress's former lover. I think it's the perfect time to discuss it."

"It was a mistake," he bit out. "A youthful indiscretion that I deeply regret. Mordred wasn't always like this. There was a time when she was different, when I thought..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "It doesn't matter. That was a long time ago, and she's clearly chosen her path. As have I."

I studied him for a moment, taking in the tension in his shoulders, the shadows in his eyes. "You loved her, didn't you?" I asked quietly.

Merlin flinched. "I-I thought I could have, if given the chance," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "But what we had, it wasn't real. It never felt like it does with Arthur."

I clapped a hand on his shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "Matters of the heart are rarely simple, my friend."

Merlin turned to me. "I never meant for any of this to happen. I should have been honest with Arthur from the beginning. She deserved to know the truth about her, about my past with Mordred. She'll hate me now."

I sighed, running a hand over my hair. "Look, you made a mistake. Several, actually. But beating yourself up about it isn't going to change anything. What matters now is that you're here, fighting by her side. Let the anger simmer for a while before you doom yourself."

Merlin nodded as he glanced over at Arthur's sleeping form. "I'll never hurt her again."

"Good, good. Because if you do, you'll have me to answer to. And trust me, I don't need a fancy sword to make you feel a lot of fucking pain." Wiggling my fingers in front of his face, I allowed the tips to frost over in shards of ice that could easily shred flesh.

Merlin rolled his eyes, but I caught the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Duly noted."

We trudged through the gloomy forest for what felt like hours; the shadows grew longer and more ominous with each passing step. The horses were a welcome sight when we finally reached them, their warm breath and soft whickers relaxing me.

Tristan gently settled Arthur onto a bed of soft moss, brushing a strand of hair from her face with a tenderness that made something clench in my chest. Lance set about making a small fire with the wave of his hand, the flickering light casting eerie shadows on the twisted trunks surrounding our makeshift camp.

I plopped down on a fallen log, my aching muscles protesting the hard seat. "Well, that was a barrel of fucking laughs, wasn't it, lads? Can't wait to see what other delightful surprises this quest has in store for us. Camelot was getting a bit boring."

Galahad shot me an exasperated look as he tended to the horses. "Your boundless optimism is truly inspiring sometimes."

"It's a gift, truly."

I couldn't help but let my gaze drift back to Arthur's sleeping form. She looked so small, so vulnerable like this, curled up on the moss with Tristan's cloak draped over

her.

Mordred's revelations, both about her true bloodline and Merlin's secretive past, had clearly struck a heavy blow. I could only imagine the turmoil swirling inside her, the foundations of everything she thought she knew crumbling beneath her feet.

My chest tightened as I recalled the haunted look in her eyes as we trudged back through the cave, Excalibur clutched in a white-knuckled grip. I wanted nothing more than to gather her into my arms, smooth the furrow from her brow, and whisper reassurances into her hair.

Percival settled down beside me, his large form making the log creak. He followed my gaze to Arthur, a knowing look in his dark eyes. He was feeling guilty still, for the way his shadows had attacked her while his nightmares held him captive. She might have forgiven him, but Percy would never forgive himself. He might be a cold, cynical bastard at the best of times, but he wasn't cruel.

Merlin rose from his spot by the fire, his gaze fixed on Arthur's too. There was a determination in his step as he started to make his way over to her, no doubt intending to settle down beside her like a faithful hound.

Oh, for the love of...

I pushed myself up from the log, ignoring the creak of protest from my tired muscles, and intercepted Merlin before he could reach his destination. I placed a hand on his chest, halting his progress.

"And just where do you think you're going?"

Merlin frowned, his eyes still locked on Arthur. "I should be with her. In case she wakes up."

"Merlin, my dear deluded friend, do you really think that's wise? The girl just found out you've been keeping rather significant secrets from her. I hardly think she's going to be thrilled to wake up and find you hovering over her like a mother hen."

Merlin's jaw clenched. "And I suppose you're offering to stand in for me then?"

"Of course I am. Besides, I'm much larger than you, puny man. She needs the warmth for—well, you know— warmth ." I smiled, all teeth.

Merlin wasn't that puny, but I liked poking at the sorcerer. He was much too serious sometimes. Besides, everyone was puny next to me and Galahad.

He cursed under his breath, running a hand down his face as he shrugged off my hand and turned back to the fire. I watched him go, feeling a twinge of sympathy despite myself. For all his mistakes, I knew Merlin cared deeply for Arthur.

I did too. Somehow, it happened, and I hadn't been prepared.

Quietly, so as not to wake her, I settled down on the moss a respectful distance away. Close enough to watch over her, but far enough to give her the space she needed.

Chapter Eleven

ARTHUR

I woke up slowly this time, rising from the depths of a blessedly dreamless sleep. The first thing I became aware of was the warmth enveloping me, seeping into my chilled bones, and soothing my aching muscles. The second was the solid presence at my back, the rise and fall of a broad chest pressed against my shoulder blades.

My eyes fluttered open, blinking away the lingering haze of sleep. Shifting slightly, I craned my neck to glance behind me and found myself gazing into a pair of familiar steel-gray eyes, glinting with mischief.

"Well, good morning, my lady," Gawain murmured, his deep voice still rough with sleep. "I was beginning to think I'd have to resort to more drastic measures to wake you."

I felt a flush creep up my neck, immediately aware of every place our bodies touched. The strong arm draped over my waist, his muscular thigh pressed against the back of my own, the soft puff of his breath stirring the fine hairs at my nape.

"Gawain? What are you doing?"

"Keeping you warm. You were shivering in your sleep. I couldn't let you freeze to death, could I?"

I was suddenly very aware of the heat of his skin seeping through the layers of

clothing between us. My breath hitched as his hand slid lower on my belly, his fingers grazing the sensitive skin just above the waistband of my trousers.

"Gawain," I breathed, my voice coming out far breathier than I intended. "We can't—the others."

"Shh," he murmured, his lips brushing the shell of my ear and sending a shiver racing down my spine. "They're all still asleep. It's just you and me right now."

His hand dipped lower, slipping beneath the fabric to skim over my hip bone. I bit back a moan, my body responding to his touch with a speed that left me dizzy.

"I can make you feel pleasure, Arthur," Gawain whispered, his voice a low rumble that I felt all the way to my core. "Just say the word and I'll chase all those dark thoughts right out of your pretty head."

I knew I should put a stop to this. We were on a dangerous quest, surrounded by deadly ancient magic. The fate of the kingdom rested on my shoulders. I couldn't afford any distractions.

But gods, the way Gawain was touching me, the heat of his breath on my neck, and the promise in his words...

I let out a shaky breath, my resolve crumbling under the onslaught of Gawain's skilled fingers. "Okay," I whispered, my voice barely audible even to my own ears. "Okay, just...be quiet."

I could feel Gawain's smile against my neck, his teeth grazing my pulse point and making me shudder. "As you wish, my queen," he purred.

His hand slid fully into my trousers, his calloused palm rough against the smooth skin

of my lower belly. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out as his fingers dipped lower, brushing against the slick heat at the apex of my thighs.

Gawain groaned softly, the sound muffled against my shoulder. "Gods, Arthur, you're so wet already. Is this all for me?"

My hips canted forward of their own accord, seeking more of his touch. "Yes," I gasped, beyond caring how desperate I sounded. "Please, Gawain."

He needed no further encouragement. His fingers delved into my heat, stroking and circling, mapping out the most sensitive parts of me like he'd been born to it. I rocked against his hand, biting my lip hard enough to taste blood as I fought to keep my moans contained.

Gawain's other hand slid up under my tunic, cupping my breast and thumbing roughly at my nipple through the thin fabric of my breast band. The dual sensations were maddening, the ache between my thighs building to a fever pitch as Gawain worked me with expert precision.

"That's it," he encouraged, his voice a dark honey rumble in my ear. "Think of my cock filling you up until you're stretched deliciously." I groaned, my hand coming up to cover my mouth. His lips pressed against my ear. "One day soon, I'm going to fuck you until your thighs shake around my hips."

His fingers curled inside me, finding that secret spot that made stars burst behind my eyelids. I came apart with a choked cry, my body shaking as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me. Gawain held me through it, his touch gentling as he coaxed me down from the peak.

I sagged back against him, my limbs feeling deliciously heavy and languid. Gawain pressed a kiss to my temple, his hand slipping out of my trousers to rest on my hip.

"Better?" he asked, a note of smug satisfaction in his tone.

"Mmm," I hummed, not quite able to form words yet.

As the aftershocks of pleasure slowly faded, reality began to seep back in, bringing with it a sinking feeling of guilt and unease. What had I just done?

I sat up abruptly, pulling away from Gawain's embrace and tugging my clothing back into place with shaking hands. I couldn't bring myself to meet his eyes, afraid of what I might see there: smugness, pity, maybe even regret.

"Arthur," Gawain said softly, reaching for me. I flinched away from his touch, wrapping my arms around myself as if I could physically hold together the pieces of my composure.

"I just need a moment," I said, my voice sounding hollow to my own ears.

"Arthur, wait?—"

But I was already pushing myself to my feet, ignoring the twinge of protest from my stiff muscles. I needed space, needed to clear my head of the lingering haze of need. I couldn't afford to be weak, not now, not with so much at stake.

Stalking away from our little camp, my boots crunched on the dry leaves and twigs littering the forest floor. I didn't have a destination in mind. I just needed to put some distance between myself and what had just happened.

What the hell was I thinking, letting Gawain touch me like that? Letting him make me fall apart with his skilled fingers? I was supposed to be their leader, the one they looked to for strength and guidance.

I paused at the edge of a small stream, the burbling water providing a soothing balm to my chaotic thoughts. Sinking down onto a fallen log, I buried my face in my hands, trying to calm the roiling emotions churning in my gut.

Everything was such a mess. I couldn't deny the attraction between us, the spark that had been simmering under the surface since the moment we met. But acting on it? Letting it distract me? That was a luxury I couldn't afford. And what about Merlin? What about this thing that was finally out in the open between us?

As I sat there, lost in my swirling thoughts, I didn't notice the soft footfalls approaching until a familiar figure settled onto the log beside me. I glanced up to see Galahad, his fiery red hair glinting in the dappled sunlight filtering through the leaves.

He didn't say anything at first, just sat there with me, his presence a quiet comfort. I found myself studying his profile, tracing the strong lines of his jaw, the regal slope of his nose that had a very slight bump on the bridge. He really was unfairly handsome, with those deep brown eyes that seemed to see straight into the heart of a person.

After a moment, he turned to me, a gentle smile curving his lips. "You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders."

I let out a humorless chuckle. "That's because I do. Or at least, it feels that way." I sighed, running a hand through my tangled hair. "You, um, didn't happen to..." My cheeks flamed, and suddenly my entire body felt hot.

Galahad grinned at me, lighting up his entire face. "Did I happen to see Gawain make you come on his fingers?"

"Gods..." I groaned, throwing my face in my hands.

Galahad chuckled softly, the sound warm and rich. "Don't be embarrassed. It's a natural thing to seek comfort and pleasure in times of stress. Gods know we could all use a little of that right now."

I peeked at him through my fingers, my blush still burning hot. "It's not just that. I'm supposed to be leading this quest, keeping my head on straight. Not getting distracted by...by whatever that was with Gawain."

Galahad reached out, gently prying my hands away from my face. He clasped them in his own, his skin warm and slightly calloused against mine. "Arthur, listen to me. You are not just a leader, and not just a queen in waiting. You are a woman with needs and desires like any other."

His thumb brushed over my knuckles, the touch sending a flood of warmth through my body. "Denying yourself, punishing yourself for being human, well, half human, will only make this quest harder in the end. You need to allow yourself these moments of respite. It's what will keep you strong when the true trials come."

I stared at him, my lips parted in surprise. Of all the reactions I had expected, this calm acceptance and encouragement was not one of them. "You really believe that?"

Galahad smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "I do. Besides, we're your knights. We're here to serve you."

"Not in that way, I'm sure..."

His gaze dropped to my lips, a smoldering heat flickering in those deep brown eyes. "In any way you desire," he murmured, his voice low and full of promise.

My breath caught in my throat, pulse racing as I processed the weight of his words. Surely he couldn't mean? But the intensity of his stare left little room for doubt.

Galahad's hand released mine, only to trail slowly up my arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake. "You carry such a heavy burden," he whispered, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear with a tenderness that made my heart ache. "Let us help lighten it, in whatever manner we can."

His fingers lingered on my jaw, tilting my face up towards his. We were so close now, the warmth of his breath ghosted across my lips. It would be so easy to just let go, to fall into his arms and let him chase away the cold, creeping dread that had taken root in my bones.

As much as my body screamed for his touch, my mind still hesitated. "I don't want to take advantage," I breathed, searching his eyes for any hint of reluctance or uncertainty. "Of you, or any of the others. This isn't part of your duty to me."

Galahad's lips quirked into a half-smile. "Bold of you to assume I'm not the one taking advantage here," he teased gently, his thumb tracing the curve of my bottom lip. "A beautiful, brilliant queen with a smart mouth. What man could resist such temptation?"

Despite everything, a surprised laugh bubbled up my throat. "Careful, Sir Knight. Keep talking like that and I might start to think you actually want me."

His expression sobered, the playful glint in his eyes replaced by a smoldering intensity that stole my breath. "I do want you. More than I've ever wanted anyone or anything, and trust me, I'm as surprised as you look right now."

Galahad's other hand slid around my waist, pulling me flush against the hard planes of his body. I let out a soft gasp, desire sparking through my veins like a wildfire.

"But I'm willing to wait until you're sure you want me back."

I blinked into his eyes, nearly at a loss for words. “Even though Gawain?—”

“Even then,” he said, cutting me off. “Even with your sorcerer panting after you like a dog in heat. I’m a man who has no problem sharing.”

At the mention of Merlin, ice crept over my heart, and my entire body went stiff. I looked away, biting the inside of my cheek. Galahad noted the change and took my hands in his large palms, rubbing them to warm them up.

“Did he betray you?” he asked, his voice low. I met his eyes, and they were hard, no longer jovial. “With the witch. Did he betray you by being with her?”

Taking in a long breath, I let my shoulders drop slightly. “Not in the way you think. This thing between Merlin and me is new. The first time we ever kissed was the day we left Camelot. What hurts is that after all these years, he never bothered to tell me about her. It feels purposeful, and we never kept secrets. And there’s the matter of Uther. He suspected I was a Pendragon for years.”

Galahad's gaze softened, and he lifted one hand to cup my cheek. "I'm sorry he hurt you." His thumb brushed over my skin. "Secrets can be a heavy burden, especially when they're kept by those we trust most."

I leaned into his touch, eyes fluttering closed for a moment. "I just don't know how to move past this. Merlin has been by my side for as long as I can remember. He's my best friend, my confidant. And now..."

My voice cracked, and Galahad pulled me into a tight embrace. I buried my face against his massive chest, breathing in the comforting scent of leather and campfire smoke. His strong arms wrapped around me, one hand stroking soothingly down my back.

"Give it time. Wounds like these don't heal overnight. But I have faith that you and Merlin will find your way back to each other."

I pulled back just enough to look up at him, a faint smile tugging at my lips. "So you're taking Merlin's side then?"

He scoffed, and his whole chest moved. "Your side is the only side, Arthur. But a part of me feels for the lad."

"Lad?" I asked dubiously. "He's not a boy."

"I've been alive for over nine hundred years. Humans are like children to me."

"And me? Do you see me as a child?"

His eyes scanned my face, filling with warmth and a flicker of that same desire I'd seen before. "You're not human, though, are you? Long after every human in Camelot's bones have turned to dust, you will still look the way you do now. Young, fierce, and perfect."

A strange sensation washed over me; a prickling at the base of my skull, like the brush of phantom fingers. I stiffened, pulling back from his embrace as my hand instinctively went to the hilt of my sword.

"Arthur? What is it?" Galahad asked, his brow furrowing in concern.

"I—I'm not sure," I murmured, scanning the trees around us. The feeling intensified, a low hum vibrating through my bones. It was almost as if the very air was charged with energy, the kind of ancient, primal power that set my teeth on edge.

Slowly, I turned in a circle, my senses straining for any hint of danger. But the forest

was quiet, the only sound the gentle babbling of the stream and the distant trilling of birdsong.

As I stood there, every nerve in my body tingling with that strange, ethereal energy, a flicker of movement caught my eye. Slowly, as if pulled by an unseen force, I turned towards the stream, my gaze drawn to the shimmering water.

The world around me seemed to fade away, the voices of the knights growing muffled and distant. All that existed was the gentle burbling of the stream, the way the sunlight danced across its surface like scattered diamonds. Without conscious thought, I found myself moving towards it, my feet carrying me forward as if of their own volition.

I followed the winding path of the stream, barely aware of the twigs snapping beneath my boots or the brush of leaves against my skin. The energy thrumming through me grew stronger with every step, a siren song I was powerless to resist.

Distantly, I heard the others calling my name, their voices laced with concern and confusion. But I couldn't respond, couldn't tear myself away from the magnetic pull that drew me onwards. It was as if I was in a trance, my mind disconnected from my body as I moved deeper into the forest.

Time lost all meaning as I walked, the stream gradually widening until it fed into a large, still body of water. The surface was like a mirror, reflecting the luminous blue of the sky and the emerald green of the trees with crystalline clarity.

And there, at the heart of the lake, I saw her.

As I stood transfixed at the edge of the lake, the ethereal figure seemed to beckon. Her translucent, outstretched hand waved me forward. Without hesitation, I stepped into the cool, crystalline water, barely registering the icy bite against my skin.

The world fell away as I waded deeper, the water lapping at my thighs, then my waist. The lady's form shimmered and danced, her luminous eyes holding mine with an ancient, unfathomable wisdom. She was terrifying and mesmerizing at the same time, a being of pure magic untethered by the constraints of the mortal plane. Her long hair flowed around her, and I could have sworn I heard singing.

Behind me, the muffled shouts of the knights grew more insistent, their voices threading with panic. But they sounded distant, as if from a dream, unable to pierce the veil of enchantment that had fallen over me.

"Arthur!" Gawain's desperate cry echoed across the water. "Arthur, stop!"

But I was beyond hearing, beyond caring. The only thing that existed was the lady and the siren call of her power thrumming through my veins. It sang to the wildness inside me, the part that had always yearned for something more.

The water was chest high now, its icy touch stealing the breath from my lungs. I stepped forward again, the lake bottom falling away beneath my feet. The shock of the frigid water closing over my head jolted me back to myself for one brief, terrifying moment. I thrashed, instinct taking over as I fought to propel myself back to the surface, to air, to life.

But something was wrong. The water was thicker than it should be, dragging at my limbs like grasping hands. Panic surged through me as I kicked harder, clawing towards the wavering light above. My lungs burned, starved for oxygen, and dark spots danced at the edges of my vision.

Just as I thought I couldn't hold on a second longer, my head broke the surface. I sucked in a desperate gasp, coughing and sputtering as I blinked the water from my eyes. The scene that greeted me was not the sunlit pond I had waded into moments before.

Towering trees with leaves of silver and gold arched overhead, their branches intertwined in a shimmering canopy. Everywhere I looked, strange flowers bloomed in riotous color, their petals glowing with an inner light. The air itself seemed to sparkle, filled with drifting motes that caught the light like tiny diamonds.

I floated, spinning in a slow circle as I tried to get my bearings. There was no sign of the knights, no sign of the forest I had left behind. Only this strange, ethereal landscape that seemed to pulse with a life and magic all its own. I'd never seen anything so beautiful, so utterly enchanting.

Slowly, I swam towards the shore, marveling at the feel of the water against my skin. It was no longer icy, but warm and silken. The closer I got to land, the shallower it became, until I could stand on a lake bottom that felt more like the softest moss than sand or stone.

I realized I was no longer clad in heavy leather clothing. Somehow it'd been replaced with a soft white dress that floated around me like gossamer. It looked like a nightdress, with no sleeves or overcoat, and it seemed like the bottom half was gone, or ripped away entirely.

I emerged from the water, rivulets streaming from my sodden clothing. Lush grass carpeted the ground and was dotted with delicate blossoms that seemed to turn their faces towards me as I passed. The dress stuck to my skin uncomfortably. My legs were exposed to the elements, and I felt utterly naked.

Ahead, a path materialized out of the foliage, winding its way through the shimmering trees. It was lined with smooth stones that glowed like moonstones, pulsing gently as if in time with my heartbeat. Without conscious thought, I found myself drawn towards it, my feet moving of their own accord.

As I walked, the strange, luminous plants seemed to sway and dance, their colors

shifting in a mesmerizing kaleidoscope. The very air hummed with energy, with a power that resonated deep in my bones. Some part of my mind knew that this was all wrong. That I shouldn't be here, but that part was shoved down deep.

As I followed the moonstone path deeper into the forest, the air grew thicker, heavier, like honey on my tongue. The colors around me became more vibrant, more alive. The path began to slope upwards, winding through the increasingly wild foliage. Vines with leaves of amethyst and jade twined around the tree trunks, their flowers unfurling like crystalline stars.

As I climbed higher, the trees thinned, giving way to a lush meadow carpeted with shimmering grasses and delicate, bell-shaped flowers. And there, at the center of the clearing, stood a towering tree unlike any I had ever seen. Its bark was a pearlescent white, shot through with veins of glittering gold.

But it was what rested in the cradle of the tree's branches that stole my attention. An orb of pure, radiant light hovered there, pulsing gently. A voice emanated from it, ancient and melodic, speaking in a language I had never heard before, yet somehow understood with perfect clarity.

"Daughter of stars and stone, born of magic's blood, To claim your fate, a bridge you must cross. But beware the path, for it is fraught with peril, And the price of failure is a fate far worse than death. Across the bridge, three guardians stand, Each a riddle, a test of wit and will. Answer true, and passage shall be granted, But fail, and your quest will be forever lost."

Three riddles, three chances to prove myself worthy.

As the orb's final words faded into silence, it drifted away from the shimmering tree, floating through the air like a miniature sun. Tendrils of golden light trailed behind it, leaving a glittering path in its wake. Almost without thought, I found myself drawn

after it, my bare feet whispering through the lush grass.

Chapter Twelve

PERCIVAL

I stood there, frozen in horror, as Arthur vanished into the dark, churning waters. My heart felt like it was being crushed in an icy grip, and I lunged forward, hand outstretched, desperate to grab her. But she was gone, swallowed up by the depths, leaving nothing but a gaping void.

"Arthur!" Lancelot's anguished shout cut through the chaos beside me, raw with panic and dread. He made to dive in after her, but I shot out my shadows, holding him in place.

It was too late for Tristan, Galahad, Merlin and Gawain. They dove in without a second thought, disappearing beneath the water.

"Wait!" I barked, my voice gravelly and strained. I shut my eyes, feeling the shadows swirl around me, pulling them in tight. I reached out, sending those dark tendrils into the roiling waters, searching for any sign of her.

Nothing. Just a seething mess of chaos that tore at my shadow threads, scattering them like dust. I couldn't find her. Couldn't even feel her. Ice coursed through my veins. I'd failed her. I'd failed in my goddamn duty to protect the heir. The one who was supposed to save us all.

"Damn it all!" I roared, slamming my fist against a nearby tree. The bark cracked beneath the impact, pain shooting up my arm. But I welcomed it. I deserved far

worse.

I released Lancelot, and he immediately started pulling off his heavy clothing and preparing to leap into the water. “I’m going, with or without you.”

I snarled, knowing he was right. There was no choice but to go after her. I followed Lance’s lead, then shucked my boots and shirt, discarding them on the riverbank, prepared to follow her to the depths.

Then, without warning, the water erupted. My heart stuttered, then thundered back to life as a familiar chestnut head broke the surface. Arthur emerged like a vengeful goddess, Excalibur raised high, its blade gleaming with a golden radiance. She was no longer wearing her leather clothing, but rather a water soaked white dress that left very little to the imagination.

Staggering relief crashed over me. We surged toward her, not giving a damn as the frigid water soaked us to the bone.

Arthur staggered toward us, coughing and sputtering. I reached her first, catching her just as her knees buckled. Excalibur toppled to the riverbank, the glow fading, but Lancelot caught it.

“I’ve got you,” I murmured, pulling her close.

She was trembling, skin icy against mine. I scooped her up, cradling her against my chest as I carried her toward the shore. Lancelot was right behind me, hands hovering, desperate to touch her.

The cloak I grabbed was woefully inadequate to warm her. She looked so fragile in that moment, like a drowned kitten. It made something ache deep in my chest.

"Here, this should help," Lancelot murmured, conjuring a flickering flame in his palm. He held it close to Arthur's face, letting the heat seep into her pale skin.

Just then, a rumble of thunder boomed overhead as shadows drew in. A storm was about to hit us fast and hard.

A whimper escaped her blue-tinged lips, and she curled into me, seeking out any scrap of warmth. I held her tighter, trying to will the heat from my body into hers. Worry gnawed at my gut. She'd been down there so long. Too long.

"We need to get her out of those wet clothes," I said gruffly, my voice rawer than I would have liked. "And find better shelter for the night."

Lancelot met my gaze, golden eyes filled with the same fear that gripped me. He gave a quick nod.

"The others..." Arthur croaked, trying to lift her head.

I coaxed her back down, shushing her softly. "They'll be alright. Three fae knights and a sorcerer are well equipped to handle a portal."

"Is that what that was?" she asked, her eyes searching mine as she blinked the water from them rapidly.

I gave a grim nod. "Aye, portals exist all over, especially when a quest is underway. They're drawn to the magic." My lips twisted wryly as I adjusted my grip on her, her soaked dress cold and clinging. "Seems the old magic wants to make sure you succeed, even if it has to drag you through seven hells to do it."

Arthur shivered against me, tucking her face into the crook of my neck. Her breath was warm on my chilled skin, igniting a heat low in my gut that I promptly ignored.

"There was an orb," she murmured, voice muffled. "And a voice...calling me..."

I frowned, an uneasy prickle running down my spine. Orbs and disembodied voices rarely led anywhere good, in my experience. Usually heralded some fresh misery the divine powers wanted to unleash.

"Let me guess," I said, tone flat and cynical. "Sounded like a woman? Melodic and alluring, promising great knowledge and power?"

Arthur pulled back, blinking up at me in surprise. "Yes, actually. How did you know?"

I snorted. "That was the Lady of the Lake—an old water spirit from the Unseelie Court. She loves to meddle. What did she tell you?"

Arthur was about to respond when Lancelot said, "Let's find shelter and get her dry before we get into that. The trees have eyes and ears."

He was right. This could wait a bit longer.

In silence, we walked for nearly an hour before reaching a cave on the side of a cliff that seemed relatively safe. I sent my shadows into its depths and found nothing but small critters scurrying around.

Rain had begun to fall in earnest now, so there was no choice but to settle in for a long night. The others would be fine once they realized they were in a portal. Tristan would be able to lead them out of it.

I carried Arthur into the cave, her small frame a shivering bundle in my arms. The cave was dark and musty, but blessedly dry. I set her down gently on a flat rock, keeping a steadying hand on her shoulder.

Lancelot wasted no time gathering kindling and logs, piling them into a neat fire pit with practiced ease. Sparks danced from his fingertips, catching the dry tinder and birthing a blaze that filled the space with flickering light and warmth.

I rummaged through my pack, pulling out a spare tunic and breeches. They'd be comically large on Arthur's slight frame, but at least they were dry. I tossed them to her, along with a thick woolen cloak.

"Here, these should fit you well enough." My words were gruff, but I couldn't quite meet her gaze. The sight of her in that sodden white dress, the fabric clinging to every curve. It stirred something primal in me. Something I had no right to feel. "We'll head back for the horses and our packs in the morning, but for now, this will have to do."

Arthur took the clothes with a grateful nod, her fingers brushing mine and sending a jolt of awareness through me. I pulled back, busying myself with laying out a bedroll near the fire.

The soft rustle of fabric drew my attention, and I made the mistake of glancing over my shoulder. Arthur had her back to me with the dress pooled at her feet as she shrugged into my oversized tunic. The firelight danced over her pale skin, casting tantalizing shadows along the elegant line of her spine. I swallowed hard and forced myself to look away, focusing intently on adjusting the one bedroll we had with hands that trembled slightly.

Gods, how long had it been since I allowed myself to look at a woman this way? Decades? Maybe more. But Arthur drew me in. Like a moth to an open flame, and even my shadows danced in her presence.

The cave suddenly felt too small, the air too thick with tension. I could hear the whisper of fabric as she finished dressing, the crackle of the fire, Lancelot's steady

breathing. Everything seemed amplified, my senses hyperaware.

"So," Arthur said, her voice still rough from her ordeal. "About that orb."

I turned to face her, steeling myself against the sight of her drowning in my clothes, her damp hair curling around her face. She looked so young, so vulnerable. It made me want to wrap her in my arms and shield her from the world. But that wasn't my place.

I cleared my throat. "Right. The Lady of the Lake. What exactly did she say?"

Arthur settled herself on the bedroll, drawing her knees up to her chest and pulling the cloak tight around her shoulders. Lancelot sat down next to her, close enough that their shoulders brushed. A flare of something hot and angry twisted in my gut at the sight, but I pushed it down.

Arthur's brow furrowed as she stared into the dancing flames. "She gave me a riddle."

"Can you remember it?" Lancelot asked as he ran his fingers through his long, wet hair, combing out the tangles.

"Unfortunately, yes," Arthur said with an amused huff. "I can't get it out of my head."

"Daughter of stars and stone, born of magic's blood, To claim your fate, a bridge you must cross. But beware the path, for it is fraught with peril, And the price of failure is a fate far worse than death. Across the bridge, three guardians stand, Each a riddle, a test of wit and will. Answer true, and passage shall be granted, But fail, and your quest will be forever lost."

"So the second trial will involve some kind of bridge, where three guardians will test

you with a riddle," I mused aloud.

"I don't like the sound of that last part. 'A fate far worse than death'? What could be worse than dying?"

Lancelot glanced at Arthur, something flickering in his golden eyes. Something that reminded me of a similar sparkle in Merlin's gaze when he looked at Arthur sometimes. Irritation twisted inside me. I wasn't an idiot. I knew what happened between Arthur and Gawain this morning. All of us knew.

I wasn't angry at Gawain for touching her. But I was jealous. I wanted to be the one with my fingers in her warm cunt, making her writhe against my skin.

It was impossible, though. How could she ever feel safe with me after my shadows attacked her after my nightmare? Shame still weighed on me, and sometimes it was hard to look at Arthur, even if she said she understood.

I watched as Arthur's eyelids grew heavy, her body finally succumbing to the exhaustion of the day's trials. She curled up on the bedroll, nestling into the warmth of the fire and Lancelot's solid presence beside her. Within moments, her breathing evened out into the slow, steady rhythm of sleep.

Lancelot and I sat in silence for a time, listening to the crackle of the flames and the soft patter of rain outside the cave. The shadows danced along the rocky walls, casting everything in a shifting, ethereal glow. It felt like we were in a world apart, suspended between reality and dreams.

My gaze kept straying to Arthur's sleeping form, tracing the delicate curve of her cheek, the way her damp curls clung to her neck. Even in sleep, there was a strength to her, an innate stubbornness that attracted me more than it should have.

"She's going to be the death of us, you know," Lancelot murmured. "She'll break all of our hearts in the end."

I huffed out a mirthless laugh. "Bold of you to assume we still have hearts to break. This life hollows you out until there's nothing left."

Lancelot shook his head. He glanced down at Arthur, something raw and aching in his gaze. "I used to believe that too. But I'm not so sure anymore."

I studied him, taking in the tension in his broad shoulders, the way his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. I recognized that restless energy, the warring emotions. How many times had I felt them myself, that painful yearning for something I couldn't have? Didn't deserve.

"What about Gwen?" I asked, careful to keep my tone neutral. "I thought you and she were?—"

Lancelot's eyes snapped to mine, burning with a heat that had nothing to do with the fire. "Gwen and I are done. Have been for a long time. Whatever we had, it wasn't real. Not like..."

He trailed off, but I heard the unspoken words as clearly as if he'd shouted them. The realization hit me like a blow, knocking the breath from my lungs. So Lancelot had feelings for Arthur too. It seemed the heir had a universal pull none of us could resist, drawing us into her orbit like helpless souls caught in the gravity well of a newborn star.

First Gawain and Tristan, now Lancelot and Galahad. Hell, even I felt that inexorable tug in my chest when I looked at her, much as I tried to ignore it. And I'd bet my best sword that Merlin would fight to the death against any man who tried to take her from him.

What a goddamn mess. A bunch of battle-hardened warriors, felled by a slip of a girl who probably had no idea the havoc she was wreaking on our black hearts. I almost wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it. The Fates certainly had a twisted sense of humor.

"So what now?" I asked. "We all just stumble around like lovesick fools, panting after Arthur?"

Lancelot's jaw clenched. "Or maybe we leave the decision up to her."

I barked out a harsh laugh, the sound grating. "Right. And how do you propose we do that? Draw lots for her favor? Fight each other for the privilege of warming her bed?"

Lancelot's eyes flashed, his hand twitching like he wanted to hit me. For a moment, I thought he might actually challenge me. Part of me relished the idea, eager for any outlet for the roiling emotions churning inside me.

Then he exhaled, the tension draining from him. "No. We let her choose, if and when she's ready."

I looked away, staring into the dancing flames. "And if she doesn't choose either of us?"

He was silent for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was rough with barely suppressed deadness. "Then we accept it. We swallow our pride, and we continue to serve her as we swore to do."

Sleep was a long time coming that night, my mind awl with dark thoughts and darker desires. When I finally drifted off, chestnut curls and eyes that shimmered with golden magic haunted my dreams.

I woke some time later to the sound of chattering teeth. The fire had burned down to embers, casting the cave in deep shadow. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, then I saw her curled in on herself, shaking like a leaf.

I'd removed my shirt and boots, warming them by the fire hours ago, but the chill in the air was beginning to nip at me too.

Cursing under my breath, I rose and made my way to her side. Her skin was like ice, lips tinged an alarming shade of blue. Without a second thought, I stretched out beside her, pulling her trembling body flush against mine. She let out a small, pitiful sound, burrowing into my chest like a kitten seeking warmth.

I cocooned her in shadows, wrapping them around us both like a living blanket. It was instinct, an unconscious manifestation of my need to protect her, to chase away anything that would cause her harm or discomfort.

Slowly, her shivering eased, but I found myself reluctant to let her go. It felt so right, holding her like this. Our bodies molded together.

I held Arthur close, savoring the way her soft curves pressed against the hard planes of my body. The chill had finally left her, replaced by a delicious warmth that seeped into my bones. Her breath puffed against my neck, each exhale a caress that sent shivers through my body. My cock was painfully hard.

Though I knew I should pull away and put some distance between us before I did something foolish, I was weak. Too intoxicated by her nearness to resist. My shadows continued to wrap around her.

Slowly, Arthur began to stir, a sleepy murmur escaping her lips. I tensed, bracing myself for her reaction when she realized the position we were in. But to my surprise, she only nestled closer, her face tucking into the crook of my neck.

"Percy," she whispered. "I'm sorry if I worried you. But...thank you...for keeping me warm."

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly tight. "It was nothing," I rasped, the words feeling inadequate. How could I explain the depths of my fear when I thought I'd lost her? The desperation that had clawed at my gut as I watched her go into the water?

Arthur shifted, pulling back just enough to meet my gaze. In the dying firelight, her eyes glimmered like molten gold, stealing my breath. "It wasn't nothing. You saved my life. Again."

Her small hand came up to rest on my chest, right over my pounding heart. The heat of her palm seared me, branding me with her touch. She had to feel the thundering beneath her fingertips, the way my pulse raced at her nearness.

"I forgive you, you know," Arthur murmured, her voice soft but filled with conviction. "For your nightmare, for your shadows lashing out. I know you didn't mean to hurt me."

I stiffened, shame and self-loathing rising like bile in my throat. I'd tried so hard to bury the memory of that night, to lock it away in the darkest recesses of my mind. But it haunted me still, the image of her sprawled on the ground, eyes wide with fear as my shadows whipped around her.

"I'm a monster," I gritted out, trying to pull away. I didn't deserve her forgiveness, her understanding. I was a broken, twisted thing, unfit to even be in her presence.

But Arthur held fast. Her hand slid up to cup my jaw, forcing me to meet her gaze. "No," she said fiercely. "You are not a monster, Percival. You're a powerful warrior who faced something that would break most souls in half. I won't pretend to know what you went through, but I can see the pain in your eyes. People don't just have

those kinds of nightmares without having seen something to put them there."

I leaned into her touch, helpless to resist the soothing warmth of her skin against mine. Her words washed over me, a balm to the festering wound that was my shame. I wanted so badly to believe her, to accept the absolution she offered.

"You don't know the things I've done," I whispered hoarsely. "The blood on my hands. On my family's hands. If you did, you wouldn't be so quick to forgive."

Arthur's thumb stroked along my cheekbone, a feather-light caress that sent sparks skittering down my spine. "I know enough. I know that you're loyal and brave, that you'd lay down your life for me and the others without hesitation. That's the man I see when I look at you, Percy. Not a monster, but a knight... my knight."

Something cracked open inside my chest, a dam bursting under the pressure of too many pent-up emotions. Before I could second-guess myself, I surged forward, capturing her lips in a searing kiss.

Arthur gasped against my mouth but didn't pull away. Instead, her fingers slid into my hair, nails scraping deliciously against my scalp as she deepened the kiss. I groaned, my shadows surging out to wrap around us both, cocooning us in a writhing mass of darkness.

I devoured Arthur's mouth like a man starved, pouring years of pent-up desire and longing into the kiss. My hands roamed her body, mapping the dips and curves I'd only ever dreamed of touching. She was soft and pliant beneath me, arching into my touch. Each breathy moan and gasp she made only fueled the inferno raging inside me.

I broke the kiss to trail my lips down the column of her throat, lathing the delicate skin with teeth and tongue. Arthur's head fell back, exposing more of herself to my

ravenous mouth. I could feel her pulse fluttering wildly beneath my lips. The urge to bite down was painful to resist.

"Percival," she breathed, my name a plea and a prayer on her kiss-swollen lips. Her fingers tightened in my hair, holding me to her as I worked at the sensitive spot just below her ear. "Please..."

I knew what she wanted, what she needed. It echoed the hunger gnawing at my gut, the desperate need to claim and be claimed in return. With a low growl, I ripped open the tunic she wore, baring her body to my greedy gaze.

Gods, she was exquisite. Milky skin glowed in the flickering firelight, the shadows of my power dancing across her flesh like midnight lace. Perfect, rose-tipped breasts rose and fell with each shuddering breath she took, begging for the touch of my hands, my mouth. The taut plane of her stomach trembled as I skated my fingers over it, feeling the lean muscles bunch and quiver.

I dipped my head, drawing one pebbled nipple into the wet heat of my mouth. Arthur keened, her back bowing off the bedroll as I suckled and laved the sensitive bud. Her fingers scrabbled at my shoulders, blunt nails digging deliciously into my skin. I reveled in her responsiveness.

My hands mapped the lush terrain of her body, committing every swell and hollow to memory. I stroked over the flare of her hips, pulling off her breeches, feeling the silken expanse of her thighs, higher and higher until my fingers brushed the damp curls at the apex of her legs. Arthur jolted as if struck by lightning, a high, breathless moan tearing from her throat.

"Please," she panted, her hips canting shamelessly into my touch. "Percival, I need..."

I silenced her with a searing kiss, swallowing down her pleas as I parted her slick lips

with my fingers. She was drenched, molten honey coating my fingers as I stroked through her silken heat. The evidence of her desire made my cock throb almost painfully against the confines of my breeches.

I circled her aching nub with the rough pad of my thumb, relishing the way she shuddered and gasped into my mouth. My fingers delved deeper, teasing her tight entrance before sinking into her welcoming body. Arthur's inner walls clenched around me, drawing me in as I began a slow, tortuous rhythm.

"That's it," I rasped against her lips, my voice guttural with need. "Take what you need from me, Arthur. Fuck my fingers until you scream."

Her hips rolled in time with my thrusting fingers, riding my hand as she moaned against my neck. I could feel her body tensing. She was close, teetering on the knife's edge of release.

I tore my mouth from hers, blazing a trail of open-mouthed kisses down her throat, across her heaving chest. I caught a straining nipple between my teeth, biting down just hard enough to make her yelp.

Arthur's eyes flashed with desperation as she suddenly pushed on my chest. My eyes went wide, and she flipped us over, straddling my hips with her strong thighs. My breath caught at the stunning sight of her above me, a goddess in the flesh, all tousled curls and kiss-bruised lips.

With a wicked smile, she pulled my cock free, and rocked her slick heat against the rigid length, coating me with her arousal. I groaned, my hands flying to her hips, fingers digging into her supple flesh. "Fuck..."

"That's the idea, Shadow Knight," she purred, reaching between us and I hissed as her small hand wrapped around my aching shaft, giving me a firm stroke. My hips

bucked up involuntarily, seeking more of her touch.

Arthur rose up on her knees, positioning me at her entrance. Her gaze locked with mine. Then, with agonizing slowness, she sank down on my thick length, enveloping me in her tight, slick sheath.

"Fuck!" The curse tore from my throat as she took me to the hilt, her walls rippling deliciously around my cock. The sensation was indescribable, hot silk and velvet pressure, a heaven I knew she could make me feel. I hadn't fucked a woman in decades, but even before, it'd never felt like this.

Arthur stilled for a moment, adjusting to my girth stretching her. Then, with a sinful roll of her hips, she began to move, undulating above me like a siren of the seas. Her pace was slow at first, a sensual glide that had me seeing stars. But soon she picked up speed, riding me as she moaned.

I was lost to her, drowning in pleasure as she rose and fell on my cock. Her breasts bounced heavily with each roll of her hips. Our bodies moved in perfect sync. The wet sounds of our fucking filled the cave, punctuated by harsh panting and throaty cries of pleasure every time she slammed down on me.

"Gods," Arthur whimpered, her head thrown back in ecstasy as she impaled herself on my shaft. "I'm so full..."

Pride and possession surged through my veins. This fierce, beautiful creature had chosen me, was taking her pleasure from my body. My shadows reacted to the intensity of my need, rising up to caress Arthur's skin, twining around her limbs like phantom lovers. She gasped, her cunt clenching hard around me as the tendrils of darkness stroked her clit.

I thrust up into Arthur's heat, meeting her downward strokes with powerful snaps of

my hips. She keened, her fingers digging into my chest as I hit that spot deep inside her again and again.

"Percy!" she cried out, her voice cracking on a sob. "Please, I need—I'm so close?—"

I felt her walls beginning to clench around me, her thighs trembling with the strain of holding back her release. Gritting my teeth, I slid one hand to where we were joined, seeking out the throbbing pearl at the apex of her pussy.

The moment I pressed down on her clit, Arthur shattered, her orgasm crashing over her in a tidal wave. She tossed her head back, crying out her pleasure to the cave walls as her body convulsed around me. The rhythmic squeezing of her cunt was too much for me to withstand. With a hoarse shout, I followed her over the edge, spilling myself deep inside her.

I fucked into her even after I came, letting the aftershocks ripple through us. We slowed, Arthur moaning and cursing.

