

KNIGHTS OF THE ROUNDTABLE:  
GENESIS OF A KING

BOOK 1

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*To the people who supported our dreams and celebrated  
the little things alongside us. We couldn't have done it  
without you. Thank you.*

## Chapter 1: The Prologue



*"Run, son!"*

*The voice echoed through the woods, drowned out by clashing swords. Through the woods, a young boy ran for his life, terrified of the sound of the swords clanging behind him.*

*A tall, commanding figure stood in a clearing behind the boy, swinging his blade up to defend himself. Black flame surrounded his boots and coated the ground, growing larger every step back from the attack.*

*The swords met again, sliding across one another with a whine. The man looked up at his opponent, daunt seeping through him like ice. Fiery, dilated eyes glared back at him, set in a horned steel mask rigid as his blade and black as midnight. The flaming black shadow stood well over the man, its very existence sapping the light from the sky and the flames that burned among them.*

*The boy hid behind a thick tree not far from where he ran, gaining his breath. He opened his hand, a necklace bound in gold thread glowing in his palm, the blue crystal in the centre glimmering in the small light from the moon peeking through the canopy.*

*Flinching at the sound of a pained yell, the boy peered his head around the tree. The man lay defeated on the ground with a deep gash on his arm, his sword in the scorched dirt beside him. The dark figure stalked over to him, its weapon dangling from its right hand and scraping*

*the ground as it moved, sparks spitting from the sword as it brushed the stones scattered across the dirt.*

*The man looked up at the demon-like shadow, his eyes wide as he clutched at his wound. The figure stood over the man in victory, the flames roiling off its shoulders and lapping at the air.*

*"Just like the legends said, 'the King will fall', and let that be true," it growled, its voice deep like thunder.*

*"A new King will rise; he will bring peace to Braynor," the man spat, his voice steady as he rose to his feet.*

*"King Benjamin, how naïve you've become," the figure mocked, a shadowy grin peeking from under the fiery embrace.*

*"The Born King is destined to rise, and you cannot change that," the King said, defiance entering his voice.*

*"But you will fall," the figure smirked. "And you cannot stop that."*

*The King jolted sharply, groaning with pain. He looked down, the sword's tip embedded into him, blood slowly pouring out of the wound. Pain flared through his body, and his knees gave out, sending him back to the ground, his hand holding the blade. A line of blood dripped from his sliced palm, crimson staining the charred grass. Gravity overtook him, and he fell to his side, facing the boy in the woods.*

*The King's lips moved slowly, the light in his eyes fading as he whispered to him, "Run, Arthur... Run."*

*The young boy felt tears dripping down his cheeks as he watched him bleed out on the ground, flicking his eyes up to the figure. In a flick of movement, the figure sharply turned its head to the boy. Bright amber eyes glared at him, piercing through the black flames and staring right into Arthur's eyes as if they'd burn him from the inside out-*



A fearful cry pierced through the air, and Arthur sprang up in fright, panting heavily. Looking around with wide eyes, he took in the familiar surroundings of his bedroom.

Bedroom.

Reality.

*Right...*

Realising it was all a dream, he calmed himself slowly, his eyes flicking around the room for any sign of the figure he saw, to no avail. He breathed slowly, calming his racing heart.

Rubbing his eyes, Arthur moved himself over to the edge of the bed. That was the first time the figure had looked at him - every other time, it was just his silhouette and voice. The dark, skeletal face with cracks and breaks, and those orange glowing eyes...

Arthur sighed, looking over to his bedside table, the same necklace he held in the nightmare resting atop it. He frowned at it, picking it up warily and hooking it around his neck.

He got up out of his bed, walking over to his wardrobe in the left corner, a mirror seated beside it. He looked at himself, his green eyes irritated at his dirty blonde hair askew from the pillows. He dragged his fingers lightly through it, studying the faint stubble dusted on his jaw. He'd need a shave soon.

He opened his wardrobe, pulling out whatever his hands grabbed first: a black fur coat with regular dark brown trousers. He threw them onto his bed before pulling out a pair of socks and brown leather boots.

Arthur stepped out of his bedroom fully dressed, heading down the long, narrow hallway. The walls were filled with ancient artefacts, mannequins with beaten pieces of armour sitting behind glass panes, broken shards of swords and axes and all other weapons framed beside them

with names of famed Knights engraved into small plaques at the bottom.

He made his way down the flight of spiral stairs leading to the lower portion of the castle, torches lighting the way down. The floor glimmered at the foot of the stairs, pearlescent swirls decorating the light marble. A length of red carpet stretched down the hall, reaching to the edge of the tall entryway and splitting around the two turns at the end of the walkway.

He made his way through the twisting castle walls, his feet leading him through narrow hallways, the wooden doors left ajar with servants buzzing through their jobs. A few of the King's Guards passed Arthur, exchanging small respectful nods.

Arthur nodded back, continuing his way forth. Further down the hallway, a larger door sat propped open, warm light pooling out along the floor. Arthur observed the kitchen from the doorway; polished light wood topped the benches, and wood shelves harboured bowls and plates stacked high above one another. Different types of crockery and equipment dangled from the low-hanging ceiling, their shadows sitting over the assorted blocks of utensils.

Pots sat above the woodfire oven, boiling away in the tidy kitchen, a symphony of crackling from multiple pans dotting the sides around the pots. An elderly woman stood at a bench, lining plates and cutlery out for preparation, her apron smeared with grease and splashed up food.

Arthur walked in, surprised to see the woman up this early without any help from the castle Maidens. He peered at the small clock on the other side of the wall; the time displayed five in the morning. Arthur supposed she wouldn't have been up for another hour or so.

She'd been busy after the feast last night that the King organised, the meals becoming a common occurrence lately. Nobody knew what the meetings were for, but rumours did have a hold in Arthur's head.

Arthur strolled quietly toward the bench, a smile falling onto his lips. The woman didn't notice him, gathering another stack of plates off the cupboard, her arms shaking at the weight. Arthur moved to her, gently taking them from her grasp.

The woman looked up at Arthur with a crinkled smile; her warm face was one of the reasons Arthur would come to check on her. Her speckled grey hair and kind, brown eyes gave anyone who met her a sense of comfort that extended to her infinite kindness and patience Arthur had been fortunate enough to have since he was little.

"Thank you, Arthur," she said kindly, her voice not yet cracked with age.

"Up early today, Ms Enid?" he asked, setting the plates in the same order as the others.

"Your uncle had a feast last night, the third one this week," she replied, taking over the job deftly. "He wanted another one for this morning."

Arthur walked over to the sink, grabbed some plates from the night before already stacked on the side and began to wash them in the basin. "He must have something important enough happening to have so many meetings," he shrugged, not quite believing the words himself.

"He is your uncle, after all, he's always busy," Enid muttered. She wasn't wrong; the King of Camelot never had much time to sit down and think, let alone spend time with family.

"Wouldn't surprise me if it was about the uprising near Catarina," Arthur said, rinsing the suds off the bowls and setting them aside to dry. "News has been springing up about that down in the marketplace from the travellers."

"Samqueel mentioned that, I believe," she agreed.

"Seems like a situation for the Knights of the Roundtable to handle," Arthur said, placing the rest of the dishes away and wiping his hands dry on his trousers.



He walked over to a basket on the bench beside small tubs of spices, lifting the lid open only to find it empty. He frowned, closing the lid and straightening it.

"They had the last of the bread. I came here to prepare you and your uncle breakfast, but I found it empty," Enid muttered with irritation, dishing out the food prepared from the pots and pans, boiled eggs and crispy bacon piled up on each serving.

"I'll head down to the Londinium markets and get some more," Arthur said, straightening his jacket.

"No need, son," Enid assured him. "The next delivery should be in by the afternoon."

"A lady like you shouldn't need to wait on bread deliveries," Arthur shook his head. "I was heading down, anyway."

"You're too kind, Arthur," Enid said, a smile stretching across her face. Arthur gave her a slight smile, heading out of the kitchen.

"I'll be back soon."

He dawdled towards the High Gates, flicking his eyes past the same old boring architecture that surrounded him twenty-four-seven. Arthur thought the castle could do with a facelift. Perhaps the bricks needed a clean; moss was indeed growing in that crack further-

Voices echoed down the hallway, coming from the room two doors down. The words grew louder as Arthur neared, too loud for Arthur not to eavesdrop.

Arthur stood beside the two doors, leaning against the wall and peering inside slowly. A large round table sat in the centre, along with twelve seats, three of them empty. Men dressed in fine attire sat around the table, wine goblets and half-empty platters strewn around them.

His uncle sat on the left side of the table, wearing a jewelled crown on his head. The others wore finely crafted jackets, different coloured accents adorning the collars on their formal white and orange coats. The men gathered

around the table paid no attention to Arthur, too focused on the conversation.

The Knight in the red-accented coat, a blonde man with sharp silver eyes, spoke up. "If Ariandel overtakes Catarina, what does that mean for us?"

"Our defences are too vulnerable for a frontal assault; we cannot afford to lose more than a few hundred Knights," the blue coat added, his hands neatly folded on the table. His dark hair was pulled back in a hair tie away from his bearded face, blue eyes watching the King.

"And with fewer trainees joining our ranks nowadays, we stand less of a chance leading troops into battle," the gold coat said. His dark skin and hair matched his eyes, intelligence writhing in them. "What are your suggestions, sire?"

The King turned his head to look at him, one leg crossed over the other, his hand folded beneath his chin. His dark brown eyes trailed over each of the Knights, disinterest clear in his gaze. The King picked up his glass of wine slowly, swirling the dark liquid inside.

"The reasonable yet riskier approach to this situation is to confront Ariandel of their transgressions against the Kingdom of Catarina. We cannot allow Camelot to suffer the same fate. We will not allow this Kingdom to fall."

"Reuben is right, sire; our defences are too few to start another war," the red coat reminded him. "The Legion is filled with new men barely a year out of their traineeship, some of them earlier than others, and even then, we have nowhere near enough numbers to take them on. A formal meeting with Ariandel is out of the question; King Solomon made that clear when we tried the first time."

"You're all Knights of the Roundtable, are you not?" the King gritted out, irritation on his face. "You're all the men of many stories. I'm sure you can figure it out."

"That's beyond the point; even with our rank and skill, we cannot take on an entire Kingdom of Barons, and the

Gods know who else they've allied themselves with," Reuben answered.

"Precisely," the Knight in gold added. "Even though we are Knights of the Roundtable, the other Knights of Camelot don't stand a chance to fend for themselves against such a dangerous enemy, especially not with the likes of Dolorous Gard, if the rumours are true."

"Sir Lorsaw," the King started, raising his brows slightly. "I would've thought you to be above listening to the common squabble's rumours. Dolorous Gard Drows meeting in the middle with Ariendal's Barons is simply ridiculous."

Lorsaw's brows twitched, his face staying immovable. "Sometimes it is wise to listen to the people of the city you protect to know if a threat needs to be defended from," he said, his voice low. "There's no use waiting on words from other Kingdoms on enemy movements if they come too late to tell us, let alone local crimes and issues."

"King Ergott," the red coat interjected before he could retort. "With all due respect to your prioritisation of our Kingdom's safety, there hasn't been a word against us to consider them a threat as of yet. If we move now, we could be accused of inciting a war purely out of spite against them. That could make our situation worse. I don't think it wise if we throw a needless war into the mix of our current issues of trying to gain the city's trust and faith in the throne since it hasn't proven to get any better in the years you've ruled. Many people think your rule on the throne is redundant; I couldn't imagine what people would think of you if you brought them anarchy instead of the safety you promised them."

"Watch your words, Samqueel," Ergott sniped, glowering at the Knight and setting his hand on the armrest. "I will not have you utter treason inside this castle unless you want your title revoked."

"I am representing the city's voice," Samqueel replied, vexation sharp in his eyes. "I have my right to express any concerns, whether public or private, and so does everyone else in this room."

"Only one person's opinion matters and that is my own," Ergott snorted, his fingers clutching the chair tightly. Samqueel's jaw flickered, his stare unwavering. The Knights at the table shifted uncomfortably; Arthur could feel the tension in the air as if it were a cat brushing his leg.

"Sire," Reuben cleared his throat, adjusting in his seat. "What if you fall? Who will be King?"

Ergott flicked his eyes to Reuben. "King George will be taking over if I fall."

"Rheged? Why?" the large Knight across from Reuben asked quizzically, his coat decorated with burnt orange. His sizeable brown beard framed his dark blue eyes, and short, clipped hair covered his broad head.

"It's my personal belief that King George is capable of leading in my stead," Ergott said matter-of-factly. "Should the need ever arise."

"And what of the Crown Prince?" Lorsaw protested, nodding outside of the door.

Arthur blinked, backing away from the door slightly. *Does he know I'm here?*

"Isn't he destined to be King? He is the son of Benjamin," the green coat Knight asked, looking around with a raised brow to the other Knights and scratching his short black goatee, brown eyes questioning under spiky black hair.

"You have a point, Arkan. The boy is destined to be King," the Knight in black nodded, leaning back in his chair and fiddling with his fork. Blue eyes widened slightly under preened black hair as he dropped the fork, frowning.

"Arthur is not ready for that type of role, and he never will be," Ergott growled, his back straight and a scowl deep

on his face, his hands clenched in a death grip on the armrests.

The room fell silent, the Knights facing Ergott. Arthur's heart sank to the ground bitterly, his eyes scowling at the floor. *Of course, he still believed that.* It wasn't as if Arthur hadn't tried to talk with him about it. Years of tension and disbelief from Ergott had built up Arthur's resentment for his uncle, and it wasn't going to change today.

"You cannot deny the boy his birthright, Ergott," Samqueel warned.

"He is not fit for the role. His father should have known that before his passing," Ergott bit, watching Sam with disdain.

"You cannot speak about King Benjamin in that way, your own brother," the light blue coat Knight protested, anger knitting his brows closer together. Green eyes glared at the King, light brown hair pushed back behind his ears with a dash of stubble coating his jaw.

Ergott glared at him, and Natan glared right back, then blinked in shock. Arthur peered through the doorway as the Knights fell silent again, trying to see what was happening. The Knights were watching Ergott with looks of surprise, their bodies rigid. Reuben's eyes flicked to the door, Arthur pulling back quickly, dread flooding his chest. *What did they see?*

"You must see the potential in Arthur, surely? Benjamin would've wanted him to take over Camelot. I don't understand why you see differently," Samqueel added, his voice quieter than before.

"My brother was naïve," he growled, bracing his hands on the armrests of his seat. "He was too wrapped up in his own beliefs of fantastical worlds and equality. Arthur will not be the King, even if it is his birthright."

"The people believe in the boy. Is he not the King's son?" Lorsaw argued, leaning forwards.

"The city points to its beliefs, as they were taught to. They need their leader," Taryn added.

Ergott frowned. "They already have one; me," he spat.

"The people are looking for guidance and a King who brings them peace and ease of life, not war and hardship," Sam's hands gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles white.

"This conversation is over. Get your troops ready for our departure in two days. Do not keep me waiting," Ergott commanded, standing up from his seat and storming out towards the staircase at the back of the room.

The Knights watched as Ergott dismissed himself. Samqueel snorted angrily and pushed himself away from the table, standing up with a growl.

Arthur felt conflicted, processing everything he'd overheard. *The Born King; that couldn't be me.* All of the prophecies were just myths.

He frowned, moving away from the door and continuing his way to the High Gates, too caught up inside his mind to notice the attention of the guards he'd passed along his way through the castle courtyard.

He opened the side door next to the Gates, stepping outside of the castle boundaries. Below the steep castle steps lay the sparse city of Londinium, a cluster of stone and wooden buildings and marketplaces on scattered small hilltops surrounding the sparse banks of the Castaral River that cut through the Kingdom like a serpent. The sun behind him rose steadily to set the city alight, illuminating the separate districts like lines on a compass. The clocktower in the North began to chime, its mighty bells ringing across the city to reach his ears.

Sighing deeply to himself, Arthur walked down the castle steps. A cool breeze hit him as the wind picked up, the smell of spruce trees, pine needles and woodsmoke as familiar as family. Flags brandishing the Kingdoms of Braynor blew heartily alongside the steps on tall poles,

standing strong as soldiers. One in particular caught Arthur's eye: the flag of Camelot, an orange wyvern on a white background, its body bunched and pouncing through the air. Arthur watched it flap around, his brows flicking up as its rings snapped, sending it off into the wild gales. His eyes trailed its journey as it flew towards the city, the sunlight shining on the thin fabric outlining the wyvern perfectly.

He smiled faintly at the flag, burying his hands in his coat pockets and beginning his descent towards the streets of Londinium.

## *Chapter 2: Londinium Streets*



Arthur scanned the streets as he reached the bottom of the steps, passing by the armoured guards standing at the stone obelisks like statues, the cobblestone streets echoing the voice of a nearby vendor. The ample circular space encompassed the base of the castle steps and split off in three directions, the largest path straight ahead leading into the heart of the city to the central Plaza.

The market locations would shift around the city from time to time, depending on the season or time of year. Typically, the markets were found in the Central District Plaza, but to Arthur's surprise, the stalls were nowhere to be seen. Plenty of citizens moved about still, many crowding the doorways of butchers, bakers, and finery shopfronts. Young children ran around the area with a leather ball, laughing amongst each other as they passed it.

Arthur made his way down the walkway, dodging the carts parked in front of buildings unloading crates and barrels of goods. Nobles walked in groups past him, hosting finery of all colours and extremities, some of them turning to watch him walk by with looks of recognition. He kept his attention forward as he weaved through the city, acknowledging people as they greeted him with a simple nod.

Arthur's mind flicked to the overheard conversation again, Ergott's voice echoing in his head. It was hard to know that even his uncle doubted him; it'd been that way for a long time, but it was still hard for Arthur to take in.



Since his father died, he'd been shoved away from anything to do with the royal throne by Ergott. He may as well have been forbidden from royal duties, his hopes of being King disappearing with his father. So, Arthur took the liberty of becoming a typical citizen of Camelot, blending in with the crowds just about every day. Sure, people still recognised him as the Crown Prince, but that's all he was: a Prince, not a King.

Exiting the alleyway, Arthur came to a busy street packed with people like herded cattle surrounding a few pop-up markets and trade carts. His eyebrows flicked up as he merged in with the crowd, walking with the same slow pace as the citizens, his eyes trailing around to find any sign of a bread market.

Finally, after minutes of searching, he broke through the crowd into a smaller breezeway, the bread stall flush against the wall. He made his way over, wary of the civilians dashing around him with full bags loading their arms. He stopped in place, waiting for them to pass to no avail.

Arthur's patience started to wear thin, annoyance creasing his brow. He had better things to do than wait for this chaos to settle. He should've been returning to Enid by now with bread in hand. He could've been back in his room studying the Knight manuals or watching the Roundtable train in the yards sooner-

Over to his left, Arthur heard a yell from one of the stalls. His eyes flicked over to the disturbance; at one of the stores, a young woman wearing a dark, torn jacket stood in front of the market, her stance startled. A man beside the stall glared at her with his fist raised.

"Put the apple back, thief!" he growled at her. His dreadlocked hair, contrasting his brown and grey jacket, stuck above his brow. His beard framed his deep scowl, cruel brown eyes set in his harsh face.

Arthur ground his teeth; he knew that face. He'd seen him getting around terrorising the people, picking fights with anyone in his way. He stood back and observed, watching through the crowd.

"What apple?" she bluffed, her hands in her pockets.

"The apple that was just in the stash. It was there before you came along!"

"You must be blind 'cause I didn't take anything," she shrugged off and turned to walk away.

Before she knew it, a hand gripped her arm like a vice. Her eyes grew wide in fear, snapping her attention up at the tall man, their eyes locked in a tense battle.

"Londinium doesn't tolerate thieves," he spat, getting in her face.

Her eyes widened further. "I didn't steal the damned apple!"

More men emerged from the crowd and began to circle her, holding planks of wood and small random rubbish, wearing the same jacket as the aggravator. Arthur watched him shove her to the ground, his jaw tightening as she hit the ground with a thud. Her hands flew out in front of her to stop her fall, and a red sphere rolled out from the inside of her coat, one of the men stooping to pick it up.

"Well, well, what's this then?" one of the men said, inspecting the apple for bruises and throwing her a dirty look.

"I... uh," she stuttered, her eyes dancing around to the men surrounding her.

"You know what we do to thieves, boys," the leader growled with a smirk and stalked over to her, the men closing in. Her eyes widened in fear, and Arthur's feet moved, stepping closer.

The man's feet lashed out suddenly and connected with her side, a cry of pain escaping from the girl. She moved her hand to protect herself, her other arm raised over her

face, curling in as the men rained harsh blows down on her small frame.

Arthur sped up a bit more, gently shoving people watching the fight out of his way, his voice itching to yell something at them to make them stop.

The man paused for a moment, watching her groan in pain on the cobblestones. He smirked, stepping forward to land another blow. Arthur's hand shot out against his side, shoving him and his men back away from her with enough force to send them stumbling.

"Back away from the girl," Arthur warned, blocking their path to the curled-up woman behind him. The man looked at Arthur, a slight smirk slithering across his rugged face as he drew closer slowly.

"Hello there, Arthur," his slippery voice drawled. "Come to join the affray, have we?"

"Go crawl back in your hole, Leonard," Arthur growled, glaring at him.

"Come *on*, Arthur! She's a thief, and thieves deserve to be punished," Leonard protested, his arms wide as he regarded the audience of people watching them.

"Says the thief himself," he spat at Leonard.

"You nobles don't understand what it means to live on the streets. You never have, and you never will," Leonard accused. "Who are you to call me a thief?"

"Just because you live on the streets, doesn't mean you have the freedom to beat a woman," Arthur scowled, shaking his head. "And don't think these people haven't seen your face before. Your reputation is as spotless as a Dalmatian."

"Still showing off your ego, are you?" Leonard asked, his words turning sharp as a sword.

"Still showing your arrogance?" Arthur retorted, tilting his head back. The people around them began to back up, giving them more space. A larger crowd gathered around, a few standing on boxes to see them.

The scrape of boots on stones sounded beside Arthur, the girl getting slowly to her feet, brushing the dirt off herself.

"You should learn not to get yourself involved in situations that don't include you, Your Highness," he growled, his eyes flicking back to Arthur. Leonard's men crept closer to Arthur, circling like wolves.

Arthur looked to his right, one of the men nearing the girl. Arthur shoved him back with a growl, branding him with a glare as the man stumbled.

"Be careful, Arthur," Leonard warned, his hand hidden behind himself. "This might not go as well as you planned."

Arthur looked back at Leonard, his hand wielding a wickedly serrated knife, the metal glinting sharply. He should've expected something dirty to happen.

The men drew ever closer, their cockiness skyrocketing at Arthur's hesitation. His eyes narrowed at the four men, observing each of them as he let his brain think. He looked to the stall beside him, noting the loose planks that separated the fruits from one another, the piles of sand that sat at the base to hold the table stable.

Leonard smirked, his fingers clenching into a tight fist. The men charged towards Arthur, their makeshift weapons held high. Arthur smirked as he ducked beneath the first attacker, grabbing the nearest separator plank and swinging it around to whack the man in the head with a clack, his boot kicking up the sand pile into the air towards the others in a great arc. They stumbled back, two yelling and rubbing at their faces as sand got in their eyes, the apple dropping to the ground and rolling away.

Within a quick flash, one of the men lunged at Arthur with his plank; Arthur spotted him, lashing his arm out at his chest and kicking his knee backwards. The breath rushed from the man as he hit the ground hard, his plank flying from his grip.

Citizens around them cried out in alarm, a few running from the commotion while others circled to watch. Arthur ignored them, returning to the now recovered men glaring at him. Another charged Arthur with a yell, moving to swing at his legs with a wickedly modified metal bar.

Arthur shoved the girl backwards out of the way, scattering the crowd before her back hit the far wall around a corner with a huff of breath. She stayed on her feet and watched the fight with slightly annoyed eyes. Arthur grabbed the man by the collar of his shirt, thrusting his knee into his chest and discarding him roughly away.

The man groaned in pain, coughing and holding his ribs. Leonard frowned at Arthur, twirling his dagger between his fingers, rooted to the stones. Arthur mirrored his look, watching the knife from the corner of his eye. He wasn't sure how good Leonard could wield a weapon, but he wouldn't put it past him to know at least how to swipe.

Leonard's boots scraped the stones and then stopped, the knife disappearing wherever he kept it. Arthur followed his line of sight; he spotted a band of Knights from the corner of his eye charging through the crowd towards the commotion.

He looked back at Leonard with a faint smirk. At least he knew a little bit better than Arthur initially thought. "Want to continue?" he drawled, relaxing his stance.

Leonard scowled at him. "This isn't over, Arthur," he spat, straightening his jacket.

Spooked by the Knights, Leonard and his men scurried into the crowd, looking back at Arthur with ire before he lost sight of them amongst the flurry of people.

Arthur watched them leave and ducked around the corner where the girl stood, watching the Knights follow after them with a smile. He looked at the girl with satisfaction, her eyes lit in interest.

"Are you alright?" Arthur asked her, turning to her.

"Yeah, I should be fine," she said, her hand still floating on her side. "Thanks for helping."

"No one deserves to be treated like that," Arthur said, bending to pick up the apple.

"He's some gentleman, isn't he?" she muttered, tucking her dirty blonde hair behind her ears.

"Definitely," Arthur lifted a brow, polishing it on his jacket. "He's the kindest man in Londinium."

"I hope we're both being sarcastic here."

"I'd be concerned if we were both serious," Arthur said, smirking at her. "What's your name?"

"Maria," she answered. "And you are?"

"Arthur," he responded, nodding his head slightly.

"Pendragon?" Maria asked, her brows flicking up.

Arthur nodded, handing her the apple. "In the flesh."

"So you're the one everyone talks about," she smiled, taking the apple from his hand.

"Please, no one talks about me," he scoffed, lowering his arm.

Her face turned confused. "What do you mean? Haven't you seen the murals?"

"Murals?" Arthur echoed, looking at her.

"They're all over Londinium," she said, gesturing around the walls. "Paintings of the prophecy - the Sword, more so."

Arthur's brow raised. "You must have confused it for something else. It'd be some sort of guild symbol, for sure."

"Why do you say that?" she asked. "No guild around here has a sword for a sigil. Besides, your prophecy is popular in the city. We believe you're meant to be the real King."

"I'm not, never have been, and never will be," he dismissed. "Even if people believe I can lead this Kingdom, it'll never happen."

Her frown deepened in protest. "Well, why not?"

"It's just not my calling," Arthur shrugged off, annoyance starting to seep into his voice. "Besides, I don't know the first thing about being King. My uncle does, however. Maybe you should turn your eyes to him."

"He's a fake," she spat, to Arthur's shock. "Everyone - even his Knights - disagree with his intentions and acts. He isn't the rightful leader of Camelot. I think you know that, too," she nodded at his solemn expression.

"Who said I thought that?" Arthur gritted out, his face hardening. "My uncle isn't the greatest King, but I'm not fit for that responsibility. It isn't my destiny."

Maria stared at him, puzzled, disbelief in her eyes. He looked away from her, sighing. He'd heard the story a thousand times before, and every time he'd denied it, he'd received the same look as the one she had now.

Her expression changed to Arthur's surprise, hope flickering, and she smiled slightly. "Have you considered Knight training?" she asked, her voice lighter.

"Knight training?" he echoed, his heart almost skipping a beat. The books on his study table back at the castle flashed in his mind. Of course, he'd considered it; he'd wanted to be a Knight since he learned what they were. He'd read and memorised the words of every training manual he'd found in the castle library on the topic and strived to join the yards with the Roundtable at every opportunity he could get away with.

"Why not? It needs more trainees lately," she shrugged. "I've been trying to find more people to help in the kitchens and with a few extra tasks around the hall, but being a Knight would suit you better. I even got Tristan Garrison to join the ranks."

Arthur looked at her curiously. "Tristan Garrison?"

She nodded. "Surprising, I know."

Tristan was known reasonably well around Londinium; his friendly, goofy charm typically was why so many people learned his name. He also happened to be Arthur's

best friend he'd met as a young boy down by the Castaral. He wouldn't put much past him in the way of finding a career that was more than what suited him.

But Knight training? Arthur hadn't expected that.

Maybe he could finally put that study to use for something other than to pass the time. If he weren't fit for the role of a King - not that he wanted to be one - then protecting the Kingdom as a Knight would give him some purpose. That's all Arthur had been looking for: a purpose, something to help find out who he was. Something other than everyone else's expectations of him picking up his father's crown.

He looked back at her, his mind made up. "Where does one go to train as a Knight?"

Her eyes brightened, a victorious smile going across her face. "Follow me, King Arthur."

He frowned at her. "Don't call me that."

Maria rolled her eyes playfully, leading the way further into Londinium. Arthur followed behind like a cat being dragged on a leash. The original reason as to why he was here - *the bread stall!* - suddenly flicked in his head. He sighed, debating whether he should go back and get it while she wasn't watching.

As if she'd heard his thoughts, Maria looked back at him from over her shoulder in expectancy, her green eyes glimmering in the sun like a polished gem. He frowned as she took them down the longer path, passing by lesser-known stalls.

Arthur glanced around the stalls half-heartedly as he followed, his frown deepening the further he got from the bread stall. A flicker of a shadow caught his eye as he passed by an alleyway, turning his head to look. A black-cloaked figure stood leaning against a wall, their face hidden under a deep hood. Citizens walked past the figure without a second glance, the figure's head turning to look away, the hood disappearing as two men carried a crate past



Arthur's field of view down the hallway further. Arthur paused in puzzlement, scouring the alleyway. *They just disappeared?*

"Hey, are you coming or what?" Maria called back to him, standing further down the way. He turned to look at her and walked hesitantly away from the alleyway, the phantom feel of eyes still raking over him making the hair on his neck prickle.

### Chapter 3: Night At Camelot



Walking down the alley, Arthur glanced around at the small stalls lining the walls, starting to thin out the closer they got to the Northern District. A few residents stopped to stare at him, faces of hope and wonder surrounding him.

Arthur lagged behind Maria, ignoring them all. He wrapped his jacket tighter around him: the cold weather was becoming unbearable, almost as bad as Amarnia's Northern end or even the Arctic. *No, not quite the Arctic.*

Looking at some stalls, Arthur spotted something on the alley walls, pausing momentarily. He stared at it, taking long enough for Maria to look back at him, stopping her trail.

Paint coated the grey bricks, red and white smeared roughly into the crevasses. A red sword in a rounded stone, the writing beneath catching his attention the most. *The Born King will rise.*

Those words, those exact words, made his heart skip. *Why would this be here, and right now of all times? Is there really a prophecy of the Born King?* The thought turned over in his mind like a whirlwind. Maybe there was such a thing as a Born King, but... it couldn't be him. At least, that's what King Ergott believed.

Maria walked up to him slowly, her eyes flicking between him and the mural, watching his face flicker with emotion. His thoughts turned too wild, and Arthur looked away from the mural, turning to Maria with his face back to

neutrality. *No. It's not me. I shouldn't even entertain the thought.*

She looked up at the painting, staring at those words that gave him such conflict. "It points to you," she said.

Arthur looked away from her. "I wouldn't get your hopes up too soon," he muttered.

"My hopes are that you actually see that you're destined to be King," she said, walking up to him. "You can't doubt yourself, Arthur."

"Even if it is my destiny, how would I rule an entire Kingdom alone? You have no idea how much responsibility comes with being the ruler of a whole castle."

"If Ergott falls, who will take over?"

"King George is what I heard my uncle say."

Maria shook her head, a small, exaggerated sigh coming through her nose. "He has no right to decide who should and shouldn't rule over Camelot; it's your birthright-"

"Stop saying it is," Arthur growled, glaring at her. "If it were my birthright, I would be wearing that crown as we speak, but it's clear it isn't."

"You're the son of Benjamin," she reasoned, something like offence sharp in her return glare. "Ergott is using this as an advantage to rule over a Kingdom that wasn't his. The rules are that the firstborn of the King is to take over the throne when he dies, not his brother."

"If a King dies, the eldest in line to overrule the Kingdom takes the throne. Children can't rule a Kingdom. Besides, suppose a new monarch is appointed to a throne. In that case, they rule the Kingdom until they're physically unable, like everyone else," Arthur said, feeling the lie turn to ash on his tongue.

"I don't know what kind of history books they've got in that big brick house, but that ain't it," a male voice echoed from the alleyway to the left of them.

Both Arthur and Maria looked over to the source of the voice in the dark shadows, the street lanterns lighting up an outline of a silhouette leaning against the bricks. The man walked out of the alleyway, the lanterns highlighting him perfectly.

Dark skin stretched over a tall frame, short brown hair falling over light brown eyes lit with mischief that matched his smirk. Arthur shook his head lightly, smiling faintly at the man.

"Couldn't find anywhere else to loiter, Tristan?" Arthur asked.

"It's hard to choose where to stand when walls are everywhere in the city. I just like this particular one," Tristan said, smiling back. "And besides, I live here."

"You've been keeping busy," Maria noted, looking over his shoulder.

Stacked piles of wood at waist height were lined up along the far side of the alleyway, a wood axe resting against one of the carts holding more logs. He looked over his shoulder at it before turning back to the two.

"It's about time we get the fire started," Tristan said, rubbing his hands. "It's too cold for this."

"Perhaps you should wear a coat as well," Arthur suggested, noticing the lack of clothing on Tristan.

"Well, I thought a long shirt would do for chopping wood, but obviously, I was wrong," Tristan frowned, pulling his sleeves down. "What are you two doing down this way, anyway?"

"Wouldn't you know if Marlon's is open?" Maria asked.

"Most likely, considering I'm already late for today's training. Why?"

"Knight trials," Arthur said, folding his arms, trying to hold the warmth in.

Tristan's eyebrows flicked up. "You're signing up?"

"Don't make it a big deal," Arthur frowned.

"If Arthur isn't going to be the King, maybe he can be a Knight of Camelot instead," Maria said, looking at Tristan.

"I mean, yeah, it's close enough. You're still protecting Camelot from danger," Tristan smiled, shrugging.

"You could say that," Arthur replied. "Camelot's in need of new Knights lately."

"Maybe this will finally get in your head about who should be the real King," Tristan smirked.

"That'll never happen. I'd be lucky enough to be a Knight," Arthur snorted.

