



S.E. WRIGHT

CHILDREN — "OF" — AVALON

THE TRAVELLER SERIES BOOK ONE

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— "OF" —
AVALON

S.E. WRIGHT

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First Edition March 2016

Edition 1.5 January 2018

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CHAPTER ONE



It was the only dream she could ever remember having. And it was always the same.

It had started when she had entered the foster care system, when she was four, and it had visited her ever since. Sometimes it came every other night, sometimes less, but it had always been the same. Until tonight.

Things had begun as usual. There was always this haze, as though an artist had come through and smudged everything with his paintbrush.

Kyah stood in a park and watched a child at play. She remained at a distance and felt as if she were supposed to be hiding.

The child had thick, wavy, deep red hair and startling, dark green eyes. A younger version of herself.

The park had plenty of trees and a slightly rolling landscape. It felt like late spring. There was a large pond with a few swans and ducks on its surface. The child fed them, giggling the whole time she did so.

A man stood next to her.

The man was dressed in a style Kyah recognized from the homes she cleaned every day. The homes of the wealthy. He was sharp, neat and stylish, and carried himself with confidence.

Never, in all her years of dreaming, had Kyah been able to see the man's face. The dream always ended with the little girl reaching for the man's hand.

Kyah would wake up full of longing. Always with the distinct feeling that

she was missing someone. Someone important.

Only, tonight, the dream continued. The man and the little girl's hands touched, and he whisked her up into his arms. He spun the child in a circle and they laughed together.

Kyah smiled, her heart beating so loudly that she was sure the two figures would hear. Her eyes were glued to the man's face and, finally, for the first time in twenty-one years, she made out his eyes. The same brilliant, emerald green eyes as the little girl. Her eyes.

The man started to carry the little girl away and Kyah's breath caught in her throat. He paused and turned his head slightly.

Heart thudding painfully now, she tensed as the man turned to look directly at her. No matter how hard she strained, she still couldn't make out any distinct features except the sharp, green eyes. His mouth was moving, but the sound couldn't reach her through the haze. She took an involuntary step forward. His hand reached out then and she thought she heard him shout before her. Then there was nothing but blackness.

This time, when she woke, she wasn't consumed by the aching sadness of missing someone. She only felt a sense of urgency and fear. Shaken, she jumped out of bed.

Exhausted but unable to go back to sleep, Kyah busied herself getting ready for the day while trying to commit to memory the hazy man's face.

She had always told herself the dream was just wishful thinking—not an actual memory. It was too painful to think that it could be. No one seemed to know who her parents were. No relatives had ever come forward. She had been left in an abandoned house to be discovered by a group of teenagers looking to have a party.

They had found her hungry, dirty and silent. Her clothes were designer but completely ruined by the time the partying teens stumbled across her. It puzzled everyone.

The only thing she had known to tell police was her first name. No last name, no address or phone number. She hadn't even cried for her parents. It was like she just appeared in that house one day with no memories of any sort.

The dream had almost been a comfort during times when her life had seemed to suffer constant change. That had especially been the case when she had bounced around from one foster home to the next. The dream had been a constant, something she could rely on—unlike her missing past and uncertain future.

Kyah shook all the bad memories away. But one question remained. *Why would the dream change now?*

The day started off well enough. She was on time for work as usual. The cleaning crew was divided up and sent off to the various parts of the house for their assigned cleaning duties that morning. Kyah had been assigned the master suite, which was made up of three rooms.

Unable to shake off the feeling of dread she'd woken up with, she entered the suite and started work on the bedroom.

She glanced down to make sure she had all of her cleaning supplies with her. When she glanced back up, she gasped and stopped in her tracks.

In the space where there was a door just a moment ago, a rippling silver substance was there instead. There was no sign of the bathroom beyond, just liquid-like substance filling the whole doorway. It rippled and glistened as she continued to stare questioning her sanity.

Kyah stood frozen to the spot, breathing rapidly and staring at the otherworldly phenomenon. She screwed her eyes shut and opened them again, but the silver pool remained before her.

Feeling a hand on her shoulder, she jumped, yelped and whirled around, only to come face to face with her boss, Frank.

With a look of impatience masking a barely noticeable dose of concern, Frank crossed his arms over his chest. "Just what are you staring at?"