Then she collapsed onto my chest, boneless and sated. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close as we both struggled to catch our breath. My shadows withdrew, slithering back into my body.

It took less than a second to realize that Lancelot was awake too.

Chapter Thirteen

ARTHUR

The unmistakable sound of a throat clearing had me lifting my head, my gaze locking with a pair of striking golden eyes across the embers. Lancelot sat up with his arms draped over his bent knees, his expression unreadable as he watched us with an intensity that made my skin prickle.

"Well," he drawled, his deep voice rougher than usual. "That was quite the show."

Mortification washed over me, heat flooding my cheeks. Scrambling off of Percival, I grabbed for the tattered remains of my tunic, trying in vain to cover up. There was rage in Lancelot's eyes. The heat of lust and desire too, yes, but rage burned brighter. Did he really hate me that much?

Slowly, I rose to my feet, not bothering to cover my nudity. Let him look his fill, see what his cold disdain and rejection would miss out on since he seemed to want nothing to do with me. I met his gaze head on, refusing to cower.

"If you have something to say, Lancelot, then say it."

He rose to his feet in one fluid motion, prowling towards me like a great cat stalking its prey. The firelight danced over the sculpted planes of his bare chest, his golden hair burnished to a fiery halo. He was terrifyingly beautiful, like a lion.

"I have quite a lot to say, actually," he growled, coming to a stop mere inches from

me. I could feel the heat pouring off his body, the barely leashed power thrumming beneath his skin. "Starting with how spectacularly stupid it was to let down your guard like that."

I bristled at his tone, at the implication that I was some witless maiden who didn't know her own mind. "I wasn't letting down my guard. I was taking what I wanted. There's a difference."

Lancelot's eyes narrowed dangerously as he loomed over me. "Taking what you wanted? And did you spare a single thought for the consequences? For how this could affect the quest, the group dynamics?"

His words stung, but I refused to let it show. Lifting my chin defiantly, I glared right back at him. "I am not some delicate flower, Lancelot. Nor am I a child in need of coddling. Who I choose to fuck is my business and mine alone."

"Not when it puts everything we've worked for at risk!" he snarled, his hand shooting out to grip my upper arm. His touch burned like a brand, sending a shock of awareness straight to my core. "You are the heir apparent, Arthur. Your life, your choices, they matter more than some fleeting pleasure."

As I ripped myself out of his grasp, my anger ignited like a blazing fire. "You have no right to judge me or dictate what I do with my body. I am not some object for you to control or be disgusted by just because you're so unhappy with your own life. I will make my own choices without your approval."

Lancelot's eyes flashed, his jaw clenching as he took a step closer, invading my personal space. "You think this is about control? About disgust?" he demanded, his voice a low, dangerous rumble. "I am trying to protect you, Arthur. From yourself and the consequences of your reckless actions."

"I don't need your protection! As if I'm some fragile fucking girl. I am the heir to Camelot's throne, and I will not be lectured by the likes of you."

His hand shot out, fisting in my tangled curls as he yanked my head back, forcing me to meet his blazing gaze. "The likes of me?" he growled, his face a breath from mine. "And what exactly is that, my lady? A fae brute?"

"Yes," I hissed, trying to ignore the sudden heat that rolled through me at the grip of my hair in his fist.

Percival's shadows were there in an instant, wrapping around Lancelot. He struggled against their hold, his muscles straining, but Percival's power was too strong.

"Release me," Lancelot snarled, his gaze darting between Percival and me. "This is between the two of us."

"I don't think so," Percival said coolly, coming to stand at my side. His shadows writhed and pulsed, ready to strike at a moment's notice. "You remember our conversation last night, don't you, Lance? She gets to choose. Not us."

My gaze bounced between both men. What conversation? Choose what?

I opened my mouth, a sharp retort on the tip of my tongue, when a flicker of movement caught my eye. My head snapped towards the mouth of the cave, every sense suddenly on high alert. Lancelot and Percival must have sensed it too, because they both went utterly still, their gazes fixed on the inky darkness.

Slowly, I reached for Excalibur lying on the bedroll; the sword seemed to hum with anticipation as my fingers closed around the hilt. The blade flared to life, casting an ethereal glow that pushed back the shadows, illuminating the jagged rock walls in shimmering golden light.

Lancelot and Percival flanked me, their own weapons drawn and at the ready. The red ruby in the pommel of Lancelot's sword glinted like a drop of blood, while Percival's obsidian daggers seemed to drink in the light, their edges razor sharp.

We waited, barely daring to breathe, as the sounds of footsteps echoed from the mouth of the cave. Multiple sets, if I had to guess.

Just as the tension reached a breaking point, four familiar figures emerged from the gloom. Relief crashed through me, so intense it left me light-headed. I lowered Excalibur, the blade's light dimming as my racing heart began to slow.

Gawain, Galahad, Merlin, and Tristan moved into the light of the fire. A smile tugged at my lips despite the lingering adrenaline. "I almost gutted you all. Announce yourselves next time!"

Gawain grinned, his steel-gray eyes glinting with mischief in the soft light. "Apologies, my lady. We didn't mean to startle you." His gaze flicked over my bare skin, one dark brow arching. "Though it seems we may have interrupted something...interesting."

My eyes locked with Merlin's as he, too, took in my disheveled appearance in just a tunic and nothing else. If this had happened two days ago, I might have felt guilty, but after the things Mordred had said, I couldn't muster up an ounce of shame.

There was hurt in Merlin's blue eyes. He knew exactly what had happened here, and I had a feeling he knew about Gawain too.

Merlin's expression was shuttered, his mouth pressed into a grim line as he surveyed the scene. I sensed his disappointment radiating off him in waves. "Perhaps," he said, his voice deceptively calm, "we should all take a moment to compose ourselves. Dawn will be here in a few hours, and we have a long day ahead of us."

"Merlin—"

He held up a hand, stopping me in my tracks. "Not now, Arthur. We have more pressing concerns at the moment." He then tossed me my pack, telling me they must have gone back to the horses before coming here, and I was so grateful. I sagged with relief as I caught it.

I wanted to push, to force the issue and clear the air between us. But I knew he was right.

With a curt nod, I turned away, heading to the privacy of the darkness to slip my clothing on and cover up as much as I could manage. I felt the weight of everyone's stares, the unspoken questions and judgments hanging thick in the air.

Warm around the fire, the men listened as I recounted what the orb had said to me, once again repeating the riddle word for word, as if it was seared into my brain.

"How did you know where to find the orb?" Merlin asked, not meeting my eyes. He just stared into the fire blankly.

"I'm not sure," I said, rubbing my chest. "I felt a tugging sensation, and it's like the rest of the world went silent. The same thing happened when I found the wooden box in the boneyard. It's like I'm drawn to the magic and it wants me to find it." I looked up, meeting Lancelot's eyes. "Was it like this for the others?"

He shook his head, running a palm over the lower half of his face. "No. There was no magic involved. They were mortal kings, and none of them had Excalibur. For them, it was more like a hunt, but the trials never presented themselves the way they have for you."

I sat back, letting that sink in. I was different, marked by magic in a way no other

ruler of Camelot had been before. It was both exhilarating and terrifying.

"So what now?" Percival asked, his brow furrowed with concern. "We have a cryptic riddle and no clear direction."

"Do you recognize where it wants us to go?" I asked hopefully. "The riddle mentioned a bridge of shadow and a chasm of secrets."

"I think it's referring to Dead Man's Path," Tristan said.

I sat up straighter, my curiosity piqued. "Dead Man's Path? I've never heard of it."

His eyes were distant, as if recalling a long-forgotten memory. "It's an ancient stone bridge that spans a vast chasm."

"Sounds like the perfect place for the next trial," Gawain chimed in.

"But why is it called Dead Man's Path?" I asked.

Tristan's expression darkened. "They say the souls of those who have fallen while attempting to cross haunt the bridge."

"That has to be it then. If the riddle points to Dead Man's Path, the magic will show me the way there."

"This is new territory for us too," Tristan said. "It's like the quest itself is responding to you, Arthur. Unlike the kings that came before you."

We sat in silence for a while, everyone lost in thought. I couldn't fall back asleep if I tried, though I was exhausted.

Merlin shifted, drawing my attention. His blue eyes were clouded, his expression unreadable as he stared into the dancing flames. The firelight cast shadows across his angular features, highlighting the tension in his jaw.

"Arthur," he said, his voice low and curt, "I think it's time we address the elephant in the room."

My stomach clenched, a sense of doom washing over me. I knew that tone, the carefully controlled calm that would rupture at any moment. "And what elephant would that be, Merlin?" I asked, trying for a lightness I didn't feel.

His gaze snapped to mine. "Do you intend to fuck every one of your knights?"

Gawain choked on a cough, while Lancelot and Percival both went utterly still beside me. "I beg your finest pardon?"

Merlin leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he fixed me with a look that seemed to strip me bare. "You heard me. First Gawain, now Percival. Is Lancelot next on your list? Or maybe you'll just work your way through the entire Round Table before we even reach the Grail."

His words cut deep, slicing through me like Excalibur itself. I recoiled as if he'd physically struck me, my heart constricting painfully.

"How dare you," I whispered, my voice trembling. "As if I'm some whore spreading my legs for anyone who asks."

Merlin's eyes flashed, his mouth twisting into a bitter smile. "If the shoe fits, my lady."

Percival shot to his feet, shadows swirling around him like a cloak. "Watch your

tongue, wizard," he snarled. "Or I'll remove it for you."

Lancelot rose as well, placing a restraining hand on Percival's chest. "Enough," he said, his voice hard as steel. "This bickering solves absolutely nothing."

I stood slowly, my fists clenched at my sides. Tears stung my eyes, but I refused to let them fall, to let Merlin see how deeply his cruel accusations cut me.

"Who I decide to fuck is none of your concern, Merlin," I said, my voice shaking with the effort to keep it steady. "Not anymore. You lost the right to care about me the moment I found out the secrets you've been keeping. If I want to mount and fuck every knight around this fire right now and make you watch, then I will."

Merlin's face drained of color, his eyes widening in shock before narrowing into icy slits. "You would throw yourself at them just to spite me? To punish me for trying to protect you?"

A harsh laugh ripped from my throat, ugly and bitter. "Protect me? Is that what you call it? Lying to me, manipulating me, using my feelings for you against me?"

"Everything I've done has been for you, Arthur. To keep you safe, to prepare you for your destiny."

"Bullshit," I spat. "You've been using me to test out some ancient prophecy, playing your cryptic druid games. Well, it's not amusing anymore. Keeping me in the dark while you pull the strings from the shadows only tells me I can't trust you."

Merlin shot to his feet, his hands balled into fists at his sides. Magic crackled around him, making the hairs on my arms stand on end. "You have no idea what I've sacrificed for you! The lengths I've gone to ensure your survival!"

"Then tell me!" I shouted, hot tears finally spilling down my cheeks. "Stop with the cryptic warnings and half-truths. If you truly care for me, then be honest with me for once in your miserable fucking life!"

He stared at me, chest heaving, blue eyes blazing with a maelstrom of emotions I couldn't even begin to decipher.

For a long moment, the only sound was the crackling of the fire and our ragged breathing. The other knights watched in tense silence, their gazes darting between us. Finally, Merlin's shoulders slumped, the fight seeming to drain out of him. He ran a hand over his face, suddenly looking far older than his years.

"You're right," he said quietly, his voice rough with exhaustion and something that sounded suspiciously like regret. "You deserve the truth. All of it."

I blinked, taken aback by his sudden capitulation. I'd expected more resistance, more evasion and misdirection. But as I searched his face, I saw only weariness and a bone-deep sorrow that made my heart ache despite my anger.

Slowly, I sank back down onto my bedroll, never taking my eyes off Merlin. "Then talk," I said, my voice softening slightly. "No more lies, no more secrets. Just the truth, Merlin."

He nodded, taking a deep breath as if steeling himself. "The prophecies about you, about the once and future king, are more complex than I let on."

I frowned but remained silent, letting him gather his thoughts.

"Your birth was foretold centuries ago. A child born of both worlds, destined to unite Albion and Avalon and usher in an age of peace." That part I already knew, but he continued. "Our world and Avalon aren't just connected. They overlap perfectly. An

exact mirror image. With the right magic, you can access Avalon from anywhere. Some are born with the ability to feel the world on top of a world, and sense the spots where the veil is the thinnest. Those people are called sorcerers, or druids, like me.”

"So all this time, you've been able to just...step into Avalon? Whenever you wanted?" I asked.

Merlin nodded. "Yes. It's how I've been able to gather information and study magic without Uther knowing. But crossing between worlds comes at a price."

He absently rubbed his chest, as if remembering an old wound. "Each time a sorcerer passes through the veil, it takes a toll. Physically and mentally. Spend too long in Avalon, and you risk losing yourself entirely to the potent magic there. Gaius trained me, ever since he discovered what I was. He taught me the prophecy of the once and future king, told me it was our duty to find the child of destiny and protect them at all costs."

“So the orphanage...Were you lying to me then? When you told me your parents were taken in the fire that killed mine, were you lying?”

Half our village lost their parents that night, and many of the children placed in the orphanage had been my friends. But Merlin had been a stranger.

Merlin's expression turned pained, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "No, Arthur. That part was true. My mother did die in that fire, along with so many others. But what I didn't tell you is that the fire wasn't just a random accident."

Something ugly twisted in my stomach at the haunted look in Merlin's eyes. Something wasn't right. I knew Merlin better than I knew myself sometimes, and everything inside me was screaming that what he was about to tell me would shatter my world. I almost wanted to run from the cave. Run from him. Run from any more

truths I never wanted.

Merlin took a shuddering breath, his hands trembling as he clasped them tightly in his lap. "The fire that night, the one that claimed so many lives, was started by you."

The world seemed to tilt on its axis, his accusation hitting me like a physical blow. I stared at him, my mouth opening and closing soundlessly as I tried to process the enormity of what he'd just said.

"That's not possible," I finally managed, my voice little more than a choked whisper. "I was just a child. How could I have...?" I couldn't even bring myself to say it out loud, the very idea too horrific to contemplate.

"You were a child, yes," he said softly, his eyes filled with grief. "But you were also so much more than that already. Your magic was strong even then. Stronger than anything I'd ever seen."

He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he fixed me with an intense, almost pleading gaze. "That night, mercenaries from Avalon broke into your home. They were sent to kill you before you could fulfill the prophecy, before you could become the threat they feared."

I shook my head, denying his words even as a sickening sense of certainty settled into my bones. "No. No, that can't be true. My parents died protecting me from the fire. They weren't?—"

Merlin's voice was gentle, almost apologetic, as he continued. "Your parents did die protecting you. But not from the fire itself. They stood between you and the mercenaries, refusing to let them harm you. And that's when your magic awakened."

He paused, his gaze distant as if lost in the memory. "It was like nothing I've ever

seen before or since, and I was barely a boy. It was a burst of pure, raw power that incinerated the mercenaries where they stood."

I sat frozen, horror and disbelief warring within me. I wanted to deny it, to scream that it was all a lie. But deep down, in a place I'd long tried to bury, I knew he spoke the truth. Flashes of memory assaulted me—the acrid stench of burning flesh, the searing heat of flames licking at my skin, my mother's terrified face illuminated by an otherworldly glow.

"The fire spread quickly," Merlin continued, his voice barely above a whisper. "Fueled by your magic and the dry summer air, it consumed everything in its path. Houses, crops, livestock...and people. But it happened so fast there was no stopping it."

I was aware that I was unraveling. My stomach churned violently, and I lurched to my feet, staggering away from the fire, away from the knights and their shocked, pitying gazes.

I made it only a few steps before my knees buckled and I collapsed, retching onto the cold stone floor. Sobs tore from my throat, ugly and wretched, as I curled in on myself. The memories assaulted me now, no longer content to linger in the shadows of my mind.

Screams of terror and agony. The sickening stench of charred flesh. Flames climbing higher and higher, painting the night sky an ominous orange. And at the center of it all, a child with glowing eyes and magic pouring from her fingertips.

Me. I had done this. I had orphaned my friends, destroyed my village, murdered my own parents. All because I couldn't control the cursed power inside me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I choked out, lifting my tear-stained face to look at Merlin.

He had followed me, kneeling just out of reach with a stricken expression. "All these years, you knew what I'd done. What I was. Why keep it from me?"

"Because that's the thing—I didn't know. Not until the day we left Camelot. Gaius took you from those flames. He's been watching you ever since. But it wouldn't have changed anything, Arthur. Even if I'd known I wouldn't have said a word." He reached out as if to touch me, but let his hand fall short, curling it into a fist at his side. "I would have wanted to protect you from that pain, from the guilt I knew would consume you if you remembered. You'd already lost so much that night."

I shook my head, a bitter laugh bubbling up my raw throat. "So instead Gaius lied to me? And you've had all this time to tell me, and kept silent? Secrets never stay buried. I thought you, of all people, were smart enough to know that."

Merlin flinched, but I couldn't find it in myself to regret it. The betrayal cut deep, made all the more painful by the love I still held for him despite everything. Why did I have to feel like this about him? Why did I still love him?

"I'm so fucking sorry," he whispered, his voice cracking on my name. "I thought I was doing what was best for you."

I pushed myself to my feet, wiping angrily at the tears that wouldn't seem to stop falling. "You took my choice away. My right to know the truth about myself, about what I'd done. I may have been a child then, but I've been a woman for a long time. Gaius had no right, and you should have run to me the second you knew. It's what I would have done for you. You've had plenty of time to break it to me like the friend I thought you were."

Chapter Fourteen

GALAHAD

I'd been to Dead Man's Path only once, centuries ago, but never crossed it. I'd heard the legends though, and knew nothing good could come of this. Arthur's next trial was bound to test her in ways the first trial hadn't. She was still learning. Still new to magic.

When she'd gone into the pond the day before, I hadn't thought twice before leaping in after her. She'd been in some sort of trance, and couldn't hear any of us shouting her name. But when we emerged on the other side, gasping for air, I realized we'd left Albion and entered Avalon for the first time in centuries.

I could still taste the sweetness of the air and feel the rightness of it. I'd spent the last seven centuries longing for Avalon, unable to return until the once and future king was found. But I could feel the pull of my homeland in the marrow of my fucking bones. It called to me, begging me to return.

She'd given that moment to me. Arthur, our glorious queen, gave me my home back if only for those brief moments, and she'd never know what that meant to me.

I could have stayed in Avalon. There was nothing pulling me back to the other side, or forcing me to continue the quest for the Holy Grail. I could have walked for days and nights until I reached the Seelie Court. Until I reached the family I left behind so long ago. I could have walked into the arms of my brothers and placed a kiss on my mother's head.

But I chose to come back. I chose Arthur, and not a single part of me regretted that choice. The same choice Tristan, Gawain, and Merlin had also made.

As we trudged through the wood, the hours seemed to stretch on endlessly. I found myself longing for the simple comforts of Camelot. A warm meal, a soft bed, and a pint of ale that didn't taste like it had been brewed by mischievous pixies. I said as much, making Gawain groan and rub his stomach. Tristan threw a glove at the side of my face and told me to stop teasing him.

"You know, Galahad," Arthur said, glancing back at me with a playful smirk, "for an immortal fae knight, you sure do complain a lot."

I raised an eyebrow, feigning offense. "Excuse me, my lady, but I've been traipsing through these woods for centuries. I think I've earned the right to a little griping."

Arthur laughed, the sound like chimes in the wind, and I couldn't stop my answering smile. Day by day, I was growing fonder of our pretty queen. My cock thickened every time my eyes strayed to the curve of her ass as it bounced in her saddle, or the little noises she made as she slept.

I was immensely jealous of Gawain. He'd touched her the way I'd imagined a hundred times already, making her sick cunt clench around his fingers. I'd forced him to recount the little tryst in detail, so I could savor it and hope that one day soon, she might let me touch her too.

As we continued on, I sensed a presence nearby—a stag—its energy pulsing in a way only I could sense. I reached out with my mind, gently brushing against the creature's consciousness. It startled for a moment, then relaxed as it recognized my touch.

Through the stag's eyes, I saw the world in a swirl of colors and scents. The greens of the leaves were more vibrant, the earthy smell of the soil richer. It bounded ahead of

us, its powerful legs carrying it swiftly through the underbrush.

As it ran, I caught glimpses of our path ahead. The trees thinned, giving way to a rocky outcropping. And there, spanning a misty chasm, was the bridge. Dead Man's Path.

The stag's heartbeat quickened as it approached, sensing the ancient magic that emanated from the stone. I shared its apprehension. The bridge looked as if it had been there since the dawn of time; the stones weathered and worn, yet still standing strong somehow.

I pulled my consciousness back, blinking as the forest came back into focus around me. "The bridge is just ahead."

We urged our horses on faster, and Merlin lifted from the ground, his griffin taking to the skies to scout from above.

As we approached the bridge, a sense of unease settled in my gut. The bridge itself was a sight to behold. Ancient stone arches stretched across the chasm, disappearing into the mist that swirled below. Intricate carvings adorned the weathered rock, depicting tentacles and clawed hands. I ran my fingers over the etchings, marveling at the craftsmanship.

"Look there," Tristan said, pointing to a wooden box lying at the entrance to the bridge. "It looks like the one in the boneyard."

I dismounted and approached the box, my hand resting on the hilt of my sword. You could never be too careful in these parts. I knelt down and tried to open the box, but the lid wouldn't budge.

"Let Arthur try," Tristan said. I stood and saw that Tristan's eyes had gone entirely

white for a moment.

Arthur dismounted, and I handed her the box. Her fingers brushed against mine for the briefest of moments. Even that fleeting touch sent a jolt of warmth through my body and my cock hardened again. I watched as she examined the box, her brow furrowed in concentration.

With a soft click, the lid popped open. Arthur reached inside and pulled out a single scroll of parchment. She unrolled it carefully, her eyes scanning the words written in an elegant, flowing script.

"To pass this bridge, a price you'll pay," she read aloud. "Three guardians stand in your way. Riddles they'll pose, answers you'll give, to prove your worth and continue to live."

"Well, that's not ominous at all. I was hoping for a nice, leisurely stroll across the bridge. Maybe a stop for a picnic halfway."

Arthur shot me a look, but I could see the corners of her mouth twitching with amusement. "Focus, Galahad. This is serious."

"Of course, my lady," I said with a mock bow. "Lead on, and I shall follow." She shook her head with a smile.

We left the horses behind again, not wanting to risk them on the narrow bridge. There was a chance we wouldn't be able to come back for them after the trial, and we'd be on foot after that.

As we stepped onto the bridge, a chill wind whipped through the chasm, making the ancient stones shudder beneath our feet. I kept close to Arthur, my hand never straying far from my sword hilt. The mist swirled around us, obscuring our view of

the other side.

We'd barely taken a dozen steps when, up ahead, a massive statue rose from the fog. The first stone guardian. It was carved into the shape of an old hunched crone, and as we approached, her eyes began to glow.

"Halt," she commanded, her voice echoing across the chasm. Her stone mouth never moved. "To pass, you must answer my riddle."

Arthur stepped forward, her chin held high. "We're ready."

I hated riddles. I'd never been clever enough to understand them.

"I am not alive, but I grow; I don't have lungs, but I need air; I don't have a mouth, but water kills me. What am I?"

Arthur's brow furrowed as she pondered the riddle. I could practically see the gears turning in her head. Tristan and Gawain exchanged worried glances, but I kept my gaze fixed on Arthur.

Suddenly, her eyes lit up. "Fire," she said confidently. "The answer is fire."

With a groan, the statue shifted, revealing a narrow path along the edge of the bridge. Arthur glanced back at us, a victorious grin on her lips, before leading the way forward.

"It was too easy," Merlin muttered as we walked.

I glanced at him, my brow arched. "How so? I never would have guessed fire."

Merlin cast me a bemused look. "I mean this with all the kindness in the world, my

friend, but a child could have solved that riddle.”

A bark of laughter came from behind me as Gawain clapped me on the shoulder. “He’s got you there, Gal. Even I knew it was fire.”

“A bunch of fucking scholars then,” I muttered, rolling my eyes and shrugging Gawain’s hand off.

The path wound its way through the mist, the sound of our footsteps echoing off the stone. Before long, a second statue emerged from the haze. This one was carved in the likeness of a stern-faced warrior, his hand resting on the hilt of a stone sword. As we approached, his eyes began to glow, just as the crone's had.

"Another riddle you must answer," he boomed, his voice like the rumble of distant thunder. "Fail, and your journey ends here."

Arthur nodded, her hand instinctively reaching for Excalibur at her side. "Ask your riddle, guardian."

“I possess no limbs yet I can dance, With whispers of secrets, I take my stance. I can be a herald of joy or of fright, Always I linger, both day and night. What am I?”

The warrior's riddle hung in the air, the mist curling around us as if awaiting our answer. My heartbeat pounded in my ears. This one seemed trickier than the last.

Gusts of wind snatched voices from the depths of the chasm below, carrying them up to us like the sorrowful moans of the dying. I locked eyes with Arthur and saw unease flicker in their depths. I offered my hand for her to take, and her delicate fingers intertwined with mine.

None of us could solve the riddle for her. If we did, then Arthur would fail the trial,

and I had no doubt that we would become part of the chorus of shrieking souls in the chasm below.

Arthur's brow furrowed as she mulled over the words, her lips moving silently as she repeated the riddle to herself. I glanced at Merlin, who was watching her intensely. He knew the answer, I could tell. Once again, I had no idea.

"A shadow," she declared suddenly, her voice ringing out clear and strong. "The answer is a shadow."

My stomach clenched, and my fingers too, tightening on hers. For a moment, the only sound was the eerie whistle of the breeze through the chasm. Then, with a grinding of stone on stone, the warrior statue shifted, revealing the next stretch of the path.

"Thank the fucking gods," Gawain muttered, running a hand over his bearded jaw. "I thought for sure we were done for."

I clapped him on the back, grinning. "Our queen is as clever as she is beautiful."

Arthur shot me a look, half exasperated, half amused. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Galahad."

"On the contrary, my lady," I said with a wink, "I find it gets me exactly where I want to be."

She shook her head, but I could see the hint of a smile playing at the corners of her red tinted lips. Lips I very much had the urge to kiss.

Arthur walked ahead and veered to the right, where she paused and peered over the edge of the bridge into the chasm. "How far down is the drop?"

In response, more moans echoed up from the dark depths, causing her long chestnut hair to blow off her shoulders. The chilly air had caused goosebumps to form on her arms, and instinctively, I stepped in behind her, rubbing my hands up and down her arms in an attempt to warm her up.

“According to legends,” Tristan said, stepping up beside Arthur and peering down. “There is no bottom. The chasm just keeps going. Some say you fall forever until you die of starvation.”

A visible shiver ran through Arthur, and she leaned back into my touch. I kept rubbing her arms, relishing the closeness. The scent of her hair, like campfire smoke and autumn leaves, made my mouth water. My need for her was growing, and touching her wasn't helping.

"Let's hurry," Merlin said, his eyes scanning the mist ahead. "We have one more guardian to face."

With reluctance, I stepped back from Arthur, my hands sliding down her arms before falling away. She glanced over her shoulder at me, her brown eyes meeting mine for a charged moment. Something unspoken passed between us, a promise of things to come. Then she turned and led us down the bridge.

The path narrowed as we went, until we were forced to walk single file, our hips brushing the rough stone on either side. The mist grew thicker, swirling around our feet and obscuring the way ahead. It felt as though we were walking through a dream, or maybe a nightmare.

At last, the third and final statue loomed out of the fog. It was an androgynous figure, neither male nor female, with a serene expression carved onto its stone face, and a crown of antlers atop their head. As we approached, its eyes began to glow with that now-familiar light.

"One last riddle, seekers of the Grail," it said, its voice a melodic whisper that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. "Answer correctly, and the way forward shall be opened to you."

"In the stillness of night, when the world holds its breath, I weave through the ages, a whisper of death. I am born in the silence, yet speak without sound, A specter of moments, in shadows I'm bound. I follow your footsteps, yet never am seen, A phantom companion, where light once has been. I feast on the fleeting, on dreams that you keep, In the depths of your heart, where the memories seep. I dance in the twilight, where echoes reside, A thief of your laughter, your joy, and your pride. Though you chase after me, I slip through your grasp, For I am the keeper and shall hold you your last."

I watched Arthur closely, trying to decipher her expressions as she puzzled over the guardian's words. Her brow furrowed, and she chewed on her bottom lip, a habit I'd noticed she had when deep in thought. It was incredibly distracting.

I wondered if Arthur knew how beautiful she was. I forced my gaze away from those lips, trying to focus on the riddle instead. The answer danced just out of reach, taunting me. I glanced at Merlin, hoping he might have some insight, but he seemed just as perplexed as the rest of us.

Minutes ticked by, and the bridge began to tremble beneath our feet. The screams from the chasm grew louder, more insistent, as if the lost souls sensed our presence and were eager to drag us down into their eternal torment.

I exchanged worried glances with the others. Lancelot's fingers sparked with flame and his eyes filled with glowing embers, ready to lash out at anything that tried to harm Arthur. Ice crawled up Gawain's arms and Tristan's eyes were glowing white.

The bridge trembled more violently, causing loose rocks to tumble down the sheer

mountain faces on either side. The moans became deafening, resembling the cries of a killing field. I should have anticipated that there would be a time limit for each riddle.

Just as the stone guardian's eyes began to dim, Arthur's entire body jerked forward, and her eyes went wide. "Time!" she shouted as she rocked to the side as the bridge shook. "The answer to your riddle is time!"

For a moment, there was only silence. Everything seems to stop. The bridge stopped shaking, the walls stopped crumbling, and the infernal glow returned to the stone guardian's eyes.

Then, with a groan that sounded like the earth itself was sighing, the statue shifted, revealing the final stretch of the bridge.

Chapter Fifteen

ARTHUR

As we reached the end of the stone bridge, I felt a strange tingling sensation wash over me. The air seemed to shimmer and pulse with an otherworldly energy that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I glanced at my companions, seeing the same mix of wonder and unease reflected in their eyes.

"Look," Lancelot breathed, pointing to a shimmering orb of light that had materialized before us. It bobbed and weaved in the air, leaving a faint trail of stardust in its wake.

As I approached, the orb pulsed brighter, and a melodic voice echoed in my mind. "Arthur Pendragon, the Once and Future Queen," it whispered.

"In the realm where legends weave, A queen awaits, her fate to cleave. In shadows deep, where whispers call, To Avalon, the fabled hall. Through the Wandering Wood, you must tread, Where paths entwine and secrets spread. The fae will guide with a shimmering light, But only the brave will win the fight. Seek the place where time stands still, A chalice awaits to test your will. Embrace the quest, let courage swell, For the Holy Grail's tale is yours to tell."

The riddle's meaning crystallized in my mind with startling clarity, as if the words had been etched there all along, waiting for this moment to reveal themselves. Avalon would be the stage for our final trial.

I turned to tell the knights, but the words died on my lips as I saw Tristan's eyes roll back, then glowing white, his body going rigid. Tristan's voice, usually so gentle and measured, took on an otherworldly timbre as he spoke.

"The chill of the air, that carries despair, It wraps around your throat, a noose of thin air. Discover the rune of wind, in its haunting snare. When gathered in silence, beneath the black sky, Murmur the incantation, let your souls fly. But beware, noble knights, for the darkness will test, Only the purest of souls can withstand this quest. For Avalon beckons, but not without cost, Step forth into shadows, for all else is lost. The portal shall open, with a wail and a moan, Face the final trial, where the lost are alone."

Tristan's body gave a jolt, then his eyes faded back to their usually icy silver. He took in a long breath and staggered back a step. Gawain caught him by the shoulder and steadied him.

"I didn't catch a lick of that," he muttered with a nervous laugh.

Tristan righted himself, giving Gawain a nod of thanks. "It means we're going to Avalon for the final trial, but it has to be Arthur who opens the portal."

My chest tightened. He was right. The riddle spoke of a rune that would carry us to Avalon. But I didn't know how to create runes. I said as much, and the knights turned almost as one to Merlin.

He met my eyes, his expression still as closed off as it had been the night before. "I'll teach you," he said. "We don't have much time, so you have to pay attention."

Lancelot stepped between us, his hand resting on Merlin's shoulder. "Let's get away from the bridge first. We need to find a place to camp for the night."

I turned, looking longingly at the stone bridge, but I couldn't see past the fog to where our horses waited. There was no going back for them, so we'd be traveling the rest of the way on foot.

As we walked, Merlin fell into step beside me, his expression still guarded. "To create a rune, you need to focus your will and channel your magic through a physical medium. In this case, we'll use Excalibur."

I nodded, trying to ignore the way my heart skipped a beat at his proximity after being so viscerally angry with him. "How do I do that?" I pulled the sword free and held it tightly. The blade glowed ever so faintly golden. "I can feel the magic running through it, but I still don't know how I'm supposed to wield it."

With a furrowed brow, I tried to focus on the magic thrumming through Excalibur as we walked. The blade pulsed like a heartbeat, sending tingles up my arm. I imagined the magic was a glowing thread, and I tried to grasp it mentally, to pull it from the sword and into myself. But it was like trying to catch mist with my bare hands. The harder I focused, the more it seemed to slip away.

"You're thinking too much," Merlin chided gently, his voice startling me from my concentration. "Magic isn't something you force. It's a part of you, like breathing. You have to let it flow naturally."

I shot him a wry look. "Easy for you to say. You've been doing this your whole life."

A ghost of a smile played at the corners of his lips. "And you will too, in time. For now, just relax. Clear your mind and let your instincts guide you."

I took a moment to breathe, trying to let the tension drain from my shoulders as we walked. The air was cool and damp, filled with the earthy scent of moss and decaying leaves. Shafts of pale sunlight filtered through the canopy, dappling the forest floor in

a patchwork of light and shadow.

Ahead of us, Gawain and Galahad were deep in conversation, their voices low and conspiratorial. Suddenly, Galahad let out a bark of laughter, quickly stifling it as Gawain punched him in the shoulder. Gawain grinned, his gray eyes sparkling with mischief. I strained my ears, trying to catch what they were saying, but their voices were too low.

Merlin muttered, rolling his eyes. "Those two are ridiculous."

Glancing up again, right as Galahad peered over his shoulder, I laughed. He sent me a cheeky wink that had a warm flush running through my body.

I tried to follow Merlin's advice, letting my mind drift and my body relax. I focused on the sensations around me. On the crunch of leaves beneath my boots, the whisper of the wind through the branches, the warmth of Excalibur's hilt in my palm. Gradually, I became aware of a subtle thrumming sensation, like a second heartbeat pulsing in time with my own. It was the magic, I realized, flowing through me like a river of molten gold.

I released a soft gasp, and Merlin glanced at me, one eyebrow raised. "You feel it, don't you?"

I nodded, too awed to speak. It was like a veil had been lifted from my eyes, revealing a world suffused with shimmering energy. I kept this going for hours, pulling and pushing my magic to and from the sword. Merlin said the trick to honing your magic was ultimately through familiarity and repetition.

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, painting the sky in vivid hues of orange and pink, we finally stumbled on the perfect spot to make camp. Nestled in a small clearing beside a bubbling stream, the site was sheltered by towering oaks and

flanked by a mossy embankment that would provide a natural barrier against the chill of the night air.

I let out a sigh of relief as I shrugged off my pack, feeling the weight of the day's journey lift from my shoulders. The knights wasted no time in setting up camp, falling into a well-practiced routine. Gawain and Galahad set about gathering firewood, their easy banter and laughter echoing through the trees as they worked. Lancelot sparked their kindling, and soon the area was glowing with warmth.

Tristan and Percival patrolled the surrounding area, whispering under their breath, no doubt setting up wards. Tendrils of shadow surrounded Percival, and I watched, mouth agape, as he sent out those shadows into the darkening woods, searching for potential threats. My cheeks heated with the memory of how those tendrils felt as they skimmed my naked body while Percival fucked me slowly.

As if sensing my eyes on him, he turned. I held his dark stare, heat simmering between us like a furnace. There wasn't a single part of me that regretted what we did. I'd do it again in a heartbeat if given the chance. I only hoped we were given the chance again, when all was said and done.

Merlin knelt beside the stream, filling our water skins and murmuring softly under his breath. The water seemed to shimmer and dance around his fingers, responding to his whispered incantations. He glanced up, catching my gaze, and a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Come here," he said, beckoning me over. "I want to show you something."

Curious, I made my way to his side, kneeling down on the soft, damp earth.

Merlin took my hand, guiding it to hover just above the surface of the stream. "Close your eyes," he murmured, his breath warm against my ear. "Reach out with your

magic. Feel the water, and the life that flows through it."

I did as he instructed, letting my awareness expand until I could sense the pulsing energy of the stream. It was like a living thing, vibrant and dynamic, filled with swirling currents and eddies. As I focused, I became aware of tiny motes of light drifting just beneath the surface, glowing softly in the gathering dusk.

"What are they?" I whispered, not wanting to disturb the delicate balance of the moment.

"Wisps. Tiny spirits of the water, drawn to the purity of the stream. They're a sign that the water is safe to drink."

He released my hand, and I watched in amazement as he cupped his palms, dipping them into the cool, clear water. As he lifted his hands, the wisps swirled around his fingers, their light casting a soft, silvery glow on his skin. He brought his cupped hands to his lips and drank deeply, then offered them to me.

I hesitated for a moment, then leaned forward, pressing my lips to his palms. The water was crisp and refreshing, with a subtle sweetness that danced on my tongue. As I drank, I felt a tingling coolness fill my body, like I was being infused with the very essence of the stream.

"Magic isn't just for grand gestures," Merlin said, watching me with a thoughtful expression. "It's in the little things too, like purifying the water we drink, or easing the aches and pains of a long day's journey."

He reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair from my face. The tender gesture caught me off guard, sending a flutter through my chest. I searched Merlin's eyes, trying to reconcile this gentle, attentive version of him with the cold, distant man who had been avoiding me all day.

Just a few hours ago, he'd snapped at me when I asked him a question about my magic, his blue eyes flashing with irritation. "If you paid attention, you wouldn't need to ask," he'd growled, stalking ahead to walk with Lancelot.

I'd felt the sting of his words like a slap, my temper flaring in response. I'd spent the rest of the day stewing in my resentment, determined to ignore him just as thoroughly as he was ignoring me.

But now, kneeling beside the stream, with the wisps dancing around us and the soft glow of the sunset painting his face in shades of gold, I felt my anger melting away, replaced by a swelling confusion.

"Merlin...What happened to us?"

Where were the two best friends who would leap into fires for each other? Where were the mischievous thieves who swindled their way through bar tabs only to hide out until sunrise, laughing and telling stories on the roofs of Camelot?

Merlin's expression softened, a flicker of sadness passing through his eyes. He sighed, looking down at our joined hands. "Everything changed when you pulled that sword from the stone. You're not just a street urchin anymore. You're not just Wart, and I'm not just your partner in crime anymore. I'm your advisor, your protector. I have to be the one to guide you, to make sure you're ready. Even if it means pushing you away sometimes."

I swallowed hard, a lump forming in my throat. "But why does it have to be like that? Why can't we still be friends the way we were before?"

Merlin's hand tightened around mine, his thumb brushing over my knuckles in a feather-light caress. "Because my feelings for you have grown far beyond friendship. And I see the way your knights look at you. Even Lancelot. It's only a matter of time

until you fall for one of them. Or maybe all of them, who knows?"

Part of me wanted to deny it, to insist that nothing had changed between us. But deep down, I knew he was right. The bond we shared had always been intense, but now, with the weight of my destiny pressing down on me and the undeniable attraction simmering between me and my knights, it had become something else entirely.

"Merlin," I whispered, my voice trembling. "I don't want to lose you. You're my best friend, my rock. I need you by my side, now more than ever."

He closed his eyes, a pained expression crossing his face. "I'll always be by your side, Wart. But I can't be what you need me to be. Not anymore."

"But what if I want you to be? Back at the castle, when you kissed me, when we..." I paused, my face flaming with the memory of his tongue between my thighs, licking and sucking while I writhed in pleasure.

A thought occurred to me then. A dark thought. One that had jealousy spreading through my veins and my fingers shaking as I looked into Merlin's eyes. "Tell me it's not because of Mordred..."

If he still loved her, I didn't know what I would do. I didn't think my heart could handle the agony.

Merlin's eyes flew open wide, a look of shock and horror crossing his face. "Mordred? Gods, no! Arthur, you have to believe me. There was never anything between us beyond a physical attraction. And even that was fleeting. A momentary lapse in fucking judgment on my part."

He gripped my shoulders, his gaze boring into mine with an intensity that took my breath away. "Listen to me. Mordred is a master manipulator. She'll twist the truth

and use my past mistakes against me, all to drive a wedge between us. That's what she does. She finds people's weaknesses and exploits them."

I searched his face, looking for any hint of deception, but all I saw was raw, unfiltered honesty. The knot in my chest loosened, and I released a shaky breath. "I believe you." I reached up to cup his cheek. "I'm sorry, I just...the thought of you and her made me feel sick inside."

Merlin leaned into my touch, his eyes fluttering closed for a moment. "You have nothing to apologize for. I'm the one who pushed you away, who made you doubt me. But I swear to you, Arthur, on everything, my heart has only ever belonged to you."

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, and I surged forward, capturing his lips in a fierce, desperate kiss. Merlin's lips moved against mine with a fervor that stole my breath, one hand tangling in my hair while the other slid down to the small of my back, pulling me flush against him.

I pulled back reluctantly, wiping at my damp cheeks with the back of my hand. "We should head back," I said, my voice still a little shaky. "The others will be wondering where we are."

For a moment, Merlin just stared at me, as if there was something on the tip of his tongue. But ultimately, he stood, holding out a hand to help me up from the river bank.

My heart was in the soles of my feet as we made our way back to camp, and I couldn't shake the feeling of loss that hovered around me like an ever thickening cloud.

As night fell, we gathered around the crackling fire. The air was filled with the earthy scent of wood smoke and the soft chirping of crickets in the underbrush. I sat cross-

legged on the ground, Excalibur resting across my lap, the blade pulsing with a faint golden glow.

Tristan and Merlin knelt on either side of me, their expressions focused and intent as they began to teach me the intricacies of conjuring magical runes. Tristan's silvery hair gleamed in the firelight, his pale eyes reflecting the dancing flames as he spoke.

"Runes are more than just symbols," he explained. "They're conduits for magic, each one imbued with its own unique power and meaning. To create a rune, you need to focus your will and channel your magic through Excalibur, using the blade as a medium to manifest the symbol. Eventually, you'll be able to manifest runes without using the sword, but that'll take more practice. For now, this will have to do."

He reached out, placing his hand over mine where it rested on Excalibur's hilt. I sucked in a sharp breath at the contact, feeling the heat of his touch seep into my skin. "Close your eyes," he murmured. "Breathe deeply and let your mind clear. Focus on the magic flowing through you, on the connection between you and the sword."

I did as he instructed, letting my eyes drift shut and my breath slow into a steady rhythm. Gradually, I became aware of a thrumming sensation in my chest, a pulsing energy that seemed to emanate from somewhere deep within me. It was like a second heartbeat, syncing up with the faint vibrations emanating from Excalibur.

"Good," Tristan said softly. "Visualize the rune in your mind. See its shape, its curves and angles. Let it burn itself into your consciousness until you can trace its form without thought."