"You never know, Arthur. This could prove to Ergott that you can be King," Maria looked at him.

Arthur sighed at her. "You and I both know he'd never accept it. Besides, King George is taking his place."

"Pff, please? That looney? He wouldn't be able to handle a *puppy*, let alone a—" Tristan stopped talking suddenly and looked over Arthur's shoulder, his eyes narrowing slightly. Arthur noticed his stare and followed his line of sight.

"Are those new guards?" Tristan asked, nodding in that direction.

Men in black hoods stood at the end of the walkway, swords hanging from their sides and masks covering their faces. Arthur narrowed his eyes, a creeping feeling in his chest. Their voices were harsh, speaking sharply to the people around them.

Maria turned to her side to watch them. "Something's not right," she murmured.

One of the hooded men pushed a civilian out of his way, the young boy hitting the ground hard. The man yelled at him angrily, lifting him by the collar and shoving him to stumble away. A scowl formed on Arthur's face, his teeth grating. *Who are these men in hoods, and what do they think they're doing?*

"They look real friendly," Tristan snorted

"Since when did Ergott get black cloaks?" Maria asked.

"He didn't," Arthur said, pivoting further towards the hoods.

The men stalked further down the alleyway, citizens peeling back to make way. Arthur's feet moved to follow, keeping to the wall. Peeking around the corner, he saw them standing in front of a stall, harassing the older woman behind her wares.

His jaw tightened, and he moved to round the corner. A sudden tug on his bicep glued him in place, and he looked back. Tristan held his arm in a vice-like grip, shaking his head at Arthur. He furrowed his eyebrows at Tristan, and his grip lightened slightly.

"Don't," Tristan warned, looking up at the horde. "Who knows what manner of weapons they're carrying under all that cloak."

"They're on our turf, unwanted and uninvited," Arthur replied, shrugging his arm out of Tristan's grip.

"Tristan's right, Arthur. They don't look like people to mess with," Maria said, peeking around the corner.

"Don't worry," Arthur dismissed. "It'll be a short conversation."

"When you say short, do you mean short as in you'll tell them to leave? Or you'll keep it short by beating them up?" Maria asked with a frown.

"Only time will tell," Arthur smirked mischievously, flexing his hands.

"Arthur," Tristan started, his expression concerned. "They really don't look like people to mess around with. Maybe they're here for a reason?"

"To what, treat the people of Londinium like stacks of rubbish?" Arthur asked.

Footsteps sounded behind them, and the three turned to the noise. Three dark hoods marched down the alleyway, their movements synchronised perfectly. They moved against the wall, watching them pass by; one of the men glanced at Arthur, his hazel eyes raking over him. Up close,

Arthur could see the faint engravings on the ebony masks beneath the hood, swirling and spiking around the eyes.

He kept his eyes trained on the masked hood as they moved around the corner to the others. Maria and Tristan peered beside him, suspicion flooding them all.

The men eyed the civilians that passed them, the townspeople nervous about their presence and attitude. Some children ducked behind the stalls, scattering out of the way. Barked orders echoed from beneath the masks, people flinching around them.

"You think they still have a reason to be here?" Arthur said flatly, glancing above him at Tristan.

"Well, they still look like proper fighting tools, but..." Tristan looked down at Arthur, "Not really."

"I'll keep an eye on them," Maria said. "They're heading down the main way." She shifted around the corner, and Arthur gripped her jacket.

"No," Arthur protested. "Let me handle it." Maria glanced back at him with a scowl.

"Maybe no one should go. I don't particularly want to get my ass *or* your ass kicked and in jail," Tristan frowned, standing beside Maria.

Arthur looked back at Tristan, his scowl deepening. "Do as you wish, but I will stop them." Arthur looked back at the men, clenching his fists and following behind.

Tristan and Maria looked at one another in annoyed defeat and walked behind Arthur warily, moving through the parted crowd.

A distressed voice cried out, metal bins clattering from a further turn. One of the cylinders rolled out onto Arthur's path, followed by yelling. His eyes widened, and he hurried to the corner, Tristan and Maria hurrying after him.

"Arthur!" Maria called out, frustration in her voice.

The three rounded the corner and stopped, eyes widening. The Black Cloaks circled an old woman on the cobblestones against the wall, beating harsh blows to the

woman's body. She cried out for help, covering her face with both arms for protection.

Deciding enough was enough, Arthur gritted his teeth and rushed towards them before Tristan could stop him, shoulder barging one of the men into the wall. A crunch sounded as the Black Cloak hit the bricks, grunting and growling at the pain. The others turned their attention to Arthur, facing him with their expressionless masks.

"Get back into your home, civilian," the hood in the middle spat at him.

"Sorry," Arthur growled, straightening up. "I don't take orders from you lot."

"Watch yourself, boy," one of the men growled. "You could get yourself into a lot of trouble."

"No doubt," Arthur agreed, landing a hand on the man's throat and sending him coughing to the ground with an elbow to the temple.

Another hood took a swing at Arthur's jaw, and he grabbed for his wrist. The man's fist connected with his cheekbone instead, Arthur grunting at the force of the hit. The man tried to free himself, but Arthur twisted his arm around his back, launching him into the two other men next to the wall, the frightened woman yelping as they landed beside her.

Tristan snapped to attention, rushing over to Arthur's side. "Maria, stay back. I don't want you caught up in this, too," he said.

"But-" she protested.

"No buts," Tristan barked and swung his fist into the jaw of a nearby mask.

Arthur looked over at Tristan, panting in pain as the men reeled back to size the pair up. Tristan moved to stand beside Arthur, both of them raising their fists.

"I go left, you take right," Tristan growled, shifting his shoulders.

"Done," Arthur agreed.



The two charged forward, Arthur kicking one mask to the bricks and swinging his fist into the next. Tristan set for a larger man, the man lunging at him. His giant fists beat into Tristan's ribs like a sledgehammer, making him grunt at each hit, driving the breath from his lungs, backing into another pair of hands.

Tristan struggled, trying to break out of the mask's grip as the larger man cracked his knuckles, walking up to him slowly. Arthur looked over at Tristan, his eyes widening. A glint of light dragged his attention back to the hood before him.

Arthur ducked, a baton swinging over his head in an arc, and lashed his fist out to hit the mask's ribcage. The man grunted as Arthur smacked the baton out of his hand and slammed his boot into his knee.

Arthur grabbed the baton off the ground and swung it into the hood's mask, sending him sprawling across the stones. Tristan groaned in pain, and Arthur turned back to see him still trapped, the baton weighing heavy in his hand. Maria lashed at the man hitting Tristan with her nails, scratching his arm.

He paused and looked at the thin trail of blood on his forearm, then glanced back at her. She balled her hands into fists and went to swing, the man backhanding her hard. Her feet reeled back, and she tripped over littered debris, grunting heavily as she fell. She held her face and moved towards the woman, holding her ground. He laughed mockingly at her and turned back to Tristan's glare of outrage, flexing his hand.

Without warning, a crack opened up in his mask, the baton shooting sparks through the Cloak's vision as the force knocked him down. The hood held his face, and he glanced dazedly to where Arthur stood. Grunts and the sounds of scuffing boots on the cobblestones turned his attention back to Tristan, seeing his men held under headlock by him.

Arthur looked at the man on the ground, his jaw clenched and eyes narrowed. Steps echoed down the alleyway, and Arthur looked to his left, the other cloaks standing in a line with batons ready.

"Excellent work, Tristan," Arthur said, turning his head to the new arrivals. "Anyone else wish to contribute?"

The men looked at the Cloak with the cracked mask, scowling up at Arthur, a growl of irritation rumbling from his throat. His arm raised in the air, and the hoods lowered their weapons as he stood with a groan.

Arthur raised his brow, lowering his own stolen baton. "Very good."

"You're lucky this time, boy," the man barked. "Next time, we won't surrender this easily."

"We'll see if there's a next time," Arthur scowled. "You don't belong in Camelot."

"The King thinks differently. Who do you think invited us here?"

Arthur's eyes grew in surprise. "He invited you?"

"That's your concern why?" the man scoffed.

"Normally, he invites people who have a shred of decency," Arthur hissed with venom, looking at him up and down. "You're clearly not one of them."

The man snorted at Arthur and walked over to his men, a few of them straightening as he walked past. Arthur watched the men as they walked away down the alley with a scowl. Tristan moved over to Arthur, holding his swollen side.

"Well," he started. "That went *exactly* as I planned it to go."

"Why would Ergott invite those men?" Arthur asked, watching them walk away.

"For some sort of guarding job, though I think the better guess would be for a wedding reception at this rate," Tristan coughed, walking over to Maria and reaching his free hand down to pull her to her feet.

"Is it just me, or did they look like assassins?" she asked, brushing off the dirt from her pants.

"They probably are assassins, but just more asshole-ish than the rest by the looks of things," Tristan frowned, looking at the alley they'd turned down.

"They're not here for anything good; that's all I know," Arthur added, looking at them and throwing the baton down the alley out of sight. "Let's get you two cleaned up, shall we?"

Tristan and Maria nodded, walking back near the first alleyway. Arthur walked over to the woman, helping her up from the ground. She smiled painfully at him, and he smiled back.

"Thank you, Arthur," she grumbled. "There's a King in you, deep down."

"Go find some help, get yourself better," he replied gently, ignoring the comment.

The woman walked off down the alleyway with a hobble, looking back at Arthur one last time, watching him follow Tristan and Maria around the corner.

She smiled to herself. "The Born King."

## Chapter 4: Jackseye's Fortune



The three returned to Tristan's alleyway, wary that more guards might be on Arthur's tail from earlier. Arthur peered behind his shoulder, watching for shadows and listening for the telltale clink of armour. Arthur couldn't think of one reason why his uncle would hire those men, especially if all they were to do was oppress the people. *Maybe they never intended to protect the people but followed their own rules.* Arthur frowned, turning back to watch where he was going.

The logs of wood Tristan cut up loomed in a dark pile beside a door, Tristan opening it for Arthur and Maria to step through. He swept his sight down the alleyway before closing them in and locking the door. They stood in the foyer of a small house; wooden shelves and plush seating decorated the open room to Arthur's right, stairs to the left leading up to another level.

The living room appeared surprisingly clean, a lovely leather couch with a maple coffee table in the far corner beside a fireplace stacked with logs.

Tristan walked into the kitchen, heading to a large stone box hidden beneath the floor and lifting the lid. Condensation rolled over the lip, slowly coiling to the floor and wrapping around his arm as he reached inside.

Maria took a seat at the scuffed-up kitchen table, wincing in pain as she touched her face, a red welt swelling on her cheekbone. Arthur approached her, placing a gentle hand on her right shoulder. Her eyes flicked up to him.

"You alright?" Arthur asked.

"Yeah," she winced. "I'll be okay."

"Those guys sure know how to throw a punch," Tristan called out from the kitchen.

"What did you expect?" Arthur said, turning towards him. "They're trained men."

"You were the one who insisted on fighting them; don't forget."

Arthur bit the inside of his cheek.

"Since when did you know how to fight so well, Arthur?" Tristan asked.

"The castle can get boring," Arthur shrugged, sitting beside Maria. In his off days when Arthur was younger, he'd get invited by the Roundtable to practise basic training. Sam would always have a plan for him when he'd join them, stretching out the time for as long as he and the lads could before Ergott could find them and shut it down. It was one of the reasons he wanted to be a Knight in the first place.

"You need to train with Marlon; he'll teach you proper techniques," Maria said.

Arthur looked at her. "You train with him?"

Maria shook her head. "Tristan trains with him," she nodded towards the kitchen.

"Every day for four hours," Tristan added, walking over to them, holding a wooden tray with three wrapped, ice-filled towels.

Arthur and Maria took each of the towels, resting it on their sorest spots. Arthur winced at the cold bite of the ice on his face, watching Maria place hers on her cheekbone, her face grimacing at the sting. Tristan sat across from Maria, his pack on his right rib.

"So what's the plan?" Maria said.

"Plan?" Arthur echoed.

"Are we just going to sit here and keep letting those men terrorise Londinium or what?"

"There's nothing we can do about them," Tristan said, adjusting his posture.

"Unfortunately," Arthur muttered. "We've already made a name for ourselves towards them."

"I don't know about us two, but you certainly have," Tristan frowned at him. "Why would you pick a fight with them, even if we did make them scam?"

"That woman was in danger, Tristan. I couldn't just let them beat up an old woman," Arthur protested, lifting the pack from his face.

"Hey, I understand the part about protecting people from others, but what will Ergott think when he sees you with a welt across your gob?" Tristan asked.

"It doesn't matter what he thinks," Arthur dismissed, turning to face him.

"He must've been drunk to think they'd be good people to hire," Maria rolled her eyes.

"That's my uncle for you," Arthur sighed.

Tristan grunted, leaning back in his chair. "The bastards are going to leave me tender as a babe, the way that big guy was hitting me."

"It's a wonder it's just a rib that hurts," Arthur raised a brow.

"Oh no, it's definitely more than that."

A distant crashing of metal snapped their attention outside, the conversation dropping. They looked towards the window, silhouettes cast on the far wall moving closer; five men passed by the window, dark hooded cloaks blowing in the wind. Arthur stood up from his chair and stalked towards the window, angling his view.

The men stood against the opposite side of the alleyway, two leaning against the bricks. Arthur narrowed his eyes; they were similar to the men they fought, but from what Arthur could tell, they weren't them. The Commander with the cracked mask was nowhere to be seen. *Probably licking his wounds, too.* Arthur smirked.

A sudden knock at the door broke the silence, the wood creaking at the hinges. Tristan and Maria looked at the door, sitting upright in their wooden chairs.

The knocking got louder and louder, rattling the wood dangerously hard. Arthur walked over, placing his ice towel on a side table next to the door, opening it slowly. Three men looked at Arthur, wearing the same black clothing as the others. One of the men wore no helmet or hood; instead, he had a grey beard and long tied-back hair, his left eye replaced with a scar stretching from the top of his forehead to the top of his lip.

"Someone is home, it seems," he said, his voice gruff and deep. "I was beginning to think no one was here since you took so long to answer the door."

"What are you doing here, Jackseye?" Arthur questioned, looking at his two flankers. Rohin Jackseye, the ex-Legion Commander under his father. The man that left on the tenth anniversary of his father's death with no explanation. The man Arthur thought was dead.

"Nice to see you too, Arthur. It's been too long," Jackseye replied.

"Probably for the best," Arthur spat. "Since you betrayed Camelot and its people."

"Men like me have duties. Besides, I'm still a close ally with your uncle," Jackseye smirked, his amber eye glinting maliciously.

Arthur frowned at him. "Answer the question," he growled flatly.

"My Barons and I are here to help defend Camelot, your uncle's special request," Jackseye said. "Wouldn't it be a shame if Camelot fell like its predecessor, Catarina?"

*So that's where he went - Ariendal.* For a man who fought to keep the Barons at bay from Camelot's borders, why would he choose to become one? And why would Ergott bring them here if he's sending a war party to fight them at Catarina? "How can you defend a Kingdom from

your own forces? It doesn't make sense," Arthur asked firmly. "And as far as I've seen, you've caused nothing but havoc and street fights."

"Which brings me to why I'm standing here; a patrol of mine was intercepted by three individuals in Londinium's side streets. You three wouldn't know anything about it, would you?" Jackseye asked, eyeing all three of them.

Arthur folded his arms, shaking his head in denial. "Haven't heard a thing, sorry."

"Funny how it sounded precisely like you. You always liked to get yourself into trouble when you had the chance," Jackseye said, smirking faintly.

"Things have changed after eight years," Arthur gritted his teeth.

"That would be true," Jackseye replied, his head tilting up and eyes narrowing slightly. "Now, as described by my men, one of the perpetrators was female, and the other two were males of different ethnicities. Apparently, one of the names was 'Tristan'. Ever heard of the name?"

Arthur fought the urge to look at Tristan, almost feeling his friends' anxiety from the other side of the room. Arthur unfolded his arms, tilting his own head back.

"Never heard of the name," Arthur said casually.

Jackseye scoffed lightly, looking at Arthur in disbelief. "Now, Arthur, lying could get you into trouble, you know," he growled.

"I don't lie," Arthur lied. "You, of all people, would know."

"Well, if you're done with your story, I'll question those two over at the table," Jackseye shrugged, nodding to Tristan and Maria.

"By all means," Arthur said, stepping aside for Jackseye to enter.

Jackseye pushed past Arthur, the two men shadowing behind him. Jackseye's hand rested on the pommel of his curved sword, stopping before the two. Tristan and Maria



looked at each other, unsure of what to say or do. Arthur closed the door behind himself, following them into the kitchen with a narrowed gaze.

Jackseye cleared his throat dramatically. "What about you two? Have you heard of the name 'Tristan'?" he asked, looking at Tristan with a slight smirk.

"I'm afraid it doesn't sound overly familiar," Tristan said with a slight waver. "Sorry."

Jackseye looked over to Maria beside him. "Have you?" he questioned, his brow raised.

Maria shook her head, her throat bobbing. Her hand clenched on the ice pack against her face, and she looked down.

"You got your answers, Jackseye," Arthur interrupted, walking over to him. "You can search elsewhere now."

"My investigation isn't done yet, Arthur. Apparently, you were seen around the area of an earlier brawl. One even said you joined in."

Arthur frowned, his brows knitting together. "Who?" Arthur thought the Knights would've been too focused on the street raff to have noticed him.

"Leonard Lionel," Jackseye answered.

"And you believe a thief over someone you've known since they were born?" Arthur growled, angered. *The bastard snitched on a fight he was a part of.* Arthur never would've thought he'd do that, nor did he think anyone would believe *Leonard*, of all people. Then again, this was Jackseye.

"You've never been good at keeping yourself out of trouble, Arthur," Jackseye repeated.

"At least I wasn't the one who started the trouble," Arthur scowled. "I just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I'd say," Jackseye smirked.

Arthur's back heated suddenly as if someone had hugged him. He looked over his shoulder and saw the two

Barons behind him, standing awfully close. The front door swung open, and more black-hooded men poured in to surround the three.

Tristan stood up, scowling at them. "You have no right to storm into my home," he snarled. "Leave right now."

The men stormed to Tristan and grabbed him roughly, Tristan spitting curses at them. Arthur glared at Jackseye, flicking his eyes to the Barons holding Maria and making her drop her pack to the floor. The men behind Arthur gripped his arms tightly, their armoured gloves scraping against his skin sharply.

"I've taught you how to speak but not lie," Jackseye drawled, sauntering to Arthur. "That's why you're terrible at it."

"I wasn't lying!" Arthur yelled, thrashing around in the guards' grip.

"I remember this boy," Jackseye pointed to an angry Tristan. "And I remember his name very clearly. You shouldn't defend others, boy; it never ends well for you."

Arthur bared his teeth at Jackseye, attempting to break loose from the Baron's grip. "You bastard! Let us go!"

"Interfering with the King's Guards is a cruel violation to Camelot, Arthur," Jackseye grinned wickedly. "You, of all people, should know."

"You know I'm a part of the royal family. You cannot arrest me!"

"Are you, though?" Jackseye asked lightly, a brow raised. "'Cause I don't see a crown on your head like you were 'destined' to have. And these two are just regular townspeople who caused a violation. A violation which you interfered with and hence got yourself into trouble."

"Your men hurt an innocent woman!" Maria barked. "That's guard brutality towards the citizens of Camelot!"

"You have no right to arrest Arthur, nor do you have a warrant," Tristan growled, narrowing his eyes at Jackseye.

"Then I guess I have every right to arrest *you*," Jackseye shrugged.

Arthur assessed the situation carefully, tugging in the men's grip. He looked down at their legs, black leather padding on the knees, thighs and shins; that could work to his advantage.

Arthur moved his right leg backwards, hitting the hooded man on his right directly in the shin and making him let his hands go with a yelp. He turned to the other guard, elbowing his jaw and grabbing his sword from the scabbard as the man stumbled. Jackseye spun to face him, unsheathing his khopesh. Arthur swung the blade up at Jackseye, trying to knock his hand away.

Jackseye deflected the blow, kicking Arthur in the abdomen as he shifted. Arthur fell to the ground and landed with a grunt, the air whooshing from him.

"Impressive, Arthur," Jackseye mocked. "Since when did you learn the element of surprise?"

"Ever since you left for the Barons," Arthur spat, trying to sit up on his knees.

"I guess a lot *has* changed after eight years," Jackseye tilted his head.

"You have no idea," Arthur glowered, straightening up toward Jackseye, his arms extended.

Jackseye allowed Arthur to grab his lower body, holding him in place as the two moved backwards. Jackseye slammed into the brick wall with a grunt, Arthur pinning his arms against Jackseye's chest. Before Arthur could lash out at him again, fierce grips tugged him back from the wall, guards holding him in place before he could do more damage.

Arthur thrashed in their grip, watching Jackseye regain his composure, twisting his neck to the right and letting out multiple cracks. Arthur widened his eyes as Jackseye threw punches to his stomach, the armoured gloves hitting hard as bricks. Tristan and Maria watched in shock as Jackseye hit

Arthur over and over again, the guards moving them out the front door, more of the hoods out in the alley.

Arthur looked up at him in pain, his teeth bared and anger flowing through his cells. "You're a bastard, Jackseye," he snarled and coughed painfully.

"March him to the castle; his uncle can deal with him from here," Jackseye ordered offhandedly, walking out of the room.

The guards marched Arthur out of the house, returning to the open alleyway. Jackseye led the three up the main street towards the castle, the passing civilians gaping in shock at the scene. Murmurs and whispers flickered through the crowds, concern and outrage thick in the air. More people stopped to stare at the Barons and the three, eyes widening at Arthur grimacing in pain. The Barons forced them out of Jackseye's road as they moved along to Arthur's demise, shoving a few civilians too slow to move.

At the castle entrance, Camelot guards stand tall at either side of the Gates, peering down at the oncoming party on the stairwell. Torches lit up the Gate with the help of the afternoon sun, lanterns swinging from poles above them.

Arthur looked up at the entrance from the staircase, still within the Baron's tight grip, Tristan and Maria behind him. The Camelot Knights looked at the men approaching them, noticing Arthur being held prisoner. They looked at each other sharply, and one of them stepped forward, Jackseye stopping before them.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sir Knight," Jackseye nodded. "If you wouldn't mind opening the gates for my men and myself."

"What is your business here?" the Knight asked, suspicion clear on his face.

"King Ergott has requested my arrival, and I delivered on his request," Jackseye answered.

"Who may you lot be?"

"Rohin Jackseye and the Black Guards," Jackseye answered.

"And Ergott is expecting you?" The Knight tilted his head down, resting his hand on his pommel.

"Indeed he is," Jackseye agreed. "And I suppose he'd want his nephew back from getting himself into trouble. He and his friends were interfering with our business, including attacking one of my patrols."

"What is your business here, Jackseye?" the other Knight repeated more firmly.

"My men and I are here to make Camelot a well-protected Kingdom," Jackseye reassured, gesturing to his men to move up.

"We weren't informed of your arrival-"

"Let them pass," a voice ordered from behind them.

Arthur's eyes flicked up at the voice behind the Knights in recognition, Jackseye and the others following his gaze. A figure walked to meet them, his armour built more extravagant than the Knights at the Gate. His blue eyes glimmered in the sunlight, his ears arching from under his long brown hair.

"Ergott is expecting them," he said, stopping beside the Gate Knights. "And so am I."

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Wilhelm," Jackseye said.

"Jackseye, it's been a while," Wilhelm replied.

"If we may, my men and I would like to enter the castle and speak with the King," Jackseye said.

"Ergott is waiting for you in the throne room," Wilhelm gestured behind himself. "You may proceed."

The Knights stood aside as Jackseye and his men marched through the castle's entrance, their grip on Arthur's wrist tight.

Arthur snorted. As if he'd run; he was in the castle he *lived in*, for the Gods sake. Arthur knew something wasn't right; the Knights and Wilhelm weren't questioning why

they had him bound. Arthur narrowed his eyes at Jackseye as they entered the castle, his hands itching to grab him again.

They turned down the hallway, entering the open Roundtable room. The Knights were still seated at the table, turning their eyes to the incoming group. Samqueel immediately stood up, glaring at the guard holding Arthur.

"Let the Prince go," Samqueel demanded, moving towards him, "right now, or you get your hands permanently removed."

"Now, now, Samqueel, Arthur here interfered with our business," Jackseye said, moving in front of Arthur.

"I don't give a damn about what kind of business you've got your nose all up in, Rohin, I'm ordering your men to stand down," Sam snarled, his teeth bared.

Arthur looked at Samqueel in shock; the Commander of the Roundtable had never been this angry in front of him. Jackseye turned to Arthur, contemplation in his expression.

"Jackseye," Samqueel warned, his voice low and silver eyes burning. "You cannot arrest a royal."

"Perhaps you're right," Jackseye muttered. "Let them go."

The men released Arthur and the other two from their grip, Arthur shrugging semi-roughly out of their grasp. Maria rubbed her left bicep, glowering at the guards. Tristan shrugged out of the guards' grip, flicking his eyes to Sam with gratitude.

"I must say, Arthur, you did hold your ground quite well," Jackseye drawled.

"You knew you had no right to arrest us," Arthur spat. "You don't have that authority."

"Times have changed, Arthur," Jackseye replied. "Perhaps even for the better."

"For the better? You call your men hurting an innocent woman on the streets 'for the better'?" Arthur asked with irritation in his voice.

"She wasn't following instructions. *Muhari* Ryker asked her to return to her home, which she denied," Jackseye said.

"Maybe because she's homeless," Tristan said, stepping to stand beside Arthur. "Her name is Loretta; that alleyway has been her home for a long while."

"You knew her?" Arthur asked.

"I give her food whenever she needs it," Tristan shrugged.

"Her refusal wasn't an attack; she has no home," Maria said softly.

Jackseye looked at the three. "Perhaps my men could've been too harsh to the woman, but she still refused direct orders from the King's men."

"You expected anyone to recognise your men? What in the ether are you even doing here, and bringing Barons into the city? Have you gone mad?" Sam growled.

"Surely the King had let you know of the plans and announced our arrival?" Jackseye huffed, looking at Samqueel and the other Knights still seated at the Roundtable.

"Unfortunately, I didn't have the time to," Ergott said, walking down the far staircase into the large room.

"King Ergott," Jackseye greeted, bowing before him. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"It's been too long, Rohin. Have the Barons been treating you well?" Ergott smiled.

"Not as well as here, I'm afraid," Jackseye said, straightening himself.

Ergott glanced over to Tristan and Maria, his eyebrows furrowing. "Who are these two?" he questioned.

"Ah, you reminded me; Arthur and his friends here interfered with my men's patrol," Jackseye said, smirking at Arthur. "So my men and I arrested them for treason."

"Jackseye, you know you cannot arrest a royal, especially not my nephew," Ergott scowled slightly.

"That's why I brought him to you, sire, so you can decide his punishment," Jackseye replied, beaming.

"Arthur's done more to help out this Kingdom than you've ever done. You should be the one to suffer, traitor," Sam hissed, his jaw clenched.

"Now, now, Samqueel," Ergott started. "No need to lash out at our guests and new colleagues; they've only just arrived. Show some hospitality."

Samqueel frowned at Ergott slightly, nodding shallowly and straightening his back. "Apologies, sire," he muttered, his face returning to neutrality. Arthur could see the shine of ire in his eyes as he glanced back to Jackseye.

Ergott looked over at Tristan and Maria, his face uninterested. "Anything to say in your defence?"

"None, sire," Tristan said, looking down to the floor. "I apologise for my actions against you and yours."

"I do," Maria looked up, stepping forward in front of Ergott.

"That is?" Ergott asked, slightly curious.

"You've robbed Arthur of his destiny," she started, her voice gritted. "He should be the King, not some selfish, arrogant imbecile like you! Saying that King George will take over when you pass on is just downright wrong. It's Arthur's birthright to be the King, yet you're so caught up in your own fantasy that you-"

"Silence!" Ergott barked, stepping towards Maria slowly.

Maria watched him gain closer, defiance and fear in her eyes. Arthur watched her with disbelief, the whole room gaping at her. No one could believe that she just disrespected the King in his own castle, especially not Arthur, especially in Arthur's defence!

"Is that really the proper way to address your King, peasant?" Ergott asked, his voice softer yet mysterious.

Her eyes flashed in protest at the insult, fear still overwhelming her features. "N-no, sire, I was just-"



"Just what? You obviously have your own opinions, and I'd like to hear them," Ergott pushed, his jaw tightening.

"I was just saying that Arthur should be King after you," she repeated, her voice trembling slightly.

Ergott hummed a short laugh, looking at Arthur sideways, then back at her. "March her and the other one back to Londinium. Feel free to lay a few blows if they resist," he dismissed.

Tristan frowned at him flatly. The King knew damn well who he was; *everyone* in the room did. It wasn't uncommon to find him with the Knights around their cabins. Friends in high places was an understatement when it came to describing the lad's friendships.

The Black Guards gripped Tristan and Maria by the arms to their annoyance, tugging them out of the Round Hall doorway and marching them towards the Gates. Arthur's brow creased in worry at the tightness of the guards' hold. Arthur looked at his uncle, his expression turning to anger. Ergott turned to him, a faint smirk on his face, aware of what he'd caused.

"As for you, nephew, don't you have anything to go to?" he asked.

"Since when did that concern you?" Arthur bit sharply.

"I found the Book of Mordred on your desk, a fine read for anything to do with becoming a Knight," Ergott raised a brow.

"Maybe you should consider it as a sign," Arthur scowled, walking out towards the door.

A small figure rounded the corner into the doorway at the same time as Arthur, running into him with a whoosh of air and a startled yelp. Arthur paused in shock, his hands shooting out to catch the tiny woman on reflex.

"You alright there?" Arthur asked in concern.

Brown eyes looked up at him in surprise and delight. "Oh, hello, Arthur," she smiled nervously. "I didn't see you there."

"Aunt Guinevere," Arthur replied, standing her up properly. She brushed her blonde hair back away from her face, fanning herself.

"Pardon me for running into you. I was in a bit of a rush," she admitted. "And you know you can call me Rosaline."

"In a rush for what?" Arthur asked.

"I was called down for an emergency with the Maidens," she explained. "I needed to ask Ergott a few questions, is all."

Arthur frowned. "The Maidens? Is Enid alright?"

"Enid is perfectly fine," Rosaline assured. "One of the younger girls was having trouble with some of the new people getting around the castle and ended up tripping down a flight of stairs."

"What did the new people look like?" Arthur asked, narrowing his eyes.

Rosaline straightened her skirts absently, trying to catch her breath. "They had black cloaks on, from what they described. I've seen a few get around the chambers, and they've caught my attention only recently, so I've come to ask Ergott about them." She peered around his shoulder into the Round Hall. "Is he in here?"

Arthur grabbed her arms gently, taking her around the corner out of the doorway. Queen Rosaline Guinevere was a fragile little thing with a busy streak like that of a bee; Arthur could swear the woman never sat down to rest on a good day.

"They're Barons," Arthur whispered. "Highly trained assassins from Ariental."

Her eyes widened in startlement at him, shock written across her face. "Assassins in the castle?" she gasped. "What are they doing here?"

"Something isn't right," Arthur said. "Just be wary of them around the castle."

"I will," she whispered. "Thank you, Art." She pulled her arms gently from his hands with a small smile, moving into the Round Hall towards Ergott.

"Evening, everybody," she greeted, watching the Barons at the door with uncertainty. Arthur stood beside her, narrowing his eyes at his uncle.

"Oh, my dear," Ergott said with delight. Rosaline moved over to Ergott gracefully, and that permanent smile lit across her face. The Knights' eyes glowed in surprise, standing from the table to bow.

"Evening to you, Queen Guinevere," Samqueel greeted, a smile on his face.

"Jackseye, you remember my wife, Rosaline?" Ergott asked.

"Indeed I do," Jackseye nodded, bowing to the Queen. "Nice to see you again, Rosaline."

"Rohin," she greeted politely.

"What can I do for you, my Queen?" Ergott asked, smiling at her.

She walked to him, taking his arm in her gentle hands and smiling up at him. "There's been an incident in the servant's stairwell, with these... um..." She looked at the Barons standing at the doors. "These men that have been in the castle. Why have they come?"

"Rohin and his men are accompanying the castle as our new royal guards," Ergott explained. Arthur watched the Roundtable Knights throw dirty looks at Ergott for the words.

"Oh?" she questioned. "But what about the Knights? *They're* supposed to be patrolling the castle."

"Like I said, *accompanying* the castle," Ergott said, wrapping his arm around her waist.

Her face softened in thought as she glanced back up at him. "Well, the reason I'm here was to seek assistance with

the injured Maiden. Her injuries are quite extensive," she murmured.

"An injured Maiden?" Ergott asked, looking at her.

"I was told one of these new guards was involved in an incident with the girl falling down the staircase," she said.

"I don't have time for this," Ergott muttered, rubbing his head. "Samqueel."

Sam's eyes narrowed slightly at the King as he stepped forward. "We're on it," he nodded. "Lead the way, my Queen."

Rosaline let go of Ergott and turned towards the door, the Knights following behind her with Samqueel escorting her out.

"And Arthur," Ergott added. Arthur looked up at him, his eyes narrowed.

"Don't you have studying to get back to?" Ergott asked.

Arthur huffed at the King, walking out of the Round Hall without a word. It irked him how only now Ergott found any interest in his pastimes. *As if he'd care, anyway.*

Ergott watched as Arthur made his way out of the Round Hall, turning away with his usual smirk. Arthur walked past Jackseye, Rohin watching him with a sideways glance.

Walking up to the array of spiral stairs, Arthur heard the slam of the Black Guards shutting the double doors. He furrowed his brows at the figures standing near the doors, continuing his way up the stairs.

Arthur sighed to himself, overwhelmed by the day that occurred, and he didn't even get the loaves of bread. But what did it matter? He wouldn't get any recognition for getting supplies for the castle from anyone but Ms Enid. Hell, it was rare for Ms Enid to even get any praise for her work, and she did just about everything around here.

He made it to the top of the spiral staircase, heading back to his room down the far end, the sun glowing through the open windows across the walls. He opened his room

door and looked around; the bed looked made, clean and well-furnished, along with his floor. Some of the clothes that were there before were now gone. On his bed, a note lay sprawled on his pillow. He walked over to it and picked it up.