Kyah gaped at him, eyes wide. Slowly, she turned back toward the bathroom and stared at the perfectly normal door confronting her.

"Well? Are you done with the bathroom yet?" Frank said.

With a 'humph,' he stormed over to the bathroom and yanked the door open.

Shaking his head, he turned back to Kyah. “I’m sorry, Kyah, but I’m on a schedule. I can’t keep having these delays with you.”

Jerking out of her trance, Kyah raised her hands. “Frank, I’m sorry. I thought I saw something in there so I froze up for a few minutes. That’s all! Just a few minutes!”

Frank stared at her, his arms crossed again. “It’s been a half hour since I called up here for you. You should be done by now. We need to leave and get to the next house. I’ve already sent the crew on ahead.”

Frank uncrossed his arms and placed his hands on his hips.

Not a good sign.

He stared at the floor before looking at her again.

She shook her head. “Frank, I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s going on with me lately. It won’t happen again, I promise! Please...just don’t fire me. I really need this job.”

Heaving a sigh, Frank looked up at the ceiling as if his response were written up there and he was memorizing it. “One more chance, but no more.” He looked her in the eye. “Finish up the bathroom and go home for the day. Tomorrow, we clean the house on 33rd Street, so be ready to actually work.”

With that, Frank left the room, leaving her gripping her cleaning supplies.

Get it together, Kyah.

Taking a deep breath, she bravely walked into the bathroom and cleaned it as quickly as she could.

She was just packing up the supply van when the owners arrived.

“Well, at least you got something right today.” She shook her head and made her way home.

The next day, she got into trouble with Frank again.

She was in yet another room at yet another house, on her hands and knees scrubbing a section of marble floor in a dining room full of crystal vases and glass knick-knacks. Most people would have *ooohed* and *aaahed* over the stuff in this room. When Kyah saw it all, she sighed, trying to calculate how much

time and effort it was going to take to clean it all.

When she was done with the floor, she paused. Next up was some spot-shining on all the glass tchotchkes. She was sitting back on her heels to give her back a break, and wiping the sweat dripping off her face, when she saw a flicker of light out of the corner of her eye.

Turning her head, she fully expected it to be the sun reflecting off one of the many pieces of glass in the room. But that wasn't it. What she saw was a little, golden light fluttering from one vase to another, as though drawn to each in turn.

Kyah squeezed her eyes shut, thinking maybe she'd sat up too quickly and was seeing spots. But upon opening her eyes again, the fluttering light remained. It was hovering near one of the vases.

Thinking now that it must be some odd sort of bug, Kyah got up from her knees and gingerly walked closer. If she could sneak up on it, perhaps she could catch it without breaking anything.

Only inches away, she stopped, and the light settled on the table in front of her. As she continued to stare, the light dimmed, and she could just make out a pair of tiny legs, a tiny female body, and a head of blonde hair. Iridescent blue wings folded under her gaze.

Shaking her head again, Kyah watched as the impossible creature knelt down and wrote something with her hand in the dust before standing up and nodding soberly at her. Kyah felt a sensation like her ears were filling up. It was as if she had climbed too fast in altitude. Then her ears popped.

"Ow!"

Kyah's hands went up to her ears. With the popping, the impossible tiny person had vanished. Walking up to the vase, she read its words in the dust: 'Traveller. It is time.'

"What the...?"

Then Frank came in.

Kyah could see he was angry. When Frank got angry, everyone knew it. His skin started to redden at the neckline, the color making its way farther up his face the angrier he became. The red had already made its way up his neck to his chin. Not a good sign.

Before she could ask what he was upset about, he started shouting at her. “What in the hell have you been doing in here? It’s time to leave and you’re not even done with this room yet.”

It was only then that she noticed the long shadows in the room. “What the hell?”

Frank got even redder. “What the hell is right. I’ll have to call the crew back to get this done.”

He left, yelling to the rest of the crew, who were outside, already packing up. She winced.

The cleaning crew filed into the room. They were not happy with her, and they weren’t afraid to let her know it.

They finished up the room together, Kyah working in a daze. *First the silver door, now this. I can only hope tomorrow’s a really boring day.*

CHAPTER TWO



Unable to sleep, and anxious about what the day would bring, Kyah lay in bed worrying most of the night.

She started work the next day exhausted. Frank threw a mildly disapproving glance at the dark circles under her eyes as he assigned everyone the work detail.