I furrowed my brow, concentrating on the image that Tristan had shown me earlier. A swirling, intricate knot of lines that seemed to dance and flow like currents of air. Slowly, painstakingly, I began to construct the rune in my mind's eye, each stroke deliberate and precise.

As the final line fell into place, I felt a sudden rush of energy surge through me, like a gust of wind whipping through my hair. My eyes flew open, and I gasped as I saw the rune glowing brightly on Excalibur's blade, etched in lines of shimmering gold.

"You did it," Merlin breathed, his eyes wide with amazement. "On your first try, no less. Fuck, Wart, I didn't think you'd do better than my first lesson with Gaius."

Pride swelled in my chest, a giddy laugh bubbling up my throat. I'd done it. I'd actually conjured a magical rune, something that had seemed impossible hours ago.

Tristan smiled, squeezing my hand gently before releasing it. "Well done, Arthur. You're a natural. The rune of air is one of the more challenging ones to master."

I glanced between Tristan and Merlin, my heart still racing with exhilaration. "What does it do, exactly?" I asked, tracing my finger over the glowing lines on Excalibur's blade.

Merlin leaned in closer, his shoulder brushing against mine as he examined the rune. "It's a manifestation of the element of air. With practice, you'll be able to use it to summon winds, create barriers, even levitate objects." He tapped a finger against his chin thoughtfully. "I suspect it will also allow you to open the portal to Avalon when the time comes. The riddle mentioned the wind rune, so I think mastering it first is smart."

I grinned at both Tristan and Merlin, feeling like I could command the earth itself to do as I pleased. As I opened my mouth to respond, Galahad's voice cut through.

"You know, Arthur," he drawled, a playful smirk dancing on his lips, "we never did finish training you in swordplay."

I glanced over at the redheaded knight, one eyebrow arching up. He was lounging

against a fallen log, his long legs stretched out before him, arms crossed behind his head. The firelight played across the angular planes of his face, casting his features in a warm, golden glow.

"Oh really?" I asked with a smirk. "And how much of this training might consist of you knocking me to the ground and laughing when I can't get back up?"

"Hmmm." Galahad's smirk widened into a full-blown grin, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "As your loyal knight, it's my solemn duty to ensure you're prepared for anything. Magically and physically." His gaze raked over me slowly.

Beside me, Merlin stiffened, a muscle ticking in his jaw. I could practically feel the tension radiating off him in waves. Tristan, on the other hand, merely looked amused, his pale eyes flicking between Galahad and me with knowing mirth.

I cleared my throat, trying to regain some semblance of composure. "As tempting as that sounds, I think I've had enough physical exertion for one day. Magical training is surprisingly tiring."

Galahad let out an exaggerated sigh, pushing himself up from the log with fluid grace. "Pity. I was so looking forward to getting my hands on you again." He winked at me as he sauntered past me and stared out into the trees, as if searching for something.

I rolled my eyes at Galahad's shameless flirting, even as a traitorous part of me thrilled at the idea of his hands on me again, in a decidedly less combative context. I glanced over at Merlin, noting the tightness around his eyes and the rigid set of his shoulders.

"I think Arthur's right," Merlin said evenly, though I detected the undercurrent of tension in his voice. "Mastering the wind rune should be our top priority. Physical

training can wait."

Galahad shrugged, seemingly unconcerned by Merlin's disapproval. "As you wish. But don't come crying to me when our little queen here gets knocked on her shapely arse because she can't swing a sword properly."

"I'll keep that in mind," I retorted dryly. "Now, if you're quite finished objectifying your future sovereign, perhaps we could get on with the actual training?"

Tristan chuckled under his breath as Galahad sketched a mocking bow in my direction. "But of course, Your Majesty. I live to serve."

Ignoring the flutter in my stomach at the heated look Galahad sent my way, I turned back to Merlin. "So, what exactly does mastering the wind rune entail? Do I need to meditate under a waterfall or something?"

The corner of Merlin's mouth twitched. "No waterfalls necessary, I'm afraid. Though if you're keen on getting wet, I'm sure Galahad would be more than happy to assist."

I shot Merlin a withering glare, even as Galahad's rich laughter echoed through the clearing. "Careful, Merlin," Galahad teased, "Keep talking like that, and I might start to think you're trying to picture me naked."

Rolling my eyes heavenward, I held up my hands in a gesture of surrender. "All right, all right, enough. Can we please focus on the task at hand? I'd like to master this rune sometime before the next century."

Merlin cleared his throat, his expression sobering. "Right. The wind rune. It's all about harnessing the power of the air around you, bending it to your will. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Feel the currents against your skin, the whisper of the breeze in your hair."

I did as he instructed, letting my eyelids flutter shut, and drew in a slow, steady breath. The air around me seemed to come alive, caressing my skin like the touch of a lover. I could sense the ebb and flow of the wind, the subtle shifts in pressure and temperature.

"Good," Merlin murmured, his voice low and hypnotic. "Now, imagine those currents as an extension of yourself. Picture them swirling around you, responding to your every thought and desire."

I focused my mind, visualizing tendrils of air wrapping around my body like a second skin. The breeze picked up, whipping my hair around my face and tugging at my clothes.

"That's it," Merlin encouraged, a note of pride in his voice. "Now, direct that power outward. Shape it into a sphere, a shield to protect you from harm."

Furrowing my brow in concentration, I willed the wind to coalesce into a sphere around me. It was like trying to grasp smoke at first; the currents slipping through my mental fingers. But gradually, I felt the air solidify, forming a bubble of swirling energy that pulsed with my heartbeat.

"Impressive." Tristan whistled, circling me with an appraising eye. "I've never seen anyone master the wind rune so quickly."

I opened my eyes, grinning with exhilaration as the sphere of air continued to dance around me. "Take that , Uther."

Galahad stepped forward, his eyes glinting. "Think fast," he called out, hurling a pebble in my direction.

Instinctively, I thrust my hand forward, willing the wind to intercept the projectile.

The pebble bounced harmlessly off my swirling shield, clattering to the ground at my feet.

"Nice reflexes," Galahad praised, his lips curving into an approving smile. "You're a natural at this, after all. I suppose your fae blood might be stronger than the human half."

I couldn't help but beam with pride, reveling in the rush of power that surged through my veins. It was intoxicating, this newfound control over the elements.

Merlin, however, fixed me with a stern look. "Don't get too cocky," he warned. "The wind rune is just the beginning."

As the night wore on, the excitement of my magical breakthrough slowly gave way to exhaustion. My limbs felt heavy, my eyelids drooped as I struggled to keep up with Merlin and Tristan's ongoing instructions.

Finally, Gawain intervened, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. "I think that's enough for tonight," he said.

Merlin looked like he wanted to argue, but a stern glance from Gawain silenced him. With a sigh, he nodded, helping me to my feet. "Right. We'll continue your training in the morning."

Gratefully, I let Gawain guide me to my bedroll, tucked away in a sheltered corner of the clearing. The soft, woven fabric felt blessedly cool against my skin as I sank down onto it, my muscles aching with a pleasant sort of fatigue.

Chapter Sixteen

ARTHUR

I found myself standing on a narrow, rocky outcropping, the slate-gray sea churning far below. The sky above was a swirling mass of charcoal clouds, shot through with streaks of crimson that looked disturbingly like blood. A chill wind whipped at my hair and clothes, carrying with it the acrid scent of smoke and decay.

In the distance, the jagged silhouette of a ruined castle perched atop a lonely cliff rose from the horizon, its crumbling towers stark against the leaden sky. A sense of foreboding settled in the pit of my stomach.

The cawing of crows echoed across the barren landscape, a harsh, grating sound that set my teeth on edge. They circled overhead in a seething mass of black wings and glittering eyes, their raucous cries seeming to mock the desolation below.

I took a step forward, my boots crunching on the loose shale. The wind picked up, howling mournfully as it tore at my cloak and sent pebbles skittering across the uneven ground. I shivered, hugging my arms to my chest as I tried to make sense of my surroundings.

"Admiring the view, sister?" a voice purred from behind me, dripping with malice and dark amusement.

I whirled around, my heart leaping into my throat as I came face to face with Mordred. She stood a few paces away, her fiery hair whipping around her face and

her emerald eyes glinting with a feverish light. Her lips curved into a cruel smile, revealing a flash of white teeth.

"Mordred," I breathed, squaring my shoulders. My hand instinctively reached for Excalibur, only to realize that in whatever dream-state this was, I no longer had my sword.

The cawing of the crows grew louder, more insistent, until it was a deafening cacophony that seemed to press in on me from all sides. Their inky black forms swirled overhead, blotting out the crimson-streaked sky like a living, writhing cloud. The downdraft from their wings felt cold and clammy against my skin.

Mordred took a step closer. I could see the dark shadows beneath her eyes, the gaunt hollows of her cheeks. She looked like she hadn't slept in weeks.

She sighed, shaking her head. "Always so quick to assume the worst of me. Is it so hard to believe that I might simply want to talk sister to sister?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Forgive me if I find that a little hard to swallow."

Mordred's smile turned brittle, a flicker of pain flashing through her eyes before she masked it quickly. "I suppose I deserve that. But believe it or not, there was a time when all I wanted was to be a good daughter, a worthy heir to the throne of Camelot, not some wicked witch."

She turned away, gazing out over the churning sea. "I was Uther's firstborn, you know. For years, I trained tirelessly, studying statecraft and diplomacy, honing my skills with a blade. I thought if I could just prove myself, if I could be the perfect princess, then maybe he would finally see my worth."

A bitter laugh escaped her lips. "But nothing I did was ever good enough. No matter

how hard I tried, how many accolades I earned, he always found something wrong with me. Some shortcoming." She spat the words like venom, her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

"Eventually, I realized nothing would ever be good enough for Uther Pendragon. Save for pulling Excalibur free from the stone." Mordred turned, locking eyes with me. "I tried every spell I could think of, and nothing worked. For months , until..." Mordred's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper, her eyes haunted by the memory. "I was desperate. I scoured every scrap of fae lore I could get my hands on, and finally, I found it. A druid ritual, said to imbue the caster with the strength of a thousand men."

She shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself as if to ward off a chill. "I knew it was dangerous. The magic required a blood sacrifice."

My chest tightened, and I took a half step backwards. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you need to hear it!" Mordred snapped, sounding half mad already. "You're about to be handed everything I ever wanted on a silver platter while I live in the darkness, alone."

My half-sister's words hit me like a whip, and I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. Despite her questionable methods, I couldn't deny that she was right. It must be incredibly painful to watch someone else take away all your hopes and dreams, even if they were not rightfully theirs.

"I gathered the necessary components—the blood of a virgin's throat, poured through the fingers, the heart of a black ram, the ashes of a hanged man. I painted the runes on my skin, chanted the words until my throat was raw. Then I made the final offering. My own blood spilled upon the altar stone."

Mordred's eyes grew distant, as if she was seeing the scene play out again. "I could feel the strength of a thousand warriors flowing into my veins, the knowledge of a hundred sorcerers burning in my mind. And the sword...Excalibur...it called to me..."

She shook her head, a bitter smile twisting her lips. "I was so close. My hand was on the hilt, the blade begging to be free for the first time in centuries. But then Gaius, Uther's pet weasel, found me."

She let out a harsh, mirthless laugh. "The old fool didn't even give me a chance to explain. He ran straight to Uther, babbling about forbidden magic and blood rituals. I tried to reason with him, to make him understand I was only trying to claim what was rightfully mine. But he wouldn't listen."

Mordred began to pace along the rocky outcropping, her cloak billowing behind her in the biting wind. The crows overhead seemed to follow her movements, their beady eyes tracking her every step.

"Uther was furious. He dragged me before the entire court, denouncing me as a traitor, a practitioner of the dark arts. I pleaded with him, told him I had only done what was necessary to prove myself worthy of his approval."

She paused, her voice dropping to a haunted whisper. "But he just looked at me with those cold, pitiless eyes, and said that no daughter of his would ever stoop to such depravity. I'll never forget the disgust in our father's eyes."

Mordred turned to face me fully, her expression a mix of pain and rage. "And now, here you are. The long-lost daughter, the chosen one. Here to claim everything I ever wanted."

I strode closer to Mordred, my heart churning with a tumultuous blend of pity and caution. "Mordred," I said quietly, as though speaking to a scared animal that might

attack at any moment. "I'm not so heartless that I can't sympathize. Uther was wrong to turn his back on his own blood. But this quest for power and vengeance will only bring more suffering for you and all those around you."

Mordred stared at me, her chest heaving, her green eyes glittering with unshed tears. "It's easy for you to preach to me about suffering when you've never experienced it for yourself."

A bolt of rage shot through me. "You know nothing about my suffering. Don't mistake my empathy for what you've gone through for absolution, Mordred."

Mordred's eyes flashed with a feverish light. "You think I need your absolution?" She laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. "I've endured more agony than you can possibly imagine. The only thing that matters now is taking back what's mine. And if I have to go through you to do it, then so be it."

She advanced on me; her steps slow and deliberate. The crows overhead began to screech and caw, their cries rising to a deafening crescendo. I stumbled back, my foot slipping on the loose shale. For a heart-stopping moment, I teetered on the edge of the precipice, the churning sea yawning below.

Mordred's hand shot out, grasping my wrist in an iron grip. For a split second, I thought she meant to save me. But I saw the malevolent gleam in her eyes, the cruel twist of her lips.

"Long live the queen," she hissed, her voice dripping with hatred.

And she let go.

The sound of my own screams tore me from sleep. As my eyes flew open, I felt as if my body slammed into the ground, knocking the air out of me. Shapes moved around

me in the pre-dawn light. The sound of moss crunched under foot.

Galahad was by my side instantly, his strong arms wrapped around me and pulled me close against his chest. I felt the steady beat of his heart and the warmth of his skin through his shirt. The scent of him—leather and wood smoke—wrapped around me, bringing me back to the present.

“Arthur,” he murmured, his voice thick with sleep and worry. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

I shook my head, burying my face against his shoulder, trying to steady my breathing. The other knights formed a protective circle around us, swords drawn, eyes scanning the dark trees for any sign of danger.

“It was a dream,” I finally said, my voice shaky. “But it felt so real. I could feel the wind, smell the sea...”

I shuddered, remembering Mordred’s cold, green eyes. Galahad tightened his hold on me, one hand gently stroking my hair as if to calm my fears.

Percival stalked over, noticing my trembling. He wrapped a dark cloak around both of us, blocking out the chill of the night. “Arthur, why were you screaming? What did you see?”

I lifted my head, searching for Merlin’s familiar blue gaze. In the moonlight, his hair looked almost black, his skin pale and his stance tense. Worry was etched on his face, the way his fists clenched gave him away even more.

An understanding passed between us. Merlin knew me too well, could read my thoughts like an open book. Before I could explain, he spoke up, his voice low and serious. “She saw Mordred.”

Galahad's grip tightened, as if he could protect me from even the mention of her name.

I swallowed hard. "It was more than just a dream. It felt like a vision. Mordred was on a cliff, talking about her past, about how she tried to prove herself to Uther." Merlin's gaze dropped, his face clouded with guilt.

"She's alone and feels betrayed by our father...by Uther," I said, struggling with the weight of the word father. It still felt strange.

Lancelot scoffed, quickly putting out the flames that had sparked in his hands. I glanced at Gawain, relieved to see the icy tendrils on his arms receding.

"Don't believe everything Mordred says, Arthur. She'll do whatever it takes to get her hands on Excalibur," Lancelot warned.

I slowly pulled away from Galahad's warm embrace, my legs still quaking as I steadied myself on the mossy ground beneath me. The cloak that Percival had draped over us slipped from my shoulders, pooling at my feet like a dark shadow.

Pacing back and forth, my mind churned with flashes of my vision. No, it was more than that. It felt too real, too visceral to be a dream. The briny scent of the sea clung to my senses, and the haunting cries of crows still rang in my ears.

As I walked, I spotted Excalibur resting in its sheath beside my bedroll. My hand moved almost of its own volition, wrapping around the hilt, the soft leather warm against my palm as if the sword were breathing.

I unsheathed the blade, the steel rasping against the ornate scabbard. The moment I raised it, a soft golden light emanated from the sword, growing brighter until it rivaled the pale glow of the moon. The illumination danced along the elegant fuller,

tracing the intricate scrollwork etched into the metal.

Tristan's voice broke through my reverie, his words low and breathy with a mixture of awe and something that sounded like uncertainty. "Arthur, your eyes..."

I tore my gaze away from Excalibur, meeting Tristan's stare. His face had gone ashen, and he approached slowly, his eyes roving over my face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"They're glowing. Just like the sword," he said as he reached me, placing a large palm on my cheek and cupping my face. Then, he turned his head to the side, asking over his shoulder, "What day is it?"

There was a pregnant silence, and I looked over Tristan's shoulder to see the other knights walking this way slowly.

Percival inhaled deeply, his dark eyes reflecting the starry expanse above. "It's the Dawn of the Ancients," he said, his voice reverent and tinged with a hint of excitement.

I furrowed my brow, glancing between Percy and Tristan. "The Dawn of the Ancients? What does that mean?"

Tristan turned back to me, his hand still cupping my cheek, his thumb gently brushing over my skin. "It's a sacred holiday celebrated by the fae, a time when we honor the old gods we're descended from. According to legend, on this day, the veil between our world and the realm of the gods grows thin. Magic surges through the land, and those who possess the gift can tap into its raw power."

I tightened my grip on Excalibur's hilt. The golden glow emanating from the blade

seemed to pulse in response, as if the sword itself was attuned to the ancient magic in the air.

"The fae believe that on the Dawn of the Ancients, the old gods walk among us," Gawain added as the men began to circle the fire pit. "Then comes the Night of The Ancients, when all of Avalon sets aside their differences and revels in the surge of magic."

"Your magic must be reacting to the dawn," Tristan said. I blinked several times as he leaned in, placing a featherlight kiss on my lashes. "Eyes of molten gold..."

Lancelot stepped forward, his hand outstretched towards the flickering flames of the fire pit. With a subtle twist of his wrist, the flames leapt higher, burning brighter and hotter than before. The light cast dancing shadows across the knights' faces, illuminating the wonder and anticipation in their eyes that wasn't there before.

"I can't believe we didn't realize what day it was," he said. "The Dawn of the Ancients, the most sacred of all fae holidays, and here we are, on the cusp of Arthur's final trial."

The flames crackled and popped, sending sparks spiraling into the night sky like tiny, glowing fireflies. The heat washed over us in waves, warming our skin and seeming to infuse the very air with a palpable sense of magic.

"This is no coincidence," Merlin said. "The old gods have aligned the stars for this moment, Arthur. Your magic, the surge of power in the land, the opening of the portal to Avalon. It's all happening for a reason."

Chapter Seventeen

TRISTAN

The first time I witnessed the Dawn of the Ancients, I was barely more than a boy, still learning to navigate the intricacies of court life and the responsibilities that came with being a member of the Unseelie nobility. My father, a stern but fair man, had taken me to the sacred grove at the heart of the Unseelie Palace, where the nobility gathered to bear witness to magic at its strongest.

As the first rays of dawn crept over the horizon, the air seemed to hum with power. The trees whispered to each other, their leaves shimmering with an otherworldly light. In the center of the grove would stand a High Priestess, her eyes aglow with the same molten gold that now shone in Arthur's.

Raw power. Godly power. It was a moment that changed me as a young fae. Before the sight began, before the wars, before the sword was taken to Albion and thrust into the stone. Back when the world was open and new. Before the corruption and greed of kings.

Arthur stood facing the sunrise, her chestnut curls dancing in the gentle breeze that whispered through the forest. The first rays of dawn painted the sky in hues of lavender and rose gold, casting an ethereal glow on her freckled skin.

Fuck, she was beautiful. The most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. In over seven hundred years I only loved one female, and it hadn't lasted long, but something inside me stirred again when I looked at Arthur Pendragon.

She grasped Excalibur; the hilt fit snugly in her delicate hands, its golden light pulsing rhythmically like a heartbeat, echoing the magic that hung thick in the air around us. Arthur's gaze, usually warm and soulful, now glimmered with that same molten brilliance, as if she and the sword were entwined in some ancient dance—one was an extension of the other.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from her. Here stood the heir to Camelot, the weight of prophecy draped over her like a cloak, yet she bore it with a grace and strength that seemed far beyond her twenty-four years. In that moment, bathed in the dawn's glow and the whispers of ancient magic, she embodied every bit of the queen she was destined to be.

The other knights and I gathered in a loose circle around Arthur, our own magic thrumming beneath our skin in response to the energy swirling around us. Lancelot's flames flickered in his hands, casting playful shadows across his sharp features. Gawain's eyes sparkled like shards of ice, frost spiraling from his fingertips. Even Percival, usually so stoic, radiated a palpable excited tension. His shadows writhed around him, undulating like smoke.

"It's as easy as breathing," I murmured to Arthur, knowing she could hear me over the howling wind. "Remember what we said about guiding it? Make the magic do what you want it to do, not the other way around. The portal will open when you allow it to."

Arthur turned as I stepped up beside her, Merlin mirroring me on her other side. Her eyes met mine. "There's no going back, is there?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"Not until it's finished," I said, shaking my head. "We come back with the Grail or not at all." Uther wouldn't allow anything less than that.

Any one of us fae could open a portal to Avalon, but this time, it needed to be her.

The riddle was as clear as it could have been, and we couldn't risk ignoring even the slightest detail. We were here to serve and protect our future queen, but we couldn't complete the quest on her behalf, no matter how badly I wanted to.

Arthur began to carve the wind rune into the air. The blade seemed to sing as it sliced through the morning mist, leaving trails of shimmering light in its wake. The rune took shape, glowing with an ethereal brilliance that made my eyes water.

As Arthur completed the final stroke, the surrounding air began to stir. At first, it was just a gentle breeze, playfully tugging at our hair and clothes. Then it grew in intensity, whipping the leaves from the trees and sending them spiraling through the air in intricate patterns.

I felt my magic responding to the call, my skin tingling with the raw power. It was intoxicating, like drinking in pure energy with every breath. The same exhilaration was reflected in the faces of my brothers.

The wind continued to build, swirling faster and faster around Arthur until it seemed to take on a life of its own

Then the fabric of reality began to tear. It started as a small pinprick of light, no larger than a candle flame, hovering in the air in front of Arthur. But as she continued to channel the ancient magic, the light grew, expanding and unfurling like a shimmering golden flower.

The portal pulsed with energy, its edges rippling and undulating like the surface of a sun-dappled pond. Through the shimmering veil, I caught a glimpse of Avalon.

Rolling hills of emerald green stretched out as far as the eye could see, dotted with ancient trees whose leaves glittered like precious gems in the perpetual twilight. The sky was lavender and indigo, streaked with ribbons of iridescent light that danced and

shimmered like diamonds. In the distance, I could make out the spires of the Seelie Palace where I'd taken my vows to protect the sword.

A wave of nostalgia washed over me, so intense it was almost painful. Memories of my youth spent roaming the lavender fields and woods, learning the ways of the fae at my father's side, came rushing back with startling clarity. The scent of night-blooming jasmine, the feel of cool grass beneath my bare feet, the laughter of my brothers and sisters.

As Arthur took a tentative step towards the shimmering portal, the very air around us seemed to hold its breath. For a moment, she looked like one of the ancient queens. A goddess of pure, holy fire.

Then she glanced back over her shoulder, her eyes finding mine, and I saw the flicker of uncertainty there.

I gave her a small nod, trying to pour all my confidence and faith into that single gesture. "You've got this, Arthur," I said softly, my voice nearly lost in the howling wind. "You were made to travel through worlds. Let it bend to you."

She took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders as she turned back to face the portal. With Excalibur held high, she stepped forward, the golden light enveloping her like a lover's embrace. For a heartbeat, she seemed to hover on the threshold, caught between two realms. Then, with a flash of blinding brilliance, she vanished, drawn into the heart of Avalon.

The rest of us moved to follow, but before we could take more than a step, a sudden movement caught my eye. A dark cloud, like a writhing mass of shadows, was rapidly approaching from the east. As it drew closer, I realized with a sinking feeling that it was not a cloud at all, but a seething flock of crows, their inky black forms stark against the lavender sky.

They descended on the portal in a frenzied swarm, their raucous cries piercing the air like shards of glass. I watched in horror as they funneled through the shimmering gateway, their dark forms vanishing into the light one after another.

“It’s Mordred!” Merlin shouted, his voice cracking with fear as he sprinted towards the portal after Arthur.

Fury boiled in my veins. How could we have been so stupid?

My eyes locked with Lancelot's. "She was waiting for the portal. She's after Excalibur!"

Lancelot cursed, his knuckles turning white from the tight grip on his sword. "And if she gets her hands on the sword, she'll claim the Grail too."

I lunged for the portal, my heart hammering against my ribs as I leaped into the shimmering light. The magic engulfed me, searing through my veins like liquid fire. For an instant, I was suspended between worlds, caught in a dizzying kaleidoscope of colors and sensations.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. I stumbled out onto the emerald grass of Avalon. I spun around, my eyes frantically scanning the landscape for any sign of Arthur. But she was nowhere to be seen. She’d vanished into the vast expanse of the fae realm. A cold knot of fear twisted in my gut. If Mordred found her first...

A flash of movement caught my eye, and I whirled to see Lancelot burst through the portal in a blaze of fire. His eyes were wild, his hair whipping about his face as he raised his hands, flames already flickering to life along his fingertips.

The crows descended on him in a screeching mass of flapping wings and glittering eyes. But Lancelot was ready for them. With a roar of fury, he thrust his hands

forward, engulfing the crows in a blistering inferno.

The birds screeched in agony, their feathers smoldering and turning to ash as they tumbled from the sky. The stench of burning flesh filled the air, acrid and nauseating, but Lancelot didn't flinch.

Gawain leaped through the portal a heartbeat later, his hands already coated in a shimmering layer of frost. With a fluid grace, he thrust his arms outward, sending a flurry of razor-sharp icicles hurtling towards the remaining crows. The frozen projectiles found their marks with deadly precision, impaling the birds and sending them plummeting to the ground in a rain of blood and ice.

Percy was last through the portal, his writhing shadows surrounding him like living tentacles. A darkness covered the portal as more birds tried to flood through, blocking their way into Avalon. Percy shouted, gritting his teeth against the onslaught, but the portal was already starting to close, shrinking with every heartbeat.

Then, with a sound like shattering glass, the portal collapsed, the golden light winking out of existence. Percy stumbled backwards, his legs giving out beneath him as he pitched towards the ground. I lunged, catching him around the waist and hauling him upright. He sagged against me, his head lolling onto my shoulder.

The air around us crackled with residual magic, the lingering traces of the portal mingling with the coppery scent of blood. Gawain and Lancelot were already moving, their eyes scanning the treeline for any sign of Arthur or Merlin.

"Arthur!" Lancelot called, his voice echoing through the twilight. "Merlin!"

But only silence greeted us, broken by the mournful whisper of the wind through the ancient trees. The indigo sky stretched out above us, the stars twinkling like diamonds. It would have been breathtaking if not for the gnawing fear that gripped

me. She should have been right here waiting.

I closed my eyes, reaching out with my magic, trying to sense Arthur's presence. Now that we were in Avalon, magic was stronger, and I should be able to sense the familiarity of hers. But the land was saturated with power tonight, the very air humming with it, and I couldn't untangle her aura from the ancient threads.

"Spread out," I said, my voice sounding hoarse to my own ears. "They can't have gone far."

We moved through the forest like shadows, our footsteps muffled by the thick carpet of fallen leaves. The trees loomed over us, their trunks twisted and gnarled with age, their branches reaching out like grasping fingers. So much older than the trees in Albion. Bioluminescent flowers bloomed in the undergrowth, their petals pulsing with magic.

The eerie call of a familiar horn echoed through the forest, sending a shiver down my spine. It was a sound I hadn't heard in centuries, not since the last time I set foot in Avalon. The horn of the Wild Hunt, blown only when the fae courts rode out to chase down a quarry.

I exchanged a tense glance with Gawain and Galahad who both stood to my right and left, their eyes reflecting the same dread that coiled in my gut. If the Hunt was out tonight, then Arthur was in more danger than we realized. The riders would be drawn to her magic like moths to a flame.

But the bigger problem was who might have sent them.

We moved through the trees with renewed urgency, our senses strained for any sign of Arthur or Merlin. The forest seemed to shift and change around us, the paths twisting and turning in ways that defied logic. It was as if Avalon itself was working

against us, trying to keep us from our queen.

Our queen... Because that's what she was, I realized. Athur was everything a queen should be and more, and fate had decided that I would protect her. That we would keep her safe.

I paused at the base of an ancient oak, its trunk wider than four Albion Oaks put together. The bark was rough beneath my fingertips, thrumming with a deep, primal magic that set my teeth on edge, but at the same time, settled something inside me. I closed my eyes, reaching out with my senses, trying to untangle Arthur's aura from the web of power that permeated the forest.

For a moment, there was nothing. Silence save for the thundering horn of The Wild Hunt. Then, like a distant candle flame flickering to life in the darkness, I felt it. A whisper of Arthur's magic.

Chapter Eighteen

ARTHUR

The world swirled around me, a dizzying array of unfamiliar sights and sounds assaulting my senses. Attempting to shift, I felt the chill of metal digging into my wrists. Panic surged through me as I realized I was tethered to something living.

"What in the fates...?" I muttered, blinking rapidly to clear my vision.

Slowly, the hazy forms surrounding me took shape, revealing a forest unlike any I had ever seen. Trees with bark the color of rich chocolate loomed overhead, their leaves shimmering like distant stars, wet with rain. The air carried a thick sweetness that made my head spin.

I was sitting upright, strapped onto the back of a creature that defied description, its hide gleaming like burnished bronze, crowned with spiraling horns on its forehead. It was an Elhorn. Stories of these beasts were just that...stories. A fae horse breed created specifically for battle.

We were stopped, and the horse wasn't even tied to a tree to keep it from galloping away.

"Arthur?" Merlin's voice, filled with both concern and amusement, sounded from beside me. "Any inkling of where we are or how we landed in this rather...compromising situation?"

Turning my head gingerly, a fresh wave of pain shot through me as I did so. I caught sight of Merlin, similarly bound to another Elhorn. Despite our predicament, a smirk played at the corners of his lips, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

I winced as I tested my bonds, then gave up and shrugged. "Beats walking, don't you think?"

Merlin chuckled. "Always the innovator. You know, it's always you who gets us into the strangest situations."

It was impossible not to snort, even as my mind raced to make sense of our situation. The last thing I remembered was stepping through the portal in Avalon. Tristan and Merlin were right there behind me with Galahad, Gawain, Percival and Lancelot not too far behind. Then...nothing. How had we ended up here wherever "here" was?

"We're obviously in Avalon," I said, vaguely gesturing with my chained hands to the towering magical trees. "But where in Avalon?"

Squishy moss carpeted the forest floor, and in the distance, I heard the tinkling of what sounded like crystal chimes. It was nothing short of magnificent.

Merlin's nose scrunched as he looked around. "If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say we've found ourselves somehow in Seelie forest."

"How do you figure?" I asked, a brow arched. How would Merlin know anything about the courts of Avalon?

His eyes met mine, and his grin was back. "Because if we were in the Un seelie forest, we wouldn't be breathing."

I opened my mouth to retort when a deep, resonant blast shattered the ethereal

tranquility of the forest. The horn's call seemed to reverberate through the very earth, sending tremors up my spine and setting the leaves fluttering to the ground.

The Elhorns stamped their hooves, snorting and tossing their magnificent heads in response to the summons. I strained against my bonds, my heart hammering against my ribs as I scanned the tree line for the source of the sound.

Merlin struggled too, and I watched in horror as sparks of his magic flared up before fizzling to nothing, telling me that whatever these chains were, they were blocking his magic. Looking down in a sudden panic, I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized Excalibur was still fastened to my hip.

Figures emerged from the shimmering foliage like apparitions taking form. They moved with an otherworldly grace, their lithe forms adorned in armor that seemed to be crafted from the very essence of the forest—leaves, bark, and all kinds of plating. Each rode an Elhorn of their own, the creatures' coats ranging from the deepest ebony to the palest silver, their spiraling horns and claws catching the dappled light.

As they drew closer, I realized immediately that these were no ordinary Sidhe fae. Their beauty was sharp and terrible, their angular features both captivating and unsettling. Eyes the color of mist shone out through the shadows, and mist swirled around their mount's hooves.

But it was the sight of the figures riding amongst them that made my breath catch in my throat. Riding towards us with the ethereal procession were five familiar faces—Tristan, Galahad, Gawain, Percival, and Lancelot. Unlike Merlin and me, they weren't bound, but rode freely.

Relief flooded through me as Lancelot urged his mount forward, his golden hair catching the light like a halo as he fixed the fae leader that rode in with them with a piercing stare. The male was so large that he dwarfed his Elhorn, and he wore a helm

of black antlers.

"Release her," Lance commanded, his voice ringing with authority I had no idea he had in this place. "She is Arthur Pendragon, Queen of Camelot, and you will show her the respect she is due."

The fae man regarded Lancelot with an inscrutable expression. For a moment, I thought he would refuse, but he lifted a gloved hand and made a subtle gesture. The chains binding me to the Elhorn fell away, dissolving into mist before they touched the ground.

I slid from the creature's back, my legs unsteady, as I found my footing on the mossy earth. Lancelot dismounted in one fluid motion, catching me by the elbow as I swayed. His touch was warm and familiar, and more welcoming than Lancelot ever felt before.

"Are you alright?" he asked in a rush, his eyes searching my face.

I nodded, my voice trapped somewhere in my throat. I glanced over to see Merlin being similarly freed, Percival and Galahad flanking him protectively.

"Who are they?" I whispered, so low that only Lancelot could hear.

He straightened, his eyes going up and over my shoulder, his brows dipping sternly. "They're called The Wild Hunt. Queen Tatiana sent them when she felt the portal open. We're too close to the Seelie palace for her to ignore it."

I nearly choked as I processed what he'd just said. The Wild Hunt... Terror surged through me, and every hair on my body stood up. I took a step towards Lancelot and, almost instinctively, his large arm wrapped around my waist.

I looked around at the Hunt gathered around us. They were both terrifying and breathtakingly beautiful. One fae had hair that moved as if caught in an invisible breeze, each strand a different hue of the rainbow, but his limbs were made of what could only be described as tree branches. Another had intricate patterns etched into their stone-like skin. A female had wings like a dragonfly, iridescent and delicate, fluttering gently behind her.

Their armor was equally mesmerizing, seeming to be crafted from the elements themselves. One wore a breastplate that appeared to be made of intricately woven leaves, while another had gauntlets that shimmered like ice. A helm adorned with twisting vines and delicate flowers rested on the head of a particularly fierce-looking male with eyes so black they were depthless.

Idly, I wondered how a breastplate made of leaves could be beneficial in a fight.

Even their weapons were works of art, each one unique. I saw swords with blades that seemed to be forged from starlight, bows that looked as if they had been carved from the bones of ancient beasts, and spears tipped with crystals that pulsed with energy.

The commander stepped forward, his piercing gaze sweeping over us. "We must move out," he declared, his voice deep and resonant, carrying an undercurrent of power that seemed to make the very air tremble. "Queen Tatiana is expecting you, and we've wasted time here long enough."

He turned to Lancelot, Galahad, and Gawain, tilting his head in a gesture of respect. "It's only due to my regard for you as former knights of the Seelie Court that your companions remain unbound. Do not make me regret this decision."

Lancelot bowed his head in acknowledgment, his grip on my waist tightening almost imperceptibly. "You have my gratitude, Commander."

The commander's gaze lingered on us for a moment longer before he turned, mounting his Elhorn in one fluid motion. The rest of the Hunt followed suit, their ethereal mounts pawing at the ground, eager to be off.

The Wild Hunt moved around us like a silent, dangerous royal escort, their massive mounts leaving no hoofprints on the mossy ground. As we rounded a bend in the path, the trees parted like a curtain, revealing a sight that stole the breath from my lungs.

Before us was a sprawling palace in the trees. The walls were crafted from what looked like living wood, as if the trees themselves had grown around the fae, creating archways, corridors, grand rooms and balconies. Windows of stained glass cast a kaleidoscope of colors across the ground, painting the earth in hues of amethyst, sapphire, and emerald.

The path led directly to a grand arched doorway, flanked by two towering statues. They were Elhorns, rearing up on their hind legs, their spiraling horns stretching towards the heavens.

Fae were everywhere. The hustle and bustle of a city full of vibrant life was familiar, reminding me of Camelot, only...cleaner and more alien.

Eyes followed our procession as we were led through the heart of the inner city, past shops, markets, and homes. I suddenly felt incredibly aware that I was dressed in dirty, smelly riding clothes that had seen far better days.

The Wild Hunt dismounted once we reached a massive archway crafted from stone. Lancelot helped me down from my Elhorn, his hand lingering on my waist for a moment longer than necessary. I felt the warmth of his touch even through the layers of my clothing, and it had me looking up into his eyes in surprise.

“Remember, stay close to me,” he whispered, his lips close to mine.

“I thought I was supposed to be the one in charge here? I’m a queen, remember?”

Lancelot's lips quirked into a smile, his eyes glinting with amusement. "You're insufferable sometimes, you know that?"

I couldn't stop my answering grin, even as nerves fluttered in my stomach. "Unfortunately, it's permanent."

He laughed, but before he could respond, the commander of the Wild Hunt stepped forward, his antlered helm glinting in the soft light. "Queen Tatiana is ready for you," he said, leaving no room for discussion. "Follow me."

He led us through the archway and into a vast hall, its ceiling so high it seemed to disappear into the shadows. The tree bark walls were lined with tapestries in every color imaginable.

As we walked, our footsteps echoed on the polished mosaic floor, inlaid with intricate patterns that seemed to shift and change with each step. Fae of all kinds moved through the halls, their beauty and grace leaving me awestruck. Some had wings like butterflies, others had horns, and still others had skin that shimmered like precious gems.

At the end of the hall was a massive set of double doors, crafted from wood so dark it was almost black. The doors creaked open, revealing not the grand throne room I expected, but a stunning library that seemed to go on forever.

Towering shelves lined the walls, reaching up to a ceiling wrapped in a warm, golden glow. Scrolls and books filled the shelves by the hundreds. The air was thick with the scent of old paper and ink, mixed with a sweet aroma that reminded me of honey and

spices, with hints of wildflowers and autumn leaves. It enveloped me, leaving me a little dizzy.

In the center stood a massive tree, its trunk so wide that a dozen people could hold hands around it. Its deep brown bark shimmered with gold veins, and its branches spread out like welcoming arms, draped in leaves of vibrant greens, rich reds, and burnished golds.

I spotted a figure beneath its sprawling branches. She wore a gown woven from nature itself—deep green leaves, vibrant petals, and shimmering threads that caught the light like dew on a spider's web. Her hair flowed like spun gold, crowned with delicate blooms. Behind her was a pair of ivory wings that reminded me of a butterfly.

Surrounding her were hooded figures in rich purple robes, each wielding slender staffs topped with glowing crystals.

As we approached, she turned, and I was met by eyes the color of the summer sky—piercing blue. Her features were regal; high cheekbones, a slender nose, and a gentle smile, her skin a warm clay hue that contrasted beautifully with her bright hair.

"Welcome, Knights of Camelot," she said. "Lancelot, Gawain, Galahad, Percival, Tristan—it's good to see you all again."

My knights stepped up around me, and as one single unit, they brought their closed fists up to their chest in a sign of respect. Not a bow, but an acknowledgement, I noticed.

Queen Tatiana's eyes widened as they locked onto mine, her breath hitching in surprise. She took a swift step forward. The cloaked figures parted without a sound to let her pass. It was almost as if the Seelie Queen embodied the essence of her own

kingdom. As if she were the beating heart of it all.

She moved with an otherworldly grace, almost floating on air. I wondered how old she was. By appearance alone, she looked no older than maybe thirty years, but the fae didn't age like humans. For all I knew, she was thousands of years old.

Her hand lifted and hovered just inches from my cheek. The warmth radiating from her skin and the scent of wildflowers and honey that clung to her was intoxicating. "I've waited for you. You have your mother's eyes."

I blinked several times, not sure I heard her correctly. "What did you say?"

Tatiana's smile was tinged with sadness. "I never thought I'd see her face again. But here you are, Arthur Pendragon..." She stepped closer. "May I?"

I had no idea what she was asking, but I was in no position to deny this queen anything, all I could do was nod.

Tatiana gently placed her hands on my cheeks. Her hands were soft and warm, but there was an unexplainable energy emanating from them. As she cradled my face, I found myself drawn to her, unable to resist the pull.

Then something extraordinary happened. Tatiana's eyes, which were already mesmerizing with their deep blue color, began to glow. It started as a faint shimmer, but soon turned into a bright silvery light that illuminated her face and the entire library.

As I stared into her luminous eyes, time seemed to slow down and everything else faded away. It was just the two of us, connected by some unknown force. Images flooded my mind. A hundred, a thousand, a million different faces and places.

I saw a woman with hair the color of mine, with amber eyes and a mischievous smile. She was laughing, her head thrown back as a man placed gentle kisses on her neck.

The vision shifted, the laughter fading into the shadows as a new scene took shape. I saw the same woman, her belly swollen, walking through the halls of a grand castle with red and gold banners.

As she turned a corner, she came face to face with a woman of striking beauty, her dark hair cascading down her back like a waterfall of obsidian. But her eyes, a piercing green, were filled with rage.

"You," the woman hissed, her voice dripping with venom. "You dare to show your face here, you filthy little whore?"

The pregnant woman stepped back, her hands instinctively cradling her stomach. "Please, your highness, I meant no disrespect. I only wished to speak with the king..."

The dark-haired woman let out a harsh laugh, the sound echoing off the stone walls. "The king? You think you have the right to speak with my husband, after what you've done? After you seduced him into your bed like the harlot you are?"

I realized with a start that this was Uther's queen, Mordred's mother, Adriana.

My mother shook her head, tears glistening in her eyes. "It was a spell, Adri! I never would have?—"

"No more lies, Morrigan! I'm sick of looking at you." The queen spat on the ground at Morrigan's feet.

A spell? What did she mean it was a spell? I opened my mouth to ask just that, when suddenly, as if they both sensed my presence, Morrigan and Queen Adriana turned to

face me, their eyes looking straight through the vision back at me.

I stumbled backwards, and Queen Tatiana's hands left my face, taking the vision with them.

Chapter Nineteen

ARTHUR

Queen Tatiana's voice was barely a whisper as she apologized. I blinked rapidly, trying to make the disturbing vision disappear. The shining aura surrounding her had weakened. "I know it must have been hard for you to see that," she said, "but it was necessary."

I gritted my teeth and glared up at the queen. "Did my mother seduce King Uther?" The thought sent a rage through me. Maybe Mordred had a valid reason for hating me the way she did.

Tatiana shook her head vehemently, her golden hair swaying with the movement. "No, Arthur. Your mother did not seduce Uther. The truth is far more complex and tragic, I'm afraid."

She took a step back. The hooded figures around us seemed to lean in, their hidden faces turned towards their queen.