'To Arthur, thanks for your help and assistance whenever it's needed. Keep your room clean, from Ms Enid.'

Arthur smiled faintly at the note, placing it on his bedside table and lying on the freshly made bed. He stared at the roof, the cold from his blankets seeping through his clothing. He sighed once again, closing his eyes as he listened to the silence.

## Chapter 5: Spectre of the King



*"Run, Arthur!" Benjamin cried. "Run!"*

*Arthur darted through the forest, dirt and grass flicking up behind him, his feet sinking into the land. Benjamin rolled out of the way of a savage blow, the sword from his opponent hitting the ground hard. Benjamin looked up at the figure, orange dilated eyes piercing his soul. Smoke poured from the figure's mouth as it growled, yanking its sword out of the ground, clumps of dirt spraying Benjamin's face. The King groaned, blinking dirt from his eyes.*

*The figure turned to Benjamin, a menacing grin spread on its ghastly face. In the distance, an explosion erupted, tearing the being's attention from the King. A huge fireball erupted from the east past the forest to the base of the coastal mountains, the bang making their ears ring. Benjamin stumbled back onto his feet, his face slackening as he faced the explosion.*

*"No..." Benjamin whispered.*

*"Catarina has fallen, King Benjamin. You have lost," the figure said, its thunder-like voice echoing through the woods.*

*"Why do this? Why hurt thousands of innocent lives?" Benjamin asked, looking at it over his shoulder.*

*"It was never about the people or the throne; it was about getting rid of you," the figure growled.*

*Benjamin turned back to the figure, his eyes narrowing. "The throne never belonged to me. It belongs to the spirit of my ancestors. I just happened to sit in it."*

*"Now the throne will belong to another," it said, sprinting towards Benjamin with its sword raised.*

*Benjamin took Excalibur in both of his hands, his own eyes flaring a bright blue, his sword glowing with runes. He braced himself for the blow, the black flames on the figure's weapon getting hotter the closer they got. Their weapons clashed fiercely, the sound echoing around the trees. Benjamin bared his teeth. "Not if I can help it."*

*Running through the woods out of breath, Arthur looked back towards Benjamin, trying to see him. All Arthur could see were trees and bushes, nothing but thick woodlands. He squinted his eyes, hoping to see something other than leaves.*

*Something caught his attention to his left; a faint silhouette ran through the bushes, their frame too small to be a guard or Knight. He narrowed his eyes at the running shadow; it didn't look like an animal-*

*"Arthur."*

*He jumped in fright and snapped his attention to the voice. His father limped towards him, out of breath and tired... very, very tired.*

*"Arthur," Benjamin said softly, kneeling in front of the boy, his hands on his shoulders. "I need you to be strong for me and run as far away as you can get."*

*"I can't leave you, Father. I won't leave you," Arthur protested.*

*"You must run back to Londinium. Find Jackseye. He'll look after you," Benjamin said, rubbing his son's arms.*

*"I can't do it without you," Arthur whimpered, a tear falling down his face.*

*Benjamin reached his hand to Arthur's face, wiping away the tears. "Yes, you can. You always could. I want you to take this."*

*Benjamin moved his arms towards his neck, unhooking his amulet swiftly, the small blue crystal glimmering in the moonlight. Arthur looked at it, the light making his tears almost burn away from brightness. Benjamin looped the chain around Arthur's neck, letting it settle on his chest.*

*"It's yours now," Benjamin said. "It'll remind you to be brave and to remember me."*

*"Please... don't leave me," Arthur cried.*

*"I'll meet you in the castle, but right now, I need you to find Jackseye-" Benjamin swung his head around quickly with a gasp; black flames surrounded the base of a falling tree, and the world jolted as Benjamin lifted him up and promptly dodged the falling limbs, the tree crashing to the ground right where they just stood. Arthur looked at the flames in horror, looking up to see those glowing eyes in the dark behind the fallen tree. Benjamin placed Arthur back on the ground, standing in front of him like a shield and unsheathing his sword.*

*"Run," Benjamin growled.*

*"I won't leave y-"*

*"Run, Arthur!" Benjamin barked, charging towards the glowing eyes with his weapon ready.*

*Obedying his father's command, Arthur sprinted towards the castle, fear and dread soon overcoming his emotions. Arthur heard the same clashing of metal fly through the canopy. Arthur looked back at his father for a slight moment before a loud screech bellowed in front of him. He flicked his head forward, his eyes widening at the thing before him; a giant black horse reared up onto its hind legs, the same screech emitting from its maw. Glowing red eyes glared at Arthur, smoke pouring out of them in waves, the same black flames as the figure coating its flank.*

*Arthur yelled in fright and stumbled to the ground in fear, scattering back from the creature as it charged at him, its hooves tearing into the earth closer and closer-*





Arthur let out a horrific yell as he jolted awake, sweat dripping from his head onto the bed sheets. His room had turned dark, the moon glowing outside his window shining over his bed. He loosed a breath, resting his head on his pillow, trying to rid the tension in his body.

That dream was way more detailed than what he'd seen before. The flaming horse was new. He touched the amulet at his neck, the crystal cool against his fingers. He saw his father again, and that silhouette that ran past him... Night terrors were an absolute pain.

He sighed deeply, sitting up on the edge of his bed. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm, his sleeve coated in it.

*That horse; what did it mean?* From what he could guess, the horse had some sort of connection to the figure that fought his father. He shook his head, trying to clear his mind as he stood up from his bed. A knock on his door sounded, catching his attention as he stretched his limbs.

Arthur walked over to the door, opening it slowly and peering out.

"Are you alright, Arthur?" Ms Enid asked, her voice laced with concern. "I heard you cry out."

"Just a bad dream, Ms Enid. I'm fine," Arthur reassured her.

"Another one of those dreams?" Her wrinkled brow knitted together.

"Every night, they get worse and worse, it seems," he quirked his mouth.

"Have you told your uncle?"

"Why would I? He wouldn't do anything about it."

"What makes you say that?"

Arthur shook his head, a faint frown on his face.

"They're just silly dreams. He'd mock me for being afraid."

"What was your dream about?" she asked.

"It's getting a bit late, Ms Enid. Perhaps you should rest up for the night," Arthur said, purposely dodging the question. He didn't feel like talking about his dreams with anybody, not even with Ms Enid. It felt too personal and silly.

Enid looked up at Arthur, contemplation on her face. "You remind me so much of him. It's... beautiful," she murmured.

"Of who?" Arthur asked, his brows furrowing slightly.

"Your father, Benjamin," she answered with a smile.

"You have his heart. It's a shame you weren't of age when he passed."

Arthur frowned. "It's probably for the best. Ergott knows more about ruling a Kingdom than I do."

"He's afraid," she muttered softly.

"Afraid? Afraid of what?" Arthur blinked. *Odd of her to suggest such a thing...*

Enid raised her hand to Arthur's face, her hand cool against his cheek. "Of you, the 'Born King'. He knows your destiny, what you're to become. He wants to remain the King until the day he falls 'cause he knows you'll be the King not only of Camelot but also of Braynor."

*She's been up for so long that she's becoming delusional.* Arthur gave her a slight smile, moving her hand away from his face. "I wish that was true, but my uncle has other intentions."

"That is true, unfortunately," Enid sighed.

"It's getting late, Ms Enid. You need to get some rest," Arthur changed the subject.

Enid smiled softly. "Very well, see you in the morning."

Arthur returned the smile, resting his hand on her left shoulder before she wandered off, heading down the hall to the stairwell. Arthur turned back into his room, allowing the wind to shut the door behind him a bit too swiftly.

Walking over to his desk, Arthur lit a small match from within his drawer, lighting a lantern hanging above his desk. The room turned a hue of orange, the flame illuminating the papers and books stacked in piles.

Sighing to himself, Arthur pulled out the wooden chair tucked underneath the bench, sitting with a thud. Various notes lay scattered on top of their suited books, a larger pile stacked upon a peculiar book of interest. Looking up, Arthur reached up to a shelf above his head, placing more books on his table.

He moved a few pages out of the way and positioned the books in front of him. The books were protected by unique dust jackets, and gold and copper decals decorated the sleeves. Arthur panned over the titles, deciding which of the three he'd like to use his night on studying over.

*The Knights Manual, Knights of Camelot Training, The Darklands...* He placed the Darklands book up to the others above his desk and moved the Knights Manual to the side, opening the training book.

The author's name glittered in black ink on the first page: **Comdrick Mordred**. Arthur flicked the page over, browsing the contents table.

One part in particular caught Arthur's interest: the training of the Knights, lists of all the exercises needed to be deemed fit enough.

His mouth quirked at a few. *Who in their right mind would make a Knight stand on their hands?* As the hours passed long into the night, Arthur's eyes began to grow heavy once more until, eventually, with a slight thud, his head lay to rest against the book on the table.



*Arthur stirred awake from an uncomfortable rest, the side of his head throbbing in pain. He cracked his eyes*

*open, finding himself still sitting at his desk, the book under his face still wide open to the page he left it at. Arthur sighed to himself, sitting up in his chair.*

*Good job falling asleep at the desk, Arty. Real intelligent.*

*He rubbed his face, groaning at the throbbing in his head. A cool breeze flowed from underneath his door, and Arthur shivered, turning to look. His eyes flashed, flicking towards the gap under the door quickly.*

*He stood up from his chair, trying to get a better look at what he saw. A faint blue light shone beneath the doorway, reminding him of the moonlight glow from outside. He blinked at it, curiosity propelling him forward. He reached his hand out to the door handle, opening it slowly.*

*As if spooked, the light darted across the hallway, heading down the stairwell.*

*Arthur's eyes widened. He'd never seen such a thing before in his life. Arthur followed the light down the stairwell warily, picking up a torch from a sconce on the wall and holding it before him as he walked down the stairs. The further Arthur walked down the stairs, the further away the little blue light went.*

*Perhaps it was leading him somewhere? But where? Arthur already knew the castle inside and out from his, more often than not, bored days of exploration.*

*Hell, he'd even found an extra passageway one time when he was younger, but that didn't go so well for him when the bakers found him stuck and covered in flour in the butler's pantry early the following day...*

*Arthur paused, seeing something standing in the middle of the lobby before the High Castle Gates, his heart skipping a beat. The blue light seemed to materialise before him into a man kneeling in front of a small boy. Arthur turned his eyes to the boy, and his eyes widened.*

*The boy was him, and that man... his face was too blurred out to see who it was.*

*With a slight whoosh, the forms of the boy and the man diminished, the little orb speeding off to leave Arthur gaping to himself in a dark, empty foyer beside the stairwell.*

*He furrowed his brows in confusion and kept chasing after it. He weaved his path down the castle corridors, too focused on the blue light to notice the Knights that passed through him effortlessly, none of them taking any heed to his presence.*

*Heading down a narrow hallway, Arthur stopped as the blue light transformed again, turning into the form of the same man as before, facing away from him.*

*Arthur paused, narrowing his eyes at the spectre in front of him. It stood beside one of the side doors along the hallway walls. Arthur felt the same cool breeze of wind as the one that came from beneath his door, goosebumps dotting his arms as it blew out the torch in his hand. He looked at it with a frown and sat it on the ground.*

*The spectre looked back at him, bright glowing eyes staring at Arthur, the light enveloping the man's entire eye.*

*Arthur's eyes widened, freezing; could it see him? The spectre looked to the door to its left, phasing itself through, the blue light shining beneath the door gap. Arthur frowned and walked to the doorway, inspecting it. Something in Arthur's gut told him to open the door, but another part of him hesitated at the thought. What if the spectre is dangerous?*

*"Open the door, son..." a whisper told him.*

*Arthur turned around in fright, looking down both hallways, but no one was there.*

*"Open the door..."*

*There it was again. Arthur placed his hand on the handle gently, the door swinging open and the cool breeze rushing more intensely to Arthur as it opened, the blue light gone from the hallway.*

*Stepping inside the room, Arthur looked around the dark, looking for anything sticking out of the shadows. Beside the wall on a bracket, a readied torch sat dormant.*

*He grabbed it and swiped the tip along the brick wall beside him, sparking into an intense flame before dying back down to burn slower. Soon, the whole room in front of him lit up, revealing piles of crates and tables dotting the far wall.*

*Arthur looked around curiously. This was one room he hadn't stepped foot into before, simply because he wasn't allowed to. It was one of Ergott's many rules for Arthur to follow. His eyes panned over each side of the room but came to a halt when he spotted a chest at the far end of the room, pressed up against the brick wall.*

*The chest was made of dark wood, rusted metal lining the edges and holding the locks still, the lid completely covered in dust and cobwebs. Arthur felt uneasy but was too invested in the chest in front of him; he had to see what was inside. Arthur walked up slowly to the chest, feeling a strange presence coming from it. Seating the torch in a bracket above the chest, he knelt before it, scrutinising every detail.*

*"Arthur..." the whisper called, sounding closer. Was it coming from the chest?*

*Arthur looked behind himself to see if anyone was in the room, but no one else was there. His bravado wavered slightly, and he thought about leaving the room before Ergott found out somehow.*

*He looked back at the chest warily, slowly placing his two hands on the chest. Arthur pulled the locks undone and opened the chest, a cold breeze escaping and whooshing his hair back from his face. That same blue light glared brightly from beneath the lid. His eyes widened: beneath a white sheet, pristine and glinting in the torchlight, Knight armour edged with copper glinted cleanly, a sword and shield laying down the bottom of the clothing.*

*The metal glinted harshly in Arthur's eyes, a vibrant blue blinding him for a moment. Arthur reached down into the chest, moving the various pieces of armour out of the way, gripping the sword's hilt firmly.*

*He pulled his arm out of the chest, lifting the weapon from within the wooden box. His eyes widened, glued to the sword in his hands. Lifting the blade to the light as he stood, he pulled it from the scabbard a few inches, Arthur's eyes glittering in wonder at the runes etched into the blade.*

*"Arthur ... " the voice said.*

*His eyebrows furrowed as he paused in place. The voice was behind him.*

*He slowly turned around to face the voice, a similar blue light shining in the corner of his eye. Behind Arthur, the spectre stood solemnly, staring at him at eye level. It stepped forward, and Arthur stepped back slightly, wary of the spectre's presence. Arthur studied his facial details, clearer than what they were before. A rough-hewn beard coated his jaw, high cheekbones framing the glowing blue eyes, his hair roughed up as if with helmet hair.*

*"You have no idea how long I've waited for you to find that chest," the spectre said in the same gravelly voice as before.*

*"Who are you?" Arthur asked, sheathing the sword.*

*"What are you doing in Camelot?"*

*"Checking on my son," the spectre answered, his voice smooth and soft.*

*Arthur looked at the man, his face slackening.*

*"Father?" Arthur asked.*

*"Yes, my son," Benjamin smiled. "You have grown to look a lot like your father."*

*"Like father, like son, right?" Arthur asked, a small smile forming on his face. His father was here, talking to him, but how? Is this a dream?*

*"Exactly," Benjamin said, looking at Arthur up and down. "Something is missing," he noted, looking at Arthur's brow.*

*"If you're referring to the crown, Ergott is wearing it," Arthur said.*

*"Why aren't you?" Benjamin asked, his eyes furrowing.*

*"Ergott's taken over the title of King. He believes I'm not ready to rule, nor will I ever be. People in Camelot and Londinium believe it's my destiny to wear the crown, but I don't know what to think at this point," he said, running his hand through his hair. "I don't want to end up failing this Kingdom, even though people want me to take the lead. All of his negative talk about me not being fit or ready to be King has me thinking he might be right."*

*"What do you believe, Arthur?" Benjamin asked calmly.*

*Arthur looked down at the sword gripped in his hands. "I want to believe I'm destined for greatness, that I have a purpose instead of being nothing."*

*"You, my son, are the Born King. You always have and always will be. It is your destiny to take my place, but you must earn it first."*

*"Well, how do I earn it?" Arthur asked, looking at Benjamin.*

*"When the time is right, you must traverse the Darklands and find a man who lives within the deepest, darkest part of the territory," Benjamin said. "He will guide you to finding the key to your destiny. But for now, you must take this sword and this armour and learn the skills necessary to survive."*

*"This destiny I'm said to have and fulfil; when will it come into place?" Arthur asked softly. "If it ever came into place. It sure hadn't in the times he'd wished for it."*

*"In time, that question will be answered before your very eyes," Benjamin reassured.*

*"What of my uncle?" Arthur asked curiously.*



*"Ergott is withholding dark secrets behind a veil. He cannot be trusted on the throne," Benjamin answered, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Believe me with this, my son; you will take Ergott's place, no matter how long it takes. The throne is your birthright."*

*Arthur looked down at the sword, watching the dreamcatcher-shaped pommel weave the blue spectral light through its strands like a spiderweb. The prophecies - they had to be true. How else would he be in this vision, talking to his father?*

*If nothing else made sense to Arthur regarding the prophecy and his destiny, could he trust that what he was seeing was real? That this wasn't all some sort of twisted dream his brain conjured up like the nightmares?*

*But what about the people who depend on his rule? If the words were valid, he'd save them from great evil in the face of the most significant threat the country had ever known. Who would protect them if it wasn't him?*

*He couldn't leave people to suffer. He'd never been able to.*

*Arthur clenched his jaw and looked up at the spectre. "I'll try my best, Father," he vowed, holding tighter to the scabbard.*

*Benjamin smiled as his spectre began to fade away, the world swirling around Arthur with technicolour waves.*

## Chapter 6: The Roundtable



Arthur jolted awake with a start, his head throbbing just like in the dream he had. He groaned to himself, rubbing his temple as he sat up and lifted his face off the books on his desk. *Well, at least that part of the vision was right.*

That couldn't have been a memory, nor just a random dream like any other person in Londinium; it had to have had a purpose. He looked over to his window, becoming instantly blinded by the sunlight, clamping his eyes shut as the sun harassed his vision.

Arthur stood from his chair, his spine cracking as he stretched his arms up over his head with a groan. Arthur walked over to his windowsill by the far left wall, letting out a tiresome yawn as he shuffled over, his legs not quite fully awake from sleeping in a wooden chair. Yet again, it's not the most ideal sleeping spot of *all* the choices.

Arthur opened the windows to allow the cool breeze to travel through his room. The temperature dipped in and out of all different conditions in this kind of weather; whether it be hot, warm, cold or cool, there was no way of telling what the climate would be doing each day.

Especially in Braynor.

Walking to his cupboard, Arthur opened the double wooden doors, pulling out fresh clothing that Ms Enid had packed away for him. He pulled out an olive green shirt and brown trousers, quickly following a pair of leather boots.

He moved over to his bed, sitting on the edge of it and placing his clothes beside him.

Arthur took off his long-sleeved shirt, throwing it towards the clothes basket on the opposite side of the room. The shirt bounced off the wall and into the basket smoothly. Arthur grinned faintly, taking the olive shirt next to him and sliding it over his head.

He stood from the edge of his bed and changed his trousers. From where he was, Arthur could hear a conversation coming from the hallway, the voices familiar. He strained his ears, trying to listen to them clearly.

"Ergott is the King of Madness," Taryn growled, leaning against the hallway wall.

"Be careful what you say out loud," Samqueel warned, his voice stern as he turned to face him.

"Let me ask you, Sam; do you think the Barons are the right choice for Camelot's new protectors? You know of their history," Taryn frowned, folding his arms.

"In all honesty, I'd be lying if I said I agreed with Ergott's choice," Sam muttered.

"You and I both know that he shouldn't be King," Taryn mumbled quietly, looking around the hallway.

"Speaking about Ergott like that can get yours and my ass kicked if someone overhears," Samqueel reminded him with a glower.

"He deserved to be told off by that girl," Taryn said. "Ground his ego a bit. Satisfying to no end."

"Ergott wants us at the Roundtable in fifteen minutes," a third voice joined, Reuben walking to stand beside Sam. "Another meeting about the assault on Ariandel, I'm guessing."

"That brings up my next point - he throws us into stupidly dangerous situations," Taryn added, giving Sam a sharp look.

"When did Wilhelm estimate our departure?" Samqueel ignored him, turning his attention to Reuben.

"Tomorrow at sunrise, when the men are ready," Reuben replied. "Are we even sure this is a smart idea?"

"I know damn well that it isn't," Samqueel sighed. "Have the boys returned with the others yet?"

Reuben nodded at him. "They arrived early this morning."

"Good. At least we can fall back on that plan if things go the way I'm guessing."

"Surely he's not so stupid to do something like that?" Taryn scoffed. "The city would never forgive him."

"For now, it's just a precaution. They know the plan. As for Ergott's concern with Catarina," Sam shook his head with a sigh, "I don't understand what he's worried about. And why the Hell would Jackseye show up after all these years just to bring Barons back here? Something isn't right."

"Are you three coming? Ergott's waiting for you," Lorsaw's voice sounded from the stairwell.

All three Knights flicked their eyes over to Lorsaw near the staircase, seeing his typical tight-lipped face peering around the corner. Taryn smirked at him from over Samqueel's shoulder, relishing in his irritation.

"A bit tired there, Lorsaw?" Taryn asked, nodding to his knotted hair and messy outlook, his shirt untucked and coat crinkled.

"Since when did you care?" Lorsaw sniped, straightening his shirt.

"Oh, I don't. I just find it funny," Taryn grinned at him. "Normally, you'd never let a single hair on your head be out of place, never mind full-on look as if you got dragged in by the cat."

"In the Round Hall, now," Lorsaw demanded. "We don't want to keep Ergott waiting."

"Last time I checked, Lorsaw, you weren't the ones giving the orders around here," Samqueel frowned at him slightly. Lorsaw sniffed, looking away. "Ergott can wait for another five minutes. For now, go fix your hair, your outfit and your attitude. You look terrible."

"We'll be waiting for you in the Round Hall," Lorsaw growled, walking back down the stairs and threading his fingers through his hair.

From his doorway, Arthur watched the Knights follow Lorsaw down the stairs with grumbles of annoyance, their boots echoing in the hallway. Arthur sighed lightly, reaching over to the back of his neck for the hook on the necklace. Taking it off, Arthur went to gently place it on his bedside table and accidentally dropped it to the floor, hearing it hit the planks with a thud. Arthur shook his head with an annoyed huff, squatting down to the floor to pick it up.

As Arthur turned his head to look up, a shadow caught his eye beneath his bed, his brows knitting together. He placed the necklace up on the bedside table, turning his attention to peer beneath the frame. Arthur reached under the bed, getting a grip on the object.

To his surprise, the object was a lot heavier than he anticipated. He strained his tired limbs as he tugged it out from under the bed, backing up to look at it in confusion.

It was the chest from the dream.

*Had that been there the whole time?* It was a carbon copy of the chest from his dream - the same latches, with the same type of wood and the same rust coating the edges.

There was no way it could have gotten itself into his room; he never went into the door that was forbidden to him... or had he?

Arthur's eyes felt glued to the chest, the whole atmosphere centred on the box. A new question filled his thoughts: *What's in it?*

Arthur hesitated before reaching over to the latches, flicking them lightly as they clicked open. He lifted the chest open, the same cold breeze passing by his fingers, but no glowing blue light.

There it was: the armour, the sword and the shield, perfectly placed within the chest in the same spot as before.

Uncertainty creased Arthur's brow. *Maybe the dream wasn't a dream after all...*

Arthur closed the chest slowly. He knew he couldn't tell Ergott; otherwise, that would mean many consequences. He slid the chest back under his bed, out of sight and out of his mind - for now. Arthur finished readying himself, stepping out of his room to head down the stairwell, looking both ways to see if the Knights were still out there. He sighed in a bit of relief, heading down the stairs.

How in the Ether had it ended up under his bed? It couldn't have just shown up in Arthur's room as a coincidence - maybe someone put it there?

Like Hell they would. His uncle wouldn't - not even his Knights would dare to do it. They'd get into deep trouble if King Ergott found out they'd put it there.

Arthur reached the bottom of the stairs, his mood lifting as he saw Ms Enid in the main room, wiping down the doors with a wet cloth, a wooden water bucket on the ground beside her. Arthur walked over, spotting a spare cloth flopped over the bucket untouched. Without hesitation, Arthur made his way over to the Maiden, eyeing the extra cloth.

Ms Enid turned to look behind her, a broad smile beaming across her wrinkled face. "Good morning, Arthur," she greeted.

"Morning to you too, Ms Enid," Arthur smiled.

"You're up earlier than normal today. Are you heading somewhere?" Ms Enid asked softly.

"Not for a while; I still need to get you your bread," Arthur said, guilt growing across his face.

"Don't worry about the bread, lad; the delivery came on time. I heard about yesterday's incident - those men were too cruel to you, dear," Ms Enid frowned, looking at a spot on his face. "Look at what they did to you."

Arthur turned to look at a mirror seated against the wall towards the door; a purple bruise smudged just under his eye across his cheekbone. It was probably a factor contributing to the pounding in his head.

"It's nothing too major, just a bruise," Arthur shrugged, turning to look at her.

"Do I have to have a word with the men?" Ms Enid asked in a low voice, her eyes narrowing.

"It's nothing, Ms Enid. Trust me, I'm fine," Arthur reassured. An old mistress like her would never be able to fight against the Barons, regardless.

Ms Enid nodded shallowly, turning back to the door she was cleaning. "Did you have another bad dream?"

Arthur dipped the cloth in the water bucket, beginning to clean with the elderly Maiden. "Not a bad one, but an interesting one," he nodded.

"You know me too well to not tell me," Ms Enid said with a slightly expectant tone.

Arthur quirked his mouth. "It was strange. I started in my room, sleeping on the desk. There was this blue light coming from underneath my doorway, so I checked it out, and nothing was there except this blue orb. I walked down the main lobby, and the blue light kept on leading me on a specific path like it was guiding me to a place. I followed it down the Western hallway, and then it became a silhouette, a spectre, I believe." He wiped across the door's surface, dust clinging to the cloth. "It led me into the room Ergott banned me from, and I found a-

"Chest?" Ms Enid interrupted, giving off a slight grin.

Arthur looked at her sideways. "You knew about it?"

"Of course. I made sure it got moved there," Ms Enid shrugged casually.

"You put it there?" Arthur asked with incredulity, his eyes widening slightly.

"I knew that after our conversation about Ergott not wanting to give up the throne, I had to help you somehow," Ms Enid murmured under her breath, wary of eavesdroppers.

Arthur couldn't believe it. "Ms Enid, that could get you into trouble," Arthur frowned.

"Ergott doesn't control me. The only reason I'm still here is to look after you as best as I can since he won't," Ms Enid dismissed, dipping her cloth in the bucket.

Arthur was stunned. Of all things, he never would have thought Ms Enid would go against the King for him. "Why give me the armour? Why risk getting yourself into trouble for me?"

"Because no one else would have," Ms Enid shrugged, casually polishing away.

"No one should, not even you," Arthur protested. "I'm not worth the risk of you getting your job taken away or even worse. I appreciate the thought, but that was a risky move."

"Ergott needs to understand that you're not just a peasant living in the royal castle under special care, Arthur. Your uncle is a hard man, and I have a gut feeling that something isn't right about him."

"Maybe that's for the better or the worse, but I heard it from his own mouth that he doubts me," Arthur muttered, getting irritated. "I'm going to prove to him I'm more than just his nephew."

Ms Enid looked at him, intrigued. "And how will you prove it to him?" she asked curiously.

"If I can't be a better King than what he believes, then maybe I'll become a better Knight than he could ever think. Other people seem to believe in me, so why can't he?" Arthur declared, frowning deeper.



"Because you're too young and naïve," Ergott's voice snaked towards them.

Arthur and Ms Enid flicked their attention over to his voice, their eyes widening. Ergott, along with two Camelot Knights, stood at the top of the stairs to the High Gates, his expression flat. Arthur scowled, taking a step in front of Ms Enid.

"You two are like Syren's in the castle. I could hear you from a mile away," Ergott grumbled.

"So you got all of that information?" Arthur asked defensively. His heart pounded in his ears. *How much of that had he heard?*

"About you thinking you can become a Knight of Camelot? Yes, I did," Ergott answered, a slight smirk slithering across his face.

Relief flew through Arthur, but he kept his face neutral. "Why does everyone but you believe in me?" Arthur asked, his voice stiff.

"Because everyone else is blind. They're so caught up in their own opinions, imaginations and hopes of you that they've blinded themselves from the truth. You're a weak young boy with a fancy title to your name. They already have a King - a King who can and will do anything for his Kingdom. But they can't see that because all they want is 'The Born King', a myth and a tale," Ergott growled.

"You've blinded yourself, uncle," Arthur glowered. "You keep on telling yourself that you're the only one here who can bear the pressure of being King."

"That's because I am. Being a King has many, many responsibilities, Arthur. People want you dead. I'm doing the right thing by you," Ergott narrowed his eyes back at Arthur.

"You're wrong," Arthur spat, his blood firing up.

"You don't know how well you've got things, boy. I've done so much for you, and you're repaying me by being as selfish as your father," Ergott barked at him.

"You've done nothing for me! You've kept me here and robbed me of knowledge and power, all for your own agenda!" Arthur bit back.

"I'm trying to protect you," Ergott boomed, his fists clenching at his sides.

"You're holding me back!" Arthur barked. "You're pushing me away and telling me no because you couldn't be bothered to face the fact that you're not the rightful King. You're afraid!"

"Afraid of what? My nephew, the street fighter? The saviour of the poor and weak?" Ergott looked him up and down in mockery. "You should consider yourself lucky I was here to clean up the mess your father left behind. Who was going to teach you the ways of the King if you just so happened to pick up the crown?"

"I'd have figured it out. A lot of things would be different around in Londinium, I assure you that," Arthur huffed, his eyes cold.

"And would they have been for the better or the worse?" Ergott asked, his jaw clenched.

"You tell me, your Highness," Arthur glared at him.

"King Ergott," a voice broke the tension from the Round Hall doors.

Ergott pivoted, seeing Samqueel standing with the door halfway open. Sam flicked his eyes to Arthur, his face steeled with tension. Arthur wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

"Yes, Samqueel?" Ergott answered, his spine rigid.

"We're ready for the meeting, sire," Samqueel replied, stepping out to the hallway further.

Ergott nodded, making his way over to the Round Hall, glaring sidelong at Arthur. "Disrespect me in such a regard again, boy, and you will find yourself out on the streets as a commoner," he threatened.

"You wouldn't dare," Arthur scoffed, narrowing his eyes in anger.

"Don't test me." Ergott turned his gaze forward, Arthur and Ms Enid watching as Ergott disappeared into the Round Hall.

Arthur glanced at Sam, nodding in thanks. It was one of many times that Sam had broken up a fight between him and Ergott, settling the tension to keep the peace. He'd done it since he was a young lad - came to his defence, fought for his freedom to roam the streets and to train in the castle yards with them, made sure Tristan kept his privilege to hang around the Knight Quarters. All of the Knights had made sure he was kept safe and sane since Jackseye left the castle. He couldn't be more grateful.

Samqueel nodded back to Arthur in acknowledgement, the Round Hall doors shutting with a thud. Arthur turned back to Ms Enid behind him, the old woman fretting with the cloth in her hand.

"Looks like that armour will be coming in handy after all," Arthur smirked, walking back towards the staircase and chucking the rag into the bucket with a sploosh.

"What are you doing, dear?" Ms Enid asked, watching him.

"Becoming a Knight of Camelot," Arthur answered, smiling at her as he walked up the stairs.

Ms Enid smiled proudly as Arthur disappeared up the stairs, dunking her cloth in the bucket. "Well, Benjamin," she murmured, ringing the water out into the bucket. "You might just get your wish after all."



Tension rolled in the air of the Round Hall thick enough that Sam could cut his sword through it. Barons stood on either side of the room along the walls, positioned as if the Knights at the table were the threat. His jaw clenched tightly at Carsen standing on the dais beside a comfortable

Jackseye lounging with his hands behind his head, the quiet Knight's face irritated at the man in his seat. Jackseye didn't notice, his boots up on the lip of the table and a wine glass in his fingers.

*The cocky bastard always did know how to make enemies.* It made Sam want to drag him in the dirt behind his horse tied to a chain.

The Knights watched as the King walked over to his seat, Ergott's anger filling the room like an open tap as he collapsed into the chair with the grace of a giant beast. Samqueel took his seat beside Ergott, Reuben at his usual spot to his right.

"Are you a new Knight of the Roundtable, Rohin?" Samqueel asked Jackseye flatly, keeping his face uninterested.

"Do I look like a Knight to you, Sam?" Jackseye sniped at him.

"The Roundtable seats are reserved for the Knights who serve it, not black hooded strangers," Samqueel hinted, letting an edge enter his tone.

"Maybe I'm allowed to sit at the Roundtable because I have a higher authority than you as of today, Sir Torona," Jackseye replied.

Sam gripped the edge of his armrest. "I believe you lost that privilege when you abandoned your Legions to join a league of assassins," Samqueel added, keeping his voice steady.

"I wouldn't underestimate my status if I were you, Sam," Jackseye growled. "We both know Barons are the proper solution to ending chaos."

"We talk about chaos, but I'm yet to find any other than the stink your forces are kicking up to the east," Sam sniped, turning to look at him sharply. "And to know there wasn't any uproar before your leagues patrolling our streets, I can say for certain that your men have been the root of many headaches caused as of late. Suppose you believe

your purpose here is to rule by fear over people who were peaceful before your 'intervention'. In that case, you've got your ideals in the wrong council, Rohin."

"Perhaps my men could bring a new order to this wretched city," Jackseye suggested, leaning closer to Samqueel. "You and your men are too soft on the people. You've let them stew in their belief of a so-called corrupted crown. With our help, this city can go back to believing Camelot is strong under the rule of King Ergott. To make a Kingdom strong, you need to show your people your strength."

"The Barons have swapped your train of thought for one of a weasel, I see," Sam muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose. *What was Ergott thinking, bringing this wreck back to Camelot?*

"They've opened my eyes," Jackseye growled. "And they see better than yours."

"Are you two finished?" Ergott grunted, his patience wearing thin.

Samqueel glanced at Ergott briefly before turning back to Jackseye, frowning deeply. "Apologies, sire," he muttered.