She kept seeing spots before her eyes and gave her head a shake.

“The master bedroom not to your liking, Kyah?”

Startled, she realized Frank had finished the assignments and everyone was walking off. “Sorry. Just a headache. The master bedroom is fine.”

Sighing, and resigned to her fate of being fired sooner rather than later, Kyah hauled her cleaning supplies up to the third floor.

As she entered the room, she gave the doors leading off the main sitting area a wide berth and eyeballed them warily.

“Get it together, would you?” she whispered angrily to herself.

She was wiping down a massive armoire when she started to feel lightheaded. Spots reappeared before her eyes, followed by a familiar popping in her ears. Leaning against the armoire, she squeezed her eyes shut, taking deep breaths, expecting to see the tiny person with wings again. She opened her eyes, turned, and gave a startled yelp as she staggered back into the cupboard.

Standing before her was a rather handsome man, who, at first glance, appeared to have jumped straight out of a Victorian romance novel. Kyah looked

closer. He was wearing actual leather pants! As she continued to stare at the stranger, she noticed that his skin had a hint of green sparkle to it.

He stared at her with bright, black eyes.

Smiling at the look on her face, he spoke. "Traveller, my name is Pan." He followed this with a deep bow from the waist. "It is an honor to meet you."

Still confused, she stared at the stranger who appeared to have a penchant for green glowtion. He wore a tan, linen shirt that looked homemade, like, right-off-the-loom homemade.

"My name is Kyah," she managed to blurt out. For some reason that she couldn't fathom, she wasn't feeling afraid. "Who are you and how did you get in this room?"

"I walked in, of course," he said simply.

"I think you need to leave. You're not supposed to be in here."

Kyah's palms started to get sweaty. Whether she felt afraid or not, it didn't change the fact that she was all alone on the third floor with some weirdo.

The stranger just turned his back to her and made himself comfortable on the couch in the sitting area. He took on a lord-of-the-manor pose that was kind of irritating, considering he shouldn't even be there.

Kyah scowled. This guy was trouble. She'd definitely get fired if Frank found him up here.

That thought propelled Kyah away from the armoire and she moved to stand in front of this Pan person. Well, almost in front of him. She stood behind a chair and close to the door for a quick getaway. Just in case.

"You need to leave. You're not supposed to be in this house," she said with far more confidence than she was feeling.

"I am only in this realm because of you, my dear."

Realm? What the...?

"What are you talking about?" she said, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms over her chest. It was really irritating that this stranger continued to lounge on the couch as if he owned the place.

"It is time for you to leave this realm and do what you were born to do," he said, as though it were an entirely normal thing to say.

“I already have a job, thank you very much.”

At this, the man started to laugh. It was a genuine laugh that came from the belly and went all the way up to those deep, dark eyes. Eyes, she was just noticing, that had absolutely no whites to them. And they were sparkly, like stars winking in and out.

Kyah looked away. She could feel her face growing warm as she got angrier. Who was this pompous man laughing at her?

“This,” Pan waved his hand at her cleaning supplies, “is not your *job*.” He said ‘job’ like he had just eaten something vile. “You do not belong here. You are not even from this realm.” He stood then and looked at her with an intensity that reminded her that she should probably be afraid. “You were born to a great race. A powerful race that has a great influence over the balance between the light and the dark. We need you now. There are terrible things happening in the realms and too few Travellers willing to right the balance.”

She shook her head vehemently. “I’m sorry, but I really don’t know what you’re talking about. I think you have the wrong person. I’m no one special, believe me.”

Her statement seemed to make him angry. Continuing to stare at her intently, he swept his arms up over his head into a thunderous clap that made Kyah cover her ears and duck behind the chair.

“You can come out now,” said Pan.

Kyah stood up slowly and saw the little woman with wings flitting next to Pan’s head. She heard a sound similar to the twinkling of bells and Pan nodded at the tiny figure. He looked back at Kyah with a smile again, but he continued to stare at her with an intensity that made her break out in a cold sweat.

“Traveller, I am pleased to introduce you to Princess Naieem of the faery. She hails from the realm of Elmiria. You two will travel together on a rescue mission to the realm of Avalon. She will be your guide and will assist you in these dangerous times.”

“You’re real,” Kyah whispered, a little stunned to see again what she had thought was just a figment of her imagination.