A strong hand landed on my shoulder, and I looked up to find Merlin there. I let out a long breath, just now remembering that I wasn't alone in all of this. I had Merlin, and I had my knights. At least, I hoped I'd still have them after this. They were still gathered behind me, an impenetrable wall of muscle, magic, and loyalty.

"Morrigan was a sorceress of immense power, born of both fae and druid blood. She was my very best friend, and I loved her. She went to Camelot as a guest, sent by her

father, the Archdruid of the Old Religion, to study under Gaius and hone her abilities. Uther had just returned from a long campaign that took him away for three years."

Tatiana's eyes took on a distant look, as if she were seeing the events unfold before her. "The moment they met, an ancient prophecy awakened, one that had been dormant for centuries. It spoke of a child born of magic and royal blood, destined to unite the realms and bring about an age of peace."

She sighed, a sound filled with sadness and regret. "The prophecy bound Morrigan and Uther together instantly, their fates intertwined like threads in a tapestry. It was a force beyond their control, a destiny written in the stars themselves."

I opened my mouth to speak, but Tatiana held up a hand, silencing me.

"I know you have questions, Arthur. And I promise, I will answer them all. But first, you must understand."

She waved her hand, and the air shimmered. Suddenly, we were no longer in the library, but in a lush garden, filled with flowers of every color imaginable. The scent of roses and lavender filled the air, and a gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the towering trees.

In the middle of the garden stood Morrigan and Uther. Uther's hand rested on Morrigan's swollen belly, a look of pure wonder and love on his face.

"The prophecy may have brought them together," Tatiana said softly, "but it was love that kept them there. They were happy, for a time. Uther even planned to annul his marriage to Adriana and make Morrigan his queen. The first fae queen in all of Albion."

The scene shifted, and we were back in the castle. Morrigan was in a bedchamber, her

face contorted in pain as she labored to bring me into the world. Uther paced outside the door, his face drawn up in worry.

I watched, transfixed, as the scene shifted once more. Morrigan lay in the bed, her face pale and slick with sweat, but filled with joy as she cradled a tiny bundle in her arms. Uther sat beside her, his eyes shining with tears as he gazed down at his newborn daughter.

"She's perfect," he whispered, his voice filled with awe. "Our little faerie."

Morrigan smiled, but there was a sadness in her eyes that I couldn't quite understand. She pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead, her lips lingering as if she never wanted to let me go.

The vision dissolved, and we were back in the library. Tatiana's face was etched with sadness, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"What happened?" I demanded, my voice shaking, with grief or with anger; I had no idea. "Why did she leave me? Why did she give me up to humans? Why would she go through all of that just to leave me?"

As the questions poured from my lips, one of the hooded figures stepped forward. Slender hands reached up, grasping the edges of the deep purple hood and slowly lowered it to reveal a face I knew all too well.

I staggered back a half step, my heart leaping into my throat as Gaius's weathered features came into view. His kind eyes, usually filled with warmth and wisdom, now held a deep sadness and a hint of guilt.

"Gaius?" Merlin's voice rang out, echoing my disbelief. He shook his head, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

Gaius bowed his head. "My dear boy," he murmured, his gaze shifting to me. "Arthur, I am so sorry. I never wanted you to find out this way."

I shook my head, trying to make sense of it all. Gaius, here in Avalon, among the fae. It was almost too much to comprehend. "What are you doing here? What is going on?"

Gaius sighed, the weight of years seeming to settle on his shoulders. "I have always been here, Arthur. Not only am I Uther's sorcerer, I'm a guardian of the Old Religion, brother of the Archdruid."

My mind reeled as I tried to process that. He was not only a sorcerer, but a guardian of the Old Religion, brother to the Archdruid—my grandfather. Which meant...

"You're my great uncle," I whispered, my voice barely audible over the pounding of my heart. "All this time, you knew who I was, and you never told me?"

Gaius took a step forward, his hands outstretched in a pleading gesture. "Arthur, please understand. I couldn't tell you, not until the time was right. The prophecy had to unfold naturally, without interference."

I felt a surge of anger rise up, hot and sharp. "Naturally? You call being lied to my entire life natural? You let me believe I was an orphan, that I had no family in this world!"

Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them back, refusing to show weakness. Not here, not now. Behind me, I detected the steady presence of my knights as they shifted on their feet.

Gaius's face crumpled, the lines around his eyes deepening. "I never wanted to hurt you, Arthur. But it was necessary. The prophecy spoke of a child born of magic and

royal blood, destined to unite the realms, but it also warned that if the child was raised aware of their destiny, their heart could be corrupted by the allure of power."

"Your mother knew this. She knew that for you to fulfill your destiny, you had to grow up humble, unaware of your true birthright. It was the only way to ensure that your heart remained pure, untainted by the temptations of power."

My entire life, my entire identity, had been shaped by a damn prophecy I didn't even know existed. "And Uther? Did he know about this plan?"

Gaius shook his head. "No. Your father believed you had died shortly after childbirth, along with your mother. It was the only way to protect you both."

"Protect us from what?" I demanded, my voice rising. The knights shifted behind me, their weapons clinking softly, the sound almost comforting. Somehow, I knew they'd stand by my side.

"From Adriana," Tatiana said softly, her voice filled with a deep sadness. "She was consumed by jealousy and rage, driven mad by the knowledge that Uther's heart belonged to another. She turned to dark magic, determined to destroy Morrigan and the child."

Gaius nodded, his eyes distant, as if lost in memory. "On the night you were born, Adriana attacked. The castle was in chaos, and in the midst of it all, Morrigan made the ultimate sacrifice. She used the last of her strength to open a portal and send you away. You landed on the steps of a human family's home, and they took you in."

And it was because of that kindness that I ultimately doomed them to die.

Chapter Twenty

MERLIN

My heart ached for her. I wanted to hold her tight, shielding her from the pain radiating off of her in waves. We could all see the vision, and I had a feeling that was the queen's doing.

"There's more we must discuss, but it's late and we're expected at the Night of the Ancients feast. I'm sure your knights have filled you in on what this celebration means for us here in Avalon."

How could we have forgotten? First, the Dawn of The Ancients, and now the Night when the entire realm of Avalon reveled in magic. How strange and slightly suspicious that it happened to coincide with Arthur's arrival...

She turned to all of us, knights and myself included. "You're all welcome to join us; it would be an honor to have Camelot's knights and the infamous Merlin with us." She glanced at Gaius and winked.

I looked at Arthur, trying to read her thoughts. Her face remained composed, but I saw the turmoil in her eyes and how she clenched her hands into small fists. I stepped closer, my shoulder brushing against hers.

"What do you say, Wart?" I whispered. "A feast might be just what we need. A bit of wine to forget about the prophecy for a few hours."

If there was one thing I knew about Arthur, it was that she never passed up a chance to have some fun. For a moment, I thought she would refuse, then she let out a long sigh and nodded.

"Fine. But I'm not doing this for any prophecy or destiny. I'm doing it because I'm starving and I need a damn drink."

Even Queen Tatiana laughed at that, some light returning to the faerie queen's face. She summoned several servants into the room and instructed them to take us to the guest wing of the palace to get cleaned up and ready for the feast. I could tell that Arthur still had more questions on the tip of her tongue, but it would have to wait.

I lingered for a moment, my lips brushing against Arthur's cheek in a fleeting kiss. Her skin was soft and warm, and I could have kissed her again and again. I gave her a reassuring smile and promised I'd be up in a moment.

As Arthur followed Queen Tatiana's servants out of the library, Tristan, Lancelot, Percival, Gawain, and Galahad filed out after her. I watched as they nodded and greeted several fae guards who'd been stationed around the exits. It reminded me that this was once their home, and they probably know everyone here. It made more sense why they were so willing to trust Queen Tatiana with Arthur.

I hung back, my gaze drifting to the towering shelves and the ancient tomes they held. The scent of parchment and ink mingled with the sweet aroma of magic.

It wasn't until the echo of footsteps faded that I realized Gaius and I were alone. He stood near the massive tree, his purple robes shimmering in the golden light that filtered through the leaves. For a moment, neither of us spoke.

"You knew," I finally said, my voice barely above a whisper. "All this time, you knew, and you didn't tell me."

Gaius sighed, his shoulders sagging as if the burden of centuries rested upon them. "Yes, Merlin. I knew. And so did you, my boy. You just didn't want to accept it."

I stepped towards him, thrusting out my finger. "It was a possibility, remember? You said the prophecy spoke of a halfling. There are hundreds of halflings in Albion, Gaius. But you knew about Morrigan and Adriana. You were there when it all happened and you chose not to tell me."

I glared at Gaius, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. The betrayal stung like a slap to the face. "You lied to me," I said through gritted teeth. "You let me believe that Arthur's destiny was uncertain, that she might not be the one the prophecy spoke of. I could have prepared her for this."

Gaius met my gaze unflinchingly. "I did what I had to do, Merlin. For Arthur's sake, and for the sake of all Albion."

"What about my sake?" I demanded, my voice rising. "Did you ever stop to think about what it would do to me, living with this secret, not knowing the truth about the woman I—" I caught myself, the words dying on my tongue.

Gaius's expression softened, understanding in his eyes. "The woman you love," he finished gently. "I've always known it was inevitable, Merlin. I've seen the way you look at her, the way you protect her. Your bond is something special, something rare and precious."

I shook my head, refusing to be placated. "Then why keep me in the dark? Why not trust me with the truth?"

Gaius sighed. "Because you had a role to play in Arthur's destiny. She had to be protected from the corruption of royalty until the time was right. She needed a companion and a protector. Arthur needed you as you were, Merlin, and I won't

apologize for that. Prophecies are incredibly delicate, and one wrong move could disrupt it all.”

I felt my shoulders slump as the fight drained out of me. As much as I wanted to hold on to my anger, I couldn't deny the truth. In a way, I already knew the truth. I was just angry, and I didn't know what I should do with it.

"What comes next?" I asked. "Now that Arthur knows the entire truth, what happens?"

Gaius smiled, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. "For now, you enjoy the Night of the Ancients. Revel in the magic. Let it fill you up and renew your reservoirs. Because come morning, her quest continues."

Chapter Twenty-One

GALAHAD

I left the bustling preparations for The Night of the Ancients celebration early, my heart both heavy and eager as I made my way out of the Seelie Palace. The glow of the bonfires faded behind me as I ventured down the winding path that led to the outskirts of the royal city.

Seven hundred years had passed since I last saw my mother. A span of time that felt like both an eternity and the blink of an eye to an immortal fae. I knew this city inside and out, and I was pleasantly surprised to see that nothing had changed while I'd been gone.

The further I walked, the more modest the homes were. Just charming cottages with sprawling gardens settled by sparkling streams and ponds that backed up to the wood. Most of the fae, aside from royalty, lived simpler than wealthy humans did. With such long lifespans, we needed less material possessions to fulfill us than mortals.

My family was one of the oldest bloodlines in the Seelie Court, my late father having also served her majesty as a knight for centuries. I'd lived here all my life, only leaving when I made the decision to join the Seelie knights.

I paused at the edge of the barrier to my family's home, suddenly uncertain. Would she recognize me after all these years? Would she be proud of the knight I'd become or disappointed that I had been away for so long?

And my brothers...Were they angry at me too for abandoning them in the name of some prophecy?

I took a moment to breathe and stepped through the shimmering boundary, feeling the familiar tingle of my family's magic wash over me. The door swung open for me without having to knock; the house recognized me instantly and allowed me to enter.

Plush velvet sofas surrounded a crackling hearth, its mantle adorned with intricate carvings my father and I had done when I was young. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled to the brim with my mother's favorite romance stories. My father's extra set of armor was hung on a hook next to the far door, and my chest gave a twinge.

"Mother?" I called out, my voice echoing through the seemingly empty house. An eerie silence greeted me, broken only by the soft whisper of the wind through the open windows. Unease prickled at the back of my neck as I ventured further inside, my hand instinctively reaching for the hilt of my sword.

Before I could draw my blade, a sudden weight slammed into me from behind, sending me sprawling to the ground. I twisted, ready to defend myself, only to find myself pinned beneath two grinning faces I'd know anywhere.

"Eat dirt, fucker!" Roark crowed, his dark red hair falling into his eyes as he beamed down at me. "You're getting slow in your old age, brother."

"Welcome home." Elyan laughed next to him, his green eyes sparkling with mischief. "We thought we'd give you a proper greeting."

I couldn't help but laugh as we tussled on the floor like we did when we were children, all elbows and knees. For a moment, the centuries melted away, and we were just three brothers again, years dissolving away.

"Alright, alright, let me up, you idiots." I chuckled, shoving them off me and climbing to my feet, then dusted off my tunic. "Is this how you welcome a decorated knight of Camelot?"

Roark snorted, slinging an arm around my shoulders. He was a lot larger than I remembered. A grown male now, in his prime. "Don't make me vomit, Gal."

Elyan laughed, eyes danced with amusement. "It's our sworn duty to keep you humble, Sir Galahad ."

I opened my mouth to retort, but the words died on my tongue as a figure appeared in the doorway. Time seemed to slow as I took in the sight of my mother, as radiant and beautiful as the day I left. Her strawberry hair cascaded down her shoulders in soft waves, and her grass-green eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

"Galahad," she whispered, her voice trembling. "My beautiful boy, you've come home!"

"Mother," I choked out, my voice cracking as she enveloped me in a fierce embrace. Her familiar scent of cinnamon and cloves surrounded me, and I felt the weight of the centuries melt away as I clung to her, tears streaming down my face. I was suddenly glad I hadn't brought Gawain with me. He'd never let me hear the end of it.

"Too long, Gal," she murmured, her hands cupping my face as she pulled back to look at me. Her eyes shone with such pure love and pride, and I felt a wave of emotion wash over me. "I've missed you so much."

For a second, I almost felt guilty. When I was a boy, my father had been gone more often than he was home. It was in the time of the court wars, and he was a commander. I dreamed of rising off with him to fight, but he was killed before I could ever make it a reality. Here I was now, abandoning my mother all over again.

"I've missed you too," I whispered, leaning into her touch. "More than you can possibly imagine. It feels good to be back in Avalon."

Finally, she pulled away, wiping the tears from her eyes with a watery smile. "Enough of that," she said with a laugh, wiping away her own tears. "Come, sit with me. I want to hear everything about your adventures."

"I can't stay long," I said, following her into the sitting room. "I'm needed back at the castle for the feasts."

My mother's face fell for a moment, but she quickly masked it with a warm smile. "Of course. The city is buzzing with rumors, you know." Her eyes sparkled with mischief. Sometimes I forgot how young my mother still was. Centuries older than me, she still looked no older than thirty in human years. "You really did find the heir, didn't you?"

"I did. And unfortunately, I might be in love with her," I said, running my hand over my face.

There, I'd said it. The thing that had been nagging at me since the moment I met the feisty queen. If I couldn't admit it to her yet, I could damn sure say it aloud at least.

My mother raised her eyebrows in surprise and a grin spread across her face. "You're in love?" She leaned forward, eager for details. "Tell me about this woman who's captured your heart. I never thought I'd see the day."

My brothers snorted at the same time, and I shot them a glare. "She's the most beautiful female I think I've ever seen. Powerful without realizing it, and she's got a mouth on her." Elyan opened his mouth, but I silenced him with a look. He snapped it closed. "She could probably kick your arse up and down the city streets if she wanted to, Elyan."

"Well then, she sounds amazing," my mother said, shaking her head at my brothers. "But does she feel the same way about you?"

I hesitated. "I don't know. There are so many complications. It's hard to know where we stand. I'm not the only knight that feels this way. Percy is practically in love, and Tristan too. Gawain is smitten, but that's not a surprise, and Lancelot tries to pretend he feels nothing, but I know him better than he realizes."

Roark plopped down beside me, jostling me with his elbow. "You always did overthink things. Why not just tell her how you feel and see what happens? Worst case, she lets you down gently and you move on."

"Or she could banish him from the Round Table for being a lovesick fool," Elyan teased, dodging the pillow I tossed at his head.

"Boys, behave," Mother chided, though her eyes twinkled with amusement. I nearly rolled my eyes at the word boys. There were no boys left in this house, just three grown fae males who drove their mother crazy. "This is serious." She turned back to me, her expression thoughtful. "Galahad, if this woman doesn't love you, then there's something wrong with her brain."

I threw my head back and laughed; the sound echoing through the cozy room. "I dare you to say that to her face, Mother. We'd all pay good coin to see you two go head to head."

The image of my petite mother squaring off against Arthur was too amusing to ignore. While my mother was a force to be reckoned with in her own right, Arthur's fiery spirit and sharp tongue were unmatched.

"Perhaps I will," Mother said with a grin, her eyes glinting like polished emeralds in the firelight. "Someone needs to knock some sense into the girl if she's too blind to

see what a catch my son is."

Warmth bloomed in my chest at her words.

We stayed in the sitting room for the next couple of hours as I filled her in on what I'd been up to for the last seven centuries. I told her of the kings I'd escorted on quests for the Grail, of the battles I'd fought in on behalf of the Pendragons. I told her about Arthur, and Mordred and Uther. It felt nice to have a listening ear who only wanted the best for me.

As much as I longed to stay cocooned in the comfort of my childhood home, duty called. The celebrations at the castle would be starting within the hour. I rose from the sofa, reluctantly pulling away from the embrace of my mother's arm.

"I should head back," I said, my tone tinged with regret. "The feast will be starting soon, and Arthur is new to all of this."

"Of course," Mother said, rising gracefully to her feet. She reached out, her fingers brushing a stray lock of hair from my forehead with a tender touch. "But promise me you'll visit again soon. And bring this queen of yours next time. I'd very much like to meet the woman who's stolen my son's heart."

Nodding, a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. "I will. I promise." Then I turned to my brothers, who had also risen from their seats. "Try to stay out of trouble while I'm gone. And don't embarrass mother."

Roark scoffed, a grin splitting his handsome face. "Us? Trouble? Never. "

Elyan snickered, punching Roark playfully in the arm. "We're the very picture of innocence and propriety, dear brother."

I shook my head, chuckling under my breath as I made my way to the door. "Why do I find that hard to believe? I have no doubt I'll be seeing both of you at some point tonight at the feasts."

My mother threw her arms up in surrender and left the room, while my brothers didn't bother denying the truth. They were both unmated fae males, and the Night of the Ancients was a revelry that would go unmatched. It was a night of fucking, drinking, and forgetting propriety for a while.

With a final wave and a promise to return soon, I stepped out into the twilight, the warmth of my family's love wrapped around me like a familiar cloak. As I made my way back to the castle, my thoughts turned to Arthur, wondering if maybe my mother was right and I should just tell her how I felt.

Chapter Twenty-Two

ARTHUR

I stood before the ornate mirror in my old chambers, preserved for me all these years. With a critical eye, I studied my reflection, feeling strange in the fashions of Avalon rather than the stiff uniform of a knight of Camelot.

The silken black pants hung low on my hips, the material loose and airy. My chest was bare, the runes painted across my skin glinting in the candlelight. It was a traditional way to dress for the Night of the Ancients, but I couldn't help feeling exposed after spending centuries in Albion, where humans tended to be a bit more conservative.

It felt fucking good to be back where I belonged. Back with my people, and a part of me wanted to say fuck it, and never return to Albion.

My door clicked open, and Galahad poked his head into the room, a grin spreading across his face as he took in my appearance. "Well, don't you look festive," he teased, stepping fully into the chamber.

He was dressed similarly, though his runes were silver instead of gold. His red beard was twisted into various braids with glass beads interwoven in the strands.

I grunted in response, turning back to the mirror. "Let's just get this over with."

"Oh come on, Lance. It's a celebration! Try enjoying yourself for once. Surely even

you can crack a smile for one night."

I shot him a sidelong glance, my lips twitching despite myself.

He snorted, shaking his head. "You're hopeless, brother." His expression softened, growing thoughtful as he studied me. "Have you seen your family yet?"

I stiffened, a dull ache blooming in my chest. "No," I said shortly, turning away from the mirror. "And I don't plan to. Not until this quest is done."

Galahad frowned. "But why? Your sisters miss you. And you've missed them, even if you're too stubborn to admit it."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. The clean golden strands slipped through my fingers like silk. "A bit longer won't make a difference," I said quietly, my voice rough. "To see them now, only to leave again so soon...it would be too painful. For all of us."

It was hard enough to leave seven hundred years ago, but I'd done it. I managed to lock away the pain for long enough to become the knight I had to be. I could keep it up a while longer.

Galahad's expression softened, understanding flickering in his eyes. "I get it. I just like to give you shit."

We made our way to the bar cart, where decanters of delicious amber liquid and faerie wine awaited us. We both grabbed a glass from the tray and poured a generous amount of wine, ready to let loose for the evening.

"Have you seen yours yet?" I asked, desperate to change the subject.

Galahad's face lit up, a broad grin splitting his bearded face. "I just got back, actually. Roark and Elyan ambushed me at the door, the little shits."

I chuckled, picturing Galahad's younger brothers. They were notorious troublemakers, even by fae standards. "Sounds about right. I'm surprised they didn't tie you up and leave you there."

They had to be fully grown males now, after seven centuries. Still young compared to us, but old enough to be finding their own way soon. I wondered if either of them were planning on following Galahad's footsteps and joining up as Seelie Court knights.

Galahad laughed, taking a sip of his wine. The dark liquid stained his lips before his tongue darted out to lick them clean. "Mother would have skinned them alive if they tried. She's missed me too much to let them get away with that."

I hummed in acknowledgment, swirling the wine in my glass. The delicate floral notes mixed with the heady scent of fermented berries, a familiar aroma that brought back countless memories of nights spent with our own kind.

"Did you tell her?" I asked, glancing at Galahad out of the corner of my eye. He knew what I was referring to without me having to spell it out.

Just then, the door opened, and Gawain and Tristan entered. Tristan must have known we'd be here. He knew everything, and it irked me sometimes. I waved them in, pouring them each a drink.

Galahad met my eyes and nodded, his expression growing thoughtful. "I told her. She's thrilled, of course. Wants to meet Arthur as soon as possible."

"Of course she does," I muttered, draining my glass in one swift gulp. The wine

burned pleasantly down my throat, a welcome distraction from the thoughts swirling in my head. "Everyone wants a piece of the prophesied queen."

Gawain clapped me on the shoulder, his gray eyes glinting with amusement. "Don't be such a sourpuss, Lance. This is a good thing! If Arthur wins over Galahad's mother, she'll have the support of one of the most influential families in the Seelie Court."

I shrugged off his hand, scowling. "And what about the Unseelie Court? You think they'll just welcome her with open arms?" I poured myself another generous glass of wine, the bottle clinking against the rim. "She's walking into a vipers' nest, and we all know it."

Tristan leaned against the wall, his eyes thoughtful as he sipped his wine. "She's faced down worse threats than a few scheming fae nobles."

Tristan, a member of the Unseelie Court himself, stood out as one of the few good ones. Unlike his queen, he was trustworthy and kind. But I had to remind myself not to judge an entire court of fae based on the actions of their ruler.

I scoffed, shaking my head. "It's not her strength that I doubt. It's the depths these bastards will sink to in order to get what they want."

My mind flashed back to the countless times I'd witnessed the cruelty and manipulation of the Unseelie Court firsthand. The games they played, the lives they toyed with like pieces on a chessboard. It made my blood boil just thinking about it.

As if on cue, the only other member of the Unseelie Court graced us with his presence. Percy's shadows filled the room before he stepped through the door.

Gawain chuckled, the sound rich and deep. "Always so cynical, Lance. Try having a

little faith, would you?" He took a long sip of his wine, savoring the taste as he waved Percy over before handing him the rest of the bottle.

"So," Gawain said as he slammed his glass down on the table. "How delectable do you think Arthur will look tonight?" His black brows wiggled up and down, and I groaned, rolling my eyes. "What? I can't be the only one looking forward to seeing our queen painted and primped for us."

I rolled my eyes at Gawain's lecherous grin, but I couldn't deny the flicker of anticipation that sparked in my gut at the thought of seeing Arthur dressed for the Night of the Ancients. The way the fae dressed was far more revealing than anything she would have worn in Albion, and I couldn't resist imagining how her moonlight would look painted with shimmering runes, her curves draped in gossamer and silks that left little to the imagination.

"Try thinking with your brain instead of your cock for once, Gawain," I growled, but there was no real heat behind my words. We were all guilty of letting our thoughts wander in that direction when it came to Arthur, as much as I loathed to admit it.

Percy chuckled, shadows dancing around his fingers as he toyed with the half-empty bottle of wine. "You're one to talk, Lance. I've seen the way you look at her when you think no one's watching."

I scowled, but I couldn't deny the truth. Arthur had a way of getting under my skin, of making me feel things I had long thought buried. It was unsettling, the power she held over me without even realizing it.

Tristan sighed, pushing off the wall to join us by the bar cart. "We're all in the same boat here, lads. There's no point in pretending otherwise."

I drained the last of my wine, the sweet burn doing little to ease the tension coiled in

my gut. Tristan's words hung heavy between us, an uncomfortable truth we had all been dancing around for far too long.

"So what do we do about it?" I asked, my voice rough. "We can't all pursue her."

Galahad ran a hand through his fiery locks. "Maybe we should let her decide," he suggested. "Give her the choice, and respect whatever she chooses."

Percy scoffed, sending Galahad a withering look. "And risk losing her entirely? I don't like those odds."

"Since when have you been a coward, Perce?" Gawain teased, arching a brow. "Afraid of a little competition?"

"Fuck off," Percy grumbled, but there was a laugh in it. "I just know how unfair it would be to the rest of you sad sacks. I've already had her once, so I think I have a leg up."

The mental image hit me like a punch to the gut, making me grit my teeth. It wasn't that I hated Percy for touching her. No, strangely enough, it wasn't that at all. It was the thought of not being able to do the same that made my chest burn hot.

I shook my head. Since when did I give a fuck about just one woman? Even with Gwenevere, I couldn't be bothered to ask if she was sleeping with other men, and I don't think I would have cared. I'd bedded others while I was with her, and never hid it from her.

But Arthur...The thought of her with any other man aside from the six of us on this quest was fucking unbearable.

"You're taking out of your ass," Gawain snapped at Percy, ice beginning to run up

the length of his arm until it froze the glass.

Tristan held up a hand, his silver eyes flashing with warning. "Enough. This isn't a pissing contest. We're all in love with her, and we need to figure out what to do about it before it tears us apart."

A heavy blanket of silence draped over the room, settling uneasily on my shoulders. The words hung in the air, taunting me with their absurdity. In love? Me?

Love was a concept reserved for romantics and fools, not someone like me who had been burned too many times to count. Someone who'd been betrayed by the woman he thought loved him as much as he loved her. Love was messy and brutal. It destroyed nations and toppled empires. Love wasn't worth the risk of what you stood to lose.

At least, that's what I'd been telling myself for the last nine hundred years.

Galahad sighed, breaking the tense silence. "What if we just...let things happen naturally?" he suggested, his voice hesitant. "We all pursue her, and what happens, happens. You're the only men I'd trust with her."

I stared at Galahad, not immediately saying no. The idea was both tantalizing and terrifying. My heart raced at the thought of allowing myself to explore these foreign feelings for Arthur, but the cynic in me balked at the risk of my sanity.

"And what happens when she inevitably chooses one of us over the others? Are we supposed to just smile and pretend it doesn't gut each and every one of us?" I had to ask. It had to be said out loud or else we'd all end up in a mess of trouble between the five of us.

Gawain leaned back against the bar, his expression thoughtful. "Maybe she won't

choose. Maybe she'll want us all."

I scoffed, shaking my head. "You're delusional if you think that's even a possibility. She's going to be a queen. Queens take king consorts, not six of them."

"Six?" Gawain asked, arching his brow.

"If you think for one fucking second that Merlin wouldn't turn us all into a pink mist in the wind if we tried taking Arthur from him, then you're delusional," I said dryly.

Percy chuckled, a knowing smirk playing at the corners of his lips. "This isn't Albion. The fae have always been a bit more...open-minded when it comes to matters of the heart...and the flesh."

I hated to admit it, but he had a point. Our kind had never been bound by the same rigid moral codes as the humans. Love, lust, and everything in between were celebrated, not shunned. The idea of Arthur taking multiple consorts wouldn't even raise an eyebrow among the fae.

Tristan nodded, his silver hair gleaming in the candlelight. "Percy's right. We've been living among humans for too long, I think."

I ran a hand over my face. "Fine. Since I have a feeling none of you lovesick fools are going to let up anytime soon, we'll just agree to let her decide. And whatever she chooses, we respect it. No jealousy, no resentment. We're in this together, no matter what."

Galahad clapped me on the shoulder, his green eyes shining with the challenge of a hunt. "Well said, brother."

Gawain raised his glass, a wicked grin spreading across his face. "To the queen," he

said, looking around at each one of us. "And to the poor bastards foolish enough to love her."

Chapter Twenty-Three

ARTHUR

I stood in front of the standing mirror and marveled at the ethereal creature gazing back at me. The sheer golden fabric clung to my body like a second skin, accentuating every curve and contour. It was a daring choice, far more revealing than anything I had worn before in Albion.

The golden runes painted across my skin glimmered in the candlelight, ancient symbols of power and protection, or so the servants had told me. They'd traced intricate patterns along my arms, my collarbone, and my exposed midriff. Each stroke of the brush had been a nearly ritualistic act, imbuing me with the blessings of the fae ancestors.

The Night of the Ancients had arrived, preceded by the Dawn of The Ancients. On this sacred day, the barrier between realms was thin, allowing the powerful magic that sustained the land to flow freely. I'd never heard of it before, but I was excited to see it firsthand.

My chestnut curls were wild and silky, untamed and free. Gone were the tight braids and rigid updos of my mortal life. The curls framed my face like a lion's mane, and made me feel a bit wild inside too. Like I could set the world on fire if I wanted to.

As I stared at my reflection, something moved in the corner of my eye. I turned to see the sheer curtains swaying, beckoning me to the open window. The cool twilit air breezed over me, smelling like jasmine and wet leaves.

I sank into the window seat, the velvet cushions soft and comfortable enough that I could easily fall asleep. Below, the Seelie Court sprawled out, lit by lanterns that flickered like magic. The palace was only the centerpiece of a sprawling royal city that stretched out for miles and miles into the horizon. Every home, every structure seemed to have grown up from the ground, twisting into shape.

I felt a strange sense of belonging here, like this place had wrapped itself around my heart already. Now that I knew who my mother was—that she was from the Seelie Court—it was almost like coming home.

My thoughts drifted to the visions Tatiana had shown me. How did nobody know about her? How were rumors not swirling about the fae mistress Uther had a child with? Camelot was swarming with gossip. Even the servants should have known something.

Morrigan. That was my mother's name. Hearing it for the first time had nearly knocked the wind out of me. Half fae and half druid. So what did that make me? It was frustrating, the not knowing. I could still barely wrap my head around how drastically my life had changed since the moment I pulled Excalibur free. What I did know was that I wasn't human.

Maybe Mordred was right to be angry. After all, she was Uther's firstborn daughter and the rightful heir to her father's throne. It was the way of things in the human realm. Crowns were passed on through bloodlines, from oldest to youngest. But Mordred grew up in the shadow of a prophecy that snubbed her.

I couldn't help but wonder what my life would have been like if I had been raised in Camelot, if I had grown up alongside Mordred. Would we have been close, like true sisters? Or would the rivalry between us have festered, poisoning our relationship from the start?

As much as I wanted to resent Mordred for her bitterness, a part of me understood it. How could she not feel betrayed, knowing that her own father had chosen to overlook her? Knowing that her own father banished her from her kingdom, all because she chose to take matters into her own hands and fight for what she thought was rightfully hers?

The thought left a sour taste in my mouth, and I found myself questioning the fairness of it all. How was I any more deserving of the throne than my sister? I was just an orphaned thief with no accomplishments to her name. She was a princess with powerful magic. Maybe she should be queen instead of me. Maybe Camelot would be stronger for it.

The cool breeze caressed my skin, carrying with it the distant sounds of music and laughter from the celebrations below. I shivered, the thin fabric of my dress doing little to war with the chill.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew out the candles and left me in darkness. I jumped up, hand reaching for my sword that lay across the large bed, as Merlin emerged from the shadows. Letting out a relieved breath, I set the sword back down and slowly took in his shirtless, muscular frame and dark, tousled hair that brushed his shoulders.

"Don't sneak up on me like that," I scolded, trying to ignore how my heart raced. "I could have skewered you."

A smirk played on his lips. He was dressed like a fae tonight, in loose linen trousers, feet bare, and painted with shimmering runes that matched the blue of his eyes.

Merlin moved closer, his gaze intense and darkening by the second. "You wouldn't skewer me. We both know you enjoy my surprises far too much for that."

I scoffed and crossed my arms over my chest, inadvertently pushing my breasts up

higher. His eyes flickered down to my cleavage before meeting mine again. "You're far too confident for your own good. One of these days, it's going to get you into trouble."

"Perhaps." He stepped even nearer, close enough now that the heat radiating off his bare skin seeped through the light dress. "But I have a feeling you'll be there to bail me out when it does. Just like you always do, Wart."

I rolled my eyes, even as anticipation coiled low in my belly. "Maybe I've had a change of heart. Have you considered that?"

Merlin's hand came up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip. I shivered at the contact. "I think deep down, you know you need me as much as I need you. This thing between us...I suppose it's inevitable."

I wanted to protest, to push him away and tell him he was wrong. But I couldn't. Not when every fiber of my being was drawn to him like a moth to a flame.

"Damn you," I whispered, my voice hoarse with desire. "Damn you for making me feel this way. You gave up your right to demand anything from me. It's too late, Merlin. My feelings for my knights...They're?—"

Something flashed in Merlin's eyes then, hot and hungry. "Fuck it all to hell, Arthur," he said with a growl of frustration. "You can have your knights, as long as you remember who claimed you first."

Merlin's lips crashed against mine, hot and demanding. I gasped into the kiss, my hands coming up to tangle in his hair as he pulled me flush against him. The hard planes of his body molded to my softer curves.

"I can't keep pretending," he growled against my mouth, nipping at my bottom lip. "I

can't keep acting like I don't crave you every fucking second of every day. Like I don't need to be inside you more than I need my next breath."

A broken moan escaped me, echoing the ache between my thighs. I knew we shouldn't, that giving in to this desire would only complicate things further. But gods help me, I wanted him. I wanted him so badly I could barely think straight.

Merlin's hands slid down my sides to grip my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh through the thin fabric of my dress. He walked me backwards until my back hit the cool stone wall; the contrast made me shiver. Or maybe it was the way his eyes devoured me, dark with need and something far more dangerous.

"Tell me you don't want this," he demanded, his voice rough as gravel. "That you don't feel this thing between us, pulling us together like gravity. Tell me, and I'll stop."

I swallowed hard, my pulse hammering in my throat. Every inch of him felt hot and hard against me. The blue of his eyes burned into me, stripping away my reservations until all that remained was the primal hunger raging inside.

"I can't," I whispered, the admission ripped from somewhere deep down. "I can't tell you to stop, because I don't want you to."

A noise that was half growl, half groan rumbled from his chest. Then his mouth was on mine again, claiming me with a ferocity that left me weak. I clung to him, my nails raking down the powerful expanse of his back as he consumed me.

Merlin's hands roamed my body, mapping every curve like he was committing me to memory. He cupped my breasts through the thin fabric, thumbing my nipples until they pearled against his touch. I arched into him with a gasp, the ache between my thighs growing unbearable.

"I need you," he rasped against my throat, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin. "I need to be inside you..."

Merlin's hands slid down to grip my thighs, hoisting me up with a swift motion that had my back pressing harder into the stone wall. I wrapped my legs around his hips instinctively, the new position allowing me to feel the thick ridge of his arousal through his trousers. A broken moan fell from my lips as he ground against me, the friction delicious torture against my aching core.

"Fuck, Arthur," he groaned, his voice strained with barely restrained need. "Do you have any idea what you do to me? How badly I've wanted this?"

I could only whimper in response, my head falling back against the wall as his lips trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses down the column of my throat. His teeth grazed my collarbone, sending sparks of pleasure zinging through my veins.

Merlin's hand slid beneath the hem of my dress, the calloused pads of his fingers skimming up the sensitive skin of my inner thigh. Higher and higher he went until he reached the apex of my thighs and discovered my lack of undergarments.

"Gods," he choked out, his eyes slamming shut as his fingers delved into my slick heat. "You're dripping for me already, aren't you?"

I keened as he stroked me, teasing my clit slowly. Before I could respond, he was freeing himself from the confines of his trousers. He held me up with one arm, and I barely had a moment to beg him before he was notching himself at my entrance and thrusting deep in one smooth stroke.

"Oh gods!" I cried out, my head falling back and my eyes closing as he filled me so completely. The stretch and burn as my body yielded to his was exquisite, pleasure and pain blurring together until I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

Merlin stilled for a moment, his forehead pressing to mine as we both adjusted to the intensity. When his eyes met mine, they were glowing a vivid blue.

Then he began to move, withdrawing almost completely before slamming back in with a force that had me seeing stars. Again and again he drove into me, hard and fast, the sounds echoing obscenely through the room.

He shifted the angle of his hips, striking a soft spot deep inside that made stars explode behind my eyelids. A high, keening cry tore from my throat and my back bowed, pressing my breasts against his chest.

His mouth found my neck, teeth sinking into the sensitive flesh hard enough to leave a mark. The sharp sting only heightened my pleasure, sending me hurtling closer to the edge.

Merlin abruptly pulled back, still buried deep inside me, and carried me across the room. We tumbled onto the large, plush bed in a tangle of sweat-covered limbs, never breaking our connection. The cool silk sheets were a shock against my flushed skin as Merlin loomed over me, caging me in with his powerful arms.

His eyes burned into mine, the vivid blue nearly eclipsed by blown pupils. The runes painted across his chest shimmered, casting an ethereal glow over his features. In that moment, he looked every inch the powerful sorcerer—raw, primal, and untamed.

"You're mine," he growled, punctuating the words with a deep, purposeful thrust that had me arching off the bed. "Say it, Arthur. Say you belong to me."

I moaned, my nails digging into his shoulders as I wrapped my legs tighter around his waist. The new angle allowed him to sink even deeper, filling me so completely that it made my head swim.

I looked up at Merlin through my lashes, a wicked grin spreading across my face even as he drove into me with punishing force. The runes painted across my skin suddenly flared to life, shining golden, reflecting off of Merlin's skin.

"No, Merlin," I purred. He cocked his head as he slowed his thrusts, but I only dug my nails into him harder. " You belong to me ."

Quick as a flash, before he could react, I surged up and flipped us over. Merlin landed on his back with a surprised grunt, his eyes wide and dark with need as I straddled him. His hardness throbbed inside me, stretching me deliciously as I slowly rolled my hips.

"Fuck..." he groaned, his hands gripping my waist hard enough to bruise. But I relished the slight pain, the way it mixed with the intense pleasure building at my core.

I leaned down, my hair cascading around us like a curtain of molten chestnut and gold curls. My breasts brushed against his chest, the peaked nipples visible through the sheer fabric. Merlin's gaze was riveted, his throat working as he swallowed hard.

Merlin let out a strangled groan, his grip on my waist tightening as his hips bucked up involuntarily. "I always knew you were going to be the fucking death of me."

"But what a way to go, hmm?" I teased, slowly lifting myself until only the tip of him remained inside me. Then I slammed back down, taking him to the hilt in one smooth motion.

Merlin cursed as his hands roamed my body, skimming up my sides to cup my breasts. He plucked at my nipples through the thin fabric. The sensation sent jolts of heat straight to my core. I arched into his touch, my head falling back as I lost myself to the building pleasure.

"That's it," he rasped, his voice strained with the effort of holding back. "Take what you need from me. Use me for your pleasure, my queen."

His words only spurred me on, and I redoubled my efforts, rolling my hips in such a way that my clit rubbed against his pelvis. The coil in my belly wound tighter and tighter, my inner walls fluttering around his thick length as I chased my impending climax.

Merlin must have sensed how close I was, because his hand snaked between our sweat-slicked bodies to find my clit. He rubbed tight, purposeful circles around the sensitive nub, the calluses on his fingers providing the most exquisite friction.

"Come for me, Arthur," he commanded, his voice rough and on the brink of a growl.

With a sharp cry, I shattered around him, my inner walls clamping down on his length as wave after wave of ecstasy crashed over me. Merlin groaned, his fingers digging into my hips as he thrust up into me erratically, chasing his own release.

Suddenly, a burst of blinding golden light exploded from my body, filling the room with an otherworldly glow. The runes adorning my skin shimmered and pulsed, as if alive with ancient magic. Merlin's eyes went wide, his grip on me tightening as his own release overtook him.

"Fuuuck!" he roared, his back arching off the bed as he spilled himself deep inside me. His face contorted in agonized bliss, the chords of his neck straining as he lost himself to the pleasure.

I collapsed on top of him, my body still trembling. Merlin's arms came around me, holding me close as we both struggled to catch our breath. His hips still moved very slowly, easing me through the pleasure. The golden light slowly faded, replaced by a sudden flickering of newly lit candles at the wave of Merlin's hand.

When I emerged from the bathing chambers ten minutes later, skin flushed and glowing from the surge of magic, Merlin was waiting for me. He lounged on the bed, propped up on an elbow, the very picture of seductive indolence. A lazy, self-satisfied smirk curled his lips as his eyes roamed appreciatively over my body, once again clean, as if nothing had happened.

My golden runes that had blazed so brightly had faded back to a pretty shimmer, as if the magic was temporarily sated. We were already running late for the feasts and needed to make an appearance as soon as possible. As a royal guest, I didn't want to be seen as disrespectful or inconsiderate.

We slipped out of my chambers and into the torch-lit corridor. Merlin fell into step beside me, his fingertips grazing the small of my back in a possessive gesture that made me grin wickedly. I wasn't lying when I told him he was mine.

As we descended the long, twisting staircase to the palace courtyard, the distant sounds of music and laughter grew louder. The Night of the Ancients celebration was already in full swing, and the thrum of magic was in the air.

At the palace gates, my five knights stood waiting for me. Dressed in the same fae fashion as Merlin, only their runes were painted in colors that matched their eyes or hair. I shucked in a sharp breath as I ran my eyes over them. So different from the courtly knights of the round table I'd gotten to know in Albion. Here, they were fae down to the core. There was something feral about my men tonight.

I nearly choked on a laugh. My men...Is that what they were now? I supposed I could claim them all the way I claimed Merlin. It would be simple, really. Their attraction to me was like a physical tether between us. All five of them wanted me, There was no denying that.

Galahad was the first to step forward, his eyes smoldering with barely restrained

desire as he bowed deeply. "My Queen," he murmured, his voice low and husky. "You look fucking ravishing tonight."

I felt Merlin stiffen beside me, his hand tightening possessively on my waist. But before he could say anything, Gawain chimed in with a roguish grin. "Careful, Gal. You don't want to incur the wrath of our queen's lover. Something tells me he wouldn't mind the challenge though."

Tristan and Lancelot exchanged an amused glance, while Gawain merely quirked an eyebrow, his gray eyes glinting with mischief. The tension between the knights and Merlin was palpable.

I watched with growing amusement as Merlin stepped forward, a dangerous glint in his eye as he faced off against Gawain. The fae knight merely grinned, completely unfazed by the powerful sorcerer's glare.