"Dearest apologies, my King," Jackseye smirked, leaning back in his chair, much to Carsen's annoyance, who sat beside him in Joseph's spot. The silent Knight hadn't turned up to the meeting, most likely for the better. Since the Barons showed up, he'd hidden himself out of sight to avoid a fight between himself and his brother.

That's if Voss was even in Camelot. Sam hoped for Joseph's sake that it wasn't the case. He could tell the ink on his body was itching at their very presence.

The room fell silent, the Knights waiting for Ergott to speak. Sam watched the Black Guards closely; it was as if they were statues. He couldn't tell if they were even breathing with how still they were. *Exactly how long do I have to put up with these freaks?*

"I'm only going to say this once," Ergott started. "We are going forward with the attack, and we are bringing Ariandel to its knees."

"Like I have told you many times before, sire - Camelot is not a Kingdom of war," Reuben sighed, irritation edging his words as he glanced at Ergott. "King Benjamin intended to make this a land of salvation, as it was King Uther's and his father before him. We can't just change our values at the flick of a switch."

"Benjamin was a soft King, never doing anything to change Braynor," Jackseye stated, smirking slightly. "Enforcing freedom of speech and the right for a homeless hag to be as equal as the richest person in the Kingdom is just begging for trouble against the crown. What would he have done if someone started questioning his right to lead?"

Lorsaw looked at him flatly from the corner of his eye. "I find it odd when someone can change their opinions as quickly as the weather," he grumbled, his voice dripping with venom.

"Shocking, ain't it?" Jackseye said smugly.

"Samqueel," Ergott turned to him, Sam flicking his attention to the King. "You are the Commander of the Roundtable. You lead these Knights. You've been in worse situations with worse odds and came out better. Convince them to change their minds."

"This isn't what Camelot is known for. We don't just head into battles for the sake of shutting down a threat that's yet to be given. Our job is to protect the Kingdom and our people, sire, not inspire madness," Taryn argued.

"You need to understand that, my King," Reuben added, leaning forward on the table. "Think about the people of Camelot that could die if we did this."

Jackseye looked over at Ergott with his brows high in fake surprise. "They've gone soft on you, Ergott," he drawled. "Look how quick they are to back out of a fight. Mighty men, indeed."

The Knights flicked their eyes over to him sharply, annoyance rippling off their shoulders like fumes.

"You have no say in what the Roundtable does, Baron," Lorsaw growled, scowling at him.

"Please," Jackseye scoffed. "My authority is a lot greater than yours."

"So is your ego," Arkan mumbled. "And that's saying something."

"And your arrogance," Natan muttered. Carsen turned his head, hiding his smirk.

"Why are the Barons even here? Aren't you supposedly sending us to *fight* them?" Brannagh asked, sighing.

"We aren't allied alongside the normal gaggle of Ariendal's Barons," Jackseye corrected sharply. "We're separate, an outlawed force. It's funny what happens when previous connections make your future turn sour. We're here to protect the Kingdom when you leave for the oncoming battle. Myself and Ergott figured that your leftover Knights wouldn't be able to handle the backlash if you failed to bring them down."

Sam's blood roared at that. *And what the Hell was that supposed to mean?*

"And may I add, he is correct," Jackseye continued. "Barons, unlike your sorry lot, actually possess the skill to triumph on the battlefield. Your sorry excuse of a warfront specialises in babysitting. The folks in Londinium know that when their so-called 'mighty' Knights of the Roundtable hold the front line, they're clinging to a small, pitiful thread of hope. But what about the shambles you leave behind yourselves to pick up your scraps, those pitiful, untrained adolescents clutching toothpicks? Barons are warriors, born and bred for battle – we're attackers, not mere protectors. Alone, we're magnificent; together, we're an unstoppable force. Honestly, I can't fathom how you expect to stand a chance against a force like them when you're relying on stable boys and pickpockets to do your

dirty work. Your reputation has crumbled to dust since I departed, but then again, I never held high hopes for you, Sam. Ever since you stumbled into the training hall, you've had a knack for wildly overestimating yourself."

The room fell into an ominous, bone-chilling silence, the Knights' collective anger and tension hanging heavily in the air with all eyes now fixed upon Jackseye. Sam, in that unbearable stillness, felt rage surge through his veins like a wildfire in the heart of the Ether Plains. The hairs on his arms stood at attention, bristling as Sam clenched the armrests of his seat. The wooden chair let out a slow, agonised creak, mirroring the strain in his clenched fists. His fingernails dug into the wood like claws, leaving deep, permanent grooves.

How.

*Dare.*

He.

"You're forgetting one significant thing, Rohin," Samqueel growled through his teeth.

"And that is?" Jackseye asked, curiosity laced mockingly in his voice.

"My men did not shed their blood, sweat and tears inside of the training hall and sacrifice their safety to spend three nights in the heart of the Darklands proving their worth just to be called toothpick-wielding teenagers by a man with as much integrity as a wolf in sheep's clothing! You've got some bloody nerve accusing me of hosting weak forces, considering it was you who took Green Thumbs from the hall beneath Commander Mordred's nose to serve the crown untrained and unprepared. You have no idea how much of a mess Wilhelm and I have had to clean up since you left or how much time I've put into fixing all the little mistakes you've conveniently decided to cover up."

Jackseye's face twitched with slight surprise, his easy mask flicking back into place instantly. "In that case, it's no wonder why things have gone downhill since you've made



them think using a shield is better than using a sword," he snorted.

Sam sat forward in his seat, pushing his finger into the wooden grooves. "Training a Legion of any sort of fighters based on prioritising attack over defence is foolish! If you meet an attack with defence, you keep your men safe and still on their feet. But if you choose to counter an attack with another attack, your fighters will turn into nothing but bloody debris – and it will happen even faster if a damn volley of arrows is raining down! You attack when there's a clear opening to exploit, or you don't attack at all. Just blindly charging into battle like a bunch of reckless imbeciles, with your stupid methods for training offence with no defence, will leave you and your men torn to ribbons!"

He stood to his feet, bracing his knuckles against the table. "My men once slayed a Darklands dragon in this very Kingdom using the same tactics that I teach to every single lad that comes through the Gates with a title and a badge to their name. I've led my men every step of the way through each battle we've faced and come out victorious *every single time*. I am aware of how to win my battles with defence as our priority. Protection is no laughing matter. The people *need* protection. They will always depend on their Knights to guide them to safety and defend their homes whenever another dragon decides to pay a visit.

"Your men will be the last ones they will ever count on fighting for them. They know of your history of violence and killing. You're proving to them on the streets of your unworthiness as we speak, for the Gods' sake. Poke and prod all you want over my method of battle. In the end, I'm not leaving my home to be defended purely by you. The odds may be stacked against us in that case, but I don't care. I'll continue to know my people's worth, regardless of what you think," Sam spat at Jackseye, standing straight and looking down at him.

The Knights at the table raised their wine glasses high, cheers of support for Sam's words bouncing off the walls as they yelled heartily.

*Let him chew on that.* Sam picked up his goblet, his withering stare burning Jackseye as he raised it with the others. Jackseye glanced at Ergott, a dirty frown coating his face. Ergott's face remained unimpressed, his jaw tight.

Samqueel turned to King Ergott, taking in his scowl. He watched him as he picked up his goblet, waited as the room quietened, and the Knights turned to the King.

"You are all dismissed. Except for Samqueel," Ergott murmured softly, taking a deep drink of his wine.

Sam's heart quickened, watching as the lads around him hesitated a moment before standing from their seats. The Barons by the wall pushed the doors open, moving to let the Knights leave, Jackseye pushing past them with a scowl. Reuben looked back over his shoulder, his mouth quirked in uncertainty as he glanced at Sam. *Good luck.*

Sam felt as if he may need it.

"Disobeying my orders has become your personal goal, has it?" Ergott swirled his wine, taking a sip.

Samqueel sat back in his chair slowly, sitting his glass back down. The room felt remarkably empty without his friends surrounding him. The feel of the Barons' masked faces watching them made his spine rigid. "Using Rohin's Barons to protect Londinium is not a good choice, sire."

"I don't quite understand, Samqueel," Ergott frowned, placing the glass down. "I thought you looked up to Jackseye as a mentor when he was a part of my Legion."

"I wouldn't know where you had gotten that thought from, considering I'd never particularly gotten along with him, sire," he answered, clearing his throat quietly. Sam had hated Jackseye since the day he'd blamed him for tarnishing his reputation for telling Commander Mordred about his ideas of early recruitment. "Besides, he left to fight for Ariendal. Why should I respect him for that?"

"What if he was ordered by me to go to the Barons?" Ergott looked at him scornfully, the brown in his eyes warming considerably.

Samqueel observed his face, his jaw clenched. "Then I would've expected to be informed of his movements instead of being left in the dark, sire."

"Sometimes, royalty comes first out of all things, Samqueel. It was the tenth anniversary of Benjamin's death; I was busy, of course, as we all were. Unfortunately, time is limited for me to inform you of every little detail of what happens within the castle walls," Ergott frowned.

Sam's eyes flashed angrily. "I am your Knight Commander, Ergott," he shot. "I need to know these things so I can keep a level of order and stability under your crown. Having the Legion Commander up and leave with no explanation or foretelling does nothing to help that." He leaned on the table, lowering his chin to look at Ergott from beneath his brows. "And if royalty truly came first, then did you bother to tell Arthur as well?"

"Don't you bring Arthur into this; he has nothing to do with it," Ergott snapped, thudding the table with his fist.

"Then why not include the boy in any meetings? Why not involve him in anything he needs to know for when he becomes King? If royalty was more important than informing your Knight Commander of key details, then surely it's within your reasoning to include him," Sam tested, half raised out of his chair.

"You are stepping on a very, very thin surface here, Sir Torona," Ergott warned, his eyes heated.

Samqueel resisted the urge to glare at him, his lips pursed tight. "So we are clear: the movement against Ariandel is a fool's choice."

"You're the fool. Disobeying the King's direct orders is a huge mistake to make," Ergott spat.

Sam fixed Ergott with a cold stare. "My orders are to take care of my men, my colleagues, and my Kingdom.

You're sending us on a death errand, and right now, the honour and safety of my Knights is more important than a King's orders."

Ergott scoffed, picking up his goblet once again for another sip. "Follow me, if you will," he ordered, his voice suddenly calm.

Samqueel observed him, still bristling with fury. Ergott reached the base of the stairs in the far corner before he turned back around, scowling at Sam.

"It would be rude of you to not join me," Ergott hinted, his voice laced with disapproval.

Sam stood straight slowly, straightening his coat before walking off the dais with a barely contained scowl. "Where are we going?"

"To the balcony," Ergott assured. "Fresh air will help us to settle this."

Sam stalked behind him, looking back towards the open doors to watch the Barons walk out of the room, dispersing like shadows to a corner.

King Ergott walked swiftly up the stone stairs, the clack of his boots on the stones bouncing off the curved walls of the stairwell. Sam followed behind quickly, taking an exasperated breath. He was still determining Ergott's intentions, but he knew some sort of power trip was about to happen.

Ergott led Samqueel out to the balcony, the sun glaring down as they stepped out onto the stone platform. Ergott walked to the brick ledge lining the balcony's railing, leaning both hands on the bricks and peering out over the city.

Samqueel stood behind him, keeping his distance. The sun was scorching for this time of year, Sam's coat heating up quickly. He imagined the children in the city to be looking for a good spot on the riverbank to go for a swim as he once did when he was younger.

"Do you see that Kingdom over there?" Ergott pointed, looking at a pale stone castle in the far distance to the west.

He flicked his eyes to look, turning his head. "What about it?"

"They look up to you and your Knights, you know," Ergott reminded him.

Samqueel raised a brow. "Rinecroft? How... weirdly flattering," he mused. Sure, he and his men were no secret to the rest of the world, but to be an object of idolisation in a Kingdom known for farming? Odd indeed.

"Jackseye and I believe that Rinecroft will be Ariandel's next target," Ergott muttered, looking back at him from over his shoulder. "Wouldn't it be a shame if they fell?"

Sam chewed his tongue. *Why would Ariandel want to take a young Kingdom that has little benefit to them?* "You're certain of their movements? This isn't just Rohin leading by emotion?" he asked.

"I'm afraid it isn't," Ergott answered, turning around to face him. "If the Knights of the Roundtable aren't out to protect them, who will?"

"We have allies, or *had*," he tilted his head slightly at Ergott accusingly. "Sending a Legion of our Knights will cover their territory just fine if the need ever arose."

"Ariandel will go through them like a knife to paper," Ergott frowned slightly. "The Knights of Camelot aren't properly as trained as your Knights."

Samqueel looked at him sharply. "You underestimate your Knight's capabilities, sire," he protested. "Marlon trains the lads to the highest quality. You're aware of the extensive boundaries pushed before they're deemed acceptable."

Ergott chuckled deeply, shaking his head. "You really don't know about this situation, do you?"

"I'd know more if you would inform me of any reports from the front lines of our allies," he gritted out. "Sending

my men to find out from halfway across the country is redundant. We have couriers. Pigeons, even."

"I'm going to tell you this one last time," Ergott growled, walking closer to him. Sam straightened, meeting his stare equally. "Your men will be leading the front line on the raid at Catarina. You have absolutely no say in it, and you will follow through with my lead. Am I understood?" Ergott growled deeply.

Samqueel narrowed his eyes, ire burning deep in them. "I'll be researching the defence of Ariendal for myself this evening. If I do not find a crack for us to slip through, consider your task forgotten."

Ergott's smirk was one of wickedness, his eyes malicious. "In that case, you can consider your titles revoked," he threatened.

Sam's heart skipped a beat, his stare wavering. "You're not serious," Sam spat, his teeth baring a little.

"You don't want to let go of that position now, do you?" Ergott asked menacingly. "All that hard work you've put in to get to where you are now, wasted with a single sentence. It would be a shame to put all your years of service down because of a refusal."

*You twisted bastard.*

"I would rather let my men live another day to fight a real war and forsake my title than lead them to their deaths over a war no one wanted to fight," he muttered, his jaw clenched. He turned on his heel and walked towards the door, leaving it open as he stormed through.

Ergott smirked as Samqueel left the balcony, his eyes glinting with irritation. "I suppose we'll have to wait and see what you come up with," he muttered quietly to himself.

Ergott turned back around to the balcony's ledge, scouring his eyes over the outskirts of Camelot. Silently, Black Guards moved to stand behind him on the terrace, shifting into position from their various spots. Ergott

looked at them over his shoulder, their mask revealing nothing.

## *Chapter 7: Knight's Training*



Arthur opened his door, stepping into it as the sunlight lit up the space through the window. He pushed his hair out of his face and let a breath loose, his heart still thundering in his ears.

That had been the first time he had ever stood up for himself in front of his uncle; it felt unnatural to him, foreign as a drug. He was never normally allowed to speak for himself in those situations, but it must've been a rare day.

Arthur walked over to his window, leaning on the lip of the skirting and looking down at the people below him. He could pick out a few Knights and the shadowy forms of the Barons within the crowd. Arthur watched the Barons closely, noting the way they moved.

The largest man led at the front, his men trailing behind in a cluster. It was like a wolf pack. An alpha who led his hunters to stalk their prey.

Only a fool would believe that the Barons would be a good choice for protecting an already well-guarded Kingdom such as Camelot. Just as well, Ergott had to be the fool to hire them. It was only time before he realised his mistake.

Arthur frowned at them, watching the patrol push and shove any civilians that stepped within their proximity. His eyes glued to the Barons, he moved away from the window ledge-

"Arty! Oi!"



Arthur paused, turning back to look down at the castle courtyard.

"Arty! Arthur! I see you up there!" Tristan called out from below. His arms waved above his head in a wide arc, his beaming grin visible even from the tower window. "Remember me? Your best friend?! Can you see me? Hey!"

"How could I forget the most annoying person in the Kingdom?" he muttered, rolling his eyes. "I'll be down in fifteen minutes," he called down to Tristan, who whooped in celebration.

Muttering to himself, he moved over to his wooden cupboard, opening the double doors with ease and digging through the clothes folded high on the overhead platform. Arthur eventually found what he was searching for; a brown satchel, the leather faded with frayed strips ripping off the surface. He coughed as the dust swirled in the air around him.

Arthur walked over to his desk with the satchel in hand, opening the latches as he shuffled over to the desk. He grabbed a water bottle from the corner of his desk, opening the satchel wide before placing the water bottle gently inside, stashing a few of the training books inside as well. Arthur flung the strap over his shoulder and stepped out into the hallway, the door shutting loudly behind him as he continued along his path.

Walking down the stairs, Arthur began to feel different, a mix of nerves and excitement stewing in his chest. After all, he was heading to train to become a Knight of Camelot, and that was a big thing. Refining his skills instead of relying on his street fighting skills could help him find his way or stop some sort of fight between him and the Barons when it came down to it, especially against someone like Jackseye.

Coming to the bottom of the stairs, Arthur walked into the castle lobby, seeing a few familiar faces standing around the pillars to the left, their attention turning to him.

"Going somewhere, are we, Arthur?" Sir Natan asked, his shoulder pushing off the pillar he leaned against.

"Possibly," Arthur answered, walking over to them.

"Is that a purse?" Arkan asked, raising an eyebrow at Arthur's satchel.

"No," Arthur replied slowly, confused. "I'll be back in the next two hours."

"Don't go getting yourself into any strife now," Sam said from behind him on the stairs, walking over to them.

"Since when did I get into trouble?" Arthur asked with feigned hurt, looking back at Sam.

Samqueel gave him a look, raising his brow. "From what I recall, getting shoved around in the streets with scuffed and muddy trousers at the age of ten was when your fighting career happened to become a reality," he chuckled.

"At least I know how to defend myself from an attacker. I don't see anyone trying to tell me any different," Arthur frowned. "Nor have I got anyone to teach me anything."

Sam straightened his back, his mouth quirked to the left. "I suppose all you had to do was ask, but it seems you've taken the initiative to learn the right way. I'm proud of you for doing so."

Arthur flinched; he hadn't heard those words in forever. "You're proud? Of what exactly?"

"For becoming the man you want to be."

"For standing up to your uncle," Reuben chimed in. "That was a huge thing to overhear."

"For getting yourself involved for the sake of your people," Natan nodded, moving to clap his shoulders.

"For following in your father's footsteps," Brannagh said, giving him a soft smile. "He'd be proud of you to no end."

"For taking the time to learn to fight for your Kingdom," Lorsaw said and muttered quietly, "Even if it goes against everything Ergott asks of you."

Karsol heard him and slapped the back of his head, Lorsaw grunting and glaring up at him.

"For always, *always*, protecting the people of Londinium. Even though it isn't your duty yet," Taryn said with a smirk.

"For being yourself," Carsen piped up, his voice strained. Joseph nodded in agreement, thumping his chest with a fist.

"For being our Crown Prince. We're honoured to serve alongside you, Art," Derak said, placing a hand on his back.

Samqueel smiled down at him, approval in his eyes. "We all believe in you, Arthur. What will it take to make you believe it, too?"

Arthur looked at each of the Knights around him, taking a deep breath in. "Myself," he murmured. "Proving to myself that the prophecies have a hold in more than just stone and story. For me to find my place in the world, where I belong."

"You belong here, lad. Camelot is your home. Who is it you want to be?" Forlorn questioned, folding his arms.

"What I'm destined to become. I just need to figure out what that is," Arthur answered, furrowing his eyebrows lightly.

"Whoever you decide to be, we'll be here," Samqueel promised. The Knights nodded to Arthur, adding their agreements.

Arthur nodded back at all of them, standing up tall with a slight grin on his face. "It's time to prove to Ergott that I've got a place in this Kingdom."

Arkan grinned. "Go show the world you're more than just a pretty face," he joked. "Show us what you're *really* made of."

"I'll do my best," Arthur replied. "That's if I'm not killed in the process."

Lorsaw snorted. "Please, the whole thing wraps you up in armour with the squish factor of a marshmallow. Training's easier than fieldwork, I can tell you."

Taryn groaned. "Lorsaw with the ever-so-inspiring cheer factor. You should start a cheerleading squad since you're so fantastic with your motivations," he drawled.

Arthur frowned slightly at Lorsaw, raising his eyebrow at him. "Thanks for the encouragement."

"I'm only giving educated information-"

"Oh shoosh, Lorsaw," Arkan interrupted with a sigh.

"Sit down, Lorsaw," Reuben said.

"Take a few calming breaths, Lorsaw," Taryn grinned slyly.

"Don't be a cranky Knight today, Lorsaw," Derak rolled his eyes.

"Have you had your morning snack yet, Lorsaw? Is that why you're so moody?" Brannagh raised a brow, smirking.

Lorsaw scowled. "No..."

"Damn it, Lorsaw!" Taryn scorned, lifting his hands in the air. "No wonder you're grumpy."

"You ought to go feed your face, then, Lorsaw," Brannagh looked over at him with raised brows.

"Ms Enid can cook you some eggs. We all know that's your favourite dish," Reuben suggested with a grin.

"I'm allergic to eggs!" Lorsaw growled in protest.

"No wonder why you're always refusing to eat rations," Sam muttered.

"I'm just going to go now..." Arthur muttered awkwardly, slowly stepping back to exit the gates.

Arkan looked over at him. "Hey Arthur, a word of advice?"

"Sure," Arthur said cautiously.

"Take out his left knee; you'll know who." They all rolled their eyes and groaned. It seemed a shared joke sat with them that puzzled Arthur.

*What the hell could that mean?*

"Who?" Arthur asked in confusion.

"You'll know when you know, trust us," Forlorn chuckled.

"Trust anyone but Arkan," Reuben reassured.

Arkan frowned. "I have ears that work just fine, and they can hear the liquid crap pouring from your mouth," he said flatly.

"You have ears and hearing; you just use them whenever you think it's necessary. Which is *never*," Brannagh added, staring pointedly at Arkan.

"At least my diet doesn't consist of just plants."

"Don't you judge my food," Brannagh growled.

"What are you gonna do, nibble on me? You rabbit," Arkan maliciously grinned, backing up quickly with a laugh as Brannagh chased after him.

Deciding to leave them to it before he got caught up in a wrestling match he'd never escape from, Arthur slipped out of the castle quickly, chuckling under his breath.

The Knights were either a laugh, a fight or a terrifying thing to behold. There wasn't much in between to label them. Considering the men were capable of both taking down a dragon and beating the entire Kingdom in a drinking contest, it wasn't hard to get along with the protectors of Camelot.

Arthur stepped onto the stairs leading down to Londinium's streets, looking around the area to spot Tristan anywhere in the vicinity.

"Ah, there you are! I was starting to think you got lost in that massive boulder," Tristan grinned, popping beside him quickly from the Gates' wall.

"How long have you been waiting for me?" Arthur asked, walking down the steps.

"About half an hour probably, according to the sun," he said, holding his hand up to the bright star. "I don't know exactly how people tell the time like that, but from what I'm guessing, you tell the time by rating on a scale of one to

twelve how much it hurts your eyes to look at." He squinted at the sun.

"Are you finished with your time theory yet, or would you like a script about everything you just said?" Arthur said to him. "I mean, you could make serious gold with those kinds of philosophies."

Tristan looked at him, blinking harshly. "Is that not how that works?"

Arthur shrugged. "Your choice of if it does."

Tristan smiled slightly, looking at the satchel tucked beneath Arthur's arm. "Is it a trend to wear purses in the royal family now?" he observed.

"It's called a satchel, not a purse," Arthur frowned at him. "It was my father's before he died, and of course, he left it for me."

Tristan hummed. "What's in it?" His eyes lit up. "Do you have food?"

"A bottle and some books," Arthur answered. "And what makes you think I'd give you my food if I had any?"

Tristan raised his hands in a shrug, waving them slightly. "No one said you'd *give* it to me," he reasoned.

Arthur frowned at him, a ghost of a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. "Because it's you, and you're always looking for food," he shook his head.

"Ask your uncle to lower the taxes. Then, I could afford to buy more food than a lump of bread and some cheese."

Arthur scoffed at that suggestion. "Like he'd listen to someone else's opinion."

Tristan shrugged again. "Who knows? Anyway, let's go before Maria gets cornered with the normal tools in the training hall," he said joyfully, walking down the stairs.

Arthur followed behind him, keeping close as they snaked through the crowds bundled in the alleyways. The Northern District path led past homes decorated with frilly flowers and well-maintained gardens, the noble citizens buzzing around their district cheerily. Tall

terracotta-coloured walls met the multi-coloured shingles topping their roofs, birds of all colours flying through the sky with cheery chirps. Knights in training moved around the small square plaza beneath the clock tower, some seated at the benches near the wall of the stone training hall.

"Hopefully, somebody decided to leave the door unlocked this time," Tristan muttered to himself.

"Who trains you?" Arthur asked, looking at him sideways.

Tristan stood in front of a wooden door, steel reinforcing the edges. He gripped the handle and looked through the small window in the centre of the wood. "An old guy known as Marlon," he answered and twisted the doorknob, swinging it open. "A-ha, finally."

"Since when did you want to train as a Knight? You always said you wanted to be a blacksmith when we were young," Arthur said.

"Well... there aren't many blacksmiths that are willing to take me in," he shrugged, his voice a little strained. "They all think I'd try and melt the tools or something."

Arthur looked at him, his head tilted. "Who told you that one?"

He grimaced slightly. "All of them."

Arthur frowned. "Right."

Tristan walked inside, leading Arthur inside. A small foyer peeled off in three directions, the sound of sparring lads coming from the long, straight hallway in front of him. Glass lined the sides of the walls, and chunks of old beaten-up pieces of armour were stashed in alcoves behind the panes similar to the hallways in the castle. Iron plaques engraved with the names of Knights widely varied throughout history adorned the spaces between, some of them shinier and more recent than others.

Arthur looked around curiously, peering closer at the cleaner plaques. The names of the Roundtable stared back at him, their rankings engraved beside each of their names

with their assigned colours polished into the inlays. Arthur smiled and turned to keep heading down the hall. A light flared in front of Tristan, his silhouette breaking through the end of the hallway into a massive room, Arthur blinking the light from his eyes rapidly.

"Well, this isn't what I expected," Arthur muttered to himself, looking around the building.

Lads stood below him on the lowered flooring at the base of the stairs leading down to the stone arena pit, a few of them training in drawn chalk squares on the ground, hitting each other with savage blows. Each corner of the large room was coloured with faded paint, viewing platforms with wooden rails lining the space behind the bleachers on the far wall stretching around towards the entrance where Arthur stood. A door could be seen in the gap near the stairs between the red and blue bleachers, large windows shining light inside from a sizable fenced-off grass area outside. To his left, an arched doorway sat behind a stone table holding empty, crumbed platters, the smell of cooking food wafting to his nose quickly. The roof reached high above him, rafters supported by the pillars standing at attention beside the bleachers glowing with sunlight that streamed through the circular window.

Tristan looked back at him. "I mean, it's not a whole place of pain and torture, but it's not a tea party either," he shrugged.

"Tristan!" A voice called out from the red corner.

Tristan perked up, turning to the voice with a grin. "Oi, Peter," he greeted.

"Training started two hours ago," Peter said while walking up the stairs to him. "Marlon was missing you." The trainee looked at Arthur with calculating blue eyes, his brown hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. A nick in his eyebrow was slashed on a slant through the middle of his left eye, a small scar stretching along the length.



"Apologies, I was waiting for this one to come out of the big fancy brick house," he nodded to Arthur.

"My liege," Peter bowed his head to Arthur.

"First time I heard that one," Arthur's eyebrows flicked up unenthusiastically.

"Yeah, but you haven't heard 'your absolute outstanding, praise-the-Gods, golden-hearted majesty' before," Tristan huffed.

"Thank you for that overview, Tristan," Arthur frowned lightly. Tristan held his grin in.

"He isn't exactly wrong, you know," Peter chimed in. "I mean, you are the King's son, aren't you?"

Tristan looked at Arthur funny, his brows low. "You're Ergott's son now?"

"He is my uncle," he corrected. "My father was the King before Ergott took his place."

"But he just said the King, as in the current King..." Tristan frowned, thinking to himself. "Which means... there's a Queen, too?"

"Tristan, you're thinking too hard," Peter said, frowning his eyebrows.

"Who's the Queen?" Tristan asked confusedly, ignoring Peter.

"You mean my mother or my aunt?" Arthur asked.

His eyes widened. "You have a mother?"

The pit in front of them fell silent, their eyes trailing a man walking towards the three. Arthur flicked his eyes to the man, and Tristan turned to look. "Oh, look, it's Marlon," he said in a high voice, watching him tower over him as he climbed the stairs to stand in front of him.

"Tristan, you're late. Again," Marlon growled, his voice deep and mysterious. His brown skin reflected that of Tristan's, dark eyes set in a scowl of disapproval. Long dark hair sat atop his head in a tight bun, leading across his jaw in a thick bundle.

Marlon looked over at Arthur, his eyes narrowing slightly. "A guest?" he pondered.

"Arthur," he introduced himself.

"I know who you are. I knew your father as well," Marlon answered.

"You knew my father?" Arthur asked, looking at Marlon curiously.

"Of course I knew Benjamin," he frowned. "Being a Knight doesn't come without affiliation to the royal family."

"Interesting," Arthur said quietly. *I suppose that's correct...*

Marlon looked him over, studying the satchel at his side. "Why have you come along today?"

"Observation mostly," he said. "I'm looking to join the Knights. I thought I'd come along and bless you all with my presence while I watch how this place works before deciding if I'd like to join."

Marlon tilted his head to the side. "I'm sure the helpers in the kitchen feel honoured," he said flatly. "As for your plans - you don't learn from just observations."

"I won't be joining in the fighting today, I'm afraid. I've already had a run-in with the Barons the night before," Arthur reassured.

"Nonsense," Marlon dismissed and pivoted to look to the far corner.

Arthur furrowed his eyebrows. "I don't mean to disappoint, but I'm only observing today. If there's a next time, maybe. I don't have any skills-"

"Kyan!" Marlon boomed across the hall. A lad looked over to them and stood up from the floor. "Over here, now."

Tristan blinked in surprise. "You're going to verse him against Kyan?" he questioned incredulously.

Arthur looked at Marlon, narrowing his eyes. "I'm not fighting anyone-"

Marlon turned his stare on Arthur, his eyes intense. "You're here to either train or help clean up afterwards, not

sit in the corner to watch. So yes," he growled. "You will be fighting."

"I appreciate your encouragement," Arthur drawled sarcastically. "But I have no intention of landing any blows to anyone today."

"Well, that's just too bad, isn't it?" Marlon said back with equal fire.

Arthur looked at Tristan. "Did you know this was going to happen?"

Tristan's smile waivered with nerves. "I didn't think he'd verse you against *Kyan*."

Arthur narrowed his eyes at him. "So you *did* know," he accused.

He chuckled nervously, touching the back of his neck.

"Who am I fighting now, Marlon? Is it Tristan again?" Kyan asked, standing beside Marlon. The trainee stood up to Marlon's shoulder, his black hair falling about his shoulders in a fluffed-up mess. His green eyes flicked to Arthur with curiosity.

Tristan's eyes widened. "I'm just going to..." he quickly dashed down the stairs, heading towards the corner with the faded green paint.

Arthur looked at Tristan with a deep frown. "Well, thanks for your help, Tristan," he called to him sarcastically. Peter sighed through his nose and followed after Tristan.

Marlon glanced at Kyan, shifting his weight to one foot. "I'm setting you a starter," he nodded towards Arthur.

"I told you, I'm only observing-"

"Hush!" Marlon snapped, his voice echoing through the rafters. Arthur blinked at him. *Is everyone here as rude as this Marlon? Because I'm starting to have second thoughts.*

"Shouldn't be too hard. He doesn't look like a fighter to me," Kyan shrugged with a faint smirk.

"I can fight," Arthur growled. *Who do they think they are, talking to a royal like that?*

"Show us then, *Your Highness*," Kyan mocked.

Marlon moved back down the stairs towards a chalk outline, Kyan following him loyally. The other trainees looked over and gathered to watch, many recognising Arthur at the top of the stairs. Arthur narrowed his eyes, reluctantly following the two over to the outlined square.

"In the square, feet at nine and four, begin on my word," Marlon ordered, standing at the edge. Kyan shifted his feet to the proper position, his arms loose at his sides.

"I don't want to fight you," Arthur said softly, setting his satchel down and moving inside the square. He shifted his feet to copy Kyan, his muscles bunching.

"It's not a fight, Arthur," Kyan smirked, curling his fists. "It's a test."

Marlon nodded. "Begin!"

Arthur flicked his eyes to Marlon. "You just want to see me get hurt-"

His sentence was clipped short as a sharp pain lanced through his chest, making him stagger back. Arthur held his chest as the pain dashed across where Kyan struck him.

Kyan danced back, shifting his shoulders. "Now that I've got your attention," he grinned. "Maybe you'll learn to watch your opponent."

Arthur narrowed his eyes at him, getting himself ready for Kyan's next blow. *The bastard doesn't know who he's messing with.*

Kyan's feet shifted, and his fist rocketed towards Arthur's shoulder, his other hand shooting towards his jaw. Arthur grabbed his outstretched arms, folding them back into his chest before pushing him back fiercely.

Kyan gained his footing quickly, grinning at him. "There you go, a small glimmer of fight," he observed. "What else you got?"

Arthur narrowed his eyes at him. "You want to try me?"

Kyan shrugged casually. "If you insist," he said lightly.

Arthur glared at him, shifting his feet. "I'd prefer to observe," he growled.

Kyan smirked at Arthur, pacing to circle him like a vulture, watching Arthur with calculated eyes. His fists bunched, ready to strike. Arthur looked over at the benches, spotting Maria moving amongst the crowd towards Tristan, carrying a tray of food.

"What's Arthur doing?" she asked, looking at Tristan on the bench.

"Getting beaten by Kyan," he said simply, eyeing the sandwiches.

"I thought he was observing?" Maria commented, unconsciously moving the platter towards Tristan. Tristan's eyes widened, his hand snaking up slowly towards the sandwiches.

"You don't learn anything from observations, Maria," Peter remarked, folding his arms. "This'll teach him better than the sidelines ever will."

"By hurting him even more?" Maria looked at him flatly, turning to face him. Tristan looked at her with a frown, dropping his hand from the air. "The Barons already landed a few hits on him. Didn't you see his eye?"

"The Barons aren't ones to mess with," Peter murmured, looking at her sideways. "I thought he would've known that."