"Is that a challenge, Sir Gawain?" Merlin asked, his voice deceptively calm. "Because if it is, I'm more than happy to oblige." His lips twitched into a smirk, and it was all I could do to contain an eye roll.

"Your male posturing is adorable," I said, taking a step between them. "But we're being rude to our hosts. Can we get on with the night without you pulling out your cocks to measure?"

Gawain, never one to miss an opportunity, quipped with a roguish wink, "Obviously, I have the largest cock. No need to measure."

Tristan smacked him on the back of the head, the silver-haired knight's eyes dancing with amusement. "Keep dreaming, Gawain. We all know it's not the size that counts, but how you use it to please her."

Gawain shoved Tristan back and laughed. "Spoken like a man with an inferiority complex, hm?"

The tension broke like a spell, the knights' laughter ringing out into the night air. Even Merlin cracked a smile, shaking his head.

Percy finally stepped forward from the shadows that constantly swirled around him, his dark eyes fixed on me with an intensity that made my breath catch. The memory of his cock buried deep inside me made my whole body tingle.

"Let's get moving. I'm tired of standing around while there's wine to fucking drink. I, for one, am more than ready to show off who she belongs to."

A shiver of pleasure shot through me at his words, causing Merlin to tense beside me again. But I quickly raised my hand, giving them all a sharp stare. "No man will ever own me. But, I will gladly let it be known that the six of you have been claimed. At least for tonight."

Chapter Twenty-Four

ARTHUR

The night air was warm and fragrant with the scent of blooming jasmine and honeysuckle. Towering trees with luminescent leaves in shades of purple, blue, and silver stretched up into the starry sky, their branches hung with glowing lanterns that cast a soft, otherworldly light over the Seelie Court.

Everywhere I looked, fae of all kinds were indulging in the pleasures of the Night of the Ancients. Lithe dancers with iridescent wings fluttered and spun gracefully through the air, their gossamer gowns shimmering in the firelight.

Musicians played hauntingly beautiful melodies on instruments I had never seen before. Harps with strings that seemed to be made of spun moonlight, flutes carved from shimmering crystal, and drums that pulsed with a deep, primal rhythm.

Merlin's hand rested possessively on the small of my back as he guided me through the throng of revelers. Around us, the knights formed a loose circle, their eyes constantly scanning the crowd, but I noticed they seemed more at ease than ever. It occurred to me that this really was their home. The place they felt most safe. Full of familiar faces of people they'd known for centuries.

As we moved deeper into the heart of the festivities, the pulsing energy of the crowd enveloped us. Towering bonfires dotted the sprawling clearing, their flames flickering in mesmerizing shades of blue, green, and violet. Sparks drifted upward like glowing fireflies, mingling with the twilight stars above.

Merlin snagged two goblets from a passing servant, handing one to me. The wine was a deep, rich crimson, and as I took a sip, flavors of ripe berries, dark chocolate, and something distinctly magical burst across my tongue. It sent a pleasant warmth spreading through my veins, making my skin tingle.

We settled onto an arrangement of cushions beneath a towering willow tree, its cascading branches adorned with softly glowing crystal orbs. The air here was cooler, heavy with the scent of damp earth and night-blooming flowers. Galahad and Lancelot balanced two large trays of cheeses, fruits, and candies in their hands, settling them in the center of our little group.

A group of dancers twirled past us, their bodies painted with intricate swirling patterns that seemed to shift on their skin. Their wings fluttered and gleamed, and it got me thinking.

“Do any of you have wings?” I asked, my eyes meeting Tristan’s.

Tristan's nod was easy, his shoulders relaxed and his eyes shining brighter than I've ever seen. "All the Sidhe fae have the power to manifest wings. It's a natural aspect of our magic. Some lower fae who have the blood of other creatures can also have wings, horns, claws, or tails; it all depends on which kind of creature their ancestors mated with."

I leaned forward, intrigued. "Even me? I'm only half fae." The other half, I had no realistic idea. Was I a druid? Or was I human?

Tristan nodded, popping a ripe berry into his mouth. "Even you. Your magic is still young and untrained, but it's there, waiting to be awakened when you're ready."

The thought sent a thrill through me. I glanced up at the sky, imagining what it would feel like to soar through the clouds.

Lancelot must have seen the longing in my eyes, because he chuckled, his golden hair falling into his eyes as he shook his head. "Don't get any ideas. Flying takes years of practice to master. We wouldn't want you plummeting to the ground on your first attempt. Trust me, we've all been there."

I huffed, taking a sip of my wine. The rich liquid warmed me from the inside out. "True, but I'm a quick study. I want to see your wings."

The wine was getting to my head already, and I felt lighter than I had since before the quest began, and I wanted to stay on this high.

Lancelot's cheeks reddened, but he pushed himself to his feet. His tanned skin gleamed with runes, and I took a moment to appreciate the rugged ripple of his warrior's muscles. With a deep breath, he closed his eyes, and the air around him began to shimmer and pulse with an otherworldly energy.

Then, with a sudden burst of power that sent a gust of wind swirling around us, Lancelot's wings unfurled from his back, stretching out to their full, magnificent span. They were unlike anything I had ever seen.

Each wing section looked like it was made of glass. They gleamed, run through with fissures of burnished gold, catching the flickering light of the bonfires. I stood, passing my cup to Merlin, trying to get a better look at them. I reached out to touch one, and Lancelot sucked in a sharp breath as I made contact.

Though it looked like glass, it felt like steel. Heavy, sharp, and thick. They were shaped roughly like insect wings, and their wingspan was double that of Lancelot's height. I suppose that made sense, since they were supposed to have the power to lift his heavy body into the air.

Still, it was hard to fathom how these massive glass-like appendages just...existed

somewhere inside of him. My back prickled with the thought, and suddenly I wondered if a similar pair were lurking under my skin.

What caught my eye next were the sharp, wicked-looking hooks crowning the top of each wing near the spine, curved and deadly. They gleamed like polished gold, and sharp enough to pierce flesh easily.

Percival rose next, shadows dancing at his feet as he stepped forward. With a roll of his broad shoulders, his wings unfurled like a cloak of midnight. They were as dark as a starless sky, made of undulating smoky wisps in the shape of wings. I reached a hand out and sifted my fingers through the wisps, and Percy rolled his shoulders at the contact, his jaw tensing, but his eyes were full of desire.

"Show off," Gawain muttered, but there was a hint of admiration in his voice. He stood, his lean but muscular frame tensing as he called forth his own wings. They burst forth in a flurry of icy crystals, each one catching the light like a prism. The wings were a stunning glacial blue, shot through with veins of pure white. The edges looked sharp enough to cut through diamond.

Galahad grinned as he stepped up. "My turn, lads." His wings unfurled in a rustle of autumn colored feathers, a rich tapestry of golds, oranges, and deep reds. They were the wings of a griffin, or a massive hawk, and they looked powerful.

Tristan was the last to rise, his silver hair gleaming in the firelight. When his wings came out, my jaw dropped in awe. They were dragon wings... or something like it, but the color of moonstones. The tips of his wings were adorned with delicate silver filigree, in intricate patterns. They were massive and terrifying, but beautiful.

"Always have to make an entrance, don't you?" Gawain teased, his icy wings fluttering behind him. "It's not how pretty the wings are, it's how you use 'em."

Tristan smirked. "You're only jealous because those icy monstrosities of yours could put someone's eye out."

Gawain clutched his chest in mock offense, his other hand reaching back to stroke the razor-sharp edges of his wings. "I'll have you know these 'monstrosities' are a work of art. Deadly and beautiful, just like their owner."

A chorus of groans sounded out from the rest of the men as they tucked away their wings and plopped back down on the cushions. I winked at Gawain and said, "I'm sure they're very deadly."

He grinned back, tucking them away with flourish, puffing out his broad chest. "See? The lady agrees."

"What I'd like to know," I asked, narrowing my eyes around the circle of knights, "Is why none of you thought to use your wings when we were standing at the foot of Dead Man's Path."

"We're here to protect you and guide you through each challenge. But ultimately, it's you who has to face them alone," Tristan said.

I frowned. "But why not just fly me across? That'd be faster and safer. We could have avoided the stone guardians altogether."

Galahad shook his head. "It's not about speed. Each challenge is crafted to test something different about you—your bravery, your cleverness, your kindness. They're meant to test you, and make sure that you're worthy of the Holy Grail."

"Think of it as a rite of passage," Lancelot chimed in. "It's not easy, but if you can beat the trials and win the Grail, then Uther has no reason to deny you your crown. If you cheat, then you don't deserve it. You'd be no better than Mordred."

I sighed and leaned back against the soft cushions. The wine had me feeling warm and relaxed, and the distant music wrapped around me like a comforting blanket. I waved the men off and plucked a grape from Merlin's hand. "I regret asking. Please just smother me in lies and flowery promises, not logic..."

Merlin rolled his eyes. "I think you've had enough wine for now, Wart."

Galahad cocked his head, his eyes bouncing between us. "Why do you call her Wart?"

Merlin smirked. "It's a nickname from when we were kids at the orphanage," he explained, his blue eyes twinkling with nostalgia. "Arthur has this little dark freckle under her eye, see?" He ran a thumb gently under my eye. "I used to tease her mercilessly about it."

I groaned, covering my face with my hands as the memory flooded back. "Ugh, don't remind me. You were such a brat. Actually, you still are a brat."

Merlin grinned wider, reaching over to tug my hands away from my face. His fingers lingered on the freckle in question, tracing it gently. "The other kids used to tell her she was kissed by the faeries."

Gawain snorted, arching a dark brow. "I'd say she'd been kissed by a few faeries..." Again, Tristan smacked him across the back of the head.

"Can I ask the lady for a dance?" came an unfamiliar voice, causing all the knights to go utterly still and silent.

A tall, striking fae man with hair the color of burnished bronze and eyes like molten amber stood before us, his hand outstretched towards me in invitation. His chiseled features were accentuated by the intricate bronze runes that swirled across his sun-

kissed skin, catching the flickering firelight. He wore loose linen trousers slung low on his hips and a sheer, open vest that did little to conceal his sculpted chest and abdomen.

He was handsome, objectively, but he didn't cause my belly to flutter like it did with my knights and my sorcerer.

I felt the knights tense around me, their postures shifting from relaxed to alert in an instant. Merlin's hand tightened on my waist, his fingers digging in possessively. Percy's shadows swirled around us, agitated and ready to strike. Lancelot and Gawain exchanged a look, their jaws clenched and eyes hard. Galahad's hand drifted to the hilt of a dagger he wore, his knuckles white. Tristan's gaze was assessing, calculating, as if trying to determine the level of threat this newcomer posed.

The fae man seemed unfazed by the sudden tension, his amber eyes locked on mine as he waited patiently for my response. I knew it would be considered a grave insult to refuse his request, especially as a guest in the Seelie Court. The last thing I wanted was to cause offense or create a diplomatic incident over a simple dance.

I placed my hand on Merlin's thigh, giving it a reassuring squeeze as I rose gracefully to my feet. "One dance is all I can promise before my mates decide to intervene."

Behind me, several of my men sucked in sharp breaths at my use of the term mates. It had slipped out by accident, but I wasn't going to bother taking it back. I could feel the knights' gazes burning into my back as I accepted the fae man's outstretched hand, allowing him to guide me towards the swirling throng of dancers.

As we stepped into the crowd of dancing fae, the music shifted, the haunting melody growing more sensual, more primal. The drums pulsed with a deep, throbbing rhythm that seemed to echo the beating of my heart. Fae all around us moved with an otherworldly grace, their bodies undulating and entwining in a dance that was both

beautiful and erotic.

My partner pulled me close, one hand resting on the small of my back while we began to move, our bodies swaying in perfect sync to the hypnotic beat. The music was so much more wild than anything that existed in Albion. So free, fast, and raw.

"I'm Keir," he murmured, his lips brushing the shell of my ear. His breath was warm, smelling faintly of cinnamon. It took everything in me not to flinch away from him, and to stay as friendly as I could manage. "And you, of course, are Arthur Pendragon, daughter of Morrigan. Your presence here has caused quite the stir."

I tilted my head back to meet his gaze, a small smirk playing at the corners of my mouth. "Is that so? And what have you heard, exactly?"

Keir spun me out then back in, dipping me low before pulling me flush against his body. His hand splayed across my lower back, fingers grazing the bare skin exposed by my backless dress. "Some say you're the key to everything."

I laughed, the sound musical and carefree even as my mind raced. I didn't like the way he said "key", as if I was an object to be wielded rather than a person with agency. "And what do you believe, Keir?" I asked, arching a brow as we moved together, our hips rolling in tandem.

Over his shoulder, I locked eyes with Lancelot. He and the rest of my men stood shoulder to shoulder, arms crossed over their chests as they watched us dance. His eyes were narrowed on Keir's hand.

"I believe," he murmured, his hand sliding lower to rest just above the curve of my ass, "that you are a woman of immense power and potential. And that many will seek to harness that power for their own gain."

I tensed, my eyes narrowing. "I am no one's pawn," I said, my voice low and dangerous. "And I don't take kindly to those who would seek to use me."

Keir's lips curved into a smile. "Of course not." His smile was sharp and cunning, his amber eyes glinting with a hint of malice. "I would never dream of using you, Arthur Pendragon. I merely wish to...appreciate you."

His hand slid lower, cupping the curve of my ass in a bold, possessive gesture. I stiffened, anger and disgust flaring hot in my veins. Keir leaned in, his lips a hairsbreadth from mine. But before they could make contact, something deep within me snapped. It was like a dam bursting.

A surge of raw, primal magic exploded from my core, a searing golden light that enveloped me like a second skin. It crackled and danced across my flesh, ancient runes flaring to life in a dazzling display of power. The very air around us seemed to shimmer and pulse with the force of it, the ground trembling beneath our feet.

Keir's eyes widened in shock and fear as he stumbled back, his hands raised in a futile attempt to shield himself from the onslaught of my magic. But it was too late. A bolt of pure, molten energy shot from my outstretched palm, striking him square in the chest with the force of a battering ram.

He flew backwards, his body hurtling through the air like a rag doll. Fae scrambled out of the way, their faces a mix of awe and terror as Keir crashed to the ground in a heap of tangled limbs. He skidded across the earth, leaving a deep furrow in his wake, before coming to a stop at the base of a towering tree.

The music came to a sudden halt, the silence that followed deafening. Every eye was fixed on me as the air crackled with tension and anticipation of a fight.

Keir groaned, pushing himself up on his elbows. He looked around, taking in the

shocked faces of the gathered fae, the expectant hush that had fallen over the clearing. For a moment, he seemed poised on the brink of retaliation, his eyes flashing with humiliation and fury.

Then, to my surprise, he threw his head back and laughed. The sound was rich and deep. He climbed to his feet, brushing dirt and leaves from his clothing with an air of nonchalance.

"My fault!" he called out. "I suppose I deserved that for my poor attempt at flirting. I should have known better, your highness." He sketched a bow in my direction, a rueful grin playing at his lips. "I beg your forgiveness for my uncouth behavior. It won't happen again."

Around us, the tension began to dissipate as the gathered fae realized that the confrontation had been defused. But I felt more open and exposed than ever. There were eyes on me now, studying me, realizing exactly who and what I was now that he'd announced it.

As the music and revelry hesitantly resumed around us, I stood frozen in place, my heart pounding and my skin still tingling with the aftershocks of the magic I'd unleashed. I could feel the weight of countless stares, the air thick with hushed whispers and speculative murmurs.

Keir remained where he stood, his eyes fixed on me with an intensity that made my skin crawl. He smiled, slow and sharp, like a wolf baring its fangs. But before he could take a step towards me, a familiar figure interposed itself between us.

Lancelot.

"I believe the lady has made her point abundantly clear," he growled, his voice low and deeper than I'd ever heard from him before. His golden eyes flashed with barely

contained fury as he stared Keir down, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. "Turn around and walk away now. Before I'm tempted to rip your spine out through your throat."

Keir's smile only widened, but a flash of fear passed through his eyes that he couldn't hide. "Ah, the loyal knight to the rescue. How predictable."

With a final, lingering look in my direction, Keir turned on his heel and melted into the swirling crowd of dancers, his bronze hair glinting under the enchanted lanterns. The sea of fae parted before him.

Lancelot remained where he stood, his broad shoulders taut with tension as he watched Keir's retreat. In that moment, he looked every inch the fierce, legendary fae warrior. A knight of the round table.

As the music swelled around us again, the dancers spinning and twirling in a dizzying array of color and motion, I reached out to place a hand on Lancelot's arm. The muscles beneath my touch were rigid, coiled like a spring ready to snap.

"Lance," I murmured, my voice soft yet firm. "He's gone. It's over."

Slowly, as if emerging from a trance, Lancelot turned to face me fully. The fury in his eyes dimmed, replaced by a swirl of emotions I couldn't quite decipher. Concern, relief, and something deeper, more intense, that made my breath catch in my throat.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his voice rough with barely suppressed rage. His hand came up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing over the freckle beneath my eye with a gentleness that caught me off guard.

I leaned into his touch, my eyes fluttering shut for a brief moment as I savored the warmth of his skin against mine. When I opened them again, I managed a small,

reassuring smile. "I'm fine. Really. Just a bit shaken."

His brow furrowed, his gaze searching mine as if looking for any sign of distress or discomfort. "You seemed to handle yourself just fine."

I glanced down at my hands, still half-expecting to see the golden glow of power emanating from my skin. But the runes had faded back to their usual shimmering state. "I don't know what came over me," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

Lancelot's fingers tightened on my cheek, his touch grounding me in the moment. "Your magic responded to a threat. It protected you, as it should." His voice was low and filled with a quiet awe. "You're getting stronger. Embracing your power now that you're in Avalon."

Around us, the music shifted, the melody turning softer, more intimate. Couples drew closer, swaying together in a dance that was less about passion and more about connection.

On an impulse, I reached up and took Lancelot's hand in mine, lacing our fingers together. His eyes widened in surprise, but he didn't pull away. "Dance with me," I said, less a request and more a gentle command.

For a moment, he hesitated, his gaze darting around the crowded courtyard as if searching for a reason to refuse. Then, to my shock, he nodded. "As my queen commands," he murmured, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Hand in hand, we stepped into the swirling throng of dancers. Lancelot's arm slid around my waist, drawing me close until our bodies were flush, moving as one to the hypnotic rhythm. The heat of him seeped into my skin, chasing away the lingering chill of my encounter with Keir.

As we danced, the world around us seemed to fade away until there was nothing but the music, the warmth of Lancelot's body against mine, and the steady thrum of magic in the air. The melody was haunting and ethereal, and even a bit sensual.

My breath caught in my throat as his hand slid from my waist to the small of my back, his fingers splaying wide across the bare skin exposed by the backless dress. His touch burned like a brand, igniting a fire in my veins that had nothing to do with the magic coursing through me.

"You frustrate me," he murmured, his breath whispering against the shell of my ear.

I tilted my head back to meet his gaze. "And why is that, Sir Lancelot? Do tell."

He was so fucking handsome it almost hurt to look at him. "Because you make me feel things I thought I'd buried. Things I swore I'd never allow myself to feel again."

We turned in a slow circle, our bodies moving in perfect sync to the sensual swell of the music. The air between us crackled with tension.

"And what things might those be?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Lancelot's hand tightened on my waist, his fingers digging into my skin through the thin fabric of my dress. "Desire," he growled, his voice rough with barely restrained need. "Longing. A hunger that fucking consumes me."

I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry. The raw honesty in his words, the vulnerability beneath the fierce exterior, made my heart ache.

"I don't believe in love," he continued, his gaze never leaving mine as we swayed together, our bodies brushing with each movement, sparking energy across my skin. "It terrifies me."

The confession hung between us, raw and honest, stripped bare of all pretense. I felt the rapid thrum of his heartbeat where our chests pressed together, and saw the war raging behind his eyes. Fear grappling with longing, the desperate need to maintain control.

"Why does it terrify you?" I asked softly, my fingers toying with the silken strands of hair at the nape of his neck.

Lancelot exhaled shakily, his breath warm against my cheek. "Because I don't know if I'm strong enough to survive losing myself in you. Losing myself to this...this madness. Because that's what it feels like, Arthur. When I saw Keir's hands on you, it took every ounce of my willpower not to crush him into fucking dust. Just watching the way he smiled at you made me sick. I've never felt so possessive over a female in my life."

Gently, I cupped his face in my hands, my thumbs brushing over the high planes of his cheekbones. His skin was warm and smooth, as if he'd shaved the stubble earlier in the night. "Lancelot," I murmured, my voice soft. "Give yourself time. I'm not asking for you to love me. Not yet. Not if you're not ready for that step. But I would like to explore this...thing between us."

His grip tightened, his strong arms enveloping me as he drew me impossibly closer. Our bodies molded together, fitting perfectly. Around us, the dance floor had transformed into a sea of swirling silks and shimmering wings. Laughter and music mingled with the heady scent of sex and magic.

But at that moment, the rest of the world fell away. There was only Lancelot, his golden eyes burning into mine with an intensity so raw that it stole my breath. Slowly, reverently, he raised a hand to brush a stray curl from my cheek, his calloused fingers lingering against my skin.

"Arthur," he whispered, my name falling from his lips like a prayer. "I'm going to kiss you now."

The kiss was rough, demanding, a clashing of teeth and tongues that sent sparks of desire racing down my spine. Lancelot's hands gripped my waist, his fingers digging into my skin as he pulled me flush against the hard planes of his body.

A broken moan escaped me as his tongue delved into my mouth, tasting, exploring, devouring. Everything faded away until there was nothing but the heat of his touch, the drugging slide of his lips against mine, the intoxicating scent of his skin.

One of his hands slid up my back to tangle in my hair, his fingers twisting in the curls as he angled my head to deepen the kiss. I clung to him, my nails raking down the powerful expanse of his back, feeling the muscles ripple beneath my touch.

Suddenly, with a great whoosh of air, Lancelot's wings unfurled from his back, stretching out to their full, magnificent span. The golden hooks at the top glinted menacingly in the lantern light.

Lancelot's wings beat powerfully, stirring up a gust of wind that sent my hair whipping around my face. He broke the kiss, his eyes glowing. "Hold on tight."

I barely had time to wrap my arms around his neck before he launched us into the air with a mighty thrust of his wings. I gasped, my stomach swooping as we soared higher and higher, the ground falling away beneath us.

We hovered for a moment, suspended high above the Seelie Court. From this vantage point, the revelry below looked like a scene from a faerietale. The towering trees with their luminescent leaves stretched out in every direction, their branches adorned with glowing lanterns that winked and shimmered like captured stars.

Bonfires dotted the landscape for miles and miles, their flames flickering in mesmerizing shades of blue, green, and violet. Sparks drifted lazily upwards, mingling with the fireflies that danced through the balmy twilight air. The drumbeat pulsed through the earth like a heartbeat, the haunting melodies of the faerie musicians intertwining with peals of laughter and moans of pleasure.

I couldn't help the breathless laugh that bubbled up from my chest as I clung to Lancelot, my body pressed tightly against his.

With a powerful beat of his wings, he propelled us through the sky. The wind rushed past my ears as we soared over the forest below. I tightened my grip around his neck, marveling at the strength and grace with which he navigated the air currents.

The landscape shifted and changed beneath us. The towering trees gave way to rolling hills blanketed in a carpet of wildflowers that shimmered lavender. Sparkling streams cut through the lush valleys.

I happened to glance over his shoulder, and my eyes widened as I spotted several familiar figures following closely behind us, their wings propelling them through the sky like massive birds.

Lancelot chuckled, feeling my body stiffen, hearing my sharp intake of breath. "You didn't think they'd let you out of their sight, did you?" I couldn't help the laugh that spilled out of me. I should have expected the others to follow.

In the distance, I spotted a lone structure rising from the crest of a hill, its weathered stone walls covered in a latticework of ivy and flowering vines. As we drew closer, I realized it was an ancient watchtower, its once-proud turrets now crumbling with age and neglect.

Lancelot angled his wings, bringing us in for a gentle landing atop the tower's flat

roof. As my feet touched the moss-covered stone, I exhaled a heavy breath. The world felt different up here, secluded and private.

"What is this place?" I asked, spinning in a circle, my dress fluttering around me.

Lancelot's wings folded gracefully behind him before vanishing just as the others were landing beside us, their bare feet silent.

Lancelot's eyes took on a distant, almost wistful quality as he gazed out over the hills. "This was once a watchtower, used during the old wars. Whenever the enemy was near, the sentinels would light a signal fire, alerting the camps to raise their defenses."

He ran his hand along the weathered stone parapet, his fingers tracing the ancient grooves and cracks. "It's been centuries since it was last in use. There's been a tentative truce between the two courts ever since Excalibur was taken to Albion."

I stepped closer to him, my hand coming to rest beside his on the cool stone. The tower may have been old and crumbling, but there was a certain wild beauty to it, a sense of timelessness.

"Let's go inside," I said, my voice soft in the stillness of the night. "I want to see what's become of it after all these years."

He nodded, as he led the way towards a narrow archway near the far edge of the tower, with a dark staircase that led down into the structure. The others followed close behind, their presence a comforting warmth at my back.

As we descended the narrow, winding staircase, the air grew thick with the heady scent of damp earth and blooming flowers. The weathered stone steps were slick with moss, drooping with the indentations of thousands of feet that had stomped up and down over the years.

At the bottom of the stairs, we emerged into a large, circular room that had once served as the tower's main hall. But now, nature had reclaimed the space, transforming it into a wild, enchanted grotto.

Alush tapestry of ivy and flowering vines almost entirely obscured the crumbling stone walls. Delicate blossoms in shades of white, lavender, and pale blue peeked out from between the glossy green leaves, their petals shimmering with droplets of evening dew.

The floor was a plush carpet of emerald moss, soft and springy beneath my bare feet. Tiny wildflowers in vibrant hues of yellow, pink, and violet dotted the velvety expanse, their faces turned up towards the gentle light that filtered in through the cracks in the domed ceiling.

In the center of the room, where I imagine a great strategy table would have once stood, now grew a small, but beautiful tree, still in its fledgeling stages. The others moved to join us, their steps nearly silent on the plush carpet of moss. Galahad carried a bottle of faerie wine, the dark liquid sloshing gently in the cut-crystal decanter.

Galahad grinned as he uncorked the bottle with a flourish. "A vintage from Queen Titania's private reserve." He took a deep swig before passing the bottle to Percival, who followed suit with a satisfied groan.

"Stealing from the queen, Gal? How delightfully wicked of you." Percy's dark eyes were glossed over with drink, and for once, a lazy smile played on his lips. It was the most at ease I'd ever seen the dark fae.

I accepted the bottle from Percy, the crystal cool and smooth against my palm. I took a long pull, savoring the rich, complex flavors that burst across my tongue—ripe summer berries and a hint of something smoky.

Tristan conjured several softly glowing orbs of silver light that hovered in the air around us, casting the grotto in an ethereal shimmer. The play of light and shadow across the stone walls was mesmerizing, the vines seeming to dance and sway.

As I passed the bottle to Tristan, a sudden burst of shimmering golden light filled the grotto, causing the delicate blossoms to tremble and the hovering orbs to flicker. Merlin stepped out of the swirling golden mists. He caught the flying bottle of corked wine that Tristan tossed, and with a roguish grin, he sauntered towards us, his movements fluid and graceful as a panther.

"Starting the party without me?" Merlin quipped, his voice a low, seductive purr. "I'm wounded, Wart."

I glanced between Merlin and Tristan, narrowing my eyes at the seer. "You saw him coming, didn't you?"

Tristan smiled lazily and shrugged. "Perhaps."

Merlin took a deep pull from the bottle before passing it on, his eyes scanning my body, catching on the bare thigh peeking out from the obscene slit in my dress. "Can you blame me for not wanting to miss out on all the fun?"

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't stop the grin that tugged at my lips. "And what makes you think there's any fun to be had?"

Merlin's smile turned wicked, his gaze hot and heavy as it raked over me. "Oh, I don't know. A beautiful, powerful woman...six deadly, devastatingly handsome males who worship at her feet...hidden away in a grotto where no one will find us. I'd say the possibilities are endless, wouldn't you?"

"Worship, hm?" I tilted my head to the side. "Careful, Merlin. That sounds

dangerously close to a promise and a challenge."

Gawain leaned back on his elbows as he fixed me with a heated gaze. "I think we all know who could make our queen scream the loudest."

"Is that so, Gawain? Because I seem to recall having Arthur writhing beneath me not too long ago, begging for more," Percy said smugly.

My cheeks flushed hot at the memory, a thrill of desire zinging down my spine. The wine had lowered my inhibitions, and the simmering tension between the six males was like an aphrodisiac, making my blood sing with need.

Galahad leaned forward, his eyes glinting with mischief. "Ah, but making a woman scream is about more than just brute strength and stamina. It takes finesse, skill...the ability to play her body like an instrument until she's singing your name to the heavens."

Tristan hummed thoughtfully, his gaze distant, as if seeing something beyond the here and now. He leaned against the stone wall, idly twirling an icy lock of hair around his finger. "I could have her shattering with pleasure without even laying a hand on her. The mind is the most powerful erogenous zone, after all."

Lancelot scoffed. "Pretty words and parlor tricks are all well and good, but when it comes down to it, a woman wants to be thoroughly, utterly claimed. Possessed. Taken to the very limits of her endurance until she's hoarse from screaming."

My eyes bounced rapidly between each man in the room. I was suddenly very aware of every part of my body, and the amount of skin that was exposed to their wandering eyes. A fluttering heat built up inside of me.

"You're all talk," Merlin said, his voice a low, sensual purr. "But let's see who can

actually back it up. I propose a little wager."

I swallowed hard, my pulse quickening as six pairs of heated eyes turned to me, glittering with challenge and anticipation. The air was thick with the heady scent of arousal and magic; the tension crackling like a living thing.

Merlin stood, his movements fluid and predatory. He circled me slowly, his fingers trailing lightly over my bare shoulders, down the exposed line of my spine. I shivered, goosebumps erupting in the wake of his touch.

"The rules are simple," he murmured. "We each get a turn to pleasure our queen, using whatever methods we deem fit. And Arthur decides who made her come the hardest, the most intensely...who wrung the most exquisite ecstasy from her beautiful body."

My body went weak, a gush of wetness flooding my core. I could barely think straight through the haze. The prospect of being the center of attention, the object of desire for these six incredible males, made my head spin.

Galahad groaned, his fists curling tightly. "I'm in. This is going to be fun."

"Agreed," Percival rumbled, shadows dancing across his bare chest. "I've been craving another taste for days."

Lancelot stood, rolling his powerful shoulders. "I feel sorry for you poor saps. None of you stand a fucking chance."

Tristan's silver gaze met mine, ancient and knowing. "There's no shame in backing out, Arthur. This is for your pleasure, after all."

I wet my lips, pulse hammering in my throat. My skin felt too tight, feverish with

anticipation. "I would be an idiot to put a stop to this."

Gawain flashed me a roguish wink. "I do love a woman who knows what she wants."

Merlin stepped forward, his eyes glowing an ethereal blue. With a wave of his hand, a large, plush bed appeared in the center of the grotto. It was draped in silks of burgundy and gold, piled high with downy pillows. It was the largest bed I've ever seen, large enough to fit ten people or more.

I stood on shaky legs, my heart thundering in my chest as I made my way towards the enormous bed. The plush carpet of emerald moss was soft and springy beneath my bare feet, tiny wildflowers brushing against my ankles with each step.

As I reached the edge of the bed, I turned to face my knights and my sorcerer. They stood in a loose semicircle, their eyes hot and heavy on my body, tracking my every movement with predatory intensity. The air was alive with anticipation, crackling with the primal energy that flowed between us.

I reached for the delicate straps of my dress, my heart pounding like a war drum in my chest. Slowly, teasingly, I slid them down my shoulders, baring inch after tantalizing inch of naked skin. The fabric whispered over my curves, catching briefly on my hardened nipples before fluttering to the ground in a pool of liquid gold at my feet.

A chorus of ragged curses and sharp inhales echoed through the grotto as I stood before them, clad only in the shimmering runes painted across my skin. Their eyes flashed with raw, primal hunger, the power thrumming through their veins making the air hum and crackle with barely restrained energy.

I felt utterly exposed, my every imperfection laid bare to their intense scrutiny. But there was something thrilling about it too, something empowering in the way their

gazes devoured me, hot and reverent. The bulges straining against their trousers, evidence of their fierce arousal, were impossible to miss, and it made my core clench with answering need.

Tristan stepped forward first, his eyes glowing and wild. He moved with a fluid grace, his lithe muscles rippling beneath his midnight skin as he stalked towards me.

"Lie back," he purred. "Let me worship you with my mind, before the others have their turn."

I complied, sinking back onto the plush silken bedding. The fabric was cool and smooth against my heated skin. Tristan crawled over me, his gaze locked with mine as he raised a hand to hover just above my skin. He didn't touch me, but I noticed the whisper of his power, the thrum of magic that danced between us.

He was so much larger than I realized. There was something beautiful about Tristan. His features were delicate and handsome, but his body was corded with lithe muscle.

"Close your eyes," he said softly.

I let my eyes drift shut, my breath coming in shallow pants as I waited for Tristan's touch. But it never came. Instead, I gasped as a wave of pure, concentrated pleasure crashed over me, igniting every nerve ending in my body. It was like liquid ecstasy pouring through my veins, setting me alight from the inside out.

Images filled my mind, vivid and all-consuming. Tristan's hands roaming over my body, mapping every curve and hollow with worshipful reverence. His mouth was hot and urgent against my skin, trailing scorching kisses down the column of my throat, the valley between my breasts. His tongue swirling around my aching nipples, teasing the sensitive buds until I was arching off the bed, a broken moan spilling from my lips.

Lower and lower he went, his phantom touch setting me on fire. When his mouth finally reached the apex of my thighs, I cried out, my hips bucking off the bed as he laved my aching pussy with long, slow strokes of his tongue. He delved deep, thrusting into my dripping heat. Pleasure coiled tighter and tighter in my belly, my thighs quaking, toes curling into the silken sheets.

Just when I thought I couldn't take any more, Tristan sucked my clit into his mouth. The real Tristan. Flesh and blood fae male. Not the version of him trapped inside my mind. My eyes flew open as he rose to his knees, his lips wet and glistening.

I was panting as he freed his cock from his pants, and a small moan escaped my lips as I noticed that there were shimmering silver runes on the long, thick shaft too.

He gripped the base, stroking slowly as he held my gaze, his silver eyes molten with desire. "I'm going to fuck you now, my queen," he said, his voice low and rough with need.

I could only whimper in response, my body trembling as he positioned himself at my entrance. The thick head of his cock nudged against my wetness, teasing, tormenting. I was so wet for him already, aching to be filled.

With a powerful thrust of his hips, Tristan buried himself to the hilt inside me. I cried out, my back arching off the bed as he stretched and filled me so exquisitely. He was big, the silver runes adding a delicious texture as he withdrew almost completely before slamming back in. The magic running through the swirls tingled against my clit.

"Fuck, you feel incredible," Tristan groaned, his fingers digging into my hips as he set a hard, deep rhythm. "I've imagined you under me a thousand times..."

The others circled the bed like predators stalking their prey, their eyes glowing with

primal hunger as they watched Tristan take me.

I dug my nails into his biceps, loving the feel of his muscles tightening under my grip, my heels locking around his waist as I urged him on. "Harder," I gasped out, my voice ragged. "Fuck me harder, Tristan."

He growled low in his throat, a sound of pure male satisfaction. Shifting his grip, he hooked my knees over his elbows, spreading me wider, opening me fully. The new angle allowed him to penetrate even deeper.

Around us, the others watched with rapt intensity, their chests heaving, eyes glowing with barely leashed hunger. Gawain stroked himself through his trousers; all traces of jokes and teasing aside. He was wild now.

Galahad had a white-knuckled grip on the bedpost, as if physically restraining himself from joining in. Lancelot's molten gaze seared into me, his tongue flicking out to wet his lips. Percival was a looming shadow, still and silent, but I noticed the dark shadows writhing all around us.

Merlin watched from the corner of the bed, his blue eyes drinking in the sight of Tristan's cock slamming into me. To my relief, there wasn't an ounce of rage in his eyes, only feral need.

"That's it," Tristan rasped, his voice strained with the effort of holding back his own release. "Come on my cock, my queen. Let me feel you."

His fingers dipped between our sweat-slicked bodies to find my clit, rubbing tight, focused circles around my swollen nub. I keened, my inner walls starting to flutter and clench around cock.

"Tristan!" I cried out, my nails scoring down his back as the coil in my belly wound

too tight. "I'm-I'm going to?—"

"Yes," he hissed, his eyes wild and feverish with need. "Now!"

His command was my undoing. With a high, sharp cry, I shattered, my orgasm crashing over me in wave after wave of mind-melting bliss. A faint ringing began in my ears, my body convulsing as Tristan fucked me through the aftershocks. I was dimly aware of his broken groan, the hot splash of his release painting my belly and breasts as he pulled free.

Tristan's weight lifted off of me, leaving me feeling empty and aching for more. I was still trembling, my skin slick with sweat and tingling with residual pleasure. But I barely had a moment to catch my breath before another set of hands was on me.

Galahad gripped my hips, pulling me up onto my hands and knees with effortless strength. The silk sheets were soft against my palms as I braced myself, anticipation coiling tight in my belly.

"My turn," he growled, his voice low like the growl of a beast. "I've been dying to taste you for days. Dreaming about what you'd feel like around my cock."

A moan fell from my lips as Galahad moved to position himself behind me, his mouth tracing the length of my spine, his tongue and teeth mapping every ridge and hollow. He nipped and suckled at my sensitive skin, leaving a trail of blooming marks behind.

I felt the head of his cock nudge at my entrance, and it was all I could do to keep from slamming myself backwards onto him. I'd never felt this insatiable before, but my body was on fire, screaming for more, more, more.

"I want you to suck Lancelot while I fuck you," Galahad gritted through clenched

teeth.

I sucked in a sharp breath, looking up and locking eyes with the golden-haired knight. His eyes were dark and feral with hunger as he stepped forward, slowly pulling himself free. My eyes went wide as I took in the size of him. He was thick and smooth, the swollen head glistening with wetness. My mouth watered, needing to taste him.

Galahad gathered my thick hair into his fist and gave it a tug that had me whimpering. His cock sank into me, but not all the way. "I want you choking on him, while I take your cunt, my queen."

I obediently opened my mouth, letting Lancelot slide his hard length between my lips. A groan rumbled in his chest as I took him deep, my tongue swirling around his shaft. Galahad's grip on my hair tightened as he started thrusting into me from behind, his thickness stretching me deliciously.

Each powerful snap of Galahad's hips drove Lance further down my throat until I was indeed choking on him, just as Galahad wanted. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes from the strain, but I loved every second of it. I was lost to pure sensation, impaled at both ends by my fae knights.

"Such a pretty little faerie," Lancelot said as he petted my hair.

I moaned around him, and the vibrations made him shudder and curse. His fingers dug into my hair as he guided my movements, fucking my face with increasing urgency. He throbbed against my tongue and I knew he wouldn't last long.

At the same time, Galahad's thrusts grew more erratic, his breathing ragged as his climax approached. "Fuck, I'm going to fill this sweet cunt," he panted.

I felt my peak building deep inside me, coiling tighter with each rough thrust. Lancelot pulsed heavily against my tongue as I hollowed my cheeks and sucked him greedily. With a guttural groan, he spilled himself down my throat, his hot cum flooding my mouth. I swallowed it down eagerly, loving the taste of salt and sweat on my tongue.

Galahad's fingers dug into my hips as he chased his own release, pounding into my aching core. "I'm going to fucking worship you forever..."

His words sent me careening over the edge. My inner walls clamped down on him as I came with a muffled cry, still licking Lance's cock clean. Galahad buried himself to the hilt one final time, a harsh groan leaving his lips as he emptied himself inside me. His body was shaking against mine, trembling with absolute pleasure.

They both withdrew slowly, leaving me empty and dripping. I was a debauched mess, my hair mussed and my skin flushed. But I had never felt more powerful or desired. Gawain's gaze raked over my body, taking in the mess his brothers made of me. He glanced at Percy, and the two shared a look of pure wickedness.

"Think you can handle more?" Percy asked, his voice a low, near growl. "We can stop if you need to."

A breathless laugh burst out of me, my body still thrumming with residual pleasure. I fixed Gawain with a challenging stare as I fell back and spread my thighs, leaning on my elbows for support. "If you two don't fuck me now, I'm going to scream."

What was wrong with me? I'd never taken this much in a single night. Not even close. There'd been one drunken night years ago when I'd fallen into bed with two men traveling through Camelot. But this was something different. I felt...strong. For the first time since this quest started, I felt like a fae woman. My muscles were awake and buzzing, and my blood sang with need. A fire raged through me, screaming at me

to claim my knights.

Slowly, teasingly, Gawain pulled his cock free from the confines of his trousers. My mouth went dry at the sight of him, long, thick, and beautifully decorated with swirling patterns of icy blue runes. The head was flushed a deep red, glistening with drops of wetness.

Gawain nodded at Percival, who strode around to my right. Galahad moved out of his way as he slid in behind me, lifting me with incredible ease, as if I weighed nothing. Gawain crawled up onto the bed, settling himself between my spread thighs.

Percival's strong arms wrapped around my torso from behind, pulling me flush against his muscular chest. I could feel the heat of his skin, the thrum of power emanating from the runes painted across his flesh. His cock, hard and insistent, pressed against the cleft of my ass as he nuzzled into the crook of my neck, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin.

"We're going to take your pretty cunt together. Our brothers made sure you're ready for us."

Percival shifted beneath me, his powerful body stretching out along the silk sheets. I settled atop him, straddling his hips as his thick length nestled against me. A broken moan fell from my lips at the delicious friction, my hips rocking instinctively to coat him in my wetness.

"That's it," he purred, his large hands gripping my waist, guiding my movements. "Such a good little faerie..."

Suddenly, tendrils of shadows surrounded us like tentacles of the night. Two of them wrapped around my thighs and ankles, holding me utterly immovable. I was completely at their mercy, and salivating for more.

Slowly, reverently, Gawain ran his hands up the backs of my thighs, over the swell of my ass, leaving trails of icy sensation in his wake. I shivered, my skin pebbling with goosebumps despite the fever raging in my blood.

Gawain gripped the base of his cock, positioning the thick head at my dripping entrance. He teased me with shallow thrusts, barely breaching me before pulling back out. I whimpered, trying to rock my hips to take him deeper, but Percival's shadows held me firmly in place.

"Please—" I panted, my voice ragged with need. I'd never sounded so desperate in my life.

Gawain's eyes flashed with primal hunger as he surged forward, burying himself to the hilt in one smooth, powerful stroke. At the same time, Percival lifted my hips, and with a slow, steady pressure, he pushed inside.

I threw my head back, a guttural moan tearing from my throat as they filled me so completely. The burn of the stretch morphed into exquisite pleasure. They stilled for a moment, letting me adjust to the intense sensation of being so utterly claimed.

Gawain leaned down, capturing my lips in a searing kiss as he began to move. Long, deep strokes had my eyes flutter shut. The runes etched into his shaft created delicious friction against my inner walls as they tingled with magic. Percival matched his rhythm, his hips rolling languidly as he savored every inch.

They fucked me with a leisurely, sensual rhythm, their cocks sliding against each other inside my tight heat. Gawain's hands roamed my body, trailing icy patterns across my flushed skin as he rolled his hips, stroking deep. Percival's shadows caressed my thighs and my breasts. The dark tendrils of sensation that had me shivering and moaning.

"You take us so well," Gawain purred, his voice rough with pleasure. "Your pretty cunt is so tight, so perfect."

I could only whimper in response, my body singing with ecstasy as they moved within me. The obscene, wet sounds of their cocks pumping into my dripping core filled the grotto, mingling with our ragged breaths and bitten off groans.

Percival's teeth scraped along the column of my throat, his tongue laving the reddened skin. "Our beautiful faerie queen," he rumbled, punctuating his words with a particularly deep thrust that had me seeing stars. "You were made for this, made to be worshipped."

I arched into their touch, my head falling back against Percival's shoulder as Gawain leaned down to capture one of my nipples between his lips. He suckled the hardened peak, grazing it with his teeth before soothing the sting with his tongue. Pleasure sparked through me, my inner walls fluttering around them.

My world narrowed down to pure sensation. Through the haze of pleasure, I looked up to see Merlin standing at the edge of the bed, his hand wrapped around his thick length as he stroked himself slowly. His blue eyes were molten with desire, the runes on his skin pulsing with an otherworldly light.

I whimpered, my body clenching around Gawain and Percival. They groaned in unison, their thrusts growing more urgent, more demanding. Gawain's fingers dug into my hips as he slammed into me.

Percival's shadows tightened their grip, holding me open, exposing me completely to their onslaught. One tendril snaked between my legs, circling my aching clit with maddening pressure. I cried out, my back arching as the coil in my belly pulled taut.

Merlin's strokes grew faster. Gawain cursed long and low, his body going rigid as my

pulsing heat pushed him over the edge. I felt the hot spurts of his cum dripping down my pussy. He buried his face in the crook of my neck, muffling his groans against my sweat-dampened skin.

Percival followed soon after, a harsh, guttural sound ripping from his chest as his hips snapped forward one final time.

Sparks danced behind my eyelids, the runes on my skin flaring to life with a brilliant golden glow. The air crackled with energy, the very earth seeming to tremble beneath us as my magic swelled and surged. Merlin's low groan drew my attention, and I watched through heavy-lidded eyes as he came with a broken curse.

Chapter Twenty-Five

ARTHUR

Never in my life have I been so utterly sated.

I drifted in and out of consciousness, my body languid and exhausted in the most delicious way possible. The silk sheets were cool against my heated skin, the plush mattress cradling my aching muscles.

Around me, my knights and sorcerer lounged in various states of undress, their skin glistening with the sheen of sweat. Galahad lay stretched out beside me, his fingers idly tracing patterns on my stomach. I loved looking at him. His body was a work of art. He wasn't overly hard and muscular, but he was powerful, thick, and massive. I'd never felt so safe as I did in his arms.

Tristan sat at the edge of the bed, his silver hair mussed and his eyes half-lidded with satisfaction. Lancelot leaned against one of the crumbling stone walls as he watched me with a strange, contemplative look that I couldn't decipher. Gawain and Percival were sprawled on the soft, mossy floor, passing the nearly empty bottle of faerie wine back and forth.

Merlin stood by the arched window, the twilight filtering in and casting his face in a glow. As if sensing my gaze, he turned to me, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "As much as I'd love to just stay here forever, we should probably head back to the palace. The celebration will be winding down soon, and we wouldn't want to cause a panic."

I moved, stretching languidly as I made my way to where my dress lay pooled on the floor. But before I could reach for it, Merlin intercepted me. "Allow me," he purred, his fingers dancing through the air.

Tendrils of golden magic swirled around me. In the blink of an eye, I was fully dressed in my gown, and my body felt fresh and clean, not even the slightest hint of what we'd just done left on my skin.

With a wave of his hand, Merlin conjured a shimmering portal that swirled with golden light. It pulsed and hummed with magic, cutting the room in half. On the other side, I could barely make out a long corridor. I gaped at him, then narrowed my eyes. "You've been able to portal this entire time, and we've been on horseback instead?"

Merlin shook his head. "We're not allowed to portal you or fly you to your next trial. I thought we'd established that when your knights decided to show off their fancy wings?"

I grumbled, not wanting to admit he was right. But it did explain how he'd been appearing in random places. I never questioned him before, but knowing how deep his level of training had to be to conjure portals was staggering. Sometimes I felt like there was still so much I didn't know about my best friend.

One by one, the knights stepped through, their wings unfurling as they disappeared into the luminous vortex. I took a deep breath, glancing back at the enchanted grotto one last time. The delicate blossoms seemed to glow in the twilight, the silvery orbs of light casting an ethereal shimmer across the moss-covered stones. It was a place out of a dream, and I knew someday I'd come back here.

Merlin's hand found the small of my back, gently guiding me towards the portal. Together, we stepped into the swirling light, the world around us dissolving into a kaleidoscope of color and magic.

We emerged from the portal into a secluded alcove just off the main palace courtyard. The air was still thick with the heady scent of magic and revelry, but the wild energy from earlier had settled into a more languid, dreamlike haze.

Merlin's hand remained a comforting presence at the small of my back as my knights fell into formation around us, their wings tucking away seamlessly until they once again resembled the knights of the round table again. Only the faint sheen of sweat on their skin and the satisfied glint in their eyes hinted at what they'd just done to me.

Galahad was the first to step forward as we reached my door, a roguish smile playing at his lips as he lifted my hand to his mouth. His kiss was feather-light against my knuckles, but it sent a shiver racing down my spine, nonetheless. "Until tomorrow, beautiful faerie."

One by one, my knights bid me goodnight before heading off to their own rooms. Percival's shadows caressed my skin, his dark eyes smoldering. Gawain's fingers trailed icy patterns down my spine as he pressed a kiss to my cheek. Tristan placed a gentle kiss on my forehead, and Merlin simply winked.

Finally, only Lancelot remained. Impulsively, I reached out and took his hand in mine, marveling at the contrast of my pale, unblemished skin against his battle-worn palm. His fingers tightened around mine instinctively, and the thrum of barely contained power emanated from his touch.

"Stay with me tonight," I whispered, my voice barely audible over the distant strains of faerie music. "I don't want to be alone."

His eyes widened fractionally, a flicker of surprise and something deeper, more vulnerable, flashing across his face. Then, his shoulders relaxed, the tension bleeding out of his powerful frame as he gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

We slipped into my chambers, the heavy oak door swinging shut behind us with a soft click. Silently, reverently, Lancelot's hands found the delicate laces that held the straps of my dress together. With deft, practiced movements, he loosened the ties, his fingertips grazing the bare skin of my shoulders. The gauzy fabric whispered over my skin as it pooled at my feet.

He undressed too, and we made our way to the bed. Not as large as the one in the grotto, but had plenty of room for the two of us. We slipped beneath the cool silken sheets, and immediately, Lancelot pulled me towards him.

He rolled on top of me, his strong, muscular body settling between my parted thighs. The heat of his skin seeped into mine, igniting a slow-burning fire deep in my core. His golden hair fell around his face like a halo, the soft strands brushing against my cheeks as he leaned down.

Slowly, reverently, he captured my lips in a deep, sensual kiss. It was different from the frenzied, passionate kisses we'd shared earlier. This was languid, exploratory, as if we had all the time in the world. His tongue traced the seam of my lips, tasting, teasing, before delving inside to dance with mine.

I melted into him, my fingers threading through his silken hair, nails scraping lightly against his scalp. Lancelot groaned into my mouth. His hand skimmed down my side, calluses rasping deliciously against my sensitive skin.

Lancelot settled more firmly between my thighs, his hardening length nestling against my wetness. He rocked gently against me, coating himself in my arousal. My head fell back against the pillows, a breathy moan escaping my kiss-swollen lips.

His mouth trailed down the column of my throat, letting his teeth scrape against my racing pulse before soothing the sting with his tongue. He braced himself on one powerful forearm. The muscles flexed and rippled as he reached between our bodies

to grasp his cock. The broad head nudged against my entrance, hot and insistent, sending sparks of anticipation skittering along my nerve endings.

Slowly, inch by tortuous inch, he pushed forward. I could feel every ridge and vein of his thick length as he sank deeper, stretching me, filling me so completely that I saw stars.

Lancelot stilled, his forehead pressing against mine as we both adjusted to the exquisite sensation. His breath mingled with mine, warm and ragged, his heart thundering against my chest in perfect sync with my own racing pulse.

Then Lancelot kissed me slowly as he began to move. He took his time, savoring every ounce of pleasure. His lips moved with a tender reverence that had tears pricking my eyes. He kissed me deeply, thoroughly, as if trying to force all of his need into that single point of connection. I clung to him, my fingers digging into the corded muscles of his back, feeling them flex and ripple beneath my touch with every roll of his hips.

Lancelot's hand skimmed up my side, calluses igniting sparks of sensation in its wake. He cupped my breast, kneading the soft flesh before rolling the pebbled nipple between his fingers. I arched into his touch with a breathy moan, my nails raking down his spine as pleasure jolted through me like lightning.

He tore his mouth away from mine, trailing scorching kisses along the column of my throat, to the sharp edge of my collarbone. His tongue laved at the hollow at the base of my neck before dipping lower to swirl around the rosy peak of my breast.

His mouth closed around my nipple, suckling hard as his hips snapped forward, driving his cock deeper into my aching core. I cried out, my back bowing off the bed as pleasure seared through my veins like molten fire. He lavished attention on my breasts, licking, nipping, suckling, until I was writhing beneath him, incoherent with

need.

"Lance," I gasped, my voice ragged and desperate. "Please..."

He lifted his head, his golden eyes molten with desire as they locked onto mine. With a fluid grace and strength, he spread me wider, pinning my knees, opening me fully to him. The new angle allowed him to sink even deeper, hitting that spot inside me that made my thighs tremble.

Lancelot's thrusts grew harder, faster, and more demanding. The bed frame creaked in protest as the headboard slammed against the stone wall with every powerful snap of his hips.

I could feel my climax building, coiling tighter and tighter in my core like a spring wound to the point of breaking. Lancelot's hand snaked between our sweat-slicked bodies until his fingers found my clit. He rubbed tight, focused circles around the swollen nub.

"Come for me," he growled, his voice rough and strained with the effort of holding back his own climax. "I want to feel you shatter around me, Arthur."

With a sharp cry, I came undone. Ecstasy ripped through me. Wave after wave of intense, mind-numbing pleasure crashed over me, stealing my breath and robbing me of all rational thought. The world fell away until there was nothing but Lancelot—his body surging into mine, his skin sliding against my own, his harsh breaths mingling with my broken moans.

I felt his rhythm falter, his thrusts growing erratic and desperate. His fingers dug into my hips hard enough to bruise as he chased his own end. With a guttural groan, he buried himself to the hilt one final time, his body going rigid above me as he spilled himself deep inside me, cursing as he moaned.

We lay there for a long moment, our chests heaving, hearts pounding in sync as we drifted down from the dizzying heights of pleasure. Lancelot's arms tightened around me, cradling me close as he rolled onto his side, pulling me with him.

I tucked my head under his chin, my cheek resting against the solid wall of his chest. The steady thrum of his heartbeat was a soothing lullaby.

The room was quiet except for our slowing breaths and the distant melodies of faerie music floating on the breeze. The gossamer curtains drifted lazily on the balmy air, like delicate wisps of mist.

My fingers followed the swirling paths of the runes painted on his golden skin, tracing idle patterns on Lancelot's chest. His hand came up to cup my cheek, tilting my face up to meet his gaze.

"I think I might have been wrong," he murmured, his voice low and rough. My breath caught and my heart lurched, and a slow, sated smile stretched his lips. "I was wrong about so many things."

Chapter Twenty-Six

MORDRED

I crept through the shadows of the temple in the heart of Camelot, my footsteps silent on the ancient flagstones. The air was thick with the scent of incense and the whispered prayers of the faithful. Moonlight filtered through the high, arched windows, casting a blue glow over the towering statues of long dead gods that lined the walls.

There, kneeling before the altar, was Uther Pendragon. The mighty king, the man I once called father, looked small and vulnerable in this sacred space. His head was bowed, his hands clasped in fervent prayer, wearing white robes of worship.

It was so easy to don the robes of a priestess and slip through his guard unnoticed. With the knights of the round table off on their quest, Uther was more vulnerable than ever. For just a moment, I pitied the old fool.

Until the scars on my hand throbbed, a visceral reminder of all he had taken from me. My resolve hardened, cold as the steel of the dagger I drew from the folds of my robes.

I glided forward like a wraith cloaked in shadows. The dagger glinted in the moonlight as I raised it high. Uther tensed, sensing my presence too late. He turned, his eyes widening in shock as they met mine.

"Mordred," he breathed, his voice echoing in the cavernous temple. "Wha-what are

you doing here?"

A cruel smile curved my lips. The same cruel smile Uther had the day he banished me. "Taking back what you stole from me. And just know that after you're gone, your precious faerie whore's daughter will never be safe. I'll hunt her down like the fucking dog she is. Then, the throne will be mine."

My hand was steady as I plunged the dagger into Uther's chest. His eyes bulged in shock, a choked gasp escaping his lips as the blade pierced his heart. Crimson bloomed across his white robes, so beautifully stark and vivid in the moonlight.

I watched dispassionately as the life faded from his eyes, his body crumpling to the cold stone floor. The mighty Uther Pendragon ended in the most human way possible by the daughter he once cast aside. Poetic justice, some might say.

I knelt beside his cooling corpse, my fingers trailing through the spreading pool of blood. Power thrummed through my veins, and it was intoxicating. With Uther dead, Camelot was ripe for the taking. The knights of the round table were gone, and there was nothing stopping me.

But I needed the sword.

I needed the Grail.

Closing my eyes, I groaned. There was always one more fucking step. But the immortality that cup would give me would secure my spot on the throne for eons.

I reached deep within myself, tapping into the well of magic that coursed through my blood. The dark magic I'd taught myself since Gaius never saw me as a worthy pupil. Not like Merlin. The air around me shimmered and rippled, my form blurring and shifting.

In a burst of shadows and feathers, I transformed into a murder of midnight crows. I ascended towards the vaulted ceiling, my wings beating in perfect unison. Through a high window I flew out into the chill night air. Arthur would be approaching the next trial soon, and I would be there when the portal finally opened.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

ARTHUR

The rustling of voices and thunderous footsteps jolted me awake. Lancelot was already in motion, hastily dressing himself. "What's happening?" I asked groggily, my voice hoarse as I stumbled out of bed and grabbed a robe from the nearby dresser.

Lancelot's entire body tensed as he peered out the window and scowled. "I'm not sure. Stay put while I go find out."

He was across the room and out the door before I could protest, the heavy oak door swinging shut behind him with a resounding thud. I dressed quickly, my fingers fumbling with the dress, used to trousers and tunics.

The door burst open a moment later and Merlin strode in, his eyes wild and his long hair disheveled. "Arthur, you need to come now. Something's happened."

"What is it?" I demanded, my heart lurching into my throat at the barely contained panic in his voice. "Merlin, what's going on? Where's Lance?"

He swallowed hard. "It's-it's Uther. He's dead, Arthur. Murdered in the temple two days ago. Messengers arrived this morning, and Queen Tatiana's called a council."

I stared at Merlin, my mind reeling. His words were like a blow to the chest, and I staggered back. My father—dead. My second father to die suddenly. I shook my head, trying to process what this meant. The king was gone. And I was...the heir.

"How?" I managed to choke out, my voice sounding distant and hollow in my ears.

"Stabbed through the heart. The guards found him in a pool of his own blood, but no sign of the assassin. Several dead guards were found outside the temple as well, so there was no one to question." Merlin ran his hand through his hair. "Come on, we need to find Gaius."

I looked down at my sheer dressing gown and frowned. Merlin noticed too and waved his hand over the length of me. Golden light flared, and in the blink of an eye, I was clean, my hair braided, wearing a pair of black riding pants, a dark green tunic, and a black jerkin that were far nicer than anything I ever owned before.

I raised a brow at Merlin. "I've been bathing in rivers for the past week, and you could have been doing this all along?"

Merlin shrugged. "You never asked."

As I brushed past him towards the door, I made sure to grab Excalibur from the bedside table and tucked it back into its sheath. I couldn't fathom leaving without it, even though I felt relatively secure within the confines of the Seelie palace.

I paused, glancing back over my shoulder at Merlin. "If you can conjure so easily, then why were we thieving on the streets for years?" I'd given it some thought lately, and it didn't make any sense. Just another thing Merlin had been keeping to himself.

"I'm not really conjuring anything. The items I use already exist. I just move them from one place to another. Someone in this palace is suddenly missing their clothes." He motioned to my outfit. "I've used it many times. You just didn't realize how easily I acquired things."

My lips thinned with a frown, and I chose to just shake my head, accepting that for

now. There were bigger worries at the moment, but I'd be bringing this up again, and I knew that he knew it.

The news of my father's death should have devastated me. Instead, I was consumed by a sense of bewilderment. After all, Uther had never been there for me. He may have played a role in my creation, but he certainly didn't fulfill the duties of a father. He made no effort to find me or even acknowledge my existence.

According to Queen Tatiana, he believed I died with Morrigan that night. But if that were true, wouldn't he have needed to dispose of our bodies or give us, at the very least, a proper burial? What excuse could he possibly give for not having his own child's remains? The more I thought about it, the less sense it made.

As we stepped into the corridor, my other knights were waiting, their faces grim and tense. Urgency replaced Galahad's usual carefree demeanor. He wrapped me in his thick arms and hugged me to his chest.

"I'm so sorry, little faerie," he whispered into my hair. I sank into his arms, letting out a long breath of relief. Just smelling him, feeling him, had my spirit settling.

Gawain's jaw was clenched tight as he scanned the corridors. Tristan's silver gaze was distant, as per usual, and I wondered if he'd had another vision. Percival walked towards us, shadows trailing behind him, his eyes dark and brow furrowed. Galahad released me and we moved as a unit down the corridor, passing staff who moved out of our way and bowed.

We reached a set of double doors, and two towering fae guards stood at attention, their armor gleaming like liquid starlight. They bowed deeply as we approached and pushed the doors open for us. I heard several of my knights murmuring something to the guards in a familiar way, reminding me how well they knew these people.

I still could not get used to anyone treating me like I was royalty. Only two weeks ago I'd been a street rat, and now fae knights bowed when I entered a room. It was insane.

We walked into a room that paled in comparison to the magnificent library where we had met the queen the day before. Instead of towering bookshelves filled with magic orbs and a mossy floor, this room seemed more practical and utilitarian.

In the center of the space stood a large rectangular table made of sturdy oak. The ground was solid stone, as were the walls, with no embellishments or decorations in sight. Resting atop the table was a detailed map of Avalon.

Queen Tatiana was seated at the head of the table, surrounded by a group of fae men and women whom I presumed to be members of her council and advisors. Beside her sat a stunning woman with long black hair, piercing blue eyes, and porcelain skin. I wondered if she was the queen's consort or maybe her mate, as she held Tatiana's hand delicately in her own.

As we approached the table, I noticed Gaius was there, his weathered face etched with worry, his gray hair and beard disheveled as if he too had just woken up. Beside him sat three of those hooded druids.

Queen Tatiana gestured for us to take our seats, her eyes following me. "Arthur, let me be the first to say how deeply sorry I am for your loss. Please, join us. We have much to discuss."

Giving her a short nod, I sank into an empty chair, my knights flanking me protectively. Merlin took the seat to my right, his hand finding my thigh beneath the table and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

The map on the table glowed faintly, its intricate details shifting and changing as if

alive. Tiny pinpricks of light marked various locations across Avalon, some pulsing with urgency while others remained steady and calm.

Gaius cleared his throat, his lined face grave as he leaned forward, his weathered hands resting on the table. "We believe we know who is responsible for Uther's death. It pains me to say it, but all signs point to Mordred Pendragon. Our sources have reported several witnesses in the village who claim to have seen a woman with blood red hair near the palace in the days before Uther's death."

Merlin's hand tightened on my leg, his brow furrowing in confusion. "That's impossible," he protested. "We saw Mordred fly through the portal after us. She's here in Avalon."

Gaius shook his head. "It's not as easy as that. Mordred wields dark magic, and she has become an expert at shapeshifting, allowing her to cover more distance in a day than any human or fae."

I leaned back in my seat, pinching the bridge of my nose. "She was a flock of crows," I muttered, catching everyone's attention as I looked up. "I dreamt about her days ago, but who's to say she wasn't actually in Camelot at the time?"

Gaius nodded. "Now that Uther is dead, Mordred intends to drink from the Grail and gain immortality, then return to Camelot as the high queen."

"Arthur," Queen Tatiana said, her voice carrying the weight of centuries. I met her blue eyes and tried not to avert my gaze. "You and your knights must continue your quest immediately. We cannot allow Mordred to get her hands on Excalibur or the Holy Grail. She's already too powerful."

I breathed in deeply, my mind racing. The future of my kingdom—and all of Albion—was on me. If Mordred took the throne for herself, then dark magic would

come back to Camelot, and we would end up no better off than the Boneyard.

I looked at Queen Tatiana and noted the sadness in her eyes. I wondered how hard it had to be for this queen to have seen so much. To rely on some young, unknown queenling and have no control over the outcome of this prophecy.

I thought of my mother, Morrigan. What would she have done?

"We're leaving within the hour then," I said, glancing at Merlin next to me. He gave me a sharp nod. "I don't suppose any of you know the way to the Wandering Wood?" I looked around the table, landing on Gaius in particular.

Gaius smiled then, a glimmer of hope in his lined face. "The Wandering Wood is said to reveal itself only to those who are worthy. Those whose intentions are pure and whose hearts are not corrupted by power." His eyes flickered to Merlin, as if to say 'As I said all along...'

We stood from the table as one, the decision made. Queen Tatiana rounded the table, striding over to me. I noticed she was not wearing a gown the way she had the day before. Today she was dressed in a simple tunic and trousers, although they were finely made and spun with gold thread.

"We'll provide you with everything you need for your journey," she offered, her gaze sweeping over my knights and Merlin. Tatiana placed a gentle hand on my shoulder, her touch both comforting and empowering. "I have the utmost faith in you, Arthur Pendragon. The blood of the fae flows through your veins. Morrigan's blood. She would have been so proud of the woman you've become."

A lump formed in my throat as I nodded, holding back tears for a woman who was once just a stranger and would remain one.

"I hope she would be," I whispered to the queen. Then, flicking my eyes to the side, I made sure only she could hear me. "I have a gut feeling, Queen Tatiana. I think Mordred is biding her time, waiting for us to make our last move. She's been tracking us from the shadows, but we've only come face to face with her once. She would have struck already if she thought taking Excalibur now would help her. I believe she's using us to lead her to the Stone Temple because she can't find it on her own."

Tatiana's eyes narrowed as she listened. She gave a small nod, barely noticeable. "You're right to be suspicious. Mordred is sly and patient, just like her mother." Her voice dropped even lower. "Mordred can take on different forms. She could be anyone, but remember, the eyes always tell the truth."

I remembered the way those green eyes had flashed in the face of the old man in that clearing. The eyes my knights had recognized immediately.

The eyes always tell the truth.

The corridors were a flurry of activity as servants rushed to prepare for our departure. Stable hands readied our horses, packing saddlebags with provisions and supplies. I was more thankful than ever that we weren't going to have to make the rest of the journey on foot.

In my chambers, I changed into sturdy traveling clothes: supple leather breeches, a soft linen tunic and jerkin, and a fur-lined cloak. I belted Excalibur at my waist, the ancient sword a comforting weight against my hip.

My knights and Merlin were already on their Elhorns when I arrived in the courtyard, the majestic creatures eager and pawing at the ground. Their sleek, shiny coats glimmered in the soft morning light, and their spiraled horns reached toward the sky.

Merlin looked every bit the powerful sorcerer in his deep purple cloak, matching the

druids. My knights were watching me closely as I approached the Elhorn meant for me, my stomach churning with nerves. Everything felt so much more real now than it had back in Camelot.

Queen Tatiana stepped out of the palace, her long golden hair flowing around her like a halo. She held a small, ornate wooden box, her fingers tracing its smooth surface with care.

As I climbed onto my Elhorn, she came closer, a sad smile touching her lips. "Arthur," she said softly. "Before you leave, I have something for you."

She opened the box to reveal a delicate golden circlet resting on deep green velvet. The metal felt warm and buttery, inlaid with sparkling rubies that caught the light beautifully. It was a stunning piece, worthy of a queen.

"This belonged to your mother," Tatiana said, her eyes glistening with memories. "She wasn't a queen, but she meant the world to me. I gave her this on her one hundred and seventh birthday."

I blinked at the queen, my mind struggling to normalize the concept of living for so long. But I supposed that was my reality too, a reality I'd tried to ignore for most of my life.

With careful hands, I lifted the circlet from its cozy velvet cradle. The metal felt warm and smooth, and the rubies sparkled like tiny flames caught in the gentle morning light. A rush of emotion tightened my throat as I traced the intricate filigree, awed by the artistry and the rich history woven into its design.

"I feel strange accepting this," I whispered, my voice thick. "It's too precious, too important."

Queen Tatiana shook her head, a soft smile lighting up her face. "Nonsense. Morrigan would have wanted you to have it. She dreamed of passing it on to her daughter. Wear it with pride, Arthur. She would have been so proud of you."

The weight of the circlet felt comforting, anchoring me to the moment. I could almost sense my mother's spirit in the metal, her essence wrapped around me. Tears threatened to spill, but I blinked them away, determined to stay strong.

"I'll treasure this always. Let's just hope I can live up to its expectations and that 'always' is a long way off..." I placed the circlet on my head, letting it settle on my brow. It fit perfectly. My stomach churned with nerves as I bit down on my lower lip.

Queen Tatiana nodded, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears, but she managed a conspiratorial smile. She stepped back, her gaze sweeping over our gathered party. The Elhorns shifted restlessly.

As we rode out of the Seelie palace gates, the early morning mist clung to the ground like a gauzy veil, swirling around the Elhorns' legs. The air was crisp and clean, carrying the scent of damp earth and blooming wildflowers. I centered myself with a breath and pretended I knew what I was doing.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

ARTHUR

We rode for hours, the Elhorns' hooves beating a steady rhythm against the forest floor. The Seelie palace had long since faded from view, swallowed up by the dense, ancient trees that surrounded us. Sunlight filtered through the canopy in dappled patterns, dancing across our skin and the Elhorns' shimmering coats.

Galahad rode beside me, babbling away, and the distraction was a welcome one. He'd taken it upon himself to be my guide, pointing out the magical creatures and plants that most humans would never have the chance to see.

"Look there," he said, gesturing to a patch of delicate blue flowers that seemed to glow from within. "Those are moonblooms. They only open in the twilight, and their nectar is said to grant prophetic dreams if you're brave enough to drink it. It's always twilight in Avalon, so they're always in bloom."

As we watched, a tiny creature no bigger than my thumb flitted out from between the petals. It had wings that shimmered like opal and a body that looked as if it had been carved from living wood.

"A pixie," Galahad explained. "They're mischievous little fuckers, but if you leave them milk and honey, they might help tend your garden or mend your clothes while you sleep."

I watched the pixie hop from one moonbloom to the next, harvesting its nectar. The

tiny creature's movements were mesmerizing, graceful, and purposeful.

Luminescent mushrooms sprouted from the gnarled roots of ancient trees, their caps glowing with little white dots. Wisps of glowing mist drifted lazily through the air, curling around our Elhorns' legs. In the distance, I caught glimpses of shimmering, silver-colored deer bounding through the underbrush, their antlers gleaming like polished crystal.

"It's all so beautiful," I breathed, unable to keep the awe from my voice. "I've heard stories about Avalon ever since I was little, but this is something else...How did you ever leave this place? I would have gone mad in Albion knowing that this existed on the other side of a portal."

"We didn't have a choice," Percy said from behind us. "It was our duty to protect Excalibur and make sure it ended up in the right hands. We swore an oath, so we had to fulfill it." He brought his Elhorn closer until he was riding on my other side. "When Excalibur was bonded with the stone, we knew it might mean leaving our home for centuries, but time passes differently for fae. What seems like forever to humans is just a blink of an eye for us. We knew we'd eventually return home. But still, leaving wasn't easy."

I thought about what it would feel like when the time came for me to return to Albion. Something like dread coiled in my gut. Did I even want to go back to that place? What had the mortal realm ever done for me? Why should the fate of a kingdom that never cared about me rest on my shoulders?

This place, Avalon, felt like home from the moment I stepped foot through that pond, even if I hadn't known where I was at the time. A sense of peace and belonging had hit me so hard that it was staggering. I never felt like that in Camelot.

I turned to Galahad, my brow furrowing as I voiced the question that had been

nagging at me. "What happens after we find the Grail? When it's time to return to Albion?"

The easy smile slipped from Galahad's face, replaced by a more somber expression. He exchanged a quick glance with Percy, something unspoken passing between them. My chest immediately filled with butterflies, but not the good kind. I felt like I might vomit.

"We haven't really discussed it," Galahad admitted, his voice low. "It's...complicated."

I looked around at my other knights, noticing how they had all fallen silent, their faces suddenly guarded. "You're not planning on staying in Camelot, are you?" I said dryly, my heart sinking as I realized the truth. "You'll return to Avalon once your duty is fulfilled."

The silence that followed was deafening. Only the sounds of the soft thuds of our Elhorns' hooves on the mossy forest floor and the distant trill of birdsong could be heard.

Lancelot was the first to speak, his eyes meeting mine with a mixture of sadness and resolve. "Arthur, we've been away from our home for centuries. We've fulfilled our oath, protected Excalibur, and ensured it found its way to you. But Avalon...it's our home."

I nodded curtly, swallowing hard against the lump forming in my throat. "I understand," I said, my voice carefully neutral despite the storm of emotions raging inside me. "You've been away from your home for so long. Of course you'd want to return."

The forest around us seemed to sense the shift in mood, the vibrant colors dimming

ever so slightly. The mushrooms that had dotted the path now glowed with a softer, more subdued light. Even the Elhorns beneath us seemed to move more slowly, their graceful steps becoming heavier, more deliberate.

Tristan urged his Elhorn closer, his eyes shimmering with something that looked suspiciously like regret. "Arthur, I?—"

"Don't," I cut him off, perhaps more sharply than I intended. "Please don't try to make this easier. I understand your decision, truly. There's no need to explain further."

I nudged my Elhorn forward, putting a bit of distance between myself and the others. The beast seemed to sense my need for space as it picked up its pace.

Hours later, we made camp. Not because darkness was falling—the perpetual twilight of Avalon meant the soft, ethereal glow never truly faded—but because our bodies, accustomed to the rhythms of the mortal realm, craved rest before we ventured beyond the Seelie borders into the wilder reaches of Avalon.

We found a small clearing nestled between the gnarled roots of ancient trees. Their bark shimmered with an iridescent sheen, and delicate tendrils of moss draped from their branches like living curtains.

As we dismounted, I noticed how the Elhorns' hooves left faint, glowing imprints on the moss-covered ground. The prints lingered for a few moments before fading away, as if the forest itself was slowly healing from our intrusion.

Merlin set about creating our campsite with a series of elegant gestures. Shimmering golden threads of magic wove through the air, coalescing into a large tent. The fabric was reed thin yet strong, its surface rippling with patterns that mimicked the play of moonlight on water.

He saw my questioning look and smirked with a shrug. "I can use my magic freely here, so I might as well make us comfortable."

I wasn't going to complain. I shivered at the thought of another long night of being eaten alive by bugs as I tossed and turned by the fire.

As we settled around the fire Merlin had conjured, a mesmerizing blaze of blue and violet flames that danced and swirled without producing smoke, the tension in the air was palpable. The knights moved with an uncharacteristic awkwardness, their usual easy camaraderie strained.

Galahad passed out portions of the provisions we'd been given. Bread that tasted like herbs and butter, dried sweet fruits, cheese, and strips of dried meat that smelled faintly of smoke and sage. Merlin busied himself with brewing tea.

I accepted a steaming cup from him, murmuring my thanks. The warmth seeped into my hands, but it did little to thaw the chill that had settled in my chest. I couldn't bring myself to meet the eyes of my knights, focusing instead on the hypnotic dance of the magical flames.

Lancelot cleared his throat, the sound jarring in the tense silence. "Arthur, we need to talk about this."

I looked up from the flames. I wanted to lose myself in those eyes, to forget the ache in my chest, but I couldn't. Not now.

"What's there to talk about?" I said rather than asked, my voice low and carefully controlled. "You've made your decision. I understand."

"It's not that simple. We've sworn oaths to protect you and to serve you until you're securely on the throne of Camelot, but it doesn't mean we'll stop caring for you, or

your safety. We'll always protect you."

"Doesn't it?" I countered, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice. "You'll be worlds away, in a realm more beautiful than I could ever hope to create in Albion. How exactly do you plan to protect me from there?"

Percival leaned forward, accepting a mug of tea from Merlin. "We could visit. We can use portals to travel between realms, to check on you?—"

"To check on me?" I interrupted, my temper flaring. I laughed bitterly. "Like I'm some helpless child who needs looking after? No, I don't think so, Percival ." He flinched and for a moment, I almost felt bad. I cleared my throat. "No. What I'll have to do is replace you."

The words hung in the air, heavy and sharp. Gawain's mug clattered against his teeth as he froze mid-sip. Lancelot's eyes flashed, a mix of hurt and anger swirling in their golden depths.

"Replace us?" Lancelot spat. "You can't be fucking serious."

I met his gaze, steeling myself against the pain I saw there. "What choice do I have? I need knights and protectors. If you're leaving, I'll have to find others."

Merlin cleared his throat, his blue eyes bright with concern. "Arthur, maybe we should consider alternatives. The bonds between you and your knights?—"

"Bonds?" I scoffed, interrupting whatever his placating lies were about to feed me. The word tasted bitter on my tongue. "There are no bonds , Merlin. Maybe there could have been, if we'd been given half a chance, but now that I know I'm ultimately going back to Camelot alone, I realize it was stupid of me to hope for it in the first place."

Percival's shadows seemed to deepen, stretching across the ground between us, as if his magic were reacting to the threat. "And who the fuck would take our place, hm? Human knights?" He laughed, the sound bitter and cold. Like the Percival I first met.

I stood up abruptly, unable to contain the storm of emotions churning inside me any longer. "Yes, human knights! Knights who won't abandon their queen the moment their duty is fulfilled. Knights who won't go flitting off to another realm while I'm left to rule a kingdom when I barely know how!"

The sword at my hip gave a sudden pulse, and I knew without having to see for myself that my eyes were glowing bright gold. I noticed the magic writhing inside of me, Avalon's surge of magic making it stronger. The forest around us seemed to hold its breath, the usual symphony of night sounds falling eerily silent.

Galahad rose to his feet, his normally jovial eyes flashing with hurt and indignation. "We're not abandoning you! We've sworn to protect you, to serve you!—"

"For how long?" I demanded. "Until I sit on the throne? Until I produce an heir? Or just until you get bored with playing at being mortal?"

My words struck like physical blows, and I hated every single one. I hated that I felt this rage. I hated that I wanted to sob. Galahad flinched, and even Gawain's usual smirk was lost. Tristan's eyes were wide with shock, while Percival's shadows writhed and twisted around him like agitated snakes.

"That's not fair," Lancelot hissed. "We've given centuries of our lives to this cause, to protect Excalibur and wait for you."

"And I'm supposed to be grateful for that?" I shot back, my voice rising. "Grateful that you waited for me, only to leave me alone in a world I barely understand? I didn't ask for any of this!"

The magical fire flared in response to my surging emotions, the flames leaping higher and changing from blue to a deep, angry crimson. The air around us crackled with energy, and I picked up on the pulse of magic thrumming through the earth beneath my feet.

Lancelot took a step towards me. "Arthur, you're not being rational. We're not abandoning you. We'll always be there if you need us?—"

"But you won't be there !" I cried, my voice cracking. "You won't be by my side every day, helping me navigate court politics or fending off assassins or-or just being there when I need someone to talk to. I won't be able to hold you or feel you. You'll be here, in this magical wonderland, while I'm stuck in a cold stone castle surrounded by strangers!"

As I spoke, the circlet on my brow began to glow, pulsing in time with my racing heart. I could feel the metal growing warm against my skin. The knights' eyes widened as they watched the display of magic, a mixture of awe and concern on their faces.

"Do you have any idea what it's like?" I continued, my voice small. "To go from being a nobody on the streets to suddenly being told you're the heir to a kingdom? To have magic you don't understand coursing through your veins? To be thrust into a world of fae, monsters, and ancient prophecies? I've spent my entire life feeling like I didn't belong anywhere. Then I met all of you. For the first time, I felt like I found my place. Like I found a family."

The knights exchanged pained glances, the weight of my words settling heavily on their shoulders. Even Merlin looked stricken, his blue eyes wide with a mixture of sorrow and guilt.

"But now?" I laughed bitterly, the sound harsh and foreign to my own ears. "Now I

realize it was all just a beautiful lie. You were never meant to stay. You were just fulfilling your duty, and once it's done, you'll leave. You'll leave me..."

My voice trailed off, the last words barely a whisper. The weight of everything—the quest, the crown, the impending loss—suddenly felt crushing. I couldn't bear to look at their faces any longer, to see the mix of guilt and pity in their eyes.

"I need to be alone," I muttered, turning away from the camp.

Before anyone could protest, I strode into the shadowy depths of the forest. The luminescent moss beneath my feet pulsed with each step, leaving a trail of fading light behind me. I pushed through curtains of glowing vines, their delicate tendrils brushing against my skin like ghostly fingers.

The further I ventured from the camp, the more otherworldly the forest became. Flowers that looked like they were carved from living crystal bloomed in impossible colors, their petals chiming softly in the ethereal breeze. Tiny creatures with bodies made of living light flitted between the branches, leaving trails of stardust in their wake.

I found myself in a small clearing where an ancient tree stood sentinel. Its trunk was easily as wide as ten men standing shoulder to shoulder, its bark swirled with patterns that seemed to shift and change as I watched.

Several paces away, slightly down a small hill, was a pool of water so still and clear it looked like a mirror of liquid moonlight. As I knelt beside the pool, I felt a strange sense of familiarity wash over me. The silvery surface of the water seemed to ripple with unseen currents, beckoning me closer. I leaned forward, my reflection shimmering and distorting in the moonlit depths.

Suddenly, recognition struck me like a bolt of lightning. This was the same pond I'd

stumbled on days ago, when the mysterious Lady of the Lake had lured me in with her haunting melody. The memory of that voice echoed in my mind still.

My eyes were drawn to the ancient tree, its massive trunk twisting towards the perpetual twilight sky. This was the very same tree where I'd encountered the glowing orb and received that riddle. We'd come full circle.

With trembling hands, I grasped the lowest branch, its bark rough against my palms. I hauled myself up, muscles straining as I found purchase on the twisting limbs. Tiny creatures scurried out of my way—miniature dragon-like creatures no bigger than my thumb with tiny little wings.

I found a wide, sturdy branch about halfway up the massive trunk and settled myself against it. The rough bark pressed into my back, but I welcomed the discomfort. It grounded me, reminding me that this wasn't just some beautiful dream.

From this vantage point, I could observe the entire clearing spread out below me. The pool of water gleamed like liquid moonlight, its surface occasionally rippling. In the distance, I could just make out the faint glow of our fire.

I continued climbing higher, my fingers finding purchase on gnarled knots and twisted branches. Delicate spirals of moss coiled around the trunk, pulsing softly with a light that seemed to respond to my touch before fading again.

About halfway up, I found a wide, bowl-shaped hollow where several large branches converged. It was as if the tree itself had crafted a perfect sanctuary, hidden high above the forest floor. The hollow was lined with soft moss.

I settled into the hollow, drawing my knees up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. The ancient tree creaked and swayed gently, as if trying to rock me like a babe in a cradle. Tears welled up in my eyes, blurring the beauty of the forest

around me.

Tiny, glowing creatures that looked like a cross between butterflies and jellyfish drifted lazily through the air. Their translucent bodies pulsed with soft, ever-changing colors; blues fading to purples, then greens, then back again. One floated close, its delicate tendrils brushing against my cheek in what felt like a comforting caress.

In the distance, I could hear the haunting call of some unseen beast. The sound was unlike anything I'd ever heard before: part mournful howl, part melodic song.

The leaves of the great tree rustled, though there was no breeze. Peering closer, I realized each leaf was covered in intricate, ever-shifting patterns. Spirals became stars became flowers, an endless dance of nature's artistry. It was mesmerizing, beautiful...and so very alien.

This was their world, not mine. No matter how much I might wish otherwise. A sob caught in my throat as the full weight of my situation crashed over me. The tears came then, hot and relentless. I buried my face in my hands, my body shaking with the force of my sobs.

Around me, the forest seemed to respond to my distress. The tiny jellyfish-like creatures drifted closer. One settled on my shoulder, its soft tendrils brushing against my tear-stained cheek in a feather-light caress.

In the distance, that haunting song grew louder, as if some ancient creature was lending its voice to my sadness. The melody wove through the air, achingly beautiful and indescribably sad. But it made me feel not so alone for just a few short moments.

I thought of Galahad's easy smile and terrible jokes, of the way he'd taken me under his wing from the very beginning. I imagined Gawain's cocky grin and the gentleness in his touch. Percival's gruff exterior that hid a quiet passion. Tristan's wisdom and

the way his silver eyes seemed to see right through to my soul.

And Lancelot...golden, beautiful Lancelot. The memory of his lips on mine, the way he'd held me as if I were the most precious thing in all the realms, made my heart ache with a pain so exquisite I could hardly breathe.

Even Merlin, my oldest friend, would be leaving me. He belonged here, in this world of magic and wonder. How could I ask him to give up everything he'd dreamed of to stay by my side in a cold stone castle, stuck in a magicless world?

Fresh tears spilled down my cheeks as I imagined returning to Camelot alone. The thought of walking those drafty corridors without Galahad's laughter echoing off the walls, of facing court politics without Percival's steady presence at my back, made me feel small and utterly fucking lost.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

TRISTAN

I sat with my back against a gnarled tree trunk. My eyes were unfocused, lost in the swirling visions that danced at the edges of my consciousness.

Fragments of possible futures flashed before me—Arthur crowned in glory, Arthur falling to a hidden blade, Arthur lost in the mists between worlds. The paths of fate were in constant flux, especially here in Avalon where time itself seemed to flow differently.

Galahad paced restlessly, pausing every so often to whistle a series of melodic notes. Each time, a bird would materialize from the shadows, trilling a response before disappearing once more. His brow furrowed with worry as he relayed the information to us.

"She's still in that tree," he reported. "The nightingales say she climbed nearly to the top and found a hollow. She's been there for hours."

Lancelot growled, sinking his fingers through his long hair in frustration. "She shouldn't be alone out there. Not with Mordred after her."