Maria frowned at Peter, turning back to Arthur and Kyan in front of them. Kyan stepped over to Arthur, swinging at him wildly from all different angles, landing a shot on his ribcage and shoving Arthur back. Arthur stumbled to the ground, landing with a loud grunt, his shoulder barking in pain.

Kyan looked around at a few of the onlookers, giving them smirks as they cheered for him. Arthur slowly pushed himself up off the ground, his ribs sore. Kyan looked back over at Arthur, his eyebrows raised cockily.

"Still want some more, do you?" Kyan asked, watching Arthur getting up from the ground.

"You'd be surprised," Arthur returned, wincing as he stood to his feet.

"You've had your fun; now you can return to your other activities," Kyan jived, sneering.

"The fight will not stop until one of you yields," Marlon said. "Continue, now."

"With all due respect, you're all trained fighters. The only experience I've had was street fighting and a few sword basics, not whatever multitude of training you do here," Arthur protested, looking around the room. "I'm sure you all don't want to see your 'Future King' be beaten senseless."

Marlon looked at him with disinterest. "Status doesn't matter in the training hall. Just so long as you're here to become a Knight, you're equal to the person next to you," he growled. "Now stop finding excuses to sit out and raise your arms."

Arthur turned back to face Kyan with a scowl and grunted, Kyan's fist connecting with his jaw. Arthur collapsed to the ground, his face merging with the stone flooring with a thud. He coughed, groaning as he slowly rose back up.

"Had enough yet?" Kyan teased, standing over him.

Arthur narrowed his eyes, quickly wrapping his leg around Kyan's ankles and sending him to the ground. Kyan grunted and lashed his boot towards him, flailing around. Arthur stood up from the floor, taking off his coat before chucking it to the side. Arthur rubbed his jaw, wincing at the pain as a welt formed where Kyan hit him. Arthur glowered at Kyan, looking down at him on the floor. *How does that feel?*

Kyan growled, standing up. Arthur returned a slight smirk and began circling Kyan, their roles switching almost

simultaneously. Marlon grinned faintly, watching Arthur with interest.

Arthur pounced on Kyan and landed a hit on his chest, the impact making his breath whoosh out of his mouth with a grunt. Kyan stumbled back, his footing unsteady. Seeing an opening, Arthur punched the side of his head, rocketing him to the floor.

"He doesn't look like the fighting type'," Arthur mocked him with a smirk, curling his finger in a come hither.

Kyan launched at Arthur from the ground, swinging towards his ribs. Arthur's eyes flashed, deflecting the blow with his forearm.

*Again, too easy.* He launched his hand to grab Kyan's arm and twisted it behind his back, pinning him. Kyan yelled in pain, struggling.

"What was that about this being a test, Kyan?" Arthur drawled. Kyan seethed, trying to pull his wrist from his grip.

"Little known thing about me; I know how to pass my challenges," Arthur grinned cockily, gripping him tighter.

Pain rocketed through Arthur's foot, Kyan yanking his arm free from his loosened grip and shoving him back with his shoulders. Arthur hopped on one foot with a hiss for a moment, the pain subsiding slowly.

Kyan spun around to face him, his fist shooting towards Arthur's temple. He ducked in time to avoid a headache but was too slow to dodge the second swing to his right shoulder. Pain shot up his neck, Arthur grunting and putting his hand against his shoulder.

Tristan looked at Marlon with a concerned expression, seeing his slight grin growing wider with amusement.

Kyan used his hesitation to kick Arthur in the thigh, a loud thud echoing across the hall. Arthur yelled in pain, gripping his thigh with his hand - it felt as if he'd hit him

with a sledgehammer. Kyan watched as Arthur knelt on the ground, smirking at him from over Arthur's head.

"You should've studied harder for this test, I'm afraid," he growled, a venomous grin on his face. Before Arthur knew it, he was launched across the floor just outside of the chalk line, the cheers of the trainees drowning out as his head smacked into the stone floor.



Arthur groaned as he stirred awake from a dreamless sleep, his entire body barking in pain. His eyes squinted open, and he found himself in a bed surrounded by stone walls, more beds aligned against the wall to his right through the long room. Tall wooden cupboards sat against the walls, their handles knotted with locked chains. Drapes of grey sheets were tied back with thin ropes on hooks along the walls, their ringlets holding onto wood rods nailed to the ceiling.

*The infirmary, then.* Arthur sighed, sitting himself up hesitantly on the bed, his body aching with every move.

"To say the least, I am impressed with your skillset," Marlon said, sitting on a chair beside him. "For a so-called street fighter."

"Why did you make me fight a Knight in training?" Arthur groaned, rubbing his head.

"So I could decide if I should let you join or not," Marlon said simply. "Watching you watching others wouldn't have been any help in the decision."

*Asshole.* "Observation would've allowed me to learn my targets better," Arthur hinted, looking over at him. "Who was that man I was fighting anyway?"

"Kyan Bors, he's one of our newest trainees," Marlon answered, ignoring the snipe. "You're lucky I didn't put you up against Dagonet."



"Dagonet?" Arthur asked, an eyebrow raised. "An odd name for a man, don't you think?"

Marlon frowned at Arthur. "Peter Dagonet," he corrected.

The memory of the blue-eyed boy from earlier flicked into his head at the name. "Seems like everyone has unusual names these days," Arthur muttered, groaning as he shifted against the pillow.

"I'd say," Marlon looked at Arthur sideways. "What brought you here to train?"

Arthur glanced at him. "Ergott has been holding me back for as long as I can remember. It was time I proved him wrong."

"Why come here with no clue of our process?" Marlon asked. "Your father had at least some knowledge of what to do."

"I'm nothing like my father," Arthur replied with a slight frown. *And I'm sick of everyone saying so.*

"I'm sure you've seen the murals around Londinium," Marlon said as flat as his stare. "Question is, do you believe in what the murals foretell?"

Arthur mirrored Marlon. "You mean the murals of the 'Born King'? Yes, I have seen them. And even if they were true, I couldn't hold that responsibility."

"Well, how would you know if you've never tried?"

That stumped Arthur. "I've never been given the choice," he replied, almost as a question.

Marlon shook his head. "Choices aren't given," he growled. "They're taken."

"What would be the point, anyway? My uncle wouldn't allow me to try and learn to take on that responsibility," Arthur said bitterly. "I'm lucky I'm even in this building."

Marlon stood up, looking towards the door. "Then you damn well better make the use of your time while you've got it," he dismissed, walking towards the doorway.

*As short as it would be.* Sometimes, Arthur liked to wonder how different things would've been if Ergott never came into power. If his father and mother were still alive.

Sometimes, it was more than occasionally.

"What was he like?" Arthur asked, watching him leave.

Marlon paused, pivoting halfway and looking down.

"Brave. Selfless. A true leader and King to his people," he muttered.

"People tell me I'm like him, that I'm selfless like him. But I'm nothing like him."

Marlon looked at him, distant memories flicking emotions across his face in a blur. "Then you insult your father by saying so."

"How can I be the man my father was? When I'm not even given the chance to do anything for this Kingdom?"

Marlon's stare became solid, his back straightening.

"You make your chance," he sniped. "You get up off your ass, go out there into the big scary world, and you prove yourself to your people. Benjamin gained the favour of his people by paving his path to lead Camelot along; go pick up the shovel and start digging your trail."

Arthur looked at him, his eyes wide with shock and defence. He had never been talked to like that before, and maybe Marlon was right, but could he have been a little less snappy about it? It wasn't as if Arthur wasn't trying to do anything for this Kingdom like his uncle.

Hell, he'd fought a Baron troop for an elderly lady.

Couldn't Marlon see that he was trying?

*No. Marlon can shove his words right up his-*

"Marlon!" Peter called from down the hallway.

Marlon turned to the hallway, dragging his eyes away from Arthur. "What is it?" he demanded.

"Some visitors are outside. Are you expecting anyone?" Peter asked.

Marlon sighed through his nose. "Not particularly."

"They said it's urgent," Peter said, walking around the corner. "Safety inspection; the guy doesn't look too pleased."

"Didn't know Camelot had safety inspections now," Kyan scoffed, standing beside Peter.

Marlon's eyes narrowed. "They don't," he rumbled, moving past the lads down the hallway.

Arthur stood from the bed and limped after Marlon, the two others following closely behind. Something was wrong, and it surely had something to do with the Barons. It was the only explanation Arthur could think of.

Arthur followed them down the hallway back to the small foyer at the front door, the long hall to the training pit to his left. Marlon peered through the small window on the door, his hand pressing against the handle. "Who's there?" he commanded.

"Open on up," a man said. "Just doing an inspection."

"Identify yourself," Marlon growled.

"Rohin Jackseye," he answered. "Go on now, open it up. The inspection will take five or so minutes; better save us both the hassle."

"Shit," Arthur whispered, backing away from the door.

Marlon's eyes flashed. "Rohin?" he said with astonishment, reaching to open the door.

"You know him?" Arthur asked Marlon, raising an eyebrow.

"Old friend turned sour," he muttered.

"Open the door now," Jackseye insisted, knocking on the door.

"Peter," Marlon growled.

Peter nodded, looking over at Arthur and Kyan. "Follow me, you two," he walked past them, heading down the long hallway.

"Where are you taking us now?" Arthur asked.

"To play hide and seek from the Barons," Peter answered, leading them down the hallway.

"Can I get some context here?" Kyan piped up.

"No," Arthur and Peter said, frowning slightly.

"Tristan! Maria!" Peter yelled, looking around for them.

"Knowing Tristan, he's probably harbouring all the food he lays his eyes on," Arthur said, smirking to himself.

Tristan turned around from the kitchen food table with a mouthful of food, chocolate covering his mouth. "What?" he said through muffled chewing.

"What did I tell you? Harbouring the food," Arthur smirked.

"Get your ass out of the kitchen and follow me," Peter commanded.

Tristan swallowed, wiping his mouth on his sleeve and following after him. "Where are we going?" he questioned.

"Jackseye and the Barons found us," Arthur said, his expression and voice changing to a more serious tone.

"Where's Maria?"

Tristan shrugged. "Got caught up with the tools, like I said," he said.

"Where can I find her?" Arthur asked, looking at him sternly.

"Probably in the stay room."

"Kyan, go and look for her," Peter looked at him.

"On it," Kyan nodded and ran down the hallway towards a far door.

"You two, this way," Peter ordered, nodding towards a far hallway across the pit.

Arthur followed, feeling the pressure on his leg strain his bruise. Tristan scampered behind, looking longingly at the kitchen.

Marlon opened the door, looking Jackseye up and down, his lip curling. "You've got a lot of nerve showing up back in Camelot," he sniffed.

"Good to see you too, Jonathan," Jackseye said, stepping into the building. "Looks like you haven't changed much, at all."

"You got yourself a new decoration, it seems," he noted flatly, looking at his eye.

"That's what happens when you gain more power; you change," Jackseye shrugged, scouring around the interior, the Barons following behind him.

Marlon blocked off the Baron's path, looking down at them with a frown.

"Don't be rude to your guests. Let them pass," Jackseye scowled.

"*Uninvited* guests," he sniped.

Jackseye turned to him, his hands folded behind his back. "You, too, had no idea of our arrival, didn't you?"

"If I had known, I would've prepared the kettle," he said with sarcasm.

"It goes to show how much attention you give to important circumstances."

"You mustn't have been important enough to be given my full attention."

"Weren't you told?" Jackseye asked, walking up to him slowly. "The Barons are now here to protect Camelot, perhaps as a replacement for your Knights. Maybe a new business wouldn't be a bad idea," he smirked faintly, standing right in front of him at eye level.

Marlon glowered at him in disgust. "You truly believe your guild will overtake Camelot without some sort of resistance?"

"Ask the King yourself," Jackseye shrugged.

As he followed Peter down the hallway, Arthur overheard the echoes of the conversation, stopping in place to listen carefully. Tristan bumped into his back, shoving him forward slightly. Arthur gave him a stern look.

"Whoops," Tristan murmured, smiling apologetically.

"Luckily for you, I've had enough fighting for one day; otherwise, I would beat you senseless right here," Arthur frowned at him.

"No, you wouldn't," Tristan waved his hand dismissively in the air, watching him with a bit of nervousness.

Arthur stared at him flatly with an eyebrow raised.

"... You wouldn't, right?"

"Shove me again, and we'll find out," Arthur said, smirking lightly at him.

"You're smiling, which means no," Tristan grinned and stepped around him.

Arthur fake lunged, growling at him. Tristan yelped in fright, darting after Peter. Arthur shook his head amusedly at Tristan, returning to listen to the ongoing conversation between Jackseye and Marlon with interest.

"I'm not asking for the 'King's' opinion," Marlon bit.

"You should," Jackseye said. "He could put you into order."

"Order? Last time I witnessed a Baron in Camelot, the order went right out the window," he spat. "What in your right mind thinks this time will be any different?"

"You best believe that something is going to happen sooner or later, my dear friend," Jackseye muttered softly. "You won't just be a Knight trainer."

"If you're so inclined to take over the Kingdom, why inform your enemies of your plans? I would have thought you'd know better, considering you were one of us once."

*One of us?* Arthur's eyes widened, the conversation getting more interesting by the second, placing new thoughts and questions in Arthur's mind. *Who exactly is Marlon? And how does he know Jackseye so well?*

"Oh, that isn't what I'm *planning*; it's what's *going* to happen, whether you like it or not," he chuckled, his grin audible in his voice.

"What exactly are you here to inspect?" Marlon ground out.

"Where is he?" Jackseye asked simply.

"Where is who?" Marlon said flatly. "There are many 'he's' here."

"Don't play dumb now," Jackseye growled with annoyance. "Arthur, I overheard him and the Knights of the Roundtable discussing that he will attempt to become a Knight of Camelot."

"Benjamin's son hasn't shown up today," he lied. "Perhaps he chickened out."

"Are you seriously going to lie to the King's men?" Jackseye asked with a frown.

Arthur could feel the heat of Marlon's glare from across the hall. "You call yourself that out of the pain and suffering of others," he growled. "You do not wear that title around me. I am *well* aware of your wavering loyalty."

"I'm impressed, *Marlon*. Has your English improved?" Jackseye asked with a grin.

A thud echoed down the hallway, an angered snarl following it. "Either learn to shut your trap right now and get the job done you were sent to do by your King, or keep talking, and I throw you and your Black Cloaks out to the stones," he snarled. "Your choice."

The sound of drawn blades whined, Jackseye's amused chuckle bouncing off the walls.

"I wouldn't go any further, Jonathan," Jackseye smirked.

Tristan turned back around the corner, staring at Arthur with raised brows. "Are you coming?" he asked.

Arthur looked forward at Tristan, nodding at him before limping after him hesitantly, straining his ears to hear the rest of the conversation.

"I can go as far as I like while on *my* ground," Marlon hissed.

The rustling of cotton and leather filled the hall, the Barons moving away from Marlon and sheathing their swords promptly. "You people in Londinium better watch yourselves, aye?"

"This is our Kingdom. You cannot change that no matter what you think."

"I beg to differ," Jackseye scowled, the sound of boots leaving the hall trailing after him reaching Arthur's ears.

The door squeaked as it moved to shut slowly. "Don't expect such a warm welcome the next time you show up here again," Marlon said sharply, closing the door and sliding the lock into place.



## *Chapter 8: Destiny Awakens*



Arthur's mind turned over the conversation he overheard with Marlon and Jackseye. None of what Jackseye said had to be true, especially since his army was nothing but cold-blooded murderers from the darkest part of Braynor: Ariendal. The Barons were infamous for how they preyed on the weak, as Arthur had seen in the alleyway. They had no sympathy for other lives that weren't of Baron blood, and the way that people became Barons was no simple or exciting task.

Arthur had read about the training they had to undergo before they were deemed acceptable; they would have to sacrifice a bit of their blood to pledge themselves to the allegiance, train for hours upon hours, night by night, day by day until their feet were bleeding beneath them. Their skin was marked with purple tattoos of all designs, their meanings known only by the Barons. He'd seen Joseph's tattoos on occasion peeking out from beneath his long sleeves - the purple thorns that wrapped around his throat and the savage tiger stripes that covered his brow and temples.

Arthur couldn't imagine what it would be like to go through that training - hell, the Knight training was rough enough. Although he could stand his ground for as long as needed, he would have to learn more than what Sam had taught him.

Peter led them down the hallway, spotting a door at the end with a small window covered with a little curtain, the

chill breeze creeping inside beneath the crack in the door. Arthur shivered as they gained closer to the door, watching Peter open it with a creak.

"Are you seriously taking us back outdoors?" Arthur asked.

"Do you *want* the Barons to find you?" Peter scowled. "What's your deal with them, anyway? I heard a lot of them talk about you."

"That's a story to tell later on," Arthur said, starting to walk out of the door.

Peter stopped him in his path, frowning at him. "You're on our turf, and those Barons want to know where you are. Answer my question."

Arthur scowled back at him. "What makes you think it's any of your business?"

"I just told you, it's our turf, *my* turf," Peter said stiffly. "Barons don't just look for people for the sake of it. They're a pack of wolves, and they only hunt the prey they want to take down."

"We interfered with one of their patrols by accident," Tristan said, stepping beside Arthur.

Arthur turned to Tristan with a scowl. "Thank you, Tristan, that was really needed."

Tristan looked at Arthur, frowning. "Well, *you* weren't going to say anything."

"I don't know what part of Londinium you grew up in, but the rest of us know that performing that kind of act could get you into strife," Peter said, folding his arms.

"Trust me, I already found that out the hard way," Arthur said.

Footsteps sounded behind them, and Tristan pivoted to look. Kyan and Maria caught up, their breath short. Maria held Arthur's satchel tightly, passing it to him.

"What's happening?" Maria panted, looking at Arthur.

"Jackseye found us," Arthur said, looking at her as he slung the strap over his head.

Her eyes widened. "How?" she said with shock.

"That's not important," Peter interrupted. "What's more important is that we need to get you three safe."

"By throwing us back into the frost land where the Barons will be patrolling? Great safe spot," Arthur scowled.

"Trust us."

Arthur sighed, nodding at them faintly. "Alright then, Maria, you go first."

Maria squeezed past them, poking her head through the doorway and wedging her way out.

"Tristan," Peter said, nodding towards the door.

"Where, exactly, do I go?" he questioned, walking towards the door.

"You'll see Maria outside the door," Arthur said, exaggerating his words.

Tristan popped his head out the door, looking around. "Oh, there you are," he said, opening the door and walking out.

Arthur looked back at the two trainees before he exited. "Send Marlon my regards."

"I'm sure he'd be happy to have Jackseye off his land, don't worry," Peter frowned.

Arthur nodded at him, making his way out of the building. The three found themselves on the streets of Londinium, the air cold with snowflakes spread across the ground. Arthur looked back at the door, seeing Peter lock it behind them.

Tristan shivered, wrapping his jacket around himself tightly. "So," he said, his breath fogging. "Where to?"

"Did you not warn them that the Barons were on our trail before?" Arthur asked.

Tristan frowned. "Well, no," he said slowly. "They either ignore my words, or they ain't understanding my English well."

"You're telling me *they* don't speak English well?"  
Arthur raised an eyebrow.

Tristan scrunched his face, shrugging. "I mean, they don't take notice of nothing I say when it's important, so I don't think so."

"They know it better than you, that's for sure," Arthur muttered. Tristan stuck his tongue out at him.

Arthur groaned as he moved, his thigh throbbing in pain from Kyan's blow. "That bloody bastard," he muttered, rubbing it gingerly.

Maria looked at him with concern. "Come on, we can go back to Tristan's and get ice on it," she suggested.

"What's the point? That just proves my point to the both of you," Arthur said.

"What point?" Tristan asked, looking at him.

Arthur looked back at him, his mouth quirked slightly. "I can't be a Knight, let alone a King."

Maria glowered at him. "Just because you got hurt doesn't mean you're useless," she said impatiently.

"I'd beg to differ."

The three pivoted to their left, Leonard leaning against the brick wall down the alleyway with a smirk stretched over his face. "Arthur was always going to be trash at fighting; I should know."

"You again," Maria growled.

"I didn't know this was the scoundrel's part of Londinium," Arthur started, straightening his back.

"Where's your hideout with your other pals?"

Leonard pushed off the wall, stalking close to them slowly. "Somewhere close by," he said casually. "They'll come when they hear you."

"And that will be when?" Arthur growled, limping up to him. Tristan watched carefully, a frown starting to form.

"Is now really the best time to fight, Arty?" he asked. "I mean, you literally just got-"

Leonard's fist lashed out into Arthur's stomach. Arthur groaned at the hit, tackling Leonard into the wall behind him.

"Gods be loving," Tristan cursed, stepping forwards.

Leonard elbowed the side of Arthur's head, the thud sending a ringing noise through Arthur's ear. Maria and Tristan felt hands grip them tightly from behind, tugging them backwards.

Leonard's men circled them, blocking their exits. Tristan snarled and pulled one arm out from their grip, swinging it back into one's chest and whipping his head back into the other's nose. The two men behind Tristan collapsed to the ground, groaning in pain.

Leonard slapped over Arthur's ears, making him stumble back, his hearing hollowed out. Arthur tensed his jaw, glaring at Leonard and landing a punch to Leonard's ribcage, followed by a knee to his chest. Leonard grunted, ricocheting back into the wall, his knees giving out beneath him.

Two thuds sounded behind Arthur, and he turned around, the two men who held Tristan lying spread-eagled on the stones. Tristan struggled with three more gripping his arms, Maria straining against the iron grips holding her in place, grunting and cursing. Arthur watched in shock, limping over to them as fast as he could move.

The world shifted out from beneath him, and he fell to the pavement, grunting in pain. Arthur looked back at Leonard's hand wrapped around his ankle, his smug look painted on his face. Arthur kicked at him from the ground, trying to break his grasp.

Leonard yelled in pain and let go of Arthur's ankle, a crack echoing down the alley as he covered his face. Arthur kicked Leonard's wrist hard, feeling a snap as it connected. He cried out again, blood leaking through his fingers down his chin as he held his wrist. Arthur gave him a smirk, slowly standing up from the pavement.

"Arthur, look out!" Maria cried out.

Suddenly, the back of his head exploded in pain, his vision following him falling to the cobblestones hard. Arthur groaned in pain, the back of his head pulsing. Leonard's biggest man towered over him and kicked him away from the wall roughly, pain shooting sparks through Arthur's side as he rolled.

Arthur looked up at him in agony, gritting his teeth with a growl.

"You bastards!" Tristan snapped, writhing in the men's grips. One of them punched his jaw, Tristan yelping in pain. Arthur looked at Tristan and Maria from the ground, his heart sinking. How was he going to get them out of this?

"Not to be rude, but I reckon those three have had enough, don't you think?" a voice said from the end of the alleyway, his accent foreign. The men pivoted to the voice, Tristan raising his head to look, blood dripping down his chin. Maria gasped, her eyes widening. The man stepped forward, a black hooded cloak covering his face; Arthur blinked in shock. *It's the hood from the alleyway!*

"By the looks of things, that one on the ground is as good as gone, and the other two don't stand a chance," the man observed, looking down at Arthur. "So, I believe it's fair to say that you've claimed victory."

"Who the hell are you?" Leonard barked from the ground.

"Just a good Samaritan," the man assured, looking at him on the ground. "Like all of us, except for Arthur, of course, since he's a royal. And I believe it's illegal to attack a royal."

Arthur looked at Leonard from the ground, blood dripping from his mouth. Whoever this man was, he was on Arthur's side.

Leonard curled his lip at the man, getting up with a groan and clutching his wrist. "It's none of your business

what happens on these streets," he sniped. "What are you going to do about it anyway, Kandor?"

The man looked into his eyes, removing the black hood from over his head. "I'd be careful of who you threaten," the man narrowed his eyes at him. Dark brown hair was slicked back from his forehead, sapphire eyes glinting with challenge framed by a thick, short beard.

Maria's eyes widened further, her breath catching. "Sir Jameson Galahad," she breathed.

Arthur looked over at her, then back at the man, his eyes wide. *This man is a Knight?*

Galahad looked at Maria with a pleased smile. "Ah, at least someone remembers," he said.

"Sir Galahad," Arthur whispered to himself. Arthur's mind spun. What in the Ether was going on? The Barons show up to watch over Camelot while the Roundtable are gone, Jackseye speaks to Marlon as if he were his brother, and then an old Knight appears? This couldn't be a coincidence, especially because the old Knights were *dead!*

Leonard backed towards his men, looking at the four carefully.

"I'm going to give you two choices; first," Galahad listed, holding up a finger towards Leonard. "You walk away somewhat unharmed and untouched, or two," he lifted the other finger, "you and your boys will be walking away with a few more broken bones than what you've already gotten, your choice."

Leonard glared at Galahad and spat blood on the ground. "Damned Knights," he cursed. "Let's go," he barked at his men. The ones holding Tristan and Maria let go, shoving them away before turning back the other way.

Galahad twiddled his fingers at Leonard mockingly, a slight smirk on his face. "Toodle-loo, sweetheart. Don't run into anyone else that bruises your ego," he cooed after him.

Leonard and his men growled and peeled away down the alley. Galahad looked down at Arthur on the ground,

shaking his head. "Just like your father, always lounging on the job," he joked, bending down and grabbing Arthur gently by the bicep. "Come on now, upsie daisies."

Arthur allowed Galahad to help him up, groaning slightly as his thigh barked under pressure. He stood beside Galahad and looked him in the eye, giving him a nod of thanks.

Tristan stared at Galahad, rubbing his jaw and wiping the blood away. "A Knight of old?" he questioned quietly.

Galahad looked at all three of them, pondering over their bruises on different parts of their body. "You three must *love* street fighting," he said quizzically. "You've got a knack for attracting it, that's for sure."

"Not entirely our fault, might I add; they seem to be at the wrong place at the right time," Arthur said, folding his arms. "We don't find trouble; it finds us."

"All the damn time," Tristan shook his head, throwing a look at Arthur.

"Every time," Maria frowned at Arthur.

"Most of the time," Arthur admitted, looking at the both of them. "But we manage, most of the time."

"Barely," Tristan muttered to himself.

"We manage to get things done, even when it involves us getting our shit kicked in," Arthur muttered, his eagerness slowly deviating.

"So you prefer to battle the streets?" Galahad asked, his eyebrow raised.

"Potentially, yes," Arthur nodded.

"That's an odd way to oversee your Kingdom."

"Tell me about it," Maria rolled her eyes. "I've known Arthur personally for two days, and both days, I've been involved in some sort of *'interaction'*."

Arthur shrugged. "And that's just two days," he huffed in amusement. "Tristan has seen it since we were ten, isn't that right?"



Tristan puffed his chest out proudly. "Friends for years with many shared tears," he grinned. "And a few dozen boots launched up the-

"Tristan," Maria scolded.

Tristan laughed, his grin returning from the scowl he'd worn.

"Never let him finish that one," Arthur shook his head.

"I was going to say launched up the alleyway," Tristan said disappointedly.

"We still get the meaning, Tristan," Arthur said, looking back at him.

Galahad grinned at Tristan. "Always good to have a sense of humour," he nodded. Tristan beamed proudly.

"Can't argue with that," Arthur shrugged. "Anyway, I'm heading back to the castle. You might see me back here tomorrow," he said, limping down the alleyway.

"Are you sure you want to walk that far?" Maria questioned.

"You sound like you don't know me," Arthur called back. Maria frowned, opening her mouth to say something but stalled.

"Bye, Arthur," Tristan farewelled cheerily. "Don't fall down the stairs on the way up like I did!"

"It'd be funny to see you do it again!" Arthur called back, rounding a corner.

Galahad rumbled in laughter. "The castle steps, eh?" he said to Tristan.

He nodded. "It took me ten minutes to reach the bottom."

Their voices gradually faded from earshot, Arthur pushing through the crowds to the castle. His teeth gritted against one another at the pain in his leg, his head worse.

*Damn you, Leonard.*



Returning to the castle steps, Arthur limped up to the Castle Gates, his bruised thigh straining with every ounce of pressure. Maybe it was more than a bruise, he realised glumly.

The wind stung his cheek, his hand reaching to touch it gently with a wince. He looked at his fingers, blood caking his fingertips. *Leonard knew how to fight, but he only knew how to fight dirty.*

Finally, he'd made it to the Gates, the great iron grates not yet shut. The castle courtyard was unusually empty, with no marching guards or Wilhelm at the top of the wall. He stepped inside, heading straight to the kitchen for an ice pack, his eyes roving around the castle.

The castle seemed more hollow than usual; there were no Knights in the foyer or the Round Hall. There weren't even Knights guarding the Gates. *Where did they go?*

His memory switched back to the argument he overheard with Ergott and the Roundtable. *Is the attack on Ariendal tomorrow?*

He looked down all the hallways in view, no telltale shine of armour or clank of metal on metal to be heard. It must be; it would explain the lack of security. It was common for Knights to return home to their families the night before a war to say their possible final goodbyes. Tonight would be no exception.

Arthur narrowed his eyes, heading towards the kitchen. He limped down one of the hallways, looking around at each room and corridor he came across.

*Empty, empty, empty.* It was spooky enough as to how open the castle was with the Knights still patrolling, never mind having absolutely no one in any place in the palace.

He walked into the kitchen, looking around for anyone in the room. *Again, empty.* Arthur walked to the cooler, taking out a bundle of ice for himself. He grabbed a towel

on the kitchen bench, placed the ice he held in it, formed it into a ball and rested it against his cheekbone.

*Why would Ergott send us to fight a war party we're not threatened by? Who's going to stay behind to protect Camelot if push comes to shove?*

Arthur frowned. *Unless it's those wretched Barons that he's using.* They wouldn't protect much of the Kingdom if they could help it. *What a stupid idea: using the enemy to protect from the enemy.*

Light footsteps echoed down the hallway, moving quickly towards the kitchen. Arthur turned to look at the doorway and saw Rosaline walking in, tying her hair back into a ponytail. She wasn't in her usual garb: a soft grey long-sleeve shirt with a white coat wrapped around her waist by the sleeves, long black trousers and leather boots. Arthur blinked in shock; *the Queen hardly ever wears anything other than gowns in the castle.*

She spotted him and placed a hand over her heart in fright. "Arthur!" she exclaimed. "You frightened me half to death. Look at you!"

"You should see the other guy," Arthur sighed, holding the ice up to his cheekbone.

She gave him a worried look and moved over to him. "What happened to you? Was it those Barons?" she asked.

"No, it wasn't the Barons," Arthur said with a frown.

"Who was it?" she asked, moving her hand over his face to inspect the cut.

"It was one of the street fighters," Arthur said, watching her hand. "Leonard Lionel."

Rosaline frowned and turned to the kitchen bench, picking up a dry cloth and rinsing it in the sink. "What are you doing down there with the fighters? I would've thought you'd know better," she said.

Arthur sat down on a bench stool, looking at her eye level. "I don't go searching for them. They always seem to find me," he frowned.

"Even if they do find you, you shouldn't choose to fight them," she pressed the towel onto his cut, the wound stinging. "It only gets you coming out looking like this."

"Leonard gets every beating he deserves," Arthur muttered, frowning at his name bitterly. "He's a good-for-nothing thief."

"Maybe you shouldn't be going down there if you can't avoid them," she scolded. She wiped away the blood on his face and sat the towel on the bench, opening a cupboard door.

"What else am I meant to do? Stay in the castle and do servant jobs?" he scowled.

"I didn't say you were to be locked in the castle. I just think it wise to avoid them. Or at least take an escort with you." She pulled out a small wooden box and placed it on the bench, opening the lid and taking out a needle and thread. "How often is this happening?"

"It doesn't matter," Arthur dismissed. "I can handle it on my own. I don't need an escort."

"You shouldn't have to need one, but if this keeps happening, I'm not sure if Ergott would let you go without one," she said, pulling the thread through the eyelet of the needle. "Where else are you hurt?"

"My thigh," he said. "A trainee landed a good hit on it."

She looked at him in interest, turning to him with the needle in hand. "Trainee?" she asked. "You were at Marlon's?"

"For a little bit," he admitted. "Though I didn't get far."

"Are you going to become a Knight?" she asked, lifting the needle towards his cut.

"I was thinking about it," he said, wary of the incoming needle.

Her hand grabbed the top of his head, holding him still. Her brown eyes stuck him in place. "If you keep moving, it'll hurt more than it will when you're still."

"I'm not a fan of needles," Arthur frowned at the point of the needle inches away from his eye.

"You should think about that before you get yourself all scraped up," she frowned. It looked odd for her to frown.

"It wasn't entirely my fault," Arthur told her.

"I'm sure it wasn't," she said gently and pricked the needle through his skin.

Arthur winced, clenching his eyes and jaw shut as the needle connected.

"If you don't open your eyes, I can't stitch it properly," she said, pausing.

"What are you, a nurse?" Arthur asked, opening one eye slowly.

Rosaline continued to stitch the wound, pulling it through gently. "I may as well be. I'm everything else in the castle except the Queen," she sighed. "I may as well be your mother, too."

Arthur frowned, his mouth quirked. "Whatever happened to my parents?"

She threaded the needle through again, a sharp pain shooting through his face for a moment. "Well, your father passed away the night Catarina fell, as you know, and your mother... Well, no one really knows what happened to Emilie."

Arthur narrowed his eyes slightly. "Why do I keep having dreams about my father? As if I watched him die?"

She pulled the thread tight, tying it off. "Some dreams aren't real," she said gently. She snipped the thread and cleaned the needle. "Your mind might just be trying to make sense of it. Many people with trauma go through the same thing."

"Each dream feels real like it actually happened. He even calls my name," Arthur said.

She smiled at him softly. "That's why I said 'some'." She placed a small cover over his stitches, packed the box up and waddled back to the cupboard.

Arthur rubbed his face, wincing at the pull of the stitches. "That feels a lot better, at least."

"Maybe you should channel that fight into your training," she pointed out, sliding the box back into the cupboard.

Arthur looked up at her. "I attempted to train today and ended up with a bruised thigh."

"Well, no one can be the best at something the first time. Your uncle should know," she chuckled.

"I don't know," Arthur sighed. "I don't know if it's worth going back there and giving it another go."

"Well, why not?" she asked, a confused look on her kind face.

"I just don't think I have what it takes," he said to her, fiddling with his hands.