I stood, stretching my stiff muscles. The others looked up at me questioningly. "I'm going to find her," I said simply. Lancelot started to rise, but I held up a hand. "Let me go alone. She needs space, not all of us crowding her."

He nodded reluctantly, sinking back down. I could see the worry etched in the tightness around his eyes, the way his jaw clenched. We were all feeling it; the weight of Arthur's pain, of all of our pain.

I made my way through the twilight forest, following the faint trail of Arthur's energy. Here in Avalon, magic thrummed through every living thing, and those attuned to it could sense the echoes left behind. Arthur's signature was unmistakable—a blazing golden thread woven through the tapestry of the forest.

I came to the massive tree where Galahad's birds had spotted Arthur. Its trunk spiraled upwards, easily as wide as ten men standing shoulder to shoulder. As I climbed, I felt the tree's ancient consciousness brush against my mind. It was a fleeting touch, alien and incomprehensible, yet somehow welcoming. The moss beneath my hands glowed brighter at my touch.

About halfway up, I noticed a change in the tree's energy. The moss pulsed with a gentler rhythm, and the very air seemed to hum with a protective warmth. I knew I was nearing Arthur.

I found Arthur curled up in a natural hollow formed by several converging branches. Her face was tear-stained, her brow furrowed even in sleep. The golden circlet still rested on her head, the rubies pulsing faintly in time with her breathing.

My heart clenched at the sight of her, so small and vulnerable in this vast, ancient tree. I settled myself on a nearby branch, content to keep watch over her as she slept.

She was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at her for too long. Her soft, but wild curls framing her devastating face. I'd never wanted a female more viscerally than I wanted Arthur. My entire body craved to be near her. To touch her and taste her.

She'd fit so perfectly around my cock, writhing beneath me as I fucked her last night.

I'd gone to sleep with that image seared into my mind. She was everything I wanted in a mate.

I wasn't sure how I felt about returning to Avalon without her when all this was done. How could I stand to live out my years worlds away from the woman I couldn't get out of my head? Before Arthur, Avalon was all I dreamed about, but something had shifted. Suddenly, it wasn't the thought of home that kept me going, because home suddenly felt like some place else...some one else.

In the distance, I could hear the haunting song of the nightstalkers. Creatures with bodies of living shadow and voices like deep, haunting brass bells. Their melody wove through the forest. They were attracted to the magic that fed off of pain, and I only hoped they stayed far away from Arthur.

A soft gasp drew my attention back to Arthur. Her eyes fluttered open, confusion clouding her features for a moment before recognition set in. When her gaze landed on me, a flicker of pain crossed her face before she quickly looked away.

"Arthur," I said softly, keeping my voice gentle. "Talk to me. Please."

She remained silent for a long moment, her fingers idly tracing patterns in the glowing moss. Finally, she spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. "What's there to talk about? You've all made your decision."

I sighed, shifting on my branch to face her more fully. The ancient tree creaked softly, as if lending its voice to our conversation. "Things are never that simple. Especially not for me."

She finally looked up, her eyes red-rimmed and filled with a mixture of hurt and curiosity. I took that as an invitation to continue.

"Do you know what it's like to see fragments of possible futures constantly? To be bombarded with visions that shift and change with every decision, every fleeting thought? It's...overwhelming," I admitted, running a hand through my hair. "One moment, I see you crowned in glory, ruling Camelot. The next, I see you laying at Mordred's feet."

Arthur's eyes widened, her lips parting. I rarely spoke of my visions, the weight of them often too heavy to share. "Every choice we make, every path we consider, it all ripples through the fabric of time. Here in Avalon, where time flows differently, the visions are even more intense. It's like trying to navigate a storm-tossed sea where the stars keep rearranging themselves."

She shifted in her mossy hollow, her brow furrowing as she absorbed my words. The soft glow of the bioluminescent fungi cast dancing shadows across her face, highlighting the sharp angles of her cheekbones and the fullness of her lips.

"Arthur, I'm not even sure I want to come back to Avalon when this is all over."

Her eyes widened as she searched my face. "But...it's your home. You've been away for so long. Don't you want to come back?"

I smiled sadly, reaching out to brush a stray curl from her cheek. The touch sent a jolt through me, like lightning coursing through my veins. "Avalon has been my home for centuries, yes. But home isn't always a place. Sometimes...sometimes it's a person."

The leaves around us rustled, as if the great tree itself was leaning in to listen. In the distance, the haunting song of the nightstalkers grew fainter, as if even they were retreating to give us privacy.

"When I'm near you, the chaos in my mind quiets," I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper. "The endless parade of possible futures slows to a trickle. For the

first time in centuries, I feel grounded. Present. I've spent lifetimes lost in visions, always one step removed from the world, and I'm fucking tired."

Arthur's eyes were rimmed in silver, a mix of emotions flickering across her absurdly beautiful face: surprise, hope, and something deeper that made my heart fucking race. Before I could react, she surged forward, her hands coming up to cup my face.

Her lips crashed into mine, soft yet insistent. I groaned into her mouth, my body responding instantly to her touch. The kiss was magic, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through every nerve ending. Arthur's fingers tangled in my hair, tugging gently as she deepened the kiss.

I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her closer until she was practically in my lap. The moss beneath us pulsed with a soft, rosy glow, as if the tree itself was blushing.

My cock hardened, straining against the confines of my breeches. Arthur shifted, and I knew she could feel my arousal pressing against her thigh. She made a small, needy sound in the back of her throat that nearly undid me.

I broke the kiss, trailing my lips along the curve of her jaw and down the column of her throat. Arthur tilted her head back, giving me better access as I nipped and sucked at the sensitive skin. Her pulse fluttered beneath my lips, rapid and enticing.

My hands roamed over her body, mapping every curve and hollow. Even through the layers of her clothing, I could feel the heat of her skin, the way she trembled at my touch. I slipped a hand beneath her tunic, tracing the soft skin of her lower back. Arthur arched into me, a breathy moan escaping her lips.

She looked into my eyes, and I felt something shift inside me. Something clicked into place in my head. I wanted this woman. This queen. I wanted to keep her.

“I want to be your safety,” she whispered against my lips.

For the first time in centuries, I felt a sob working its way up my throat, but I stifled it. Instead, I captured Arthur's lips again, swallowing her moans as I ground my hips against hers. The friction was exquisite torture, even through our clothes. I wanted, needed, to be inside her, to claim her as mine.

I flipped our positions, pressing Arthur back against the moss-covered hollow of the tree. She gasped, her eyes wide and dark with desire as she looked up at me.

With trembling fingers, I unlaced her tunic, pushing the fabric aside to reveal her creamy skin. I trailed kisses down her throat, nipping and sucking at her pulse point. Arthur arched into me, a breathy moan escaping her lips.

"Tristan," she gasped, her fingers tangling in my hair. "Please..."

I growled low in my throat, the sound more feral than I intended. My fae nature was rising to the surface, drawn out by the magic of Avalon and my burning desire for the woman beneath me. I knew my eyes were glowing silver in the twilight as I looked down at her.

Leaning back on my heels, I slowly peeled off her trousers and boots, and she shucked off the rest of her clothing, bearing herself to me fully.

Slowly, reverently, I ran my hands along her body, marveling at the contrast between my dark fingers against the paleness of her belly. Arthur shivered under my touch, goosebumps rising in the wake of my caress. I leaned down to capture her lips in a searing kiss as I positioned myself between her parted thighs.

Pulling my cock free, I lined myself up with her entrance, sliding through her swollen wetness. Arthur's breath hitched, her eyes locking with mine as I slowly pushed

inside. The tight, wet heat of her body enveloped me, and I had to grit my teeth to keep from losing control.

"Tristan," Arthur breathed, her voice thick with desire. "Don't you dare leave me."

"Fuck," I groaned, my voice rough with need. "I can't fucking leave you, little faerie. There's no Avalon for me without you."

She whimpered in response, her legs wrapping around my waist to pull me deeper. I began to move, setting a slow, deep rhythm that had Arthur moaning. Her fingers dug into my shoulders, nails raking down my back as I thrust into her. The slight sting only fueled my desperation, driving me to claim her more thoroughly.

Growling low in my throat, I hitched her legs higher around my waist, changing the angle of my thrusts. Arthur cried out as I hit that spot deep inside her that made her voice pitch higher. Her inner walls clenched around me, drawing me deeper. I was coming already, but I couldn't stop.

It was a good thing Arthur was fae, and that fae women could only get pregnant when fully mated, because between the six of us males, it could have easily happened the night before.

I picked up the pace, my hips snapping forward with increasing urgency. The hollow of the tree creaked and swayed with our movements. I moaned, unable to stay silent as I fucked her into the moss roughly.

That's it," I gritted through clenched teeth as her hips rose to meet mine in a frenzy. "Just like that, little faerie..."

My vision blurred at the edges, silver light bleeding into the corners of my perception as my fae instincts surged to the surface.

Arthur's eyes flew open, locking with mine. I watched in awe as golden light bloomed in her irises, spreading until her eyes were twin pools of molten sunlight. "Tristan—" she gasped, her voice thick with need and something deeper, more primal.

An overwhelming urge swept through me: to claim, to mark, to make her mine for eternity. Without conscious thought, I leaned forward, my lips finding the junction where her neck met her shoulder. My teeth grazed the sensitive skin there as Arthur shuddered beneath me.

With a guttural groan, I sank my teeth into the soft flesh of her neck, tasting the coppery tang of her blood on my tongue, claiming her. Arthur cried out, her back arching off the moss as pleasure and pain mingled and blended.

Suddenly, Arthur's hands tangled in my hair, pulling my head back with surprising strength. Before I could react, she surged upward, her teeth finding purchase at the sensitive juncture of my neck and shoulder.

The moment her teeth broke my skin, the world exploded into a haze of sensation. It was as if every moment of my long life, every vision I'd ever had, every possible future, all converged into this single point of connection between us. I noticed Arthur's essence merging with mine, our souls intertwining in an unbreakable bond.

Mates. We were...mates.

The realization hit us both like a thunderbolt, our bodies shuddering in unison as the mating bond snapped into place. I felt Arthur's emotions coursing through me: wonder, ecstasy, a fierce possessiveness that matched my own. Our hips moved in a frenzied rhythm as we chased our mutual release.

"Mine," Arthur growled against my neck. The word reverberated through our

newfound connection, igniting a primal fire in my veins.

"Yours," I gasped in response, tightening my grip on her neck. "And you're mine, little queen. Now and always."

I spilled into her with a growl, more animalistic than man. She followed me over the edge, moaning gutturally as her cunt squeezed me. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over us, amplified by the mating bond until it felt like we might shatter from the intensity.

As the aftershocks subsided, we collapsed against each other, panting heavily. Arthur's heartbeat thundered in time with my own, our bodies and souls now inextricably linked. She lifted her head, those golden eyes meeting mine with a mixture of awe and fierce joy.

"What have we done?" she whispered, though I didn't sense any regret through our bond—only a sense of rightness—of coming home.

I cupped Arthur's face in my hands, marveling at the golden light still swirling in her eyes. The mating bond hummed between us, a living connection that pulsed. I detected a hint of fear beneath it all.

"What we've done," I said softly, "is create an unbreakable bond. A fae mating bond is...it's beyond anything in the mortal realm. It's a joining of souls."

As I spoke, I became aware of subtle changes in my perception. The world around us seemed sharper, more vivid. The moss glowed with colors I'd never seen before, and I picked out the whisper of wind through leaves miles away.

"Among the fae," I continued, "mating isn't taken lightly. It's a choice made by our souls, often without conscious thought. When two fae are truly compatible, when

their essences resonate in perfect harmony, the urge to mate becomes overwhelming."

Arthur's fingers traced the mark she'd left on my neck, sending shivers down my spine. Through our bond, I felt her fascination mingled with a touch of awe.

"But how does it work?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "I feel different. Like the world has shifted somehow."

I nodded, understanding exactly what she meant. "The mating bond enhances our natural abilities. It's a merging of life forces. From this moment on, a part of me will always be with you, and a part of you with me. You will balance me and I'll make you stronger."

Arthur's brow furrowed as she processed this information. Her expression became uneasy as she sat up. "Tristan. What does this mean for the others?"

I sat up too, grabbing her discarded tunic and draped it over her head to quell the chill. "There have been instances where someone has taken multiple mates. It's rare, but not unheard of."

Arthur's eyes widened, a flicker of hope sparking through our newfound bond. I experienced her emotions as if they were my own: a swirling mix of confusion, desire, and a deep-seated longing for a family. A unit.

"And what about you? It wouldn't be fair of me to ask you to share me, would it?" Then she shook her head with a heavy sigh. "What am I even saying? They're going back to Avalon when I take the throne anyway. It won't matter in the end if they don't want me back."

I brushed a stray curl from Arthur's face. Sadness poured from her, but it mixed with overwhelming satisfaction. It was unlike anything I'd ever felt before, as if her

emotions were underneath my own.

"This bond doesn't change how the others feel about you. If anything, it might make those feelings even stronger." She looked up, her eyes rimmed in silver. "They're my brothers. I know their hearts better than I know my own sometimes. Give them time to figure out what they really want. Avalon has been the goal for seven hundred years, and that's not an easy dream to break. But don't write them off just yet."

Chapter Thirty

ARTHUR

"We should head back to camp," Tristan said softly, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. "The others will be worried."

I grumbled, my brief good mood suddenly draining away. The thought of facing the others after my outburst earlier made my stomach churn. Not that I had anything to feel guilty about. They'd hurt me in a way I didn't know I could be hurt. But still, what had I expected? For them to pledge their eternal love to me?

I huffed a laugh. What a stupid, stupid girl.

"Alright," I sighed, reluctantly untangling myself from my sitting position, even though I was rather comfortable.

I stood, stretching my stiff muscles, and began to gather my scattered clothing. Tristan watched me with a tender expression, and I couldn't hide the blush that crept over me. The mark I'd left on his neck stood out starkly against his dark skin, appearing slightly silver, and already healed over. The others were going to see it immediately.

Good. Let them see.

I had nothing to be ashamed of. Tristan claimed me, then I claimed him, and not a single part of me regretted it. I could already feel Tristan inside of me, like a whisper

at the back of my mind.

When I was dressed, Tristan stood with me and stretched his arms out, beckoning me towards him. I went without question, folding myself against his muscled chest. There was a buzzing of magic, then his wings unfurled from his back, looking so much like ghostly dragon wings.

“Hold on tight, little faerie,” he said as his arms tightened around me. We lifted from the mossy bed in the tree, and my stomach flipped. He carried me all the way back down to the forest floor and gently set us down.

Untangling myself from his arms, I peered up at him. “When this is all over, I’m going to need you to teach me how to conjure my own wings.”

He smiled. “I can’t wait to see what they look like.”

I suppose I never thought about that. What would they look like? Butterfly wings? Dragonfly? A bird or a bat? Faeries came in so many magical shapes and sizes that it could be anything.

As we neared the camp, I could make out the soft blue glow of Merlin's magical fire. The flames danced and swirled without producing smoke, casting flickering shadows across the sleeping forms of my knights.

Gawain sat with his back against a gnarled tree trunk, his steel-gray eyes alert as he kept watch. As we stepped into the clearing, his gaze immediately locked onto us. I saw the exact moment he noticed the mate marks on our necks. His whole body went rigid as his eyes widened in shock before quickly looking away.

Tristan squeezed my hand gently before releasing it. "Get some rest," he murmured. "I'll take watch with Gawain."

I nodded, suddenly exhausted. The events of the day—the emotional turmoil, the mating, the magic—had left me drained. I made my way to the tent Merlin had conjured earlier.

I curled up on my side, pulling a blanket woven from silken thread over me. It was impossibly soft, like being wrapped in a cloud, and smelled faintly of lavender and moonflowers. Despite my exhaustion, I found myself straining to hear the conversation outside.

The tent's walls did little to muffle the sounds of the forest or the low voices of Tristan and Gawain.

"What were you thinking? A mating bond? Now, of all times?"

Tristan's reply was calm, but I heard the underlying steel in his tone. "It wasn't a conscious decision. You know as well as I do that the mating urge isn't something we can control."

"But the timing?—"

"The timing is what it is," Tristan cut him off. His voice was more harsh than I'd ever heard him. "If you lot pulled your fucking heads out of your arses..."

Their voices faded as they moved further from the camp, likely to avoid waking the others. I strained to hear more, but the sounds of the forest soon overtook their conversation.

Slowly, my eyes grew heavier, and hot tears pricked at them. I didn't let them spill over, though. I wouldn't cry another fucking tear over men who didn't want me.

Hours into the next day, I still hadn't spoken a single word to anyone. Tristan had

kissed me good morning by the fire, while every single of them studied us, probably scenting the mating bond between us.

We rode for hours in complete silence, and it was awkward, to say the least. There were so many things left unsaid, but I wasn't going to be the first one to break it.

We crested a steep hill and came to an abrupt halt. Before us stretched a vast canyon, its depths plunging into shadow. The air grew thick with the scent of dirt, and I could hear distant groans echoing from far below, as if the earth itself was sighing.

Lancelot pulled his Elhorn up beside mine, scanning the horizon. "We've reached Giant Country," he said. "We'll have to go through it."

I gazed out at the sprawling expanse before us, my breath catching in my throat. Massive boulders dotted the landscape like silent sentinels, their rough surfaces blanketed in a carpet of reddish dirt. Some stood taller than the highest towers of Camelot, their peaks disappearing into the low-hanging mist that clung to the canyon walls.

The ground beneath our Elhorns' hooves felt solid yet strangely alive, as if the very rocks were breathing. Occasional low rumbles reverberated through the earth, causing pebbles to skitter and dance at our feet.

"We can't go around?" I asked, eyeing the vast canyon. "Or what about over? Can we fly across?"

As soon as I finished my question, a massive winged creature leapt out from the canyon wall and into view. Its wings flapped furiously, but before it could get far, a colossal stone hand emerged from the ground and snatched it in its grasp, pulling it down to the earth.

I stumbled backwards in shock as I realized the hand was connected to a body made entirely of stone. The once-still hillside now began to move as a living, breathing giant stood up from its crouched position and devoured the winged beast whole.

Lancelot gestured to the giant, " That's why we can't just fly over it. Giants may look slow and dumb, but they can actually move quite fast and appear anywhere at any moment. Luckily, giants aren't usually interested in fae meat, and their eyesight is notoriously bad for seeing things up close. So if we're fortunate enough, we'll only be seen as tiny insects wandering through their land."

That didn't sound promising in the slightest, but who was I to argue?

We began our descent into Giant Country; the Elhorns picked their way carefully down the steep, rocky path. The further we went, the more the landscape seemed to dwarf us. Boulders the size of houses loomed on either side, their surfaces etched with strange, swirling patterns that almost looked like faces when viewed from certain angles.

The air grew thicker, heavy with the scent of dry earth and something else. A musky, ancient smell that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Every so often, a low rumble would echo through the canyon, causing pebbles to skitter down the path in front of us. I tried not to think about what might be causing those sounds.

I eyed the walls, and out of the corner of my vision, I spotted the unmistakable sleeping forms of giant bodies molded to the side of the canyon walls.

As we rode, Galahad and Gawain's voices drifted back to me, arguing about some encounter with an adolescent giant halfbreed several hundred years ago, and whose fault it was that they were nearly killed.

Galahad chuckled. "To be fair, you did call him a 'pebble-brained mountain of snot'

right to his face."

Gawain scoffed, waving Galahad off. "I honestly thought he'd take it as a compliment."

Galahad and Gawain's bickering continued as we wound our way deeper into Giant Country. Despite my lingering anger, I found myself listening with growing amusement.

"You're conveniently forgetting the part where you tried to seduce his sister," Galahad said, rolling his eyes. "A giantess three times your size, I might add."

Gawain grinned, unabashed. "I've always appreciated a woman of stature."

"She nearly crushed you when you suggested an 'intimate exploration of each other's geographical features'," Galahad countered, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"It was a perfectly romantic offer!" Gawain protested. "How was I to know she'd take offense?"

Their Elhorns picked their way around boulders and dried husks of trees. It occurred to me they weren't trying in the slightest to be quiet, so they must not be worried.

"Maybe because you followed it up by asking if she'd like to 'scale your personal mountain'?" Galahad retorted.

I couldn't help the snort of laughter that escaped me. Both knights turned, surprised to hear any sound from me after hours of stony silence.

Gawain's face lit up with a mischievous grin that had my treacherous heart doing flips once again. He was too handsome for his own damn good. "Ah, so our queen does

have a sense of humor after all! I was beginning to worry we'd lost you to eternal brooding."

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't quite keep the smile from tugging at my lips. "I'm not brooding," I muttered unconvincingly. "I'm...contemplating."

"Contemplating what, exactly?" Galahad asked, his tone gentler than Gawain's teasing. "Which one of us is the most handsome and strapping?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm contemplating how a couple of centuries-old knights can still act so much like children."

Lancelot, who had been riding silently ahead, glanced back with a wry smile. "This isn't even the worst of it. You should have seen them when they were rookie knights back at court. Ridiculous. I'm surprised they weren't tossed out on their arses."

"Oi!" Gawain protested. "I'll have you know I've matured like a fine wine."

"More like a pungent cheese," Percival muttered from behind me, speaking for the first time in hours.

"At least cheese has some redeeming qualities." I shrugged.

Gawain clutched his chest in mock offense. "And here I thought we were developing a special bond, Arthur. Betrayal."

The air grew thicker with every hour that passed. Every so often, a low rumble would reverberate through the canyon, causing pebbles to skitter down the slopes around us. Our Elhorns picked their way carefully along the winding path, their hooves barely making a sound on the ground.

I felt a familiar tugging sensation in my chest. It was the same magical pull I'd experienced before finding the previous riddles. My heart began to race as I scanned our surroundings, searching for anything out of the ordinary.

This was it. A clue to the last trial.

"Wait," I called out, trying to keep my voice as low as I could, bringing our group to a halt. "I think...I think there's something nearby. It feels like it did before." I met Merlin's eyes as he searched the canyon walls. "Look for a box."

The knights exchanged glances, unable to feel the disturbance for themselves. The ground suddenly rumbled, and the Elhorns stirred, backing up and shuffling on their hooves. Galahad whispered to his, petting its mane softly. The beast calmed, clearly able to understand every word Galahad said.

Suddenly, what I had thought was just a protruding section of the canyon wall began to move. A massive slab of rock, easily the size of a ship, slowly shifted and rolled to the side.

It wasn't just a boulder. It was a giant.

The colossal figure was curled on its side. Its chest rose and fell with deep, rumbling breaths that sent tremors through the earth. The giant's face was weathered and craggy, looking for all the world like it had been carved from the very mountain itself. Its eyes remained closed, lost in what I hoped was a deep sleep.

A glimmer caught my eye as I peered up over the giant. There, on a narrow ledge just above its shoulder, was a soft, pulsing light that emanated from a small wooden box.

"Holy gods..." I said breathlessly.

As we stood frozen, staring at the sleeping giant, a gust of wind swept through the canyon. It carried with it the scent of our Elhorns, and the giant's massive nostrils flared. My heart plummeted as its eyes slowly opened, revealing orbs the size of wagon wheels, milky white and unfocused.

The ground trembled as the giant pushed itself up, stones and boulders tumbling from its moss-covered form. It blinked slowly, confusion evident on its craggy features as it tried to locate the source of the unfamiliar scent.

"Shit," Gawain hissed, already drawing his ice to his fingers. "So much for sneaking past."

Lancelot's wings unfurled with a snap, golden light flaring to life like flames. "Arthur, get to that box. We'll keep it distracted."

Each of their wings unfurled in the blink of an eye. They moved as a single, cohesive unit, taking to the air as the giant let out a thunderous roar that shook the very foundations of the canyon.

Merlin raised his hands, golden magic coiling like a rope up his arm, ready to spring out like a whip. "Go!" he shouted at me. "Get to the box!"

I didn't need to be told twice. I urged my Elhorn forward, its hooves finding purchase on the uneven ground. As we neared the canyon wall, I steeled my nerves and leapt from the saddle. My fingers scrambled against the rough stone as I clung to the sheer face of the cliff, heart pounding.

The wall was nearly vertical, with only the barest hint of handholds. I began to climb, my muscles straining with each upward movement. The box pulsed with an otherworldly light above me, tantalizingly close yet so far away.

Loose pebbles skittered down as I hauled myself higher, showering my face with grit. The wind whipped around me, tugging at my clothes and threatening to tear me from my precarious perch. I gritted my teeth, focusing on each handhold.

A deafening roar shook the canyon, and I pressed myself flat against the wall as a massive shadow fell over me. The giant's enormous hand swept past, missing me by mere inches. The gust of wind in its wake nearly dislodged me, and I clung desperately to the rock face, my heart thundering.

I risked a glance down and immediately regretted it. The ground seemed impossibly far away. Swallowing hard, I forced myself to keep climbing.

But just as I thought I was going to actually reach the box, the giant crashed into the canyon wall with earth-shattering force. The entire canyon shuddered, and a thunderous crack split the air. Massive chunks of rock broke free, tumbling down in a deadly avalanche.

Time seemed to slow as I lost my grip, my body peeling away from the safety of the rock wall. For a heartbeat, I hung suspended, the world tilting sickeningly around me. Then gravity took hold, and I was falling.

Wind rushed past my ears as I plummeted through the air, my stomach lurching into my throat. The ground below rushed up to meet me with terrifying speed. Jagged rocks and thorny bushes blurred into a dizzying kaleidoscope of gray and green.

I heard my name being screamed from multiple directions, the anguished cries of my knights cutting through the howling wind. Their voices were filled with raw panic and desperation.

"ARTHUR!"

Chapter 31

LANCELOT

Her chestnut curls whipped around her face, her eyes wide with terror as she fell. The golden circlet on her brow pulsed with desperate light, as if trying to summon some latent magic to save her.

My heart thundered in my chest, raw panic clawing at my insides. I'd never known fear like this—not in centuries of battles, not facing down monsters or dark magic.

This was visceral, primal terror that stole the breath from my fucking lungs. I was screaming her name, my throat raw. This wasn't how we lost her. We wouldn't lose her. Not now...not fucking ever.

Every word I'd said in anger flooded my mind in a split second, and I took it back. I took it all back. I'd leave Avalon forever if it meant Arthur living to see another day. I'd cut off my own wings if it meant her drawing one more breath.

Gawain's magic had temporarily blinded the giant, coating its massive eyes in a thick layer of frost. The behemoth stumbled back, roaring in confusion and pain. But even with the immediate threat neutralized, I knew with sickening certainty that we wouldn't reach Arthur in time.

My wings beat furiously as I dove towards her falling form. But the distance was too great, the seconds ticking by with merciless finality. Arthur was falling too fast, the unforgiving ground rushing up to meet her.

Desperation clawed at my throat as I pushed myself harder, faster, my muscles screaming in protest. Wind howled in my ears, drowning out the frantic shouts of my brothers. My vision tunneled until my sole focus was Arthur, her arms outstretched towards the sky. Merlin sent a whip of golden magic towards her, but the giant stumbled into the path, knocking Merlin backwards.

Gods no...

Please no...

Just as she was about to hit the ground, Arthur's body suddenly flared with brilliant golden light. She screamed in pain as something burst from her back. She screamed, and the sound reverberated off of the tall canyon walls until it was the only thing I could hear.

Then, a pair of delicate, shimmering wings unfurled from her back in a spray of golden sparks. They looked like spun glass, intricate as a dragonfly's, split into three distinct wing sections on each side, but massive and heavy enough to hold her weight.

The crystalline wings blurred into motion, beating so rapidly they became nearly invisible. Their frantic vibration caught Arthur mid-fall, suspending her in the air mere feet from the ground.

It shouldn't have been possible. It took decades to learn how to fly with any sense of control. This was something the fae went to lessons to perfect when we were children. But Arthur's wings caught her, saving her from the crush of the canyon floor.

I landed hard, my knees nearly buckling as I stumbled towards Arthur. My heart was still racing, adrenaline coursing through my veins. Arthur's new wings fluttered uncertainly as she touched down, the delicate crystalline structures catching the light

and sending prismatic reflections dancing across the canyon walls.

Her eyes were wide with shock, her chest heaving as she tried to process what had just happened. I reached her in three long strides, cupping her face between my palms. Her skin was flushed and warm beneath my touch, but most of all, alive . Gloriously, miraculously alive.

"Are you hurt?" I demanded, my voice rough. My eyes raked over her, searching for any sign of injury. "Arthur, talk to me. Are you alright?"

She blinked up at me, her lips parting as if to speak, but no sound came out. Instead, she simply nodded, her hands coming up to grasp my wrists. Arthur trembled as the adrenaline began to ebb. "I-I think I'm alright."

Around us, the air crackled with tension as my brothers landed, their curses filling the air.

"Fucking gods..." Gawain breathed, his steel-gray eyes wide as he took in Arthur's wings. "That was too damn close."

"Arthur, are you—" Galahad started, but the moment of relief was shattered as the giant let out another earth-shaking roar. The sound reverberated through the canyon, sending loose rocks tumbling down the cliff faces.

Arthur's sword suddenly blazed to life, the blade glowing with an otherworldly light. Her newly formed wings lifted her effortlessly from the ground. She pulled it from its sheath, staring at it with eyes that matched the blade.

For just a moment, it was like staring into the face of an old god.

"The box," Arthur called out, her voice steady despite the chaos around us. "I need to

get to that box!"

Without a word, we moved as one, heeding our queen's command. I took to the air alongside my brothers while Arthur flew in the opposite direction, towards the cliff. Every instinct inside of me told me to go after her. To follow her and leave the giant to the others. But she was my queen, and I was her knight, and I would follow her into the dark no matter what she asked.

Gawain's magic coalesced around his hands as he sent a barrage of razor-sharp ice shards towards the giant's face. The behemoth bellowed in pain and rage, swatting at the air with massive stone hands. He sent the shards spraying right back at us, and we dodged them, just barely.

Percival's shadows writhed and twisted, forming into solid tendrils that wrapped around the giant's legs, attempting to slow its movements. Galahad's magic caused vines and roots to burst from the canyon walls, tangling around its torso. He could only control earthen magic for so long. Merlin's golden whips lashed at the giant's face, and each blow was like the crack of thunder, but he managed to chip off pieces of rock one by one as the giant roared.

As we kept the giant distracted, Arthur streaked toward the narrow ledge, her dragonfly-like wings a blur of golden motion. She landed gracefully, snatching up the pulsing box and shoving it into her satchel in one fluid movement.

Her eyes blazed as she launched herself directly at the rampaging giant. I screamed her name, but she didn't hear me. My breath caught as Arthur soared through the air, dodging the giant's flailing limbs. She landed on its head, her wings folding against her back as she found her footing.

The giant roared in confusion, its massive hands coming up to swat at the tiny figure perched atop its skull. But Arthur was quicker. She raised Excalibur high, the sword's

glow intensifying until it the sword's radiance rivaled the sun itself. The giant's hands were inches from crushing her, its roar shaking the walls of the canyon.

But instead of striking the behemoth with a death blow, Arthur plunged Excalibur only partway into the thickest part of its skull and held tightly.

Arthur's voice rang out, clear and commanding, speaking words in a language I hadn't heard in centuries. The ancient tongue of the druids. It was the language of the Old Religion, and it flowed from her lips, each syllable resonating with power.

"Elara lunara, silvenor thalas, ancira melodis!" she shouted, her voice sounding as if she was speaking with a hundred voices at once, each layer on top of the next. She no longer sounded like Arthur Pendragon, but rather a goddess of old.

I command you to sleep, ancient one...

Chapter Thirty-Two

GAWAIN

The moment Arthur's feet touched the ground, I was moving. My heart pounded as I raced towards her, desperate to close the distance between us. She stood there, breathless and radiant.

I reached her in an instant, my hands cupping her face as I crushed my lips to hers. The kiss was desperate, filled with all the fear and longing that swept through me as I watched her fall. As I screamed her name. As I thought I was going to lose her forever.

Her lips were soft and warm against mine. My fingers sank into her wild chestnut curls, cradling the back of her head as I deepened the kiss. Arthur's hands fisted in my tunic, pulling me closer as she responded with just as much desperation. The beat of her heart raced against my chest and I thanked the fucking gods it was still allowed to beat.

"I'm sorry," I murmured against her lips, pressing soft kisses to the corner of her mouth, her cheek, her jaw. "Arthur, I'm so fucking sorry. I was a fool because I was scared. I'm sorry."

I fell to my knees before her, my arms wrapping around her waist as I pressed my forehead against her stomach. Her new wings shimmered behind her. "Forgive me," I pleaded, my voice raw and broken. "I was a fucking coward. I would never let you return to Camelot without me. Not in a million lifetimes, my queen."

As I spoke, I realized every word was the naked truth. It didn't matter how much I missed Avalon, or how I craved to be among our own kind again. Because my fear of never returning home again paled in comparison to the terror of never looking into Arthur's eyes.

Arthur knelt, her golden eyes shimmering with unshed tears. She cupped my face in her hands, her fingers gently sinking into my beard. The touch sent shivers down my spine. "Gawain," she whispered, her voice thick. "I shouldn't have tried to make you choose between your home and me. That wasn't fair."

She leaned in, pressing her forehead against mine until her warm breath was on my lips. I breathed in the intoxicating scent of her skin, like wildflowers and magic. "Avalon is your home," Arthur continued softly. "I had no right to ask you to give that up. Not after you've waited centuries to return. I can't believe how selfish I was."

I shook my head, my hands coming up to cradle her face. "You are my home now. Avalon...it's a dream, a memory. But you? You're real, and I'm in love with you."

Her eyes widened, her lips parting in surprise. For a moment, the world around us seemed to still, the rumbling of the canyon fading away as we stared at each other. I held my breath, terrified I'd gone too far, said too much.

Then Arthur's lips crashed against mine, hungry and desperate. Her fingers tangled in my hair as she pressed herself closer. I groaned, pulling her flush against me as I deepened the kiss, pouring every ounce of longing and regret into it.

When we finally broke apart, gasping for air, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright. "I love you too, you stubborn ass," she whispered, a smile tugging at her lips as she pushed on my chest.

Merlin rushed over, concern etched on his face as he helped Arthur to her feet. Her

legs wobbled unsteadily, the adrenaline clearly wearing off. With a wave of his hand, golden light shimmered around Arthur as he helped her onto a waiting Elhorn that Galahad led over to us.

I stood, brushing the dust off my knees as Tristan clapped me on the shoulder. I met his eyes, my gaze bouncing to the fresh mating mark, almost expecting him to hit me for declaring my love to his mate. But Tristan smiled at me and nodded, and it was all the approval I needed.

The Elhorn nickered softly as Arthur settled onto its back. I could see exhaustion written in every line of her body. In the slump of her shoulders, the way her hands trembled slightly as she gripped the Elhorn's mane.

"We should make camp as soon as possible," I said, my voice rough and raw from screaming. "Arthur needs rest. The Wandering Wood can wait another day."

Merlin nodded sharply, his blue eyes flickering between Arthur and me. I couldn't tell what was going on in the sorcerer's head. It was no secret that he was in love with her too, but something always seemed to be holding him back. Druids didn't take official mates, but I knew that if they did, Merlin would have claimed her already.

Galahad's gaze suddenly lifted to the sky, his brow furrowing in concentration. Following his line of sight, I caught a glimpse of a magnificent creature soaring overhead. Its wingspan must have been at least thirty feet across, with feathers the color of obsidian. The beast's long, serpentine neck ended in a head crowned with spiraling horns, and as it banked in a wide arc, I could see flashes of iridescent scales along its underbelly.

"Is that a...dragon?" Arthur breathed out in awe.

Galahad shook his head, a wry smile tugging at his lips. "Not quite. That's a wraith.

They're distant cousins to dragons, but they're not nearly as intelligent or dangerous. Beautiful creatures, though."

The wraith let out a haunting cry that echoed through the canyon before disappearing behind a distant peak. Galahad blinked a few times, as if coming out of a trance, then turned back to our group. "There's a grove of trees just past the mouth of the canyon," he said, his voice carrying a note of relief. "It's secluded away from the main paths the giants use for hunting. We should be safe there for the night."

As we made our way out of the canyon, the landscape gradually shifted from towering stone walls to a gentler terrain. The air grew thick with the scent of damp earth and blooming night flowers again, leaving the dust and clay behind us.

I kept a watchful eye on Arthur, noting how she swayed slightly in the saddle. Her new wings were folded against her back, shimmering like spun crystal in the fading light. The sight of them still took my breath away. She hadn't meant to manifest them, but her desperation made it possible without even trying. I had a feeling our queen had no idea how powerful she really was.

We reached the grove Galahad had mentioned. The trees hung like willows, only their petals were a midnight blue color that twinkled with sparkling dew. The hanging branches created secluded little bubbles of privacy, away from the prying eyes of the forest.

Merlin immediately went to Arthur's side, his arms encircling her waist as he helped her down from the Elhorn. She leaned heavily against him, exhaustion evident in every movement of her body. Merlin's eyes glowed with a soft blue light as he whispered in the language of the druids, covering her with wards.

Percival and Tristan set about creating a perimeter of protection spells, their magic weaving an intricate web of shadows and starlight around our camp.

I gathered fallen branches and set about building a fire pit. With a wave of my hand, frost crystals formed along the wood, and Lancelot gave it a spark. The magical fire that gave off no smoke cast dancing shadows across the grove, making the leaves shimmer like sapphires.

Merlin carefully laid Arthur down on a bed of soft moss, conjuring a blanket of gossamer threads that seemed to be woven from moonlight itself. He brushed a stray curl from her forehead.

"She could have died today," Lancelot said, his voice barely above a whisper. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, betraying the tension coursing through him. "If those wings hadn't manifested..."

I nodded, the memory of Arthur plummeting through the air still fresh and raw in my mind. "But she didn't. And I feel like the world's biggest fool."

"What are we doing, Gawain?" he asked, running a hand through his golden hair. "This... arrangement. All of us loving her. What does it mean for her? For Camelot? She's going to be a queen."

I sighed, leaning against the bark of a few fallen logs we'd placed into a circle around the fire. The bark was surprisingly soft, almost velvety to the touch. "I don't know," I admitted, my eyes drifting to where Arthur lay sleeping. "But I do know that I can't imagine a life without her. The thought of returning to Avalon and leaving her behind? It feels wrong."

Lance nodded. "But a queen with multiple consorts? It's unheard of, at least in the mortal realm."

I chuckled softly, plucking a luminescent flower that grew near my feet. Its petals glowed with a soft, pulsing light, like a tiny heartbeat. "When has Arthur ever done

anything the conventional way? She's a half-fae thief with druid blood, wielding Excalibur, and just put a giant to sleep in a language that's been dead for centuries. I think we're well past conventional at this point."

His lips quirked into a small smile. "Fair point. But still, the politics of it all. The noble houses of Camelot will expect her to make a strategic marriage alliance. And what about heirs?"

I twirled the glowing flower between my fingers, watching as its light seemed to dance and swirl. "Fae can only conceive when both partners intend it," I reminded him. "And even then, it's rare. As for the politics, well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, let's focus on keeping her alive long enough to sit on that damned throne."

As we continued our hushed conversation, the others gradually joined us around the fire. Galahad settled onto a moss-covered log. Tristan took a seat next to me, his silver eyes reflecting the dancing flames. He seemed lost in thought, his gaze occasionally drifting to where Arthur slept. The mating mark on his neck stood out starkly against his dark skin.

Percival materialized from the shadows, his form seeming to coalesce from the darkness itself. He moved with liquid grace, settling onto the ground with his back against a tree trunk. The shadows clung to him like a second skin, writhing and twisting in response to his mood.

Merlin was the last to join us. He looked exhausted, the lines around his eyes more pronounced than usual. I wondered how much of his energy he'd expended trying to save Arthur during her fall.

Percival's low voice broke the contemplative silence. "What language did Arthur speak to the giant? I've never heard anything like it."

"It was the dead language of the Old Religion," Merlin said softly, almost reverently. "A tongue that hasn't been spoken in centuries, known only to the most ancient magical beings. Gaius taught about it, but even he doesn't know enough to speak it. The fae can understand the words, but speaking it is nearly impossible."

"But how?" I asked, leaning forward. "Arthur's never studied ancient languages, has she?"

Merlin shook his head, his expression a mixture of awe and confusion. "No, she hasn't."

Tristan frowned and tossed a twig into the fire. "I felt something through our mating bond. It was...strange. Overwhelming. Like there were multiple presences inhabiting her body all at once."

I felt a chill run down my spine. The grove around us seemed to grow quieter, as if the very trees were listening. "What do you mean by multiple presences?" Lance asked, his eyes narrowing.

Tristan ran a hand through his silvery hair, searching for the right words. "It was as if...as if the old gods of Avalon were speaking through her. I felt their power entwined with hers, but it was distinctly other."

The fire crackled, sending sparks spiraling into the twilight sky. I watched them dance among the twinkling stars. "Could it be possible?" I mused aloud. "For the old gods to...inhabit her like that? I thought they were long dead by now."

Merlin ran a hand over his face in exhaustion. "There are legends," he said slowly, "of the old gods sometimes using mortal vessels to communicate. But it's extremely rare, and usually only happens in times of great need."

"I can't stop seeing it," Galahad said. His usually cheerful face was drawn with worry. "The way she fell...I've never been so terrified in all my centuries."

We'd all been fools. So caught up in our centuries-old dream of returning home that we'd nearly lost the woman who each of us craved down to the marrow of our fucking bones.

"I'm not going back," Percival said suddenly, and we all turned to face him. "To Avalon, I mean. Not if it means leaving her."

"Neither am I," Galahad chimed in, his usual jovial self replaced by something harder, more determined. "Arthur is everything I want in a mate, and I'm not going to betray her like that. There's nothing for me in Avalon without her."

My chest swelled with pride for my brothers. I'd made the decision to stay with Arthur the moment she slipped from that cliffside. It wouldn't have mattered to me what anyone else chose. I loved Arthur Pendragon and would make her my mate.

I looked at Lancelot as he glared at the flames. Lancelot, who'd sworn off love nearly eight hundred years ago, when a woman he thought he'd loved mated another male. We were still young, but the sting of it followed him for centuries.

He breathed in deeply, his fingers absently tracing patterns in the velvety moss beneath him. When he finally spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper, but it carried such raw emotion that we all leaned in to listen. "I've spent centuries convinced that love was a weakness. I thought I'd found it once, and I swore I'd never let myself be that vulnerable again."

The grove seemed to hold its breath as he spoke; the flowers pulsed softly in time with his words. Even the whispering leaves of the midnight-blue trees stilled, as if nature itself was listening to this confession. A confession I never thought I'd hear

from my oldest friend.

"I love her," he said, his voice barely above a whisper but filled with conviction. "Gods fucking help me."

Galahad let out a low whistle. "Well, I'll be gods damned," he said, a hint of his usual mischief returning. "The great Sir Lancelot, felled by a pair of pretty brown eyes."

Lance threw a loose stone at Gal, and it hit him squarely on the forehead. "Fuck off, Gal."

"I've loved Arthur since we were children," Merlin suddenly confessed, staring into the dancing flames. "All those years, watching her struggle on the streets, I wanted to protect her, to give her the life she deserved. We raised and protected each other. She made sure nobody knew of my magic and never judged me for it. When Mordred came along, I was weak. I used her to fill the loneliness, but in my mind, in my heart, it was always Arthur."