"Well," she said, picking up the bloodied rag and placing it in the sink. "If you want it bad enough, you'll work for it. You can be the greatest Knight *or* King," she looked at him pointedly, "in the land if you tried. Everybody faces hardships and downfalls on their journey. If there weren't any steps to take, then how would you learn? Everyone would be able to do it if it was easy. That's why there's only a special few who can." She rinsed the blood from the towel. "But that's the difference between being given something and working for it. You overcome your hardships, and you become the things you want to be."

Arthur took in her words, nodding at her silently. "You're right. I wouldn't give up over one fault."

"For every fault, there is a lesson learned," she nodded, looking at him. "You're a smart one, Arthur. I'm confident you can learn to overcome your downfalls."

"Learning some courage would be the best start," Arthur chuckled softly.

Rosaline laughed gently, wringing the towel dry. "Confidence, even if it's faked, can persuade you to be

brave enough to face the challenges. Take Samqueel, for example."

Arthur nodded at her. "He's the best Commander I know."

"Did you know he never wanted to be a Knight?" she asked.

"No," Arthur answered, his eyebrows raised. "Sam didn't want to be a Knight?"

She shook her head, spreading out the towel over the faucet. "When he was a young boy, he hated the Knights. A rumour I've heard was that they supposedly murdered his father."

"That doesn't sound like the Knights of Camelot," Arthur frowned. "They're not murderers, they're protectors."

"The story was they showed up to his doorstep the night Catarina fell with his father's chain covered in blood. The report noted that Dawson Torona was murdered in a drunken brawl hours before the war broke out, but Sam didn't believe the story. Unfortunately, Dawson wasn't unfamiliar with the watches of the Knights and prison walls."

Arthur's mouth quirked, looking at her. "I wonder if he still holds that grudge."

Rosaline shrugged, polishing the bench with a clean cloth from the drawer. "Who knows," she pondered. "He told me the story years ago when he was young and drunk and stranded in the stairwell."

Arthur couldn't even begin to picture that sentence. Arthur had known Sam and his mother, Erin, personally for years but had never thought to question where his father had gone. He'd figured that he passed away the night Catarina fell - many people were caught in the crossfire that night. It was one of the worst attacks on the Kingdom in centuries since his great-great-grandfather overtook the

land from the elves that were here beforehand. He wasn't aware of how close he was to the truth.

"Why is he so protective of me?" Arthur asked.

"Perhaps he's taken you on as a little brother of sorts," she suggested. "He is one to stand up for people who need it. Especially you."

Arthur nodded, standing up from the wooden chair and stretching his limbs, yawning widely.

"Perhaps some rest will do you good," she smiled at him, wiping her hands dry on the cloth.

Arthur smiled back at her. "Thank you for your help, Rose," he said gratefully.

"Now, no more fighting with the alleyway men," she told him with a pretend frown, wagging her finger at him. "If I hear about it one more time, you won't get any pie for dessert."

"No promises," he held a laugh in, his lips twitching upwards.

"I'm being serious," she joked, a pretend look of scorn on her face.

"I'm sure you are," Arthur said, smiling lightly at her.

The Queen chuckled softly and turned back to the kitchen bench. "Off you go, son, before your leg gives out," she dismissed.

Arthur smiled at her, turning back to face the stairs before making his way up to the upper level of the castle. The torches lit his path up the stairs, the shadow of his silhouette stark against the grey stone wall, following behind him loyally as always.

He reached his room after walking from the stairs past the corner, eager to see the armour he had uncovered earlier that morning. He shut his door as he stepped into the room, immediately moving to reach beneath his bed and pulling the chest out of hiding. He opened the lid with a bit of struggle, the armour, sword, and shield still lying in the wooden box. His heartbeat quickened, and with a slight



hesitation, Arthur gripped the sword's hilt with one hand, pulling it out gently. The gleaming metal shone silver in the afternoon sun, illuminating the ripples in the blade like ocean waves. He trailed his finger along the groove carved through the middle, following it up to the guard, his fingers bumping against hidden engraved runes towards the bottom.

Arthur blinked and raised the sword higher to his face, squinting at the engravings. Whorls of metal scarred the blade, each overlapping the next in a rhythmic pattern, trailing out over the sword until it faded towards the centre. Three in particular stood out, their carvings deeper than the rest.

Arthur traced his thumb over them; they were old English symbols, each embossed with black. One was a scale, its arms stretched wide and holding to two plates. The next beneath it had a cross with two zig-zags meeting each of its corners, and the last symbol was a circle with a pupil slitted like a lion's eye. *Justice, mercy, command.*

Scraping his finger across the edge carefully, the razor-sharpness of the blade bit his skin, a faint trickle of blood leaching out.

Arthur wiped the blood on his pants dismissively. He felt the leather wrapped around the handle, following the stitching from the gold-dipped guard down to the round dreamcatcher-like pommel, the black hide unbroken and sturdy.

*A fine sword fit for a King, alright.* Arthur set it down in the crate gently, flicking his eyes over the armour, dusty and in need of a polish. Maybe he could learn how to be that man after all. He had the things he needed; all that was left was for him to do as he said he'd do.

If he could figure out how to do so without dying along the way.

Sliding the chest back under his bed, Arthur laid down on the mattress with a pained groan, glad to finally be off his leg. Now, to rest.



The sun peeked above the land and set the frost alight, glittering on the grass and dewy rooftops. Small clumps of half-melted snow lay scattered around the castle courtyard, horses' breaths fogging in the air as they snorted.

Shouted commands fly through the air, Knights in full-clad armour readying up, packing saddlebags full of various items, sharpening their swords and some on their knees with their heads bowed. For many of them, this would be their first battle outside of Camelot, fresh faces mixed with excitement and daunt.

That was another thing Sam didn't like about this army; too many of them needed to be more experienced, and some of them had only just been appointed Knights. Ergott gave him no choice but to take the men. Desperation was never a good thing to give in to at a time like this, especially in a fight no one asked for. *And against an enemy we're leaving to defend our Kingdom, no less.*

The Knights of the Roundtable stood beside their horses, each looking around the courtyard with uncertain looks. Samqueel mounted his horse, holding the reins steady, his crimson-edged armour gleaming in the morning sun.

"Alright, men, listen up," Sam called, facing his horse to the gathered Knights.

The Knights looked up at Samqueel, their attention focused on him. The nearby Knights turned to face him, calls of attention going up across the yard.

"I understand the situation you've been asked to participate in," he said, looking at the younger lieutenants

behind the Roundtable. "Trust me, if I had more sway in the matter, I wouldn't be leading you out to a battle we know nothing of."

Reuben leaned on a wooden hitching post beside Arkan, his arms folded. "What does the situation look like from outside our view?" he asked, shifting slightly.

"Sources from Northumbria have reported that Ariendal has moved its forces to their Northern boundary. It's left us an opening to tear through and infiltrate the South. I'm not sure what that means for us or if it's a trap, but I'll be able to tell more details when I see it first-hand," he said, looking at Reuben.

"Does no one else see that this could be a set-up?" Taryn asked, standing beside his horse. "I mean, who sends their forces directly to raid an army that we sure as hell know could kick our ass even if we fought with a literal dragon on our side? We're leaving a league of them to defend the Kingdom, for the Gods' sake," Taryn frowned, looking at the others around him.

"I'm aware of the dangers, Taryn. That's why I never wanted to lead this Legion to this war," Sam sighed and looked at the other Knights. "Ergott has given us barely anything to work off. I'm flat out getting a straight answer anymore out of him. But I need all of you here," he turned to the Legion and raised his voice, "the experienced, the new kids, the people who've been here long before me; I need you to put your faith on your sleeves and take that sword, or that axe, or that bow at your side, and raise it ready to help your Kingdom.

"I'm asking you all to rise to the challenge of this fight, to be brave in the face of death - to go down swinging if you have to. I trust every single one of you to lead yourselves with an iron will into the enemy's territory," he boomed. "I trust that you *will not back down* from this fight, that you *will not give up*. You all have the power to rally against Ariendal, no matter what they say. I know you

all have the strength to do so, no matter what they say. You survived the depths of the Darklands, for the Gods' sake! We are the only force in Braynor able to say that about our Knights; that is why we are the strongest in the East! Do you believe it? Do you understand what I say?"

The Legion cheered in the winter air, fists raising and horses spooking. Inspired faces shone up at Sam, conversations rallying through the crowd.

Sam smiled at them. "All of you are Knights of Camelot; all of you were born to do this. You will all become your own legend once we get through this. Right here, right now, is the start of your storybook, the first chapter of your greatness. If you're with me, you better damn well start listening for the war songs that will be written about you." He looked around at the hope in their eyes, heads held high and spirits lifted. "Get ready to make history."

Reuben stood up off the hitching post, walking up to stand in front of him. "You've been there since the very beginning, and you've led me to victory countless times," he stuck his hand out for an honourable shake. "I'm not about to turn my back on you now."

Sam smiled at him and took his hand, both their grips iron strong. "Good, because I was kind of counting on it," he chuckled.

"What would you do without your right hand Knight, huh?" Reuben asked with a laugh.

A smirk spread across his face. "Find a left-hand one," he jostled.

"A typical Samqueel Torona response," he smirked.

"Expect no less, good sir." Sam straightened in his saddle, patting his horse's neck gently. "Everyone saddle up, it's time to move."

"You heard the man, saddle up," Reuben said, walking over to his horse beside Sam's. "Arkan, try not to fall off before you've got onto the horse."

Arkan gave him a look of pretend hurt. "You really think I'd get my shiny new armour covered in mud the moment I get on the saddle?"

"Definitely," Brannagh smirked, saddling up on his horse.

"Most likely," Taryn added, straightening himself on the horse's back.

"Certainly," Lorsaw nodded, pulling the reins tight.

"There's a one hundred per cent chance," Derak said with a smirk.

Arkan snorted and looped his boot into the stirrup. "You all have such little faith in me-" his sentence cut short with a yelp as he pushed himself up into the saddle and slid over the horse onto the ground with a metallic clash.

"Nice," Reuben drawled slowly. "Well done, Arkan," he clapped sarcastically.

Sam snorted in laughter, shaking his head. "We really wonder why, Arkansas."

"Arkansas?" Arkan frowned, looking up at Samqueel, mud coating his face and splattered over his chestplate. "You actually remembered my full name?"

"Oh, we remembered it alright," Forlorn said. "We just didn't bother to say it completely."

"His name is Arkansas?" Natan asked, an eyebrow raised.

Dominic looked at Natan with a shrug. "You wouldn't get it."

"We just removed the "Sas" because that's what he lacks in his personality," Brannagh chuckled.

"Excuse me," Arkan protested.

"Brannagh isn't wrong, you know," Derak said with a shrug, a grin spread over his ginger bearded face.

Arkan stood up, scooping a wad of mud off himself with a disgusted look. "I am *filled* with sass, thank you very much," he said dramatically.

"It doesn't get you anywhere, I'm sure of that," Reuben said, adjusting his posture.

"It gets me more women than Brannagh," he smirked and chucked the mud at Brannagh.

"I wasn't wrong when I depicted you all as children," Lorsaw sighed, shaking his head.

"Shut up, Lorsaw," Arkan grinned.

"It's got nothing to do with you, Lorsaw," Taryn said.

"Don't be a control freak, Lorsaw," Brannagh drawled, wiping the mud from his side.

"You're too observant, Lorsaw," Reuben scoffed.

Karsol reached into his saddlebag, pulled out an oat bar and handed it to Lorsaw. "Here, since you seem to be stiff as a board," he said in his thick voice.

Lorsaw glowered and turned his horse away from Karsol, clopping towards the Legion.

Sam watched him ride out and looked up towards the castle balcony. Ergott watched from above, his golden crown glimmering in the sun, scouring over the Legion. Three Barons stood behind him, their dark hoods stark against the stone wall.

Samqueel shifted his jaw and nodded to Ergott. Of all the things he'd asked of him, never had Sam wanted to refuse more. But he knew if he didn't do as he was told, that Jackseye would win.

He couldn't let Camelot fall under the reign of this tool and his cronies. So he'd do this final task. Sam knew he'd have to fight his way back inside the castle. If this war was going to happen in the way everyone was predicting, at least the backup plan would keep Arthur out of Ergott's reach. Until he could get the bastard off the throne. He just hoped Rosaline had made it on time.

Turning his horse toward the gates, he rode forward, leading the Legion of Knights behind him. Banners bearing Camelot's wyvern coat of arms rose into the air, the clack

of hooves on stone clattering behind him like war drums,  
shifting armour singing a familiar symphony.

If any luck was on his side, Sam could bring them back  
home again. He just wasn't so sure if he really could.

## Chapter 9: March to Catarina



The sharp Winter wind seeped through the castle walls, the torches in sconces giving both light and a glow of faint warmth as King Ergott passed by. Ergott walked along the hallway corridors, standing up tall with two Black Guards following behind him.

As much as he wanted the Barons to rule Camelot's citizens, it often bothered him to have these two, in particular, follow him like dogs everywhere he went in the castle - on Jackseye's command, no less. Ergott supposed he needed an entourage, anyway. But not here.

Ergott turned to them with a deep frown. "You are dismissed, Guards. Your presence won't be needed for the time being," he said flatly. The Barons looked at each other, their masked faces unreadable. It infuriated him how their identities were hidden from him, *the King*.

"Leave," Ergott barked, and the two Barons bowed to him, moving off silently back towards the stairwell.

*Right, now that that's dealt with...*

Ergott continued his way downwards, approaching another set of stairs leading further down into the castle floor. The torches lit the way down poorly, like they were dying to the cold winter's presence. The humidity made his handheld torch sputter, the flame dimming and twisting.

The stairwell ended with a doorway, a large iron knocker centred on the wooden door. Seating the torch in its sconce, he lifted the knocker and banged it to the wood three times and two more times after a short pause.



"Open up, woman," Ergott growled to himself.

He banged the knocker another three times, getting more impatient by the minute. The woman did nothing but sleep and read down here. What was keeping her from answering? He glowered darkly at the door and went to bang the knocker another three times.

The door swung open ominously with a creak, wind whooshing out through the doorway. Ergott stepped into the room slowly, looking around the dimly lit chamber from the top of an altar stairwell. A table set with unlit candles sat in the centre of the room, a white cloth seated beneath them.

"You can come out, Vivien," he called out, hearing the echo fading into the abyss while he walked down to the dusty carpet.

"Why, hello, my King," a feminine voice purred from behind him.

Ergott looked back over his shoulder. "You need to learn to answer the door," he looked towards the empty space, scouring the wall beside the stairs.

"Oh, but I still did," Vivien chuckled softly, her voice to his left. "Excuse a girl for resting peacefully."

"The Knights have left Camelot," he said, looking around the room to spot her.

"I've heard the news - the speech said before their departure was extraordinary, don't you think?" Vivien said lightly.

"What speech?" Ergott asked.

A female figure emerged from the shadows, long slender legs poking through her black and white, extravagant short-cut dress, her brown hair pulled back and tied over a shoulder, complimenting her pale skin and freakishly yellow eyes. "Sir Samqueel Torona is quite the motivator," she purred, fiddling with her hair. "Half of Braynor has already heard of his words, and the plan to attack Catarina is no secret."

"What did you call me for that was so urgent, Vivien?" Ergott scowled. "I have royal issues to attend to."

Vivien walked to the table, the candles flickering to life with a wave of her hand. The room lit up in orange hues, the corners fading into the shadows, a pile of hay and dirty blankets heaped against the far wall beneath a vent. The flames made her eyes glow pale; their citrine depths turned to him with a mad glint. "I know of the boy's destiny," she said.

"Arthur?" Ergott asked with an eyebrow raised.

"Indeed so."

"Arthur has no destiny to fulfil," Ergott sniped. "We discussed this numerous times."

Vivien smirked like a cat, her voice velvety smooth. "And each time, the same visions come to me: a King with hair of spun gold and a sword of legends with the strength of his ancestors fueling his will."

"Enough," he dismissed. "This sword of legends, where can it be found?" Ergott asked with a slight frown.

"The Blade of the Blood Ties is already in the hands of its protector," she prowled closer.

"Arthur has the Sword?" Ergott frowned deeply, disbelief spreading over his chest.

Her red lips parted to reveal too-sharp teeth. "Destiny has left its mark on the wounds already dealt; only the healer can fix them now."

"How did *he* get it?" Ergott lashed out. "Where did he find it?"

"The spirits of those once living have strong wills," she whispered.

"Spirits? What spirits?" Ergott asked furiously.

"The souls of His ancestors; the connections to the castle run deep even in death," she laughed.

"Benjamin," he growled. *The stubborn bastard still manages to rule over me without me knowing. Typical.*

"Indeed so," she said delightfully, clasping her hands together and pacing closer to Ergott.

Ergott turned to her, his eyes narrowed. "How do you know this? You know our deal."

Vivien trailed her fingers across a piece of his cape along his shoulder, her eyes trained on the fabric. "The visions," she said simply. "Our deal outlined that I report what I see, even if it did not satisfy you."

"Our deal was that you could remain here underneath *my* castle to help me with my achievements; you could not leave this chamber," Ergott reminded her.

She flicked her eyes to his, her head tilting slowly. "You think I've left the chamber? You believe the visions to sprout from opinion and not fate," she chuckled.

"I would certainly hope not," Ergott scowled. "You're lucky I even agreed to this deal. Sometimes, I wonder why I keep you here - for years, you've given me nothing but the same words."

"Tell me, Ergott," she moved closer to him, her hand inching up along his shoulder towards his neck. "Even if I did leave the chamber, would you live in fear of not knowing your future? Or would you continue to follow your path of ignorance?"

"I will do what's right for me and for the people of Camelot," Ergott said, watching her closely.

She hummed a laugh, tracing her nail over his jaw. "Whatever you wish to believe, my Lord."

Ergott flinched away from her touch, narrowing his eyes at her with a frown.

"Surely I'm not that repulsive?" Vivien drawled.

"I'd prefer if you didn't touch me, Vivien," Ergott said firmly.

Her eyes turned mischievous, her smirk sharp. "Who would've guessed you would be so squeamish," she purred and moved her hand back to his cape.

Ergott moved away from her, heading back towards the door. "I will be back once the war is finished," he said, one foot on the step.

"A woman gets lonely all alone in a hidden chamber in a castle, you know," Vivien said with her brow raised. "A little company would be appreciated more than once in every while when you require input."

Ergott looked back at her from over his shoulder. "Once our deal's requirements have been met, you can have a room in the castle for yourself and all the company you want," he said, continuing up to the door.

She hissed behind him and stopped at the bottom of the altar staircase, an invisible barrier blocking her path. "Send food for once," she barked. "It's been weeks!"

Ergott opened the door to the chamber, shutting it forcefully behind him with a loud bang and scrape of rusted metal hinges. He looked up the stairwell and began to make his ascent, his head pounding mercilessly all of a sudden.

A scrape of boots on stone echoed in the stairwell, coming towards him. Ergott looked up as he walked, hearing the sound. Had someone followed him down here?

The shadow of a female figure rounded the stairwell, a blonde woman peering down towards him with wide brown eyes. "Ergott? What are you doing down here?" she asked softly, her voice cautious.

"Rosaline," he smiled, walking up to her. "Nothing, I was just... we had a stray mole rat issue, nothing I couldn't handle."

Rosaline Guinevere was a dashing young thing, the loyal wife to Ergott for many years before he was King. Her curiosity wasn't unheard of in the castle, often seeking answers to things she shouldn't be, to Ergott's disdain. Still, he kept a smile on his face as he took her arm to lead her upstairs gently.

"A mole rat?" Rosaline asked.

"Nasty critters they are," Ergott muttered. "They got into the walls and into the basement."

"Who was the woman that shouted after you?" she questioned, touching his arm.

"The woman?" Ergott asked. "There was no woman, Rosaline."

She looked at him bemusedly. As curious as she was, she wasn't stupid, either. Ergott's heart raced beneath his calm exterior, his mind racing over different excuses.

"It could've been a Maiden or Enid," he said, keeping his smile. "I never heard a voice."

Her mouth tilted slightly. "Maybe you're right," she murmured, walking alongside him. "But I was sure I heard someone—"

"Rosaline," Ergott cut her off. "You're hearing things."

She frowned at him slightly, suspicion hinting in her eyes. "Why have you never come down this stairwell before? And where are the Knights?" she pushed.

"The Knights are marching to Catarina as we speak, and like I just told you, we had a mole rat problem," his voice turned stern. "You have your answers, Rosaline. Now, no more questions."

She sighed through her nose silently and bowed her head to him. "Yes, my King," she muttered.



The rain pummelled down in drenching sheets, the ground soaked in water from the dark clouds above. Mud stuck to the horses' hooves like glue as they travelled in rows of two along the dirt path. The trees overhead dripped water down the backs of their cold armour, the creak of wet metal echoing through the pines with the frosty wind.

Sam gritted his teeth against the breeze that froze his bones under his armour. Looking around, his Legion were

shivering atop their steeds, a few barely clinging to their reins. The Roundtable kept up, too used to the conditions to keep the chill from slowing them.

"It's so Gods damn *windy*," Arkan called out from his right, his sodden black hair blowing around his face.

"Shut up, Arkan," Natan called from behind him, his back straight and hair flicking around his head. "You should be used to this shitty weather."

"Just because you grew up in the North doesn't mean you get to brag," Arkan protested.

"Actually," Natan smirked, "it does. Maybe you should've trained in the tougher conditions," he said, a cold breath blowing from his mouth as he talked.

Arkan huffed loudly, pulling his reins tighter. "I prefer the warm sands of Hanalei to this."

"So the desert, then?" Derak chimed in with a question.

Arkan raised a brow at him. "Do you know nothing about geography, Derak?" he questioned him.

"Hanalei is in North Armania, a subcontinent if you will," Brannagh said, taking a sip from his waterskin.

"Actually, it's in the territory of North Armania," Lorsaw corrected. "An island along the tropical line of the realm, known for their great coconuts."

"Hey, Lorsaw," Taryn called over to him.

Lorsaw frowned and looked at Taryn, his hair sticking to his dark skin.

"No one cares," Taryn said, smirking at him lightly.

"Shut it, casual," he spat.

"Oooh, fighting words," Taryn teased.

Samqueel flicked his eyes between them, watching with annoyance. *Not again*. Every single time they travelled in a war party, there was at least one fight between the two, naturally started by Taryn. Sam's breath fogged through his nose as he sighed.

"I can use a lot more than just my words," Lorsaw growled in annoyance.

"Sure, you can," Taryn drawled.

"Why don't you come over here, and I'll show you how to dismount your horse like Arkan?" he threatened.

"Oi!" Arkan protested with a frown.

"Sam!" Taryn yelled at him.

"Don't go crying to me, Dawn," Samqueel warned.

"You started it."

"I didn't threaten him," Taryn protested.

"Riding with those two is a pain in my neck," Reuben said with a deadpan look. Samqueel grunted in agreement.

"I fell off *once*," Arkan argued. His horse snickered in the rain, shaking its mane out.

"Once is good enough to set an example," Brannagh teased, looking around through the rain.

"How far off are we from this stupid Kingdom anyway?" Karsol growled.

"Too far," Samqueel muttered, pulling his horse to a stop, facing the Legion. "Hold your horses, men. We'll stop here until the rain subsides."

"Couldn't have told us that earlier?" Taryn frowned, ringing out his soaked cloak. The Legion behind him groaned in relief and protest, dismounting their horses and moving beneath the cover of the trees.

Sam threw him a look. "Would you prefer to rest in the mud tonight, Taryn? Cause you're heading down that path pretty quickly," he asked sharply.

"You wouldn't leave a man behind," Taryn dismissed while dismounting his horse. "You'd feel bad straight away."

"I wouldn't test the Commander," Reuben warned, calming his horse.

"When will we reach Catarina?" Brannagh asked.

"When we damn well get there," Samqueel growled sharply, dismounting his horse and leading it further under the trees. All this bickering and questioning was setting his nerves on a thin edge. It didn't help that he didn't want to be

out here in the first place, either. He had bigger things to deal with on his plate than answering the same repeated questions over and over, like figuring out a way to get these lads home.

"Most likely within a day's travel," Reuben answered Brannagh, dismounting his horse next to Samqueel.

"Commander!" A Knight called out from the crowd.

Sam pivoted towards the voice, pushing his hair away from his eyes with a sigh. Tying his horse to the nearest tree, he walked back out to the rain, his armour heavy with water. "What is it?"

The Knight made his way over to Samqueel, his helmet bundled under his arm, his long brown hair resting at the shoulders soaked in sweat and rain.

"The Legion requests we devise a clearer plan before we continue further along," his voice sounded worried.

Reuben's eyes flicked over to Sam. Sam's brow, already creased in frustration, turned to a glower, his quicksilver eyes burning through the lieutenant. "The battle right now is the least of my worries," he growled. "A clearer plan will be made once more information is given to me. I need to be informed before I make our next decision. For now, organise a few of you to begin setting up camp under the higher trees a few paces off the path."

"It might be the least of *your* worries, but consider the others you're leading into this mess," he narrowed his eyes at Samqueel.

"Boy, I suggest you choose your next words very carefully if you wish to keep your sword at your side," Sam snapped, his voice flying through the rain. "You will address me as Knight Commander, and I will not hear another word against my orders again, understood?"

He'd never seen this lad before in the ranks, and he already had a line on his shoulder pad. *Are they giving out ranks like sweets, too, now?*



"You're starting to sound like Ergott, Torona," a voice said from his right side. Sam snapped his attention to the voice.

A man with short brown hair and grey eyes much like Sam's own strode over to him, his armour decorated in maroon patterns with three silver chains on the left-hand side of his chest plate. Three marks dashed his shoulder pad, carved through the metal - not filled with gold, however, like Sam's own. Sam's shoulder pad had three lines underneath the right lower side of the Braynor Cross, three stars in the remaining gaps, all inlaid with gold, and three strands of golden chains hanging from his shoulder to the neckline of his chest plate.

"Obviously, these men are sodden; perhaps you should ensure their safety rather than lash out at their necks," the man said.

Sam burned with anger, his jaw tight. "I would prefer if I could let my Legion be dry and prepared before any intervention on my part. Nobody wants to stand out in the rain all night and wait for answers," he said sternly. "Keep to your job, Cole, and I'll keep to mine."

"You're speaking to a Legion Commander, Torona. I speak for these men when no one else will. Everyone has their own opinions; you're just too egotistical to listen to anyone else, like the King's Pet you are," he frowned at him, standing close to him.

The Knights turned to face the two, overhearing the words, tension thick in the air. Samqueel's eyes turned cold, his body relaxing. He'd hated Cole since the day he'd met him in the Hall all those years ago, and he hadn't done anything to lessen the feeling within that time.

"Cole, I recommend you-"

"Shut your mouth, Solas," Cole scowled at Reuben, turning his eyes back to Sam. "Go on, reassure these men that you, their *Commander*, will lead these poor souls into a battle unknown."

Arkan looked around the forest, his eyes wide, running his hand through his hair. "The audacity of this man," he said to Taryn.

"Cole has always been an asshole," Taryn whispered to Arkan.

"I'm going to give you a moment to think about your choices before you end up with your backside in the mud beside that tree over there," Samqueel pointed to a fallen tree calmly, his voice steady. "Would you like two moments or just the one?"

Cole scoffed, meeting him at eye level. "You don't intimidate me, Torona."

Sam raised a brow. "Really?"

"That one over there scares me more than you," Cole pointed to Arkan. Arkan looked at him with wide eyes, signalling to cut it out.

"Oh, that's hilarious," Samqueel laughed, looking around at the Knights gathered. They laughed nervously, unsure where it was going.

"It sure is," Cole laughed, his expression blunt.

Sam chuckled, shaking his head. "You know what else is funny?" he asked, grinning at him.

"What?" Cole asked.

Sam's fist smashed into Cole's neck, his left hand following through with a punch to his unprotected side gap. Cole gasped for breath, coughing as he reeled to the side, touching his throat. Samqueel kicked him in the stomach, sending him rocketing through the air over to the exact tree he'd pointed to, grunting and landing with a squelch in the mud.

Cole coughed, spitting mud from his mouth with a groan. Samqueel dropped the grin, his eyes cold once more. "It's hilarious how you forget your manners to a Knight Commander who'd fought more battles than you," he spat, his voice dripping heavily with venom. "Next time you want to make fun of my leadership style, take it up with my

Knights. They might pay it back a little more kindly than I did."

"He had it coming," Derak smirked, leaning against a tree.

"Who's the egotistical one, now?" Taryn called out to Cole, his arms folded.

"I tried to warn you, buddy," Reuben shook his head at Cole.

Cole growled, sitting back against the log and glaring at Samqueel.

"Oh, and another thing," Sam said mockingly to him. "Ergott is *not* my King. I am nobody's pet, and I am *not* taking orders from a man who inflates his sense of self-worth by telling others how to do their job. So again, keep to yours, and I'll keep to mine." Samqueel walked away from them, heading to his horse.

Before he'd even made it ten paces, another Knight sought his attention. "Commander Torona!"

Unimpressed, he turned to the Knight. "Yes?"

"You might want to see this," he said cautiously, noting the annoyance on his face.

Samqueel sighed. "What does a man have to do to get a change of clothing and a cup of tea around these forests?" he muttered.

"A lot more than what you're displaying," Reuben smirked at him.

Sam looked at him flatly, his mouth twitching in a ghost of a smile. "Then I expect a boiled billy and a pitched tent waiting for me when I get back, Commander," he joked.

"Second Rank Commander," Reuben corrected him.

He waved dismissively. "Specifics," he rolled his eyes playfully and turned to the Knight. "Lead the way, son."

The Knight, along with two other men, led Samqueel into the forest clearing, the vines from the trees dangling to the ground in swinging ropes. The foliage around them thickened gradually as they prowled deeper, the ground

becoming uneven with roots and boulders as they entered the denser parts of the forest. Sam scouted out his surroundings with creased brows, looking up into the trees to spy large shadows of birds moving around.

The young Knight crouched down in a small pathway, the grass fading into a mottled ashen grey. He trailed his finger along the edge of the dead grass, tracing the outline in thought.

"Have a look at this," he said after a minute of analysing.

Samqueel knelt beside him, looking at the patch on the ground, his brow creased in interest.

"I don't think this is a safe territory to camp in," the Knight said. "That looks like the footprint of some animal."

Indeed, the grass formed a sizable oblong shape, five smaller circles the size of Samqueel's fist dotted above it. His jaw feathered. The forests never were a safe zone to stay in, no matter where you were. But this was new, and, looking further down the trail, there were more prints than just this one patch.

He stood back up, looking to where the prints led. "We've camped in forests like this before and have come out the other end fine," he said, turning to the men standing around the footprint. "We will have to keep vigilant of our surroundings and stay away from this area in particular."

The crouching Knight looked up at his Commander, a drop of water sliding down his face from the pouring rain above. "What animal does the footprint belong to?"

Sam looked at the Knight grimly. "Unless a new animal is getting about with human-shaped feet, I'd narrow this down to a Giant," he said.

"Guessing those other footprints belong to it?" the Knight asked, pointing down the path. Sam nodded and turned back towards the direction they came from.

"It's heading away from the area," he said, watching them stand to join him. "It shouldn't bother us as long as

we're careful. Now come on, we'll get this camp set up so I can get out of this suit."

"What of the other creatures?" another Knight asked.

"The general rule of thumb is if we don't disturb them, they won't disturb us," Sam looked at him. "If you're overly concerned, set up a few outposts." *Or send Cole after them since that's about all he's suitable for.* Samqueel smiled to himself faintly. "Make sure you're out of the rain. I don't want you to get sick."

"Right, you are, Commander." The Knights trailed past him, disappearing through the scrub towards the camp.

Sam hung back a moment. He could tell they were nervous; their voices were thick with it. The pressures of uncharted territory and the battlefield were always too much for new Knights. And with a whole Legion of mainly fresh faces, Sam couldn't help but sigh in annoyance at yet again another setback from Ergott's spontaneity.



*Surely, a Knight of my rank could set up something as simple as a tent.*

It had been a while since he had been out on a battlefield, or even camping, for that matter.

Probably too long for his liking.

Reuben had learned about surviving in the wilderness when he was training alongside Sam all those years ago; the two were like brothers, and they always had each other's backs, side by side at swordpoint and willing to do anything for the other.

Even if it meant doing things at a low level, like tent prep.

*Gods, did Reuben hate tent prep.*

"Struggling there, Reuben?" Brannagh asked, walking up to him from the right.

Reuben paused and looked up at Brannagh. "How does it look from your perspective?"

Brannagh peered over Reuben's shoulder, spotting the tent pegs strewn across the mud. "Looks like you could use a hand," he hinted.

"I know how to set up a tent," Reuben scowled. "I just haven't done it in a while."

"Well, for starters," Brannagh started. "You have the pegs in the wrong order, and secondly, how are you going to stick them in the ground?"

Reuben looked to his side, the mallet missing. He frowned back at Brannagh. "Smart ass," he muttered.

"Gods, you both are so loud," Taryn complained, walking up to the two with an annoyed expression.

"Says the loudest one of us all," Reuben shot back, raising his eyebrow at Taryn.

"Arkan's the loudest, actually. Aww, are you learning how to set up a tent?" Taryn asked, peering at Reuben's efforts.

"I know how to set up a tent," Reuben glowered at him. "Why does everybody have to have a go at me?"

"I offered to help," Brannagh said, raising his hands in protest.

"What? Who's loud?" Arkan called from his tent, poking his head out into the rain.

"*You!*" the three called back at him in sync.

"Am not," he replied quieter.

"Are you sure you can handle the tent by yourself, Reuben?" Brannagh asked.

"Yes, I'll be *fine*," he rolled his eyes, picking up another tent peg and looping it through the rope.

"You heard the man, Taryn; time to leave him alone," Brannagh said cheerily, leading Taryn away from Reuben and his tent.

Reuben looked at them with a quirked mouth, then back at the mess of rope and pegs. He sighed through his nose. "Surely," he muttered to himself.

"Surely what?" Samqueel questioned, walking out from the treeline behind the tent.

Reuben scowled at him from over his shoulder. "Surely I can be left alone to set up this wretched thing," he growled.

Sam chuckled. "You've forgotten again," he laughed.

"Helpful, Sam, thank you," Reuben replied, sarcasm thick in his voice.

"You know I was joking when I said I expected it done, right?" Samqueel knelt beside him, picking up the pegs.

Reuben frowned at him, stopping his work. "I have been working on this for thirty minutes, and you just tell me now that you didn't want me to do it?" he said flatly.

"Getting the fire going would be impossible in this weather, and I'm familiar with your struggles with tent pitching," he grinned, picking up the mallet from beneath the tarp.

"Have I ever told you how much I hate you?" Reuben asked with a laugh.

"Oh, plenty of times," Samqueel said lightly, pulling the ropes taut and tapping the pegs through the dirt. "Like that one time you insisted on going to town for a drink, and you ended up face-first in the gutter in front of that girl you liked," he grinned mischievously.

"That never happened," Reuben dismissed. "I didn't face plant; I tripped over an uneven surface."

"Yeah, my left boot heel."

Reuben frowned at him, slowly changing into a smile. "Whatever."

"'Whatever', he says, as if he didn't gain a scrape to the noggin," Sam smirked at him and pulled the last of the ropes down, pitching the poles up to stand.

A groan sounded behind the two. "I hate camping," Derak said, stretching his arms over his head.

"And here I thought you loved it, old man," Natan said.

"No," Derak sighed. "But he does." he pointed over to Carsen sitting in his tent under an overstretched tarp between two trees, his eyes bright with a smile.

"Can't judge a man for having a hobby," Reuben said, turning back to the tent.

"A hobby for nature?" Derak asked.

"It's what he likes."

"And it's something you're not good at," Sam prodded, standing up and opening the tent flap, escaping the rain.

Reuben sighed, flinging his long black hair away from his face. "That's all set up then?" he asked.

"Sure is," he said from inside.

"Just as well," Reuben muttered while standing from the ground with a grunt. "I was about to give up, mind you."

"We're fairly sure you gave up halfway through," Dominic called to him from two tents down.

"You could've helped, you know, Dom," Reuben called back.

"I mean, Henry asked," Dominic shrugged.

"I was willing to lend you a hand," Brannagh said from a tent next to Forlorn. "But it looks like you handled it semi-well," he chuckled.

"No thanks to you lot," Sam smirked, coming out of his tent to his horse.

"I'm glad Arkan didn't offer a hand," Reuben said, looking over at his tent.

Carsen took one look at Arkan's tent, a mess of rope, textile, and tarp pulled over a low-hanging branch, and stood up, walking through the rain to the makeshift hut.

"Looks like a Kobold's hut," Taryn said, looking at Arkan's creation in question.



"More of a bird's nest," Natan muttered, scratching his chin.

"In Arkan's words, it's called *Art*," Karsol gestured, standing next to Taryn with his arms folded.

"Damn right, it is!" Arkan called from inside it. Carsen shook his head at the tangle of junk.

"It's called an abomination!" Derak yelled at him, his Northern accent thick.

"It's fine, it's doing its job- *Hey!*" Arkan poked his head out into the rain to glare at Carsen, who was rearranging the ropes to pull tighter. "Mind your own tent!"

"He's adding the final touches," Reuben chuckled.

Carsen stuck his finger up at Arkan and kept fixing the tent, Joseph joining in on the other side. "Fussy bastards," Arkan growled.

"Who knew that the silent duo could create such an effective team," Brannagh said while scratching his goatee. "Fascinating."

The two stood back, admiring their work. The tent actually represented a tent, the fabric straightened out, and ropes pulled neatly together, with a decoration of a grumpy Arkan at its foot. They high-fived each other and grinned at Arkan, moving back to their tents.

"They've always been that way, Brannagh," Samqueel nodded to them, pulling his sleeping bag from his horse and carrying it towards his tent.

"The two are almost inseparable," Reuben said, helping Sam with his gear.

Natan shrugged to himself, walking over to his tent.

"Meh, I don't know about *inseparable*," he mused.

"The two are like brothers almost," Dominic said to him. Carsen gave him a thumbs up. Dom returned the kind gesture, giving him a nod.

"How much stuff did you pack, Sam?" Reuben asked, looking at the gear on his horse.

Samqueel gave him a look. "It's just my battle armour," he shrugged. "And a change of clothes and the sleeping bag."

"Did you think this was a holiday of sorts?" Reuben asked. "Don't forget you brought the tea set, the tent, and a backpack to put your toiletries in, except the utensils you bring to polish your armour off before a fight."

"Okay, okay," Sam interrupted, his eyes slightly wide. "Let's just rattle off everything I pack for every battle right in front of everybody, Reuben."

Reuben gave him a mischievous smirk. "Oh? You're embarrassed?"

Samqueel looked away, a faint bit of colour staining his cheeks. "Shut up," he dismissed, carrying the bag in the tent.

"What if I told the *entire* Legion?" Reuben asked teasingly.

"Then you're sleeping in the mud with Arkan."

Reuben scoffed. "As if you'd do that."

"Wouldn't I?" A thud sounded from inside the tent, followed by zips being undone and fabric wrinkling.

"Nope," Reuben dismissed. "You care about me too much."

"Well, if you want to keep talking about my polishing tools," Sam poked his head out through the flap to give him a flat look, "then make yourself comfortable right where you're standing, boy."

"Take a joke, will you, Sam?" Reuben said, giving him a smirk.

Samqueel narrowed his eyes playfully at him and ducked back into the tent.

"What polishing tools?" Dom laughed. "I always thought he got new armour."

"He's not rich, Dom," Reuben said to him.

"I'd beg to differ," Lorsaw protested.

"You're not rich either, Lorsaw," Derak prodded.

"You might be broke, Lorsaw," Taryn grinned, catching the bandwagon.

"I'm richer than *you*. I don't blow my money on cheese crackers and women every Saturday night," Lorsaw sniped.

The Knights around Taryn burst into laughter, Karsol nudging him on the shoulder. Taryn frowned at Lorsaw, moving away from the nudges.

"Lorsaw got Taryn good!" Natan laughed.

"The better part is he doesn't bring any of them back with him to the castle," Lorsaw grinned.

"Which ones, the crackers or the women?" Arkan laughed. They all laughed again, hunching over on their knees.

"I do!" Taryn protested. "It's just rare!"

"Okay, buddy, we believe you," Brannagh said with a smirk.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Dominic shook his head, a grin on his face.

"You guys are assholes," Taryn frowned.

"Did you pack any cheese crackers with you, Taryn?" Arkan asked. "Or did they run away after getting a whiff of your socks, too?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, Arkansas?" Taryn frowned at him.

"Damn, poor Taryn," Reuben said, watching the exchange happening in front of him with a smirk.

Rustling echoed from Taryn's tent, and Joseph poked his head out, holding a box of crackers in the air with a fiendish grin.

"Put them back!" Taryn yelled in frustration, the others laughing again. Joseph narrowed his eyes at him, opened the box, put a cracker in his mouth, and slowly backed into the tent.

"Should we be worried about the assassin?" Brannagh asked, watching Joseph in question.

"Possibly," Natan said. "I'd be more worried about the ones in the castle. At least Joe's tame... ish."

Carsen chuckled hoarsely from his tent, his hand on his chest. Joseph appeared beside him suddenly, sitting with the cracker box cross-legged on the ground. Taryn looked at him, flabbergasted. "Wh-what? How?!" he protested, his hands in the air.

Joseph pointed towards the back of Taryn's tent with a cracker in between his fingers, the ropes strung up just high enough to slip beneath.

"You sneaky little sausage," Brannagh said with high brows.

Joseph grinned and shrugged, turning to Carsen and signing to him, his fingers moving sharply in the air.

"There's a second box," Carsen translated, his voice gravelly.

"Did you really need two boxes of cheese crackers for this journey?" Natan asked Taryn.

"I was going to eat some on the way," Taryn growled, heading into his tent and zipping it up angrily. The side flap snapped shut with a crack, and the rope pulled taut.

Reuben laughed along with the rest of them as they moved out of the rain, Reuben moving his gear from his horse into his and Sam's tent.



Nightfall laid across the campground like a thick blanket, the rain clouds long gone. The shifting of metal echoed through the trees, the sentries at their outposts shifting on their feet nervously.

The Roundtable Knights kept to their tents, snores sounding from inside a few. The mud outside the tents slid under Sam's boots, puddles squelching with his weight.

The wind rustled the leaves above his head, following him on his patrol towards the Camelot Knights. He figured he may as well make himself visible to his men; sometimes, it was better to mingle with the young ones to gain their trust and respect rather than demand it. After all, Samqueel could settle down for a drink or two.

A campfire lit up the muddy patch of forest, the Knights huddling around it shivering. Samqueel huffed in amusement at them. "Not used to the wintry conditions, are we men?" he asked.

They pivoted to turn to him with respectful nods, some holding mugs of ale while others polished and sharpened their weapons. "First time on the battlefield, Commander," the closest one to him said, his teeth chattering.

"You'll learn to toughen up," Sam shrugged, sitting on one of the logs in front of the fire. "The cold only gets worse when it's snowing."

"Have you ever fought in the snow, Sir?"

"Gods, no," Samqueel scoffed. "I'd rather keep my toes and fingers than fight in an ice chamber."

The men chuckled softly, their shoulders starting to relax slowly. "How long has it been since your last fight, Commander?" one of the men sitting on the log across from him asked.

"When we were little lads, weren't we, Sam?" Reuben said, walking up behind the group with Brannagh and Dominic by his side.

Sam looked at him, his brow raised. "Little lads? My last fight was when I was twenty-three."

"So, two days ago?" Brannagh smirked.

"Flattering, Henry," Sam replied.

"Well, how old are you now, Sam?" Dominic asked, sitting himself beside the fire.

"Last time I checked, I was thirty-two."

Reuben took a seat next to Samqueel on one of the logs, nodding to the younger Knights seated around. "Keeping a lookout, are we lads?" he asked the Knights.

"Sure are, Sir," one said.

"Don't worry about the battle for the moment, yeah? Just enjoy the peace while you have it," Reuben said with a smile.

"The battle won't be the hard part about this whole thing," Dominic muttered.

Reuben looked at Dom. "What are you talking about?"

"I'd imagine carting everyone home would be harder," he mused, a hand against his cheek.

"Especially with rookies and the likes of your lazy bones," Sam smirked, nudging Reuben.

"Says you," Reuben narrowed his eyes at Sam playfully. "You always ask me to do your hard work."

"A cup of tea every now and then is hard work?"

"Shut up."

Samqueel grinned. "You volunteer half the time; I don't even need to tell you."

"What else am I supposed to do when Ergott or you aren't barking orders at me?" Reuben asked.

"Pick up knitting," Samqueel smirked widely, his eyes lit with mischief as the Knights around them chuckled quietly.

"Or pick up eating a nice salad with me," Brannagh suggested.

"No one in any of the Kingdoms would do that," Reuben said to Brannagh.

"Well, why not?" Brannagh asked. "Just because you're not into salad doesn't mean others aren't-"

A shriek split through the air, the voice pained and hoarse. Sam looked up sharply, scanning the forest. The Knights of Camelot looked around in surprise, their eyes wide. "What on Earth was that?" one asked to the open air.

"Weapons ready," Reuben ordered, unsheathing his sword. The Camelot Knights picked up their discarded weapons from around them and on the weapon stands near the tents. The howls sounded closer, the snapping of teeth echoing through the trees. The lads at the outposts dotted around the camp moved around the shadows quickly, trying to find the source with nervous calls to one another.

"Werewolves," Reuben growled.

Dom stayed on the ground, looking at the fire in realisation. "They don't like light," he muttered.

Reuben looked over at Samqueel. "Your thoughts?"

"Stay quiet and mind your shadows," Samqueel commanded, his hand hovering over his pommel.

Reuben nodded, looking at the Knights beside him, their young faces stricken with fear of the unknown. Brannagh reached for his longbow, watching the forest carefully.

"Don't go crashing through the forest or lifting bows just yet," Sam warned.

"Didn't you hear the howl?" Brannagh asked, looking at Samqueel in confusion.

"Of course, I heard the howl, but if we leave them to pass, they won't disturb us."

"Sam's right," Reuben said, looking at him sideways. "Don't engage."

The forest around them crackled with leaves, foreign growls and yips sneaking through the trees. The Camelot Knights at an outpost closest to the treeline spooked, snapping their attention towards the noises with their weapons raised.

"Commander Torona! There's something in the woodlands!" a Knight from the outpost yelled.

"Steady yourselves," Reuben barked.

Sam looked at them with his hand raised to his mouth, glaring sharply. *Gods, did they want to attract them?*

The growls grew closer, surrounding the outpost, the bushes and leaves crackling as they neared. The lads kept shouting at one another, their weapons swishing around them in panic.

*Gods help me.* Sam set his jaw, moving over towards the outpost quickly, his boots muffled on the mud. It was as if they'd never been in the damn forest before, which was impossible. *The Darklands must have scared them silly.*

Reuben scowled at them with frustration, he and Dominic trailing Sam silently. No one liked how nervous the new kids became. It was always a bad sign when dealing with conflict; nervous mannerisms always lead to critical mistakes.

They watched the Knights closely, their boots causing heavy irritation amongst the leaves. Samqueel reached the outpost, listening to the growls around him as he stood beside the fire. "Right," he growled to the Knights, irritated. "When I say so, get up into either the closest tree or *quietly* go to your tent; you've made way too much noise."

"But Commander," the Knight from earlier with the shoulder marks - Vincent, Sam had learned - protested. "We'd have more of a chance if we all defended the camp-"

"I'm not sending you into an unnecessary fight with a pack of *werewolves*," he interjected, his teeth clamped.

Right on cue, a howl to their right split the air, and three heads tore through the shrub, the werewolves' bulky form snarling at the Knights. Their terrifyingly gruesome snouts barked at them with rotted, protruding fangs. The muscles along their muzzle were torn back away from their gums, the rot following up to their eight, flamelike eyes that glared at them from inside a huge furry skull. The bones of their haunches stabbed the air with razor-sharp edges, their six huge, clawed paws dug into the ground, and their skeletal tails slashed the air.

"Oh, Gods!" Dom cursed quietly, his face paling.



Sam faced the werewolves, his anger at the Knights forgotten. The Knights behind him froze with their weapons at the ready.

"Lower your Gods damned weapons, you tools," he spat at them.

The werewolves gained closer to them, their bristling fur dark in the shadows. The muscles bunched over their abnormal forms rippled in the light of the campfire behind Sam, heatwaves rippling into the air from their heated breath.

Reuben turned to Samqueel, his eyes wide with uncertainty, noting Remedy was not in his hands. "Sam?" he whispered.

Samqueel crouched slightly at the knees and raised his palm flat toward them, extending it to the closest wolf. He could feel his heart pounding inside his ears and felt the lump of uncertainty he swallowed down his throat sink to his stomach. He trusted this to work; she wouldn't lie to him about it.

Werewolves were elves once before their transformations; Drow Elves, specifically, although it wasn't uncommon for other races to get the wild shape gene. The legend was that when the Drow Elves had crossed from the Etherrealm to the Overrealm and into the Darklands, like the other Etherspawn, they'd come into contact with wolves that had attacked their groups. When the victims healed, the bacteria from the wolves had bonded with the genes of the Drows, and because their ever-evolving immune systems couldn't handle foreign entities, the genes evolved to incorporate the bacteria into its system. As a result, it had turned them into Werewolves and spread the shifter gene to other races as they'd mingled and come across them in their territories.

*They are only aggressive to the things they perceive as threats.* Sam just prayed to the Gods that they didn't think him to be one.

"What are you doing?" Vincent asked incredulously, his sword in both of his hands.

"Lower your weapon," Sam growled at him. "They won't think you're a threat if you don't give them a reason to."

"Are you *crazy*?"

The Werewolves snarled at them, snapping their teeth at their blades. Sam sheathed his sword slowly, keeping his eyes forward.

Vincent jolted at the snap, backing up and sheathing his sword with daunt. Reuben followed Sam's word, sheathing his sword slowly and keeping an eye on the Werewolves. The rest followed suit, all of them backing away slowly, watching Sam warily.

The closer wolf sniffed at Sam's hand, all eight eyes glaring at him. He watched it cautiously, trying to steady his breathing. *Friend, not enemy.*

The glint in the wolf's eyes changed, pulling away sharply and turning to dart back to the scrub, its brothers following quickly behind, the crashing of leaves underfoot drowned out by barks and yips. More footfalls joined in - a *lot* more, Samqueel realised - and he sighed in relief, the noise fading gradually.

"How many do you reckon were actually surrounding us?" Reuben walked up beside him, looking out into the shrub.

"Too many," Dom shuddered, a howl sending goosebumps down his arms.

"Thanks for the specifics, Forlorn," Taryn frowned, walking over along the trail with his sword in hand.

"Look who decided to wake up after all the action was over," Dom frowned at him.

"The hell was all that howling?" Taryn asked, rubbing his left eye.

"What do you think, genius?" Reuben asked, brushing past him to return to his tent.

"It was your mother wailing over the lost opportunities for a grandchild, naturally," Brannagh teased, pulling his bowstring absentmindedly. "All hopes are on Elaine, now."

Taryn flipped him the bird, not making eye contact with him. "So who's going to tell me, or do I need to figure it out?"

"Werewolves, dumbass," Sam sniped at him, turning to the Knights behind him with a scowl. "If they come back, drown the fire and let them roam, do not engage. Do not leave your tents. Understood? Good. Go."

The Knights scurried off, placing their weapons back on the racks and in sheaths before making their way over to their places. Taryn frowned, following Samqueel's demand with a sigh; Reuben and Dominic moved off to sort out the rest of the camp.

*That was too close.* Trust the Darklands to give them a lick of the Ether on the first night. He sent a silent word to the Otherworld, looking at the stars before turning around to face the Knights walking away.

"Taryn," Sam called.

"Yes?" Taryn answered, looking over his shoulder.

"Apologies."

"For?"

"Attitude," Sam answered, walking towards the Roundtable tents.

Taryn rolled his eyes, turning back to him with a makeshift smile. "Sorry, Sam, it won't happen again."

Samqueel raised a brow. "I was apologising to *you*," he said slowly, walking past him.

"Oh?" Taryn straightened. "Wait, what for?"

He frowned, pausing to look back at him fully. "Well, it was for calling you a dumbass, but I'm starting to think it's true."

"Keep dreaming, Samuel," Taryn smirked, jogging past him to his tent.

Sam scowled at him, his back straightening. "Did you just call me Samuel?" he called to him.

"Guess we'll find out in the morning!" Taryn called back.

Sam narrowed his eyes, walking to Taryn's tent and kicking one of the pegs out of the ground. The rope flew up into the air, and the tent poles collapsed, sending the material crashing down.

"You asshat!" Taryn cursed, frisking around underneath the collapsed tent.

Brannagh laughed from his spot near his horse, shaking his head. "Ah, the consequences of your own actions," he chuckled.

"I take back the apology," Samqueel sniped, walking to his tent. "You're one hundred per cent a dumbass."

"I'll get you back! Ow!" Taryn struggled, poking his head out of the tent.

*Sure you will.* Samqueel smiled to himself, zipping up his tent.



The night was dead silent, the eeriness of nothing swamping Sam's ears as he lay awake staring up at the tent's roof. Reuben's quiet breathing across from him kept his guard down; at least something sounded alive. He longed for the feel of a warm bundle of brown fur at his side, for the companionship he'd been missing for years now. It was always times like these that he missed his best mate.

Gods, he missed her, too. Both of them. All of them. It'd been forever since he'd seen the flash of white appear at his window, felt her touch or heard her voice. Since he'd seen the marshlands in the North. He'd need to take a trip soon to see them if he could get away from Ergott.

He sighed through his nose, his hand fiddling with the chain resting on his chest absently, the overlapping triangles on the pendant poking his fingers gently. Sometimes, he wondered if he should've stayed with them there. Other days, he wondered what would've happened if he'd never met her, if only because the stress of knowing he'd never have time for them would weigh on his mind.

But he would never regret meeting her, never regret belonging to her, and her to him. If things were different, he'd have them both in the castle with him, safe and close by. If only she wanted that. If only she was allowed to be.

Sam shook his head clear, sitting up and leaning on his elbows against his knees. He rubbed his face, his calluses scratching at his short beard. Remedy sat in its scabbard at his right beside his bedroll, the dark metal of the hilt almost invisible in the dark. He looked at the rounded pommel, tracing down the blade to the matte silver cross guard that hugged the entrance of the leather scabbard.

He had a job to do. He had men to protect and a Kingdom to serve. An oath to uphold. Mates to fight for. He would never dare to leave his friends behind for his own gain; they were everything. Always had been since he'd met them in the hall.

Even if a select few got on his nerves often.

"WHERE'S MY CRACKERS, DAMN IT!?"

Sam's eyes widened in amusement, clamping down on his lip to keep from laughing. The crackers box in question sat behind him, emptied of all but crumbs and cheese dust. He'd snuck into the tent while Taryn had gone to scout the trees for a bathroom break, sharing the treats with Reuben and keeping their laughter quiet when they'd listened for Taryn's return. Sam was surprised he hadn't found it earlier.

*At least I can get the select few back for their pestering on occasion.*

## Chapter 10: Seasoned Oak



The streets were more relaxed than Arthur would've guessed them to be on a Sunday morning. Usually, they'd be flooded by people looking to go to the stalls for a feast at the midday mark. You'd be flat out seeing the produce over someone's shoulder; many people would dig elbows in to get a glimpse of the sweets and meals on offer. Even the poorest citizens get fed on Sundays.

Except there was no one. Not a single soul.

Arthur trailed down the alleys, looking around at the empty streets. In his left hand, he held a heavy bag that burned his arm from the weight, the objects inside sticking their corners into the material.

*Maybe taking the armour wasn't the best idea.*

Arthur turned the corner down the left alleyway, finally arriving at his destination: Marlon's Knight Training Camp. Arthur scoffed to himself, looking at the new large wooden sign stuck to the bricks above the door. "Interesting name," he snorted. *As if everyone didn't know where this place was.*

Stepping up to the door, Arthur knocked with his free hand, taking a step back to wait patiently. Small thuds sounded faintly through the door, slaps of skin on concrete echoing. Arthur frowned at the noise. *What the hell is that?*

The sound got louder, travelling towards the door, heavy breathing accompanying it. The sound stopped, heavy panting whooshing behind the door.

Then a knock.

Arthur knocked once again, his eyebrow raised in confusion. The knock sounded again, a giggle behind the door. Arthur rolled his eyes, a small smile slipping on his face.

"You've given away your identity, Tristan. Open the door," Arthur said, looking around the alleyway with a small smile.

"I have?" Tristan asked. "I mean, uh," his voice deepened, "this isn't Tristan, this is... Peter?"

"I can tell it's you," Arthur reassured.

"No. It's Peter, who are you?" Tristan coughed, clearing his throat and muttering.

"Kyan, now open the door," Arthur played along.

"Kyan!" Tristan said in his normal voice, opening the door excitedly. His grin dropped, then picked back up. "Arthur!"

"You're so gullible," Arthur scoffed, looking at Tristan and noticing the amount of sweat dripping from his forehead. "Did you just run a marathon?"

"It's a long way between here and the training hall," he panted. "Plus, I wanted to answer the door before Peter did."

"Marlon around?" Arthur asked, stepping inside.

"He's training the new lot."

"Well, he's got a new trainee," Arthur said, walking down the hallway with his bag.

Tristan closed the door, following after him. "Who?"

"Who do you think?" Arthur asked, looking back at him.

Tristan pursed his lips in thought, his eyes glazing over. *Oh gods, he's actually thinking.*

"Me, you chip idiot," Arthur told him.

"Oh. Well," Tristan looked him over, "you look better than when Kyan beat you up a few weeks back, so that's a good plus."

"I had stitches pulled out of my face, hence the bruise," Arthur said, turning a corner.

He walked over to the green corner benches, setting his bag down on the wooden bench with a metallic thud.

"What have you got in there, bricks?" Maria asked, coming over from a group.

Arthur looked over at her, his face passive. "Armour," he said simply. "My father used to wear it when he was a Knight."

Maria blinked at the bruise on his brows. "I bet that hurt," she nodded to it.

"You have no idea," Arthur scoffed.

She frowned slightly, looking back to the group she was watching. "So you decided to come back?" she said, her voice light.

"That's surprising to you?" Arthur asked, opening his armour bag.

"I would've thought-"

"You'd give up by now," a voice interrupted from beside them.

Arthur looked up towards the voice, frowning slightly. Kyan grinned at Arthur from the higher benches in the orange corner, leaning his forearms on his knees. "Good to see I haven't broken you yet," he prodded.

"Good to see you too, Kyan," Arthur snided. "Were you looking for a round of applause? I can give you one if that boosts your ego."

"Clever words for someone who can't use a sword," Kyan teased, standing up and jumping down the benches.

"I've trained with a sword before; I know the basics," Arthur said, watching him.

Kyan landed beside Maria, leaning an arm on her shoulder. "I'm sure you have," he dismissed. "Playing with sticks in the courtyard of the royal gardens classifies as formal training nowadays, it seems." Maria looked at Kyan's arm uncomfortably.



Arthur reached into the bag and pulled out his father's sword. "Does this look like a stick to you?"

Kyan's eyes glittered in amusement. "So you have a real sword," he said, surprised. "That's a start."

"You don't say," Arthur said, narrowing his eyes at him. Tristan frowned at Kyan slightly, looking at his arm on Maria's shoulder.

"I'm sure using your endless amounts of wealth and education will help you wield that chunk of iron, especially all those books you read," Kyan snorted.

"How wealthy do I look to you?" Arthur asked.

"You're the son of a *King*," he said slowly.

"I'm just as wealthy as a person in Londinium," Arthur admitted. "I have nothing in that castle. All I have is that title of a royal, nothing else. I might as well be living down here in Londinium 'cause that would make me wealthier."

"Yeah, yeah, sad rants, big deal. We all know how *hard* it is for the famous," Kyan waved his hands in the air dramatically. "Just admit, you've got more than the majority of people down here. Everyone knows it."

"Everyone *thinks* it," Arthur corrected him, frowning. "King Ergott has taken it all for himself."

"Now *that* I can believe," Kyan raised a brow.

"Kyan, can you quit being a jerk for five minutes?" Maria sniped at him, moving his arm off of her shoulder.

"Do as she says," Arthur said, narrowing his eyes at Kyan.

"Ooh, the future King is giving me commands," he mocked, his eyes wide.

"Watch it, Kyan," Tristan said in a low voice.

Kyan looked at Tristan, amused. "The hell are you going to do about it, Garrison? Stress eat?"

"Don't test me, Kyan, I'm warning you," Arthur warned.

"The street fighter with a stitch in the eye challenges a Knight trainee," Kyan sighed dramatically, clenching his

hands together beside his face. "Oh, the romance here is so... dead," he smirked.

"Let's take the romance over to a date in a chalk box," Arthur challenged, nodding over to the empty box.

"Oh? You want to spark the relationship back up, I see?" Kyan grinned darkly.

"I never got to say my goodbyes after your carriage left," Arthur shrugged, playing along with his little word game.

"A pity it went the way it did," Kyan pulled a sad face. "It could've led to a fantastic marriage of my foot to your face if we'd held on longer."

Arthur handed Tristan the sword in his hand, narrowing his eyes at Kyan and clenching his jaw.

Tristan looked at the sword in his hands. "Arthur, I don't think this is a good idea-"

"Hold the sword, Tristan," Arthur said firmly.

"At least wait for Marlon-"

"Marlon doesn't matter," Arthur dismissed. "Kyan wants a challenge, and I will deliver."

"Let's build this love back up," Kyan grinned, walking to a box.

Arthur followed him, staring him down with a stern glare.

"The hell is going on?" Peter asked, walking up to Maria and Tristan, who was unsheathing the sword.

"Kyan is being a domineering prick," Maria scoffed, folding her arms.

"And Arthur gave me this," Tristan said, turning to him with the sword.

Peter jumped back, the blade swishing a few inches away from his chest. "Gods above, Tristan!" he said, taking the sword off him.

"Hey, that's mine," he protested, going to grab it back.

"You need to watch where you point swords," Peter scowled, putting the sword back in the scabbard he swiped off Tristan's other hand and setting it down on the seats.

"I know how to point swords," Tristan scowled back.

"At the things you *shouldn't* point them at," Peter frowned, looking up at Arthur and Kyan. "Gods, what on Earth are those boys doing?"

"Bickering," Maria scowled. "One wanted to fight, and the other was in a bad mood, it seems."

"And which order is that?" Peter asked, folding his arms with a frown.

"Kyan is the former," she said, sitting down on the bench beside Arthur's bag.

Peter rolled his eyes. "Not surprising, to say the least."

Tristan edged around Peter, sitting beside the bag and eyeing the sword.

"Take the sword, and you won't be training for a month," Peter warned, spotting Tristan at the corner of his eye.

Tristan frowned at Peter. "Arthur told me to hold it."

"Before you almost stabbed me," Peter reminded him, giving him a look. Tristan slouched sulkily and watched Arthur.

Arthur stood opposite Kyan inside the sparring box, removing his fur coat and throwing it on the floor outside the line.

"Oh, look out, things are getting serious, the coats coming off," Kyan jested, grinning at him.

Arthur glared at Kyan. "Make your move, sweetheart," he taunted.

"Let me just decide how I want to hand your ass to you this time," Kyan pondered, scratching his chin dramatically with an over-thoughtful look on his face.

"You haven't seen me at my prime," Arthur said.

"Was that last move close to it? Or are you all words?"

"Well, if you stopped moving your jaw, you'd see this coming," Arthur said, launching his leg into Kyan's thigh. Kyan stepped back a little too late, Arthur's boot grazing him sharply. He hissed and touched his leg.

"Going to retaliate? Or sulk about a small graze?" Arthur asked, standing over him.

Kyan growled and barged his shoulder into him, digging his elbow into his rib and spinning to launch a foot into his chest. Arthur grunted, landing on the concrete with a loud thud inches away from the line.

"Going to get up? Or just sulk about a sore shoulder?" Kyan mocked.

Arthur moved his leg underneath Kyan, swiping at his ankles with his boots. Kyan jumped over his feet, moving back. Arthur growled, getting up from the ground in frustration.

"Come on then," Kyan beckoned to him with his fingers. "Since you haven't shown me your 'full power' yet."

Arthur glared at him, walking up to Kyan with a clenched fist.

"What is going on here?" A commanding voice boomed through the hall, trainees turning to look. Kyan looked over to the voice, taking his eyes off Arthur.

Arthur threw a punch at Kyan, stepping forward with a growl. Kyan saw it from the corner of his eye too late, copping the punch to his cheekbone. He touched his face, looking at Arthur.

"You just felt my full power, you bastard," Arthur glared at him.

Kyan's eyes went dark, and he bunched his fists hard. He swung one into Arthur's side, the punch hitting him like a sledgehammer. A blinding pain shot through his nose with a crack as Kyan headbutted him and made Arthur stumble, collapsing onto the floor with a groan after a hit to the temple.

"That didn't sound pleasant," Peter said, quirking his mouth. Maria's eyes lit in worry, her face still a mask of annoyance.

"Headache," Tristan winced.

Arthur rolled over in pain and held his nose, blood pouring down his face onto the ground beside him. Arthur glared up at Kyan standing over him, his teeth bared. Blood flowed over his teeth, the metallic taste strong in his mouth.

Kyan frowned down at him. "And *that* was my full power," Kyan spat. His cheek was blooming a deep red, and his eye started to swell.

"Cocky bastard," Arthur growled.

"Somebody tell me why Arthur Pendragon is back in my training hall," Marlon growled, standing outside the box.

"I couldn't tell you," Peter sighed, looking at him. "I came out here just as they started throwing hands."

"He's training, obviously," Tristan chimed in.

Marlon ignored Tristan, standing over Arthur with a glower. "I get pulled out of training the younger boys just to find the old King's son getting beaten yet again?" he growled. "When will you learn, boy, that you can't fight?"

Kyan chuckled, walking out of the box in victory and spitting at Arthur's feet as he walked to the far wall with the other trainees.

"You send your trainees to teach me instead of showing me yourself; how about you show me how to fight then? Since you're the trainer, after all, or was that just a lie you told me?" Arthur growled, standing up from the floor and spitting blood.

"You can't expect to be thrown into a pride of lions and come out of it best off," Marlon frowned. "Patience with little steps is what you need."

"Maybe if you taught me how to fight, then you wouldn't have to babysit me," Arthur sniffed, looking up at him with a clenched jaw.

"You will be taught what you need to learn when you are ready to do so."

"Why not give me the chance now?" Arthur asked, pressing him.

Marlon frowned down at him. "Because you're too busy with your head in the clouds to see what you're missing," he growled.

"A crown? A magical sword?" Arthur asked sarcastically, narrowing his eyes at him. "Thanks for the obvious information. If you know where to find either, a hint would be great. Or were you talking about the level of sarcasm and attitude you and the rest of your trainees have, 'cause I'm almost certain you've pulled that one right out of your-"

Marlon's hand slapped him across his head sharply, the impact stinging. Arthur flinched in surprise, touching his temple and blinking rapidly. *Um, oww!*

"What was that for?" Arthur asked with disbelief, turning back to him with widened eyes.

"To smack the arrogance out of you that you're throwing at the world like it's rice at a wedding ceremony," he snapped.

"Like father, like son, right?" Arthur growled, his shoulders squaring.

"Your father was the polar opposite of what I see before me. The man I knew had common sense with what challenges he could face without major consequences; he had *respect*. I wouldn't have expected his son to become this worm of a boy."

"You have my uncle to thank for that part," Arthur said.

"Your uncle doesn't influence your choices to resort to this attitude. You *chose* to be like this," Marlon glared at him.

Arthur scowled at him bitterly, rubbing his head. *You don't know what I've had to live through, so don't tell me he didn't do anything to me.* He looked over at Tristan and

Maria - Tristan sat pale on the seat, his hand resting on the bag of armour. Maria stared at the ground, her face impassive. How she'd reacted earlier - she'd looked away then, too. Was he really that much of a tool?

"Sure," Arthur said quietly.

"So pull your head in, boy. You've got a long way to go before you make your mark, but Gods help me, if this attitude keeps up, then Londinium's doomed," Marlon sighed, squeezing the bridge of his nose.

Arthur glowered at Marlon. "I don't understand how I'm destined to be someone I know I'm not."