I felt a pang of sympathy for the sorcerer. To love someone for so long, to watch them from afar, unable to act on those feelings. It must have been torture.

Merlin looked up then, his gaze sweeping over each of us. "I never imagined I'd have to compete with five fae knights for her heart," he said with a wry, humorless chuckle. "The irony isn't lost on me."

"None of us are competing anymore. Not for Arthur's heart, not for her attention, not for anything. And good thing too, because I'd hate to be the sad sack who had to compete with me." I wiggled my brows and Galahad scoffed. "She's a queen," I continued as Merlin met my eyes from under his hood. "Chosen by fate and blessed by magic older than any of us can comprehend."

I plucked another glowing flower, its petals unfurling at my touch. "You saw what happened today. The old gods themselves spoke through her and used her as a vessel. That's not something that happens to just anyone. Arthur deserves to be worshipped by all of us."

Chapter Thirty-Three

ARTHUR

My new wings twitched against my back as I woke the next day, still unfamiliar but already feeling like an integral part of me. Cold air rushed over my exposed skin where they'd torn the back of my tunic to make room.

I sat up slowly, my muscles protesting the movement. They were heavy, and I could already tell that my body was going to be off balance for a while. I needed to learn how to put them away.

Near the center of our camp, I could see my knights and Merlin gathered around the magical fire that still burned without smoke. Tristan was kneeling beside it, his graceful hands moving with practice ease as he prepared tea.

I heard every word they spoke last night when they thought I was sleeping. Every. Single. Word. My belly flipped over at the memory of each of their declarations. Nerves skittered down my spine. All six men were in love with me. Five ancient fae warriors and a powerful druid sorcerer. How the hell did this happen?

I'd never experienced real love from anyone before, except perhaps from Merlin. But I never thought he felt that way about me. Not until the night he snuck into my chambers in the palace. From the moment he saved me after the fire in our old village, I knew I loved him. Every day, every hour, every second, my love for him only grew stronger.

And my knights...what I felt for them transcended logic. It was insane to fall in love with six men at once, wasn't it?

Gawain caught my attention and grinned, his steel-gray eyes crinkling at the corners. "Good morning, sleepy faerie. Care to join us for some tea?"

I nodded, pushing myself to my feet. My wings unfurled instinctively, catching the breeze and sending a shiver down my spine that went everywhere. It was like trying to balance with a second set of arms attached.

Merlin's eyes met mine, his expression unreadable beneath his hood. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a herd of wild horses trampled me. But I'll live."

Tristan handed me a steaming cup of tea, his fingers brushing mine. The contact sent a jolt of desire through me, and I was suddenly aware of his emotions coming through our bond. Concern, love, and a fierce protectiveness that made me feel calm inside.

I sipped the tea, letting its warmth spread through me. The grove around us was breathtaking in the soft morning light. Dew glistened on the midnight-blue leaves, making them shimmer like sapphires.

"Galahad," I said, setting down my cup, "Could you get the box from my satchel? I think it's time we see what our next clue is."

Galahad nodded, his red hair catching the sunlight as he moved to retrieve the clue. When he returned, the wooden box was pulsing with power still. He tried to open it, his brow furrowing in concentration, but the lid remained stubbornly shut.

"Here," he said, passing it to me. "I think it only responds to you."

As soon as the box touched my hands, I felt a click. The lid sprang open, revealing a small scroll nestled inside. With trembling fingers, I unrolled it, my heart racing as I read the final riddle aloud:

“In shadows deep where whispers weave, Through ancient boughs, the lost believe.
Seek the wandering wood where secrets sigh, Beneath the watchful moonlit eye.
Follow the path where the shadows bend, To a stone temple where the echoes blend.
There lies the chalice, pure and bright, Guarded by kings who fell to night. To claim
the Grail, your courage must swell, Face the restless dead, break their spell. With
heart ablaze and spirit unbroken, Speak true your worth, let not silence be spoken. In
the realm where the past and present meet, Only the brave shall find their seat.”

As I finished reading the riddle aloud, the sky, which had been in its perpetual state of twilight, began rapidly darkening. Inky shadows raced across the heavens, blotting out the soft glow we'd grown accustomed to. In its place, a massive moon rose up, impossibly fast and unnaturally large. Its surface was a swirling mix of deep blues and silvers, casting an eerie, ethereal light over the grove.

My knights leapt to their feet, weapons materializing in their hands as they formed a protective circle around me. Merlin's hands crackled with barely contained magic, his blue eyes glowing with an inner fire as he scanned our surroundings. Even the Elhorns stirred.

"This isn't right," Galahad muttered. "Avalon doesn't have a moon cycle. It's always twilight here."

As if in response to his words, the trees around us began to shift and groan. Their leaves rustled ominously, the sound amplified in the sudden, unnatural stillness that had fallen over the grove. Before our eyes, the trunks began to bend and twist.

A gap appeared in the wall of trees, revealing an archway of branches over a winding

path that hadn't been there moments before. Thick, blue-tinged fog began to roll in. It swirled around our feet, bringing with it the scent of damp earth and dead things. The fog slowly rose and rose until it was over our heads.

"The Wandering Wood," I breathed, realization dawning. "It's calling us."

As if in response, a haunting melody drifted through the air. It was unlike anything I'd ever heard before—part mournful cry, part seductive whisper. The sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once, weaving through the fog and wrapping around us like an invisible thread.

"We need to follow it," I said, my voice sounding strange and distant to my own ears. "The final trial is at the end of this path."

We left the Elhorns behind, their restless whinnies fading into the fog as we set off down the winding path. The moon loomed before us, impossibly large and ever-present no matter how the path twisted and turned.

As we ventured deeper, the trees grew more twisted and gnarled. Their bark was black as pitch, scored with deep furrows that oozed a luminescent sap. The sap pulsed with a faint, sickly green light, as if the very lifeblood of the forest was poisoned.

After what felt like an hour of walking nowhere, though time seemed to have little meaning in this place, we emerged into a large clearing. As the riddle said, a stone temple loomed before us. Its weathered walls were covered in twisting vines and glowing moss. Crumbling statues of forgotten kings lined the path leading to a towering set of obsidian steps.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself to ascend. But before I could take a step, cruel laughter echoed through the trees. A swarm of inky black crows burst from the shadows.

I drew Excalibur; the blade flared to life with golden power. My knights surrounded me, Gawain's frost licking up his arms, Lancelot's fire crackling, Percy's shadows writhing. Galahad and Gawain had drawn their blades and Merlin wound a whip of golden magic around his wrists, ready to strike the moment my life was in danger.

The crows circled, spiraling down towards the ground, coalescing into a familiar shape. I wasn't surprised to see my sister. In fact, I'd been waiting for her to show herself, knowing she'd be coming for the Grail the moment the path to the temple was revealed. I just thought she'd be sneakier about it.

Her blood-red hair whipped around her face as she raised her arms. Dark tendrils of magic shot from her fingertips into the surrounding trees. The branches creaked and groaned, suddenly animated. They lashed out like grasping hands.

"Fuck!" someone shouted as the trees converged.

I watched in horror as my men were lifted off their feet, struggling against the branches that wrapped tightly around their bodies. Mordred's laughter rang out again as she turned her emerald gaze on me, a wicked smile twisting her lips.

I raised Excalibur. The sword felt alive in my grip, eager for blood. "I won't let you have it, Mordred," I growled, my wings flaring out behind me. "The Grail doesn't belong to you."

She laughed, the sound sharp and cruel. "And it belongs to you ? A gutter rat playing at being queen? Give me Excalibur before I gut your soldiers like little piggies."

I didn't move an inch. I didn't respond to her barbs. She was trying to goad me. She must have seen it on my face, because her smile dropped.

With a snarl, Mordred launched herself at me, tendrils of inky darkness lashing out

like whips. I barely managed to dodge them, feeling the air crackle where they struck the ground. Excalibur sang as I swung it in a wide arc, golden light blazing from its edge.

Mordred hissed as the sword's light seared her arm, just barely making contact, leaving an angry red welt. Her eyes narrowed, and her shadows writhed and twisted, coalescing into nightmarish shapes with razor-sharp claws.

I beat my wings, lifting off the ground as the shadow creatures lunged for me. Excalibur flashed, its light dispelling the darkness wherever it touched.

Their claws raked across my skin. I cried out in pain but kept swinging Excalibur, its golden light blazing through the darkness. My wings beat furiously, carrying me just out of reach of the writhing mass of nightmares below.

"You can't run forever, little sister," Mordred taunted, her voice echoing unnaturally through the twisted wood. "I'll make your death painless if you hand over the sword. You don't have to suffer the way our father did."

I gritted my teeth, pushing back the fear. Because I was afraid. Mordred chilled the blood in my veins. Excalibur pulsed in my grip, its warmth spreading up my arm. Its ancient magic mingled with my own, filling me with a strength I didn't know I possessed.

"Arthur!" someone shouted, and idly, I knew it was Lancelot. My men were shouting and cursing as they fought against the dark magic that held them hostage. Galahad's magic was no match for Mordred's grip on the tree branches. Not here. Not in this wood soaked in darkness.

With a battle cry that surprised even me, I dove towards Mordred. Excalibur cleaved through her shadow creatures, dispelling them in bursts of golden light. Her eyes

widened in shock as I barreled towards her.

Our magic clashed in a thunderous explosion of light and darkness. The force of it sent us both tumbling across the forest floor. I rolled to my feet, wincing as pain lanced through my side. A quick glance showed a deep gash where one of her shadow claws had found its mark.

Mordred stood as well, her red hair wild and her green eyes blazing with fury. Blood trickled from a cut on her cheek where Excalibur grazed her. She snarled, baring teeth that seemed unnaturally sharp in the moonlight.

“Druid blood runs through my veins too, little girl! My mother taught me everything. How to kill. How to feed off of blood magic. She taught me how to be a fucking god. What did your mother teach you?” She laughed, and the sound made me feel ill. “Oh yes, she taught you how to roll over and take it like a good little bitch.”

Dark energy crackled around her hands, morphing into wicked-looking blades of shadow. She lunged at me, moving with inhuman speed. I barely managed to bring Excalibur up in time to parry her strike. The clash of our weapons sent shockwaves through the clearing, causing the twisted trees to groan and shudder.

A vicious slash caught me across the shoulder, and I cried out in pain. The wound burned with an unnatural cold, as if Mordred's darkness was trying to seep into my very being. I stumbled back, my wings flaring instinctively to keep me balanced.

Distantly, I heard Merlin calling my name.

My shoulder burned with icy fire where Mordred's shadow blade had struck. Each beat of my wings sent fresh waves of agony through my body, but I refused to yield.

My sister circled me like a predator, enjoying every moment of my pain. My eyes

flicked to the door of the stone temple. I'd managed to turn us around, and I was now much closer to the threshold than Mordred was. She hadn't even bothered to notice the maneuver.

She was still talking, but I'd tuned out her voice, knowing her words were venomous lies. She'd say anything to make me falter. I just needed her to keep talking.

I patted my pocket, feeling a familiar shape growing warmer under my fingertips. I kept my eyes locked on Mordred, feigning exhaustion as I stumbled back another step. My wings drooped, as if I could barely keep them aloft. Inside, my heart raced. Just a few more feet...

She raised her shadow blades; the darkness writhed around her like a living thing. The moon loomed behind her, its swirling surface casting an eerie, otherworldly glow across her pale as death skin. In that light, Mordred looked less human and more like some ancient, malevolent entity.

"I am the true heir of Camelot," she hissed as I backed slowly up the obsidian staircase.

As she spoke, I felt my back press against something solid.

The temple door.

My hand snuck into my pocket, fingers closing around the cool metal of the golden key I'd retrieved from the first riddle box in the Boneyard. Its weight was reassuring in my palm.

As Mordred lunged forward, her shadow blades raised for a killing blow, I ducked and thrust the key into the lock. The moment it clicked, a blinding flash of golden light erupted from the temple doors.

Mordred stumbled back with a pained cry, shielding her eyes. I straightened and squinted against the radiance, watching in awe as intricate runes carved into the stone began to glow. They pulsed with power, each symbol igniting in a cascading wave that spread across the entire facade of the temple.

The light grew more intense, revealing patterns I hadn't noticed before. Spiraling fractals and ancient sigils danced across the surface, a language older than time itself. I could almost understand it, the meaning hovering just at the edge of my mind.

A deep rumble shook the ground beneath as the temple doors began to swing inward. The sound of grinding stone filled the air, punctuated by the snapping and creaking of ancient mechanisms that were sitting long dormant. Stale air rushed out, carrying with it the scent of dust, forgotten magic, and something other .

The golden light spilling out beckoned to me, promising answers. Promising the end to this godsforsaken quest. But as I moved to cross the threshold, some latent instinct made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

In that split second, I spun around, Excalibur blazing to life in my grip. The sword moved as if it had a will of its own, guiding my movements as I thrust the glowing blade forward.

Time seemed to slow as I watched Excalibur's point pierce Mordred's chest. Her eyes widened in shock and pain, her mouth opening in a silent scream. The shadow blades she'd been about to plunge into my back dissipated like smoke.

The force of the blow sent Mordred stumbling backward. She clutched at the wound, dark blood seeping between her fingers. Her legs gave out, and she collapsed to her knees on the obsidian steps.

"No," she gasped, her voice a ragged whisper. "It can't end like this. I was meant to

rule?—"

My knights were released from the writhing tree branches, dropping safely to the ground. They rushed towards me, their own magic flaring to life. They were shouting and scrambling, but I could barely hear them. All I could do was stare down at my sister.

Then the ground beneath us began to shake violently. Deep, resonant rumbles echoed through the twisted forest as fissures opened in the earth. The unnatural moon overhead seemed to pulse in time with the tremors.

"Arthur, we need to get inside the temple!" Merlin shouted over the din.

I nodded, turning back towards the glowing doorway. But before I could take a step, an agonized scream pierced the air. We all whirled to see Mordred's body contorting unnaturally. Dark tendrils of magic erupted from the wound in her chest.

We rushed into the temple, the ground still shaking beneath our feet. The doors swung shut behind us, cutting off Mordred's agonized screams. Golden light pulsed from intricate runes carved into the walls, illuminating a vast circular chamber.

At the center stood a stone altar, its surface etched with symbols that seemed to shift and change as I looked at them. And there, nestled in a depression at the altar's heart, was the Holy Grail.

It was both more and less than I imagined. A simple golden cup, unadorned save for a band of swirling patterns around its rim. Yet it radiated power.

I trembled as I took a step towards it. This was it. The end of our quest, the key to saving Camelot. My fingers tingled with anticipation as I reached out.

A deafening crack split the air. The stone floor shuddered and split, fissures racing across its surface like lightning. I stumbled back, wings flaring for balance, as skeletal hands burst through the cracks.

“Holy gods!” Gawain shouted, cursing as he kicked away a hand that tried to grab his ankle.

They clawed their way up, bony fingers scrabbling against stone. The skeletons that emerged were unlike anything I'd ever seen. Their bones were stained with age, yet draped in rotting finery. Tattered silks clung to ribcages, while tarnished crowns sat askew on their heads.

“There lies the chalice, pure and bright, guarded by kings who fell to night,” Merlin whispered, recounting that final riddle. His eyes met mine in horror. “The bones of the kings who made it this far and failed.”

My knights sprang into action, their own magic flaring to life. Gawain's frost coated the floor, causing several skeletons to slip and shatter. But like those hit by Merlin's magic, they simply pulled themselves back together.

Lancelot's flames engulfed a group of the undead kings, reducing them to ash. For a moment, I thought we'd found a way to stop them. Until the ash swirled and coalesced, reforming into their skeletal shapes.

"Fuck," Galahad cursed, his earthen magic entangling several of the creatures with the vines that jutted from the walls. "How do we stop something that's already dead?"

I gritted my teeth, my mind racing. The riddle echoed in my head. To claim the Grail, your courage must swell, face the restless dead, break their spell...

My grip tightened on Excalibur as I racked my brain. How could I break a spell cast

by the gods themselves? A spell that managed to ensnare ancient, long-dead kings? What power did I have that they didn't?

As if in answer, the circlet on my brow flared hot against my skin. My entire body began to glow as I looked down at my arms. Twisting light swirled under my skin like climbing vines. My wings beat rapidly, scattering motes of light that danced in the air like fireflies.

“Arthur!” Merlin shouted.

I felt my feet leave the ground as the power lifted me, suspending me in midair. The glow emanating from my skin intensified until I was a miniature sun. My knights stumbled back, shielding their eyes from the radiance. I could see the awe and terror on their faces, mouths agape.

“Arthur!” someone shouted again. Maybe multiple someones, I couldn't tell. There was a ringing in my head that drowned out everything else.

Then, in an instant, everything changed. It was as if the floodgates of the universe had opened, pouring ancient, primal magic into my very being. I was no longer just Arthur Pendragon.

I was a vessel.

Chapter Thirty-Four

ARTHUR

My body arched, and when my mouth opened, the voice that emerged was not my own. It was a chorus of voices, layered and resonant, speaking with the weight of eons. The words reverberated through the chamber, each syllable crackling with raw power. The language of the Old Religion flowed from my lips.

As suddenly as it began, the surge of power receded. I dropped to the ground, my legs buckling beneath me. The stone floor was cool against my palms as I struggled to catch my breath, my entire body trembling.

But there was no time to recover. The skeletal kings advanced, their bony fingers reaching for me. My knights fought valiantly, but their magic seemed to have little lasting effect on these ancient, cursed beings.

I pushed myself to my feet, swaying slightly as I raised Excalibur. The sword hummed in my grip. I felt the remnants of that otherworldly power still coursing through my veins, mingling with my own magic and the ancient strength of the blade.

With a cry that was part battle roar and part primal scream, I lunged forward. Excalibur carved a blazing arc through the air, its edge trailing streams of golden light. As it connected with the first skeletal king, there was a sound like thunder.

The undead creature exploded into a shower of bone fragments and tattered finery, but this time, it did not reform. The crown that had sat askew on its skull clattered to

the ground, rolling away into the shadows.

The chamber echoed with the sound of breaking bones. My wings spread wide, lifting me off the ground and allowing me to strike from above. As I fought, I noticed the power of the old gods surging through me.

The skeletal kings fought back with the desperation of the eternally damned. Their bony fingers clawed at me. But where before their touch had been deadly, now it simply crumbled against the radiance emanating from my skin.

For the first time in my short life, I felt powerful. For the first time since this quest began, I felt like the queen I was fated to become.

As I fought, the world around me seemed to blur into streaks of color and shadow. Excalibur moved as if it had a will of its own, guiding my arms with each swing. The blade sang through the air.

Skeletal kings crumbled, their ancient bones nothing but dust. My knights held the kings off until I could reach them, wearing themselves down until I could tell their energy was waning.

As the last one finally fell, an eerie silence fell over the chamber. My chest heaved as I tried to catch my breath, every muscle in my body aching.

I turned slowly, surveying the destruction. Shattered bone fragments and tattered bits of ancient finery littered the stone floor. But my gaze was drawn to the center of the chamber, where the stone altar stood untouched amidst the chaos. The Holy Grail rested there. Calling to me. Begging me to take it.

I drifted towards the altar, drawn by a force I couldn't explain. The closer I got, the more I sensed the raw power radiating from the cup.

"Arthur, be careful!" Tristan shouted. "Kings have fallen to the Grail's power. I don't—" He paused as I peered over my shoulder, meeting my mate's eyes. "Just be careful."

All I could give him was the barest hint of a smile before I turned back to the cup. I knew, with a certainty that went beyond logic or reason, that I was worthy. This cup, this ancient relic of unimaginable power, had been waiting for me.

I tentatively extended my hand towards the gleaming Grail, feeling a pulsating energy emanating from it. My fingers finally made contact with its cool metal surface, sending a jolt of power through my entire body.

The Grail seemed to come alive in my hands, its golden exterior swirling with intricate patterns and runes. As I lifted the cup, the weight of centuries pressed down on me.

A flood of visions raced through my mind: scenes from past, present, and countless futures. I saw the glory of Camelot and its eventual downfall into darkness. I saw myself as queen, draped in regal radiance, but also as a broken warrior on a battlefield drenched in blood. The visions blurred into a sea of possibilities. I saw my men lying dead around me, but also in my bed as they brought me pleasure beyond my wildest dreams.

I was consumed by blinding light erupting from the cup. Despite the shouts of my knights, I felt distant and detached as the world shifted around me. For a moment, I even questioned my own existence.

The stone walls of the temple began to ripple and fade. The air shimmered and warped, filled with swirling motes of light that danced and twirled in complex patterns. At that moment, I understood why kings had fought and died for this relic. It was more than just a cup; it was a conduit to something greater, something beyond

mortal comprehension.

The stone floor beneath our feet melted away, replaced by soft, dew-kissed grass. The oppressive darkness of the temple gave way to the ethereal twilight of Avalon. I blinked, momentarily disoriented by the sudden transformation.

We were back in the grove where we'd made camp, surrounded by the midnight-blue trees with their shimmering leaves. The air was thick with the scent of night-blooming flowers and rich, damp earth. Tiny luminescent creatures flitted between the branches, their glow casting dancing shadows across the forest floor. Gone were the stones and the statues. Gone were the bones of the fallen kings.

As my eyes adjusted to the sudden change, I spotted a dark figure crumpled on the forest floor. My heart clenched as I recognized Mordred's blood-red hair matted and tangled around her pale face. Dark liquid seeped from the corner of her mouth, staining the moss beneath her head a deep crimson.

Without thinking, I rushed to her side, setting the Grail carefully on the soft bed of mossy ground. Dropping to my knees, I cradled Mordred's head in my hands. Her skin was clammy and cool to the touch. Her emerald eyes, once blazing with fury and ambition, now flickered weakly as she struggled to focus on my face.

"Arthur," she whispered, her voice barely audible above the gentle rustling of leaves. A trickle of blood escaped her lips as she spoke, and I gently wiped it away with my thumb.

"Shh, don't try to talk," I murmured, my throat tight. This woman had tried to kill me, had threatened everything I held dear. Yet at this moment, all I could see was my sister. Broken, dying, and terribly alone.

This woman was all that was left of the blood flowing through my veins. The last

living link I had to my past. To my family. When she was gone, it would be only me, and that weight of that settled like lead boots.

Mordred's hand trembled as she reached up, her fingers brushing against my cheek. "I'm sorry," she breathed, each word seeming to cost her dearly. "Maybe Uther was right to despise me."

A tear slipped down my cheek, falling onto Mordred's face and mingling with the blood at the corner of her mouth. "I'm sorry too."

My hand trembled as I reached for the Grail. The cup felt impossibly light in my grasp, as if it were crafted from sunbeams rather than metal. With my other hand, I fumbled for the water pouch at my hip. The leather was soft and worn. As I uncorked it, the scent of fresh spring water filled the air.

"Arthur, no," Merlin's voice cut through the stillness. "The Grail's power is unpredictable. We don't know what it might do."

I met his gaze, seeing the concern etched deep in those ageless blue eyes. Around him, my knights shifted uneasily, their hands hovering near weapons as if unsure whether to intervene.

Returning my attention to Mordred, I gently lifted her head. Her eyes, once so full of fire, now held a quiet acceptance. She knew, as I did, that this was the end of her journey.

With trembling hands, I poured the crystal-clear water from my pouch into the Grail. Then, I gently cradled her head in one hand while bringing the Grail to her lips with the other.

Gawain stepped forward, frost crackling around his clenched fists. "She tried to kill

you," he growled, his steel-gray eyes flashing. "She doesn't deserve the Grail's power."

"It's alright," I murmured, tilting it gently. "Drink, sister." Mordred's lips parted, and I carefully poured a small amount of the glowing liquid into her mouth.

Black tendrils of power erupted from the wound in her chest, writhing and twisting like living shadows. They latched onto her limbs, her torso, her face. Anywhere they could find purchase. Mordred's mouth opened in a silent scream as the darkness spread rapidly across her pale skin.

I scrambled backwards; the Grail slipped from my grasp and spilled its glowing contents onto the mossy ground. Where the liquid touched, flowers instantly bloomed.

Mordred's skin began to crack and flake, dissolving into fine gray ash that drifted away on an invisible wind. The process moved swiftly, revealing glimpses of stark white bone beneath.

Her blood-red hair withered and crumbled, scattering like crimson leaves in an autumn breeze. Then she was bone. A skeletal husk draped in fine jewels, and a dress made of emerald silk.

Chapter Thirty-Five

ARTHUR

I stood on the balcony of Camelot's highest tower, watching in awe as the city below transformed before my eyes. The streets were awash with color and magic, unlike anything I'd ever seen in Albion.

Fae from every corner of Avalon had crossed through shimmering portals over the past three days, their arrival heralded by bursts of light and swirling mist. Flowers bloomed spontaneously wherever faerie feet touched the ground first. The air was sweet and floral rather than bitter and cold. For the very first time, Camelot actually felt alive.

Humans gathered in the streets, wearing their finest clothing and selling whatever they could, eager to collect fae jewels and gold.

Seelie and Unseelie fae mingled freely, their centuries-old animosity set aside for this historic moment. Among the fae, I could see the human nobles of Camelot, their eyes wide with awe and a touch of fear. Queen Tatiana was staying in the castle, and I'd made sure to provide her with a detail of our finest guards.

My coronation had been a spectacular event, but it took hours for me to recite the ancient vows to protect and serve as the high queen of Albion. Not just Camelot, but over the entire realm. The ceremony was a mesmerizing blend of human tradition and fae magic, unlike anything I had ever witnessed.

The great hall had been transformed into a breathtaking wonderland. Vines of shimmering silver and gold crept up the stone walls, blooming with flowers that glowed like captured starlight. The air was thick with the scent of night-blooming jasmine and moon flowers, their ethereal petals unfurling in the presence of so much magic.

The humans had been mystified, having never seen much of the world beyond the mortal realm they were stuck in. But not anymore. As queen, I pledged to open the gateways between realms, uniting our people as one in both trade and politics. There was a long road ahead, but I realized I was actually looking forward to figuring it out.

I turned from the balcony, my bare feet silent on the cool stone floor as I made my way back into my chambers. The room was bathed in the soft glow of floating orbs of faerie light, casting dancing shadows across the walls.

My handmaidens—a mix of human and fae—bustled about, making final preparations for the evening's festivities. They chattered excitedly in a melodious blend of languages, their eyes bright with anticipation. Tonight would be one to remember. The fae were bringing revelry to the humans, and we would celebrate deep into the early hours of the dawn.

I stood before the full-length mirror, marveling at my transformation. Gone was the street thief in tattered clothes. In her place stood a queen, radiant and ethereal. I almost didn't recognize myself.

The dress they'd crafted for me was a masterpiece of fae artistry. Sheer red fabric flowed like liquid fire, clinging to my curves before cascading to the floor in ripples of crimson. With each movement, shimmering runes flickered to life across my skin, each one hand painted with metallic pigments. My hair was styled into a strange, sleek and straight waterfall of chestnut strands, and my mother's circlet sat atop my head. I still couldn't figure out how they'd accomplished it.

Tonight I would drink from the Holy Grail. In front of all of Camelot, and all who'd traveled from Avalon to bear witness. Tonight I would become truly immortal, and worthy of the highest throne in the land.

But there was something I had to do first. Before the magic took hold and transformed me.

A soft knock at the door interrupted my swirling thoughts. The handmaidens exchanged knowing glances, their cheeks flushing as they moved to answer it. As the heavy oak door swung open, my breath caught in my throat. There, framed in the doorway, stood my knights. All five of them, and beside them, was Merlin. They filed into the room one by one.

Gone were their usual leather and steel. Instead, they wore traditional fae clothing—loose silks and fine linens that draped elegantly over their muscular forms. Their chests were bare, bronzed skin on full display. Intricate tattoos and shimmering runes decorated their arms and torsos, pulsing faintly with magic. They were barefoot and wild tonight.

The maids scrambled out of the room in a fit of giggles.

My knights surrounded me, their eyes filled with heat. Gawain let out a low whistle. "You look absolutely breathtaking, my queen," he said, his voice husky.

Lancelot stepped closer, his golden eyes smoldering. "That dress is sinful. I can't wait to peel it off you."

Tristan's silver gaze raked over me appreciatively. "Hello, mate ..." His voice was silken, and made my thighs clench with need.

Merlin's blue eyes blazed with barely contained desire. "Fuck—" he breathed, "you're

magnificent."

They circled me slowly, drinking in every detail. The heat of their gazes was like a physical caress. My skin tingled with anticipation, desire coiling low in my belly.

Gawain's fingers trailed along my bare arm, leaving goosebumps in their wake. "So soft," he murmured. "Like silk and starlight."

Lancelot stepped behind me, his warm breath fanning across my neck. "I can smell your need," he growled softly. "It's intoxicating."

Tristan's hand cupped my cheek, tilting my face up to meet his eyes. "My beautiful mate," he said reverently. "Tonight you'll bear all our marks."

And not only that, but when we were fully mated, and I sipped from the Grail, my immortality would transfer to them, and I'd know that they'd be protected.

Galahad's fingers tangled in my hair, gently tugging my head back. His hot breath hit the shell of my ear. "We're going to fuck you the way a goddess deserves to be fucked."

I sucked in a breath, barely containing a moan. Gentle hands caressed my skin as lips pressed heated kisses along my neck and shoulders. I trembled with anticipation as they slowly undressed me, the sheer red fabric falling away to pool at my feet.

Tristan lifted me in his strong arms, carrying me to the bed. The others followed, shedding their own clothing as they went. My breath caught at the sight of their magnificent bodies, hardened warriors built for battle and taking lives.

They laid me out on the silken sheets, six pairs of eyes roaming hungrily over my naked form. Gawain was the first to claim my lips in a searing kiss that left me

breathless. His tongue swept into my mouth as his hands cupped my breasts, thumbs brushing over sensitive nipples.

Lancelot's golden head dipped between my thighs, his talented tongue exploring my wet heat. I gasped and arched into his touch as waves of pleasure washed over me. Galahad captured my lips next, swallowing my moans as Lancelot's licks and sucks intensified.

Percival's shadows caressed my skin like living silk while Tristan's silver eyes blazed with hunger as he watched. Merlin's magic danced over my flesh, heightening every sensation.

Lancelot's tongue worked magic between my thighs as the others caressed and kissed every inch of my skin. Waves of pleasure coursed through me, building higher and higher. Just as I was about to crest that peak, Lancelot pulled away with a wicked grin.

"Not yet, my queen," he purred. "We've only just begun."

Gawain's frost-kissed lips trailed along my collarbone as Galahad's gentle hands massaged my breasts. Merlin's fingers traced intricate patterns on my skin, leaving trails of tingling heat in their wake. When he leaned down to capture my lips in a searing kiss, I tasted lightning and starlight on his tongue.

Merlin slid beneath me, lifting me into his lap as he leaned against the headboard of the bed, and magic tingled at his fingertips. His cock pushed at my entrance, and the kisses he peppered across my shoulders had me relaxing enough to let him in. Finally, Lancelot positioned himself between my thighs, the tip of his cock brushing against my wet heat. "Are you ready for us, little faerie?"

I nodded, my body trembling with need. Completely in sync, they slowly pushed

inside, stretching and filling me exquisitely. I gasped at the delicious fullness, my back arching off the bed. Lancelot groaned and cursed, his whole body shuddering as his eyes rolled back in his head.

They fucked me together, moving both too slow and too fast at the same time. It was too much and not enough. I writhed as cruses dripped from my lips. Galahad and Percy took turns strumming my clit.

Then, Lancelot pulled free, and I nearly whined, but he was replaced with Galahad, thrusting himself to the hilt. My hips moved on their own, seeking out more, more, more. Lancelot moved to kneel by my head, sinking his fingers into my hair and turning my face in the opposite direction. "Suck him," he ordered, his voice a guttural rasp.

Gawain was kneeling on my other side, and I wasted no time swallowing his throbbing cock. He groaned, his fingers tangling in my hair. Galahad and Merlin continued thrusting into me, their cocks sliding against each other inside me. The dual sensation was exquisite, the pleasure building higher and higher.

They took turns fucking me in every position imaginable. At one point, I was on my hands and knees, Lancelot pounding into me from behind while I sucked Merlin's cock. Percy's shadows bound my wrists, holding me in place.

Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me as they brought me to climax again and again. My cries of ecstasy echoed off the stone walls. As the night wore on, their touches grew more urgent, more possessive. There wasn't a spot on my body that hadn't been kissed, licked, or fucked.

My body glistened with sweat, flushed and trembling from countless orgasms. But still, they weren't done with me.

"On your knees," Tristan growled, his eyes blazing. I was helpless to resist a direct command from my mate. My body was moving before I was aware of it.

They positioned me in the middle of the bed, surrounding me on all sides. I was caged in, helpless and at their mercy. But I trusted these men with my life. With my soul.

Tristan knelt behind me, his cock nudging at my entrance. Gawain and Lancelot flanked me on either side while Galahad and Percival knelt before me. Merlin stood at the edge of the bed, his blue eyes glowing with arcane power.

"Are you ready to be claimed?" Tristan purred in my ear.

I nodded, utterly beyond words at this point. In one smooth thrust, he buried himself to the hilt inside me. I cried out at the exquisite fullness, my inner walls clenching around him. The others pressed close, their hands roaming my sweat-slicked skin. Gawain's frost-kissed fingers teased my nipples while Lancelot's fiery touch branded my hips.

Tristan set a punishing pace, each thrust pushing me higher. The others' touches grew more urgent, more possessive.

"Now," Tristan growled.

In perfect synchronization, they each leaned in. Sharp fangs pricked my skin as they bit down. Tristan at the nape of my neck, Gawain and Lancelot on either side of my throat, Galahad and Percival each claiming a breast.

At the same moment, Merlin grasped both my hands in his. Golden light flared between our palms as an intricate runic pattern etched itself into our skin.

The simultaneous sensations of pain and pleasure pushed me over the edge. Wave after wave of ecstasy crashed over me as the most intense orgasm of my life rocked through me. I screamed my release, my inner walls clenching rhythmically around Tristan's cock.

My climax triggered Tristan's, and he roared as he spilled himself inside me. One by one, the others followed, their seed painting my skin as they marked me as theirs. Blood dripped from my wounds, but my magic healed them over immediately. One by one, their teeth left my skin, each of them moaning as they fisted their cocks.

As the last tremors subsided, we collapsed together in a tangle of sweat-slicked limbs. Their arms encircled me, holding me close as we caught our breath. Sensation after sensation washed over me, feelings, wants, needs—all not my own.

I could feel my men at a bone deep level. Merlin too. Some ancient part of my bloodline woke up and accepted his. He was my mate as much as my knights were. As if all seven of us were merged into one.

Merlin's thumb stroked my palm, sending tingles up my arm. His azure eyes met mine, filled with awe and reverence. "You've always been my queen," he whispered. "My fucking heart. To the bitter end."

"To the bitter end," I rasped.

Tristan nuzzled my neck. "Bound for eternity."

Lancelot pressed a kiss to my shoulder. "No force in this realm or any other can tear us apart. I was wrong about everything, and I take it all back. I love you, Arthur."

Gawain's fingers traced patterns on my skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. "You are ours," he growled possessively. "As we are yours."

Percival's shadows climbed higher and higher until they draped like curtains over the entirety of the bed, bathing us in shadows. "There's no turning back now, little faerie. I'll follow you into the dark forever."

Galahad's gentle touch soothed the ache of the bite on my breast, and his chest rumbled like a cat purring in pleasure. "Always and forever."

I wanted to burst. To sob, to laugh, to fucking scream. I wanted to run through the streets of Camelot and declare in front of the gods themselves that these men were mine and I was theirs.

We'd rule Camelot side by side. One queen and her six kings.

"Always and forever," I echoed, my heart full for the first time in my life.

Merlin

I stood at Arthur's side as she ascended the steps to the throne where Uther Pendragon once sat, her crimson gown trailing behind her like liquid fire. The great hall of Camelot was packed to the brim, a sea of faces both human and fae gazing up at their new queen with a mixture of awe and fear, both at the queen and the golden relic that awaited her.

The air thrummed with magic, ancient power awakening after centuries of slumber. Motes of golden light danced through the air, swirling around Arthur as she took her place before the throne. Her chestnut hair was sleek and silky, a waterfall down her back. The circlet that once belonged to her mother crowned her head. She looked every bit the faerie queen she was about to become.

I couldn't take my fucking eyes off her. Visions of running my tongue along her soft skin played through my mind—the passion, the claiming, the binding of our souls.

Even now, I sensed her presence like a warm ember in my chest, our connection humming with life and power.

The Archdruid of the old religion stepped forward, his ageless face serene as he presented the Holy Grail. Gaius stood to the right of him, a proud smile on his face. The golden cup gleamed in the light, seeming to pulse with its own inner radiance. Arthur's hands were steady as she took it and turned to face the room, her eyes meeting mine for a brief moment. I gave her a small nod of encouragement.

"People of Albion," Arthur's voice rang out, clear and strong. "Today marks the dawn of a new era. No longer shall we be divided—human and fae, Seelie and Unseelie. We are one people, united under many rulers and many gods."

A hush fell over the crowd as Arthur brought the golden cup to her lips. The air itself seemed to hold its breath as she drank deeply from the Grail. For a moment, nothing happened. Then a soft golden glow began to emanate from her skin, growing brighter with each passing second.

Arthur's eyes flew open, blazing with inner fire. She gasped, her back arching as waves of power visibly coursed through her body. Her wings burst forth in a shower of crystalline light, unfurling to their full majestic span. The crowd gasped and murmured, shifting on their feet.

When the light faded, Arthur stood transformed. Her skin shimmered with an otherworldly radiance, her eyes now swirling pools of molten gold. The power of the Grail had changed her, elevating her to something beyond mortal or fae. She was truly magnificent. Golden runes shone from beneath her skin, in a language even I couldn't read. The language of the old gods themselves.

Arthur's words, when she spoke again, resonated with layers and layers of godly voices. "I, Arthur Pendragon, do solemnly swear to protect and serve all the peoples

of Albion and Avalon, human, fae, and all realm's beings."

"As your high queen, I have chosen to take not one, but six consorts to rule at my side." A ripple of murmurs and gasps swept through the crowd. "These males have proven their loyalty, courage, and love time and time again. They will serve as my king consorts, helping to bridge the divide between human and fae."

My heart shot to my throat. King consorts...It was happening. My body felt both light and heavy at once.

"Sir Gawain of the Seelie Court."

Gawain strode confidently to Arthur's side, his steel-gray eyes twinkling with mischief. Frost crystals shimmered in his dark hair as he knelt before our queen.

"Sir Lancelot of the Seelie Court."

Lancelot's golden hair gleamed in the light as he took his place beside Gawain. The fire in his eyes matched the passion I knew burned in his heart for Arthur. The love he fought so long against.

"Sir Galahad of the Seelie Court."

Galahad let out a whoop as he made his way forward. Arthur's lips twitched as the big man knelt.

"Sir Percival of the Unseelie Court."

Percy stepped forward as a hush descended over the room. Percy—cousin of the male who started it all. Redeemer of his family name.

“Sir Tristan of the Unseelie Court.”

Tristan glided forward, his silver hair shimmering in the light. As he took his place beside the others.

Arthur's eyes met mine. My heart raced as she called out the final name.

“Sir Merlin of Camelot.”

My heart stuttered in my chest, and I had to blink several times. Had I heard her correctly? But as the crowd's eyes turned to me expectantly, I realized this was no mistake. On shaky legs, I made my way forward.

As I approached, Arthur's lips curved into a soft smile that made my breath catch. Up close, her transformation was even more breathtaking. She was a fucking goddess.

I sank to one knee before her, my head bowed. “My queen,” I murmured, my voice trembling.

With a graceful motion, she drew Excalibur from the altar beside her golden throne, the blade shimmering with an otherworldly glow. She placed the flat of the radiant sword on my right shoulder, then slowly shifted it to the other side. “Rise, Sir Merlin. From this day forth, you’ll be known as Sir Merlin, Knight of the Round Table, and king consort to the High Queen.”

Her gaze lifted, taking in the six of us. In that moment, a surge of magic flowed through the bond that connected us all—a power I’d never known could be so overwhelming. Alongside that rush came an intense wave of devotion, solidifying as the Grail’s energy transferred from her to us.

“And rise, my mates. My kings.”

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:29 am

ONE MONTH LATER...

We stood at the gates in front of the prettiest little cottage I'd ever seen. My stomach was in knots, a flutter of nerves I hadn't felt since facing down Mordred. But this wasn't Mordred. This was much, much more terrifying.

"Relax, little faerie," Gawain teased, his steel-gray eyes dancing with mischief. "It's just Galahad's mother, not another giant or skeleton king."

I shot him a glare, but there was no real heat behind it. "Easy for you to say. You've known her for centuries."

Lance chuckled, his familiar warmth enveloping me as he wrapped an arm around my waist. "You faced down a sorceress hell-bent on stealing your throne, love. Surely meeting your mate's mother isn't more terrifying than that?"

I huffed, leaning into his embrace. "At least with Mordred, I knew where I stood. What if she doesn't approve of me? What if she thinks I'm not good enough for her son?"

"Impossible," Merlin murmured, leaning over to press a gentle kiss to my forehead. "You're too damn beautiful to disapprove of. It doesn't hurt that you're the high queen of all of Albion. You made her son into a king. What more could a mother ask for?"

Something told me Galahad's mother didn't give a rat's arse about any of that.

“Don’t worry, my love,” Percy said with a dark, knowing chuckle, as if he were immensely enjoying my discomfort. Maybe a little too much. “You’re an immortal now, so what’s the worst she can do to you?”

That was not reassuring in the slightest.

As I stood there, heart racing, the cottage door suddenly swung open. The most delightful scent of freshly baked bread spilled out. Galahad's mother stepped onto the threshold. He was right behind her, smiling broadly and proudly.

She was strikingly beautiful, her ageless face framed by flowing auburn hair that seemed to dance in the gentle breeze. I could immediately tell where he’d gotten his fiery looks from, and I wished I could see his father too. She wore a simple yet elegant dress of woven silks. Her grass-green eyes sparkled with warmth and kindness as they landed on me.

Before I could even think to curtsy or offer a formal greeting, she was moving. With graceful steps that barely seemed to touch the ground, she glided towards me, her arms outstretched. In an instant, I was enveloped in an embrace that felt like coming home.

Her arms were strong yet gentle, and she smelled of sun-warmed earth and sweet honeysuckle. I felt the tension melt from my shoulders as she held me close, one hand coming up to stroke my hair in a gesture so maternal it made my heart ache.

It’d been twenty years since I felt the loving touch of a mother. Twenty years of yearning for a family. It was all I could to keep it together, and keep from sobbing in front of Galahad’s mother.

When she finally pulled back, her hands remained on my shoulders as she looked at me with eyes brimming with joy and unshed tears. "I've always wanted a daughter."

As I wiped a tear from my eye, I turned to see Galahad walking towards us, a broad smile on his absurdly handsome face. But before he could reach us, two hulking figures that resembled Galahad to a suspicious degree burst from the bushes and tackled him to the ground with a resounding thud.

“Eat grass, fucker!”