Marlon lowered his hand from his face. "How do you know you're not that man if you haven't lived to see the day it comes to light?"

"Are you always this good with speeches? Cause you're kind of cheesy with the inspiration," Arthur said, his mouth turning up in a sly smirk.

Marlon's lips twitched. "I was a motivational speaker once," he said. "And now I'm a trainer. It's what I'm meant to do."

Arthur smiled faintly. He supposed it was only a matter of time before someone cuffed him one around the ear and told him what for. Not that he appreciated being hit in the melon.

Maybe it was because he knew Marlon knew his father, maybe because of the brash new way he's being treated by the trainer, but either way...

This time, he'll put his head in the game. He had to, for his father's sake. And his own.

"Have you fought in a while, Marlon?" Arthur asked curiously.

Marlon's face darkened slightly. "On the battlefield, no," he muttered.

"I meant in general," Arthur corrected.

"Almost every day," he said, looking at him. "Training involves fighting, as you can see."

"I've got a sword," Arthur said, nodding over to his bag. Marlon frowned. "What sword?"

"This one!" Tristan said, holding the scabbard in the air. Arthur looked over at Tristan, beckoning him to come over.

"Found it a few weeks ago," Arthur said, watching Tristan. He handed it to Arthur with a dramatic bow, humming trumpet noises as he held it up to him. "My liege," he said with a thick accent.

"Thank you, Sir Tristan," Arthur said, taking the sword from his hands. Tristan grinned, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Arthur unsheathed the blade from the scabbard, holding it in front of him for Marlon to see.

Marlon froze on the spot. "You... you found the crate," he whispered.

Arthur looked at him, slightly confused. "Is everything okay?" he asked. *He knew about the crate?*

Marlon's breath shuddered, his eyes trailing the sword's runes, the blood draining from his face. "Benjamin, you old tool," he muttered softly.

"It doesn't look all that *magical* if you ask me," Peter said, watching the exchange from behind Tristan.

Tristan frowned at him over his shoulder. "You're such a buzz kill," he protested.

"What's so important about this sword?" Arthur asked, inspecting the runes.

"That sword," Marlon said softly, "is the carbon copy of Excalibur."

"Excalibur?" Arthur echoed.

"The magical sword Peter rolls his eyes about," Maria said, walking over to them.

"What magical enchantments does it have?" Arthur asked, looking up at Marlon.

"This one here?" he asked.

Arthur nodded. "This one in particular."

Marlon looked around the hall at the trainees standing around, their attention stuck on the conversation. "Leave,"



he boomed. "The break rooms are open; get your own food from the kitchen if you have to."

The trainees peeled off towards the doors and down the hallway quickly, mutters of curiosity flicking between them. Marlon looked back at the sword once they'd cleared out and said simply, "None."

"Oh," Arthur frowned. "Well, that's... exciting."  
*Underwhelming, even.*

"The sword doesn't have magic?" Maria questioned, eyes lit in confusion.

"This one doesn't," Marlon repeated. "It was created to be a stand-in more than a magical weapon, but it will still do the same damage as a normal sword."

"What about the *real* sword?" Arthur asked, looking at the sword in his hands.

"The real one has magic, yes."

"Specifics?" Arthur asked.

"Well-

"It makes the ground tremble beneath the feet of its enemies," Maria interrupted, her eyes glittering. "It's said to make the wielder of the sword, specifically of the Pendragon bloodline, more powerful in battle, the magic in the blade sending pulse waves through the air with each impact, weapons breaking under its might, the runes glowing as bright a blue as the sky. Its magic is a mighty force that takes a long time to master once unlocked and will be the first and last defence in battle," she finished.

"Can anyone lift it?" Arthur asked, looking at Maria curiously.

"Once it's been pulled from the stone it's stuck in, I'm sure it'll be the same weight as a normal sword," she shrugged. "It's just that other people won't be able to use the magic."

"So you're telling me I'm the only one who can pull the sword from the stone?" Arthur asked, his curiosity spiking.

"Unless you have another older sibling or something, then yes," she nodded.

Arthur looked down at the sword, inspecting the runes again. Could it possibly be his destiny to pull the blade from the stone? Where *was* this stone? And did it exist, or was it more of a legend?

*No.* Arthur wouldn't let his mind doubt this one. He couldn't possibly doubt this, especially since the exact duplicate is in his very hands. And Marlon's reaction was too real to be anything else. *Was this the prophecy? The prophecy of the Born King?*

"So let me get this straight," Tristan said from the floor, turning all eyes onto him. "There are two swords."

"Correct," Maria said.

"One of them is magic."

"Yes," Arthur nodded.

"This one," he pointed to the sword, "is *not* magic."

"That's right," Marlon said.

"So... where's the magic one?" he asked, looking up at them.

"Have you been paying attention?" Peter asked, looking down at Tristan in surprise.

"For once," Maria smiled.

"Good on you, buddy, you finally paid attention to something important," Arthur said, smiling at him.

Tristan beamed, grinning. "I do listen, just subjectively," he said. "Or at least that's what Henry said before he left for his vacation."

"Tristan," Arthur said, looking at him with a flat expression. "They aren't going on a *vacation*."

Tristan looked at him with a frown. "Yes, they are," he protested. "I dared him to so I could have the salads he was leaving. They had the horses ready and everything the next day."

"The horses?" Marlon frowned. "They don't use horses for nothing."

Arthur looked at Marlon, his mouth a thin line. "Ergott's sent the Knights to attack Ariental at Catarina," he said.

"He's *what*?" Maria, Marlon and Peter asked in combined surprise.

"The Barons are now guarding Camelot," Arthur said.

"There's no Knights?!" Marlon asked in outrage.

"I couldn't see any in the castle," Arthur shrugged.

"Ergott's using the Barons as the protectors of Camelot. I caught them negotiating about the attack on Ariental a few weeks back, and they were sent two days later. They were as enthusiastic about going as you'd expect," Arthur explained, his eyes flicking between the group.

"Ergott left his castle unprotected by proper men and gave it to Jackseye of all people," Marlon frowned, shaking his head in disgust. "All for what? There's been no word of harm against the Kingdom."

"Surprising, I know," Arthur sighed. "Bit of a poor decision by the so-called Great King Ergott."

"No wonder he's disliked by the people of Londinium," Peter chimed in. "All they ever talk about is his ambitions for his own personal reasons."

"And he's proven that theory by sending our protectors and leaving us with madmen," Arthur said, crossing his arms over each other.

"Surely he's not *that* foolish," he growled.

Arthur turned to Peter, shrugging. "He seems to think himself intelligent," he rolled his eyes.

"He's up to something," Maria muttered.

"Without a doubt," Arthur agreed.

Voices surged from outside, blaring like trumpets in the air. Arthur turned to the door, the others following his line of sight. Suddenly, loud knocking echoed from the front entrance, thundering within the hallway.

"Open up, private inspection now," the voice barked.

Arthur looked over at Marlon. "Friends?"

"Them again?" Peter asked, looking at Marlon.

"What do they want this time?" Marlon sighed. Tristan stood up from the floor, moving out of the way of his hulking form before he got trampled.

"We need to get you out of here now," Peter said to Arthur.

Without warning, the door burst open with a thunderous bang, splinters of wood scattering all through the hallway. Arthur jumped, snapping his head over to the door. Barons flooded through the hallway into the training hall, spreading around in search. A slim figure strode out of the hallway, his black hood adorned with purple embroidery of a higher quality than the other Barons.

"Sorry about that mess," he said, stepping over shards of wood. "We promise to clean up once we're done with the inspection." The black mask covering his face was different from the others, the whorls filled in with gold and purple pigments, tiny jewels adorning the under eyes.

"I told Jackseye your kind were not to come back here," Marlon barked.

"Calm yourself, tool," the Baron said, flicking his violet eyes over to Arthur. "He's the one we're after."

"Yeah?" Maria challenged. "And what for? He hasn't done anything wrong!"

"My King demands he returns to the castle this instant," he shrugged, striding over to Arthur.

"Don't you lay a hand on me," Arthur sniped.

"Or you'll regret it," Tristan growled, moving next to Arthur, his shoulders square.

The Baron scoffed, looking at Tristan up and down.

"What are you going to do, boy?"

"Want to test it and find out?" Tristan scowled.

"I don't want anything to do with you, peasant. Arthur is to return to the castle this instant," he spat.

"He's not going anywhere, Voss," Marlon glared at him, stepping in front of him. "Not while he's in my hall."

Arthur looked at Marlon, questioning how he knew the Baron by name.

"Have you taken it upon yourself to care for the boy?" Voss asked. Arthur looked at Marlon.

"Anyone who enters my training hall to become a Knight is under my protection," he gritted his teeth. "And many others will agree that I'm not the only one who would protect them."

"You really think he could be a Knight?" Voss asked, a smirk laced through his voice.

"Wanna find out?" Arthur challenged. *Another one of these damn higher Barons.* What was this one's agenda? And where was Jackseye skulking if he wasn't here?

"What makes you think he can't be one?" Maria growled.

"Take the King's word," Voss said, looking down at her. "You should start believing in your King more often."

"Everyone in Londinium knows that his words are false," Arthur glared at him. "You Barons have no right to be here."

"Especially when all you do is hurt people," Tristan growled. "That's not cool."

"That's called discipline, you idiot," Voss hissed at him.

"Disciplining the poor Londinium citizens, is that your way of bringing order to an already falling apart city?" Arthur protested. "Because all it's doing is tearing it up more, and none of you see it."

"What's your King's plan?" Marlon spat. "Take away the strong to maim the weak?"

"None of your concern," Voss growled.

"It's *all* my concern! I train men to serve the Kingdom; I *deserve* to have an answer for these foolish notions! I deserve to know why the new Knights with no experience were shipped off to fight a battle no one can win!"

"Then why aren't you there with them?" Voss asked, smirking at Marlon.

Marlon's eyes flashed with hate. "You know why," he growled.

"Do *they* know?" Voss asked, pointing at the rest of the group.

Arthur looked at Marlon, his mind turning over the conversation he'd overheard. "What's he talking about?"

"Know what?" Peter spat.

"So they don't know," Voss drawled. The Barons forced their way through into the locked doorways, startled yelps of protest sounding around them. Marlon looked around at them, eyes lit in worry.

"Marlon?" Arthur asked, looking at him in concern.

"It's not important," he said stiffly. "You're just trying to make it seem like it."

"Tell them," Voss pushed. "If it's not so important, it won't matter, will it?"

Arthur stared at Marlon, his suspicions confirmed. Something was amiss, and from what he'd heard when Jackseye was here, Arthur was sure it wasn't a coincidence.

Marlon gritted his teeth, his jaw tight. Peter looked at him in confusion, a scowl creasing his brow. "What is he on about, Marlon?" he demanded. "You're just a trainer, aren't you?"

The trainees growled and yelled at the Barons as they forced them all out to the hall, some being dragged. Arthur watched in horror, his eyebrows furrowing in anger.

Kyan shoved one off of him as they pulled him out of the doorway, more of them grabbing him as he struggled, protesting against them.

"Go on," Voss insisted. "You've got your trainees here to hear who you really are," he smirked.

Marlon growled and looked at Arthur. "I knew your father a lot better than you think," he said, turning to face them all.

"How?" Arthur asked. Tristan and Maria looked at each other in confusion. It seemed no one had any clue as to what he meant.

Marlon sighed in frustration and looked at his trainees surrounded by the Barons. "All of you have known me long enough to believe the stories I've told of the Roundtable, yes?" he asked them.

They nodded, a few murmurs flitting through them.

"They weren't made-up stories," he shook his head. "They weren't tales of sacrifice, or bravery, or righteousness." He looked back at Arthur, his face dead serious. "They were memories."

Surprised gasps popped up from the trainees, eyes wide as saucers stared at him. Peter looked at Arthur with a confused frown, then back at Marlon, disbelief glinting in his eyes.

"Did you fight by my father's side?" Arthur asked, looking at him in curiosity.

"I did," he admitted. "And more than once."

Arthur baulked, looking at Marlon carefully. "When did you?" he asked.

Marlon looked at the sword in Arthur's hands, his eyes glazed. "The last battle was eighteen years ago," he muttered. "In the forest just outside the Darklands."

Arthur's heart skipped a beat, the blood draining from his face. *Eighteen years ago...*

"But that would mean you were there when..." Maria's eyes widened as Marlon looked at her solemnly. Arthur's world stopped, the hall slowing down around him as it processed through his mind.

*He was there when my father was killed.*

Arthur looked down to the floor. "You were there when he... died."

"You lied to your trainees, *Marlon*," Voss drawled, circling the group. "I wonder what they must be thinking now... let's ask one." He turned to one of the Barons,

gesturing to him to bring an onlooker over. The Baron dragged the girl over roughly, gripping her by the arm. She cursed at him, trying to fight him off of her before another Baron grabbed her other arm, making her kneel in front of Voss.

Voss crouched down in front of the girl, removing his face mask to reveal a rugged face, his teeth stained yellow and purple ink smeared across his cheekbones up to the piercings in his brow. His black hair was cut short on the sides, with a long strip of hair left along the middle of his head brushed back, fussed by the hood. "What's your name, sweetheart?" he asked, his voice poisoned with honey. She squirmed away from him, her face wrinkled at his sour breath.

"Get back away from her," Marlon commanded, grabbing his shoulder roughly.

Voss smirked up at Marlon, a dagger appearing in his hand that slashed across his arm. Arthur's eyes widened as Marlon barked curses, a few Barons grabbing him and pulling him away. Marlon fought against them, shoving them back.

"Wouldn't it be a shame if this girl's blood was painted on your walls?" Voss asked, smirking at Marlon before turning back to the girl.

Tristan's eyes lit in worry, and he moved towards the girl. "Don't hurt her," he said sternly. She looked at him, her eyes wide and fearful.

The two Barons behind Tristan grabbed him tightly, pulling him back away from the girl. He snarled at them, reefing at their grip viciously. Arthur narrowed his eyes, the sword gripped in his hands firmly.

"You spill her blood, and I'll kill you," Tristan roared. "She doesn't deserve this!"

"So, what is your name, girl?" Voss asked, twirling the dagger in his hand, Marlon's blood flicking off it.



She watched the blade dance in the air, her breathing ragged. "Lucy," she breathed.

"Lucy," Voss repeated, tasting the name slowly. He reached down to grip her hair roughly, scuffing the chestnut locks and making her wince. "Tell me, Lucy, why did you want to become a Knight? Especially under the care of Xavier Marlon," Voss turned to him with raised brows. "Or at least that's who he says he is."

"She's not training," Tristan barked, pulling an arm free and launching his elbow into a Baron holding him. The Baron punched him in return, Tristan doubling over in pain with a groan.

Voss looked at Tristan with a raised brow. "So you say?"

Arthur looked at the Barons around him, one of them grabbing the sword from his grip with a fight. He glared at the Baron, the black mask revealing no emotion, more hands catching his elbows and holding him in place.

Arthur narrowed his eyes with a growl. How were they going to get out of this wretched mess of a situation? *These pesky Barons and their black masks*. He gritted his teeth in anger. "Watch it," he growled deeply. The Baron snorted at him.

"She's a helper," Tristan hissed, half crouched over. "She works here in the kitchens."

"Let her go!" Peter yelled, thrashing in the Baron's grip.

"You all care so much about a *peasant*?" Voss mocked. "No wonder why you all belong in brothels."

Kyan snarled in outrage at him, barking obscenities at the Barons. Maria stood quietly in the Black Guards' grip, her head bowed and her lips moving quietly. Arthur watched her in interest, blinking at her.

"Maria," Arthur whispered. She didn't look up, her lips not pausing. *Is she praying?* Arthur's eyebrows creased.

"Don't forget you were once a commoner, Urhen," Marlon sniped, stilling in his struggles.

"I learnt etiquette and took a better path in life. *You* can't seem to move on from Knights or the royal influence," Voss said, standing up from the ground.

"Is that what your brother did, too?" Marlon snorted.

"We don't speak of him," Voss growled, standing close to Marlon, his eyes glinting dangerously.

"Is that because he chose to be who he wanted? Or because you can't accept the fact he knows what's best?"

Voss reeled his arm back, clenching his hand into a fist, and threw it into Marlon's ribcage. Marlon buckled slightly, leaning into his hand with a huff of breath.

"We. Don't. Speak. Of. Him," Voss repeated, his voice stronger than venom.

Maria tilted her head up, her eyes still closed, and her lips slightly parted. Arthur watched her carefully with concern and curiosity.

Marlon looked at Voss from beneath lowered brows, his body relaxing slowly. "You still don't know how to punch properly," he commented.

"Possibly," Voss agreed. "But I know how to break your spirit. Stand her up."

Tristan thrashed in the Baron's hold, snarling at them. They pulled Lucy to her feet, her brown eyes wide and her breathing too fast. Voss walked over to her, the dagger gripped firmly in his hand.

"One slice to the throat can leave a person bleeding for several seconds," Voss said, springing the dagger up against her throat, holding the back of her head with his free hand. "I wonder how long your throat will bleed?"

Maria's eyes flew open, and Arthur took a double look; evergreen eyes were replaced by full amber, her pupils swollen into a large circle. He blinked in surprise, confused as to how her eyes looked like an-

"Eagle!" one of the Barons called out, a scuffle moving behind him. Arthur turned around to face the far window, the glass pane smashed to pieces as the giant bird ploughed

into the hall. It flew towards the Baron that called out, hooking its talons viciously into his mask, shredding it from his face with a shriek. The Baron screamed, trying to bat it away as it soared around the room.

"Kill the bird!" Voss commanded. The Barons let the trainees fall from their minds, chasing after the bird with their weapons raised, the eagle swooping down to gouge their arms deeply, blood spraying across the hall. The trainees scattered, barging down Barons as they ran towards the doors, fighting their way out.

While the Barons were distracted by the eagle, Arthur launched his head into the Baron behind him with a sickening crack, landing an elbow into the other, spinning to knee his crotch and watching him drop to the ground. Free of their holds, Arthur turned to the one he headbutted, his sword on the ground beside him. Arthur bent down, picking up the blade from the floor, looking at the Baron wryly.

"Thanks for holding it, lad," Arthur smirked, twirling it in his hand.

Tristan stomped his heel down on his Baron's foot, swinging his arm up into their mask, the Guard's head whipping back and falling to the ground. The other Baron gripped his shoulder, and Tristan pivoted, pummeling him in the stomach with unmatched force. The Baron dropped like a stone beside the other.

"You got a crush, Tristan?" Arthur asked, looking at him from a few feet away. Tristan looked at him with a frown for a moment before launching himself at the guards holding Lucy.

*One hundred per cent he does.* Arthur grinned, then caught something in the corner of his eye, swinging the sword up in defence. A Baron lashed at Arthur violently with a thin-edged sword, pushing Arthur back away from the sparring boxes. Arthur swung the sword in front of him, barely blocking a savage upper blow aimed at his chest.

The Baron kept shoving him back, the clash of swords getting too fast to parry-

The Baron paused his attack, his head jerking to the side before collapsing to the floor. Peter stood in the empty space behind the Baron, his pommel raised in his grip, looking at Arthur. "We need to get you out of here *again*," he growled.

"Tristan! Maria! With me!" Arthur commanded, nodding at Peter for his help.

Tristan kicked away the last Baron and grabbed Lucy's arm gently, pulling her along with him towards Arthur. Arthur and Peter rushed to the hallway, awaiting their arrival at the entrance.

"Where's Maria?" Tristan asked, panting as he stopped beside them.

"For the Gods sake, wait here," Arthur growled, rushing back out to the rivalry.

The hall was a bundle of chaos, Barons and trainees locked in an intense battle, more than a few bodies littering the floor. Arthur searched the cluster for any sign of Maria, nothing standing out.

"Maria!" he yelled, defending himself from a few incoming blows from Barons, slicing them down with some struggle.

Golden hair caught his attention, and he turned to see Maria running towards him, her eyes still eagle-like.

"You got a death wish, do you?" he asked, panting heavily.

She blinked, and the familiar green eyes came back, realisation glinting in them as she looked around. "Holy cow," she cursed.

"Since when could you control eagles?" he questioned, giving her a look.

"Doesn't matter, let's get out of here," she said, looking towards the hallway.

"Follow me, and stay close," Arthur said, running in front of her with the sword at the ready. She ran after him, dodging a few wild swings from the fight surrounding them. Kyan looked over at them running and pummelled a Baron once more, standing up and joining them, his arm bleeding.

Arthur led them over to the others, standing aside for them to go in first. They squeezed past him, looking at one another with startled looks.

"Where's Marlon?" Peter asked, looking around the hall for his familiar figure.

"He's fighting Voss," Kyan panted through his teeth, gripping his injured arm.

"I'm not leaving without him," Peter said, panting.

"He can find his own way out; there's no way we can pull him out of that," Kyan protested.

"You guys go, I'll wait for him," Peter insisted.

"Peter, get your ass moving down the hallway," Arthur commanded.

"I'm not leaving him!" Peter scowled at Arthur.

"We don't have time to argue! Move!" Arthur barked back.

Tristan moved down the hallway quickly, seemingly determined. "I know of a way out," he said.

"You, of all people, know a way out?" Kyan asked incredulously, following him.

"Yeah, it's called *the front door*," Tristan said with his hands raised, his fingers twiddling.

Peter shook his head and went to shove past Arthur, who stood in his way with his hand on his chest.

"Peter, we don't have time," Arthur growled. "I'd go back for him too if I could-"

Shouts boomed from behind them, Barons running towards them with their weapons drawn. Maria's eyes widened, and she shoved Arthur and Peter forward. "Go, just go!" she cried.

Peter's eyes widened and he spun around, pelting after Tristan quickly, Arthur hot on his tail with Maria. Arthur looked back, seeing an array of Black Cloaks following their path, gaining closer.

On one of the walls, sconces with lit torches sat dormant within reach, buckets of burnt coals hanging beneath glowing red. Immediately, Arthur had an idea. He stopped dead in the tracks behind the group, gripping the sword tightly in his hands. He waited for the Barons to gain closer, narrowing his eyes at them as they rushed to him.

Maria turned around to see him stopped, pausing her run. "Arthur!" she called him. He ignored her, watching the Barons as he adjusted his grip on the sword.

"Get closer," he murmured to himself.

"Move it, you tool!" she yelled at him.

The Barons came a few feet away from Arthur, their yells echoing through the hallway. Arthur raised the sword above his head, hitting his blade against the two torch buckets in the hallway, sending a massive spray of hot coals straight towards them. Arthur turned away and covered his eyes, glaring at the hot air in front of him. The Barons hissed in pain, the burning coals scattering over them, searing through their cloaks into their under armour.

Arthur grinned and lowered his sword, spinning around and sprinting after the others. Maria looked at him incredulously, running alongside him. "You're crazy," she scolded.

"I know," Arthur agreed. "But it paid off."

Tristan flung the door open the wrong way, the hinges creaking and snapping off the door frame. His eyebrows flicked up at the door cascading down the stairs.

"Whoopsies," he murmured, laughing nervously.

"What did you do?" Arthur asked, stopping beside him, panting heavily.

"He... broke the door," Lucy said with wide eyes.

"Really? Now of all times you decide to break our only exit?" Arthur scowled at him.

"At least it's open," Tristan shrugged and moved out of the building.

"That's not your doing," Peter said, looking at the splinters across the ground. "You just happened to break off the rest of the door from the Baron's entrance."

"Don't steal my thunder," Tristan frowned at him from outside.

Arthur followed behind him, stepping out into the street grounds and looking back at the others. Arthur held his hand out gently to Lucy, his face soft.

"Down you get," he said with a small smile. She looked at him nervously and took his hand, her skin smooth, and walked down the stairs.

Arthur turned to Maria and gestured his hand out to her. "You too."

"You don't get to steal *all* of the girls from this area, Arthur," Kyan smirked, swooping in to take Maria's arm and lead her down.

Arthur straightened, scowling at Kyan. "What a tool," he muttered to himself.

Peter shoved the remainder of the door back in place, wedging it in an awkward spot. "That should hopefully stop them for a moment," he nodded to the door and jumped down the stairs.

Arthur jumped off the steps, twirling the sword in his hand as he landed. "What were they talking about with Marlon?"

Lucy blinked at Arthur, observing the sword, a glint of - *wait, is that admiration?* - in her eyes.

"Marlon never said anything about those stories being memories," Kyan said, looking back at Arthur.

"It's odd, but at the same time," Tristan shrugged, moving closer to Lucy, "it explains why he went into so much detail."

"Jonathan," Arthur pondered. "Jackseye called him by that name the last time I was here," Arthur's eyes furrowed.

Peter snapped his head to Arthur, his eyes locked on him. "What did you just say?" he said intensely.

Arthur looked up at him, his eyebrows creasing. "The leader of the Barons called Marlon by that name weeks ago."

"Jonathan Gawain," Kyan breathed, looking at Peter with wide eyes. Tristan and Maria shared the same expression, Lucy covering her mouth in shock.

Arthur looked at them in puzzlement, unsure of their shared look. "The name is significant because?"

"Marlon would tell stories of Sir Gawain all the time," Peter breathed, his jaw slack. "He always had a tale about him. I thought he was just a relative of his or something and figured that's how he knew, but now..."

"It all makes sense," Kyan touched his forehead with a hand, his eyes wide.

"A few weeks back, another man saved us from Leonard and his street gang, too," Arthur recalled. "His name was Jameson Galahad."

"*Sir* Jameson Galahad," Maria corrected, running her hand through her hair.

"*The* Sir Jameson Galahad?!" Peter asked.

Arthur looked at Peter, raising an eyebrow. "And *he's* relevant because?"

"Do you know nothing of Knight history? Sir Jameson Galahad and Sir Jonathan Gawain were members of your father's Roundtable," Peter said, starstruck.

Arthur's face dropped, his heart skipping a beat. "They were Knights of the Roundtable?"

"This whole time, we were being trained by an ex-Roundtable Knight?!" Kyan laughed incredulously, looking around the alleyway. "No *wonder* they were pumping out Knights like a production line!"



The blockade behind them shifted, the sound of bashing wood splitting the air. They turned and looked at the door fragment, the wood dislodging dangerously.

"Time to go," Tristan said quickly, turning to Lucy and leading her down the alleyway at a run.

"Go! Now!" Arthur commanded, leading them further down the alleyway. They all ran further down the alleys of Londinium, the streets still void of any citizens. The wood splintered and scattered from the last of the door, Barons filing over it carelessly as they gave chase.

Tristan darted around the corner, pausing for a second with Lucy. "Run home, don't stop until you get in the door," he said gently to her.

"What about you?" she stammered, looking up at him with wide eyes.

Arthur looked back at Tristan, pausing in his tracks. "Tristan!"

Tristan looked at Arthur, then back at her. "I'll be okay, just go."

Lucy nodded and glanced down the alleyway, running as fast as she could. Tristan watched her go, then sprinted after Arthur. Arthur raced beside Tristan, looking back at the Barons for a split second.

The Barons gained closer, their black capes flapping in the wind behind them. They split up down multiple alleyways, commands being thrown across to different men. Three of them shimmied up onto the roofs of the buildings, and Arthur looked up at them, watching them run along the gutters like cats.

Tristan cursed, and Arthur felt a sharp tug on his arm. He spun back around in alarm to see a wall in front of him, his body jerking awkwardly from Tristan's tug. His footing stumbled for a moment, and Arthur collided against the wall, his head hitting it hard.

Arthur's vision swam, and he shook his head, stumbling after Tristan.

"Thanks for that!" Arthur growled, rubbing his head.

"It's better than running full pelt into it!" Tristan called back.

"I basically did!" Arthur said, running back up to him at full pace.

"Stop looking at the pigeons and run straight, then, you tool!"

"Head down the left turn two blocks from here!" Arthur commanded.

Tristan looked at him with a grin. "Ah, the old manoeuvre, eh?"

"Let's test the tools out," Arthur grinned back.

"Alrighty, here we go," Tristan whooped, running after Maria and the others. Arthur sprinted at an equal pace a few feet beside him, the both of them overtaking the group. Peter looked at them in astonishment, slowing back in shock.

"Maria, lead them back to my place; take the long way," Tristan shouted to her.

"You got it," she called back and skidded to a slower pace, doubling back down an alleyway to her left, Kyan and Peter following after her hesitantly.

Arthur gripped the sword tighter, adrenaline surging through his body. Tristan huffed as he ran and looked at him with a nod to the left. Arthur nodded back, and as the Barons split off to chase after Maria and the others, Tristan and Arthur split apart, darting down opposite alleyways.

The Barons paused for a moment, looking at them separately before darting after Arthur, their voices echoing across the brick homes.

Arthur looked back at them, scowling. "Of course you follow me, you big bastards," he bit, running faster.

The alleyway flew under his feet, eating up the cobblestones with ease, his boots clacking harshly. Shutters on windows flew open, curious eyes peering out at the disturbance down the way.

Arthur darted to the right, gripping a pole to swing around faster. The Barons reeled back, taking time to turn back to the alleyway. Arthur grinned and spotted a carriage filled with barrels and crates beside a building.

"Brilliant," he muttered, darting over to the carriage. The Barons watched him as he sprang up onto the back of it, vaulting onto higher crates and jumping up to grip the ledge of a roof, pulling himself up and over the shingles.

Arthur looked down at them with a grin. "Bet you can't climb up here without a carriage at your disposal," he teased. The Barons jumped up onto the carriage, and Arthur moved to the far end of the roof. He picked up a stick inside the gutter connected to a rope hidden down the drainpipe and pulled it.

A snap sounded from the alley below, and the Barons yelped as the cart jolted beneath them. The wooden pegs at the front of the carriage pulled loose from the rope, the wheels rolling down the hill and sending the carriage toppling down the alleyway, Barons scattering out of the way of the boxes.

"And that is called *Seasoned Oak*," Arthur grinned and bowed to them, turning and making his way towards the centre of the roof, a ladder leading down inside an old chimney. Arthur squeezed down it, black soot covering him from head to toe as he pushed out of the hearth.

He looked at the soot in disgust, brushing it off his jacket half-heartedly. "I always forget about this part," he muttered to himself.

He made his way through the house down a set of stairs, lifting a trapdoor down into a secret tunnel. Jumping down, he felt around in the dark for the table with the torches, his hand fumbling the handle before he grabbed it, scraping it across the bricks to light it on fire. He jogged his way down the tunnels, burrowed-out stone edges prodding his boot soles sharply.

Arthur and Tristan had accidentally found these tunnels the same way Arthur came in. They were exploring the abandoned house as children no older than twelve, not knowing what to expect, and ended up finding the trapdoor. Ever since, they'd mapped out the tunnel's directions by memory, leaving torches like the one in Arthur's hand at convenient spots throughout.

Arthur figured they were old spy tunnels from years and years ago or some sort of servant system. Either way, he knew where to go.

A familiar gait echoed down the tunnel, a light in the distance illuminating Tristan's figure. Arthur smirked and made his way to him, dodging the muddy puddles littering the ground.

"That was easy to do," Arthur said with a smile.

"Fools them every single time, no doubt," Tristan grinned.

"I'd say we've got a high chance we've lost them in the confusion," Arthur said, walking with Tristan down the tunnel.

"They shouldn't be able to tell where we've gone," Tristan said, walking up a small set of stairs. "Hell, the other guards haven't every other time. They wouldn't know about the tunnels. And besides, if anyone comes down, we'll hear the trap go off."

The trap consisted of a mismatched-sized pile of wooden oak planks; if any of the openings they used to access the tunnels were opened too wide, the trap would set off, dropping a load of wood into the tunnel and making a big enough ruckus to warn them from anywhere in the tunnels. Hence the name "Seasoned Oak".

Arthur followed Tristan up the set of stairs, winding round and round in circles until they'd reached the top. A bucket of water sat at the table with the spare torches, Arthur dunking his torch into it with a loud hiss, Tristan doing the same.

The trapdoor above their heads was outlined in daylight, and no voices came from above. Well, since the Knights were gone, of course there wouldn't be anyone patrolling the High Gates closest to the staircase.

Tristan and Arthur braced their legs on the steps and pushed up in unison, the trapdoor heaving open with a clunk against the wall beside the Castle Gates. Arthur peered his head out, looking around cautiously.

"Anyone out there?" Tristan asked him, slowly peeking his own head up.

The castle courtyard was awfully silent, too eerily deserted. Everyone really was feeling the Knights' absence; the castle wasn't the same.

"All clear," Arthur confirmed, climbing out of the trapdoor and holding it open for Tristan to roll out, the both of them laughing to themselves.

Arthur stood up, closed the trapdoor, and hooked the trap back up promptly. *Better safe than sorry.*

"Alright," Tristan sighed, looking at Arthur. "Where now?"

"To prison," a voice growled to their left. Arthur and Tristan snapped their heads to look at the Baron, more of the Black Guards peeling out from behind him, the few on the closeby roofs pointing crossbow bolts at them. Arthur raised his hands with Tristan, backing up towards the Gates, their eyes wide.

The sun glared in Arthur's eyes, squinting at the Barons on the roof. He was done for now; he had no way out of this one. Somehow, they'd known about the tunnels and exactly where they'd come out, but how? He'd been sure to keep it a secret; even Tristan knew not to tell anyone about them...

Where was Maria? Did she make it back to Tristan's house with Peter and Kyan? Arthur frowned slightly. He wouldn't mind if Kyan got lost along the way, but if they'd

gotten ahold of her, then they were in deeper trouble than what he and Tristan already were in.

"Taking us back to my uncle, are you? You know he'll do nothing about it like he always does," Arthur bluffed, looking back at the Barons.

"You're at the top step of the castle. It'll be an easier trip than the last time," the Baron replied with a laugh that echoed through the rest of them.

"Go on, drag me inside if it'll fulfil your ego," Arthur smirked to himself. Something blocked the sun faintly, and he sighed inwardly, blinking the light out of his eyes, looking at the smoke crossing the sky-

*Hold on a minute.* Arthur looked more closely, trailing the smoke in the distance to its source.

"The hell is that?" he asked, squinting his eyes at the horizon.

The Barons followed Arthur's eyes, their yellow eyes dilating. The smoke became thicker from a distance, and a massive ball of flame erupted into the air, a loud explosion reaching his ears.

Arthur's eyes widened in realisation.

*That was Catarina.*