The faery flittered over to a spot just in front of her nose, causing her to go

cross-eyed, and addressed her in a voice that sounded like tiny bells. “Traveller, pleased to meet you. Please do not be afraid. All will become clear in time.”

Shaking her head, Kyah covered her face. Maybe she was having some kind of psychotic break.

Finally, she took a deep breath and raised her head from her hands. *Crap, they’re still here.*

“Look,” she said shakily. “I don’t know what is going on here but I really think you have the wrong person. I mean, I was a foster kid. If I was born to do these great tasks and be part of some great race of people then I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have been dumped in an abandoned house as a baby.”

Pan’s smile disappeared. “We understand that your upbringing here was not...ideal. Your father did what he had to do to protect you. It was not something he wanted. I can *assure* you of that.”

Kyah stumbled back as though she had just been slapped in the face, hard. Trying to form words and trying to remain upright, she managed to whisper, “You know my parents?”

It was the faery who replied. “We know who your father is. He disappeared after he left you here. A small group of us volunteered to keep watch over you. We’ve been waiting for your powers to become apparent.”

Kyah stiffened. The mention of mysterious powers seemed ridiculous and unimportant right now. What struck her was the suggestion that she had been watched her entire life.

“Wait. You’ve been here this whole time? You couldn’t, you know, have helped me out when I was going through foster homes like some people go through underwear?”

She ended on a shout.

Pan cleared his throat. “It is against the rules of my kind for me to intervene directly. So your guardians did what they could to keep you moving around so no one would find you. To keep you safe.”

Stunned at this news, Kyah stood frozen to the spot, processing everything she had just heard. Could it be true that the life she thought she knew was not what it had always seemed?

I have parents out there.

That's when it hit her square in the stomach. All of this was real. She wasn't having some strange mental breakdown.

Somehow, she actually believed every word these two creatures were saying. She sensed that her life was about to take a turn in a direction she never would have pictured in her wildest imaginings.

She practically jumped out of her skin when Frank burst into the room.

"You need to go," he announced. "Now."

He paused and looked behind him down the hallway before he slammed the door shut.

She stared at him as he tilted his head toward the door with his eyes closed, listening. "They're in the street."

He turned back to them and opened his eyes.

Kyah was struck dumb. Frank's eyes were silver. All silver, like Pan's were all black.

Her mouth worked, trying to form the words shouting in her brain, but she wasn't given the chance to speak.

Pan grabbed her arm. "It's time to go."

He dragged her over to the door to the bathroom and practically ripped the hinges off. Behind this door was the undulating liquid silver—the same liquid silver she had seen the other day. *What is up with these bathroom doors?*

Pan turned to her. "I am sorry, Kyah. I thought we would have more time to talk, but it appears that precious commodity has been taken from us."

In his hands he held a golden-green bow and a matching quiver of arrows. *Where did those come from? Did he have those this entire time?*

"You are a Traveller," he said. "Stay in the Light and heed your guide. These are my gift to you."

He placed the bow and arrows into her hands. At the same moment, she felt a flutter of air next to her ear and a small hand on her neck as the tiny faery landed on her shoulder.

"Wait! I don't know what's going on here! I..."

The master bedroom door glowed briefly before exploding in front of her

eyes. Four large men in black suits and dark sunglasses burst through the glowing fragments. She could have sworn she saw fangs in their mouths.

“Good luck,” said Pan, somewhat ominously.

She crinkled her brow at him and opened her mouth to shout, but he didn’t hesitate, as he shoved her into the silver rippling silver liquid.

CHAPTER THREE



Kyah had the sensation of floating, and then she was stumbling through a gray haze. until she found herself falling onto her hands and knees.

Seeing stone blocks under her hands, she slowly got to her feet and faced a stone-block wall that complemented the floor she'd almost face-planted on.

Turning around, she found herself in what could only be the entryway to a castle. It was a vast hall complete with sweeping ceilings that sported enormous beams. Whatever was beyond the beams was shrouded in darkness. There was a corridor before her, closed doors lined up on either side. There were at least a dozen of them, all spaced out in such a way that Kyah had to assume that the rooms behind them were each the size of a gymnasium. The place was lit entirely by candles and a roaring fireplace.

She walked over to a sitting area, the giant fireplace on her right. On the other side of the hall to the corridor, a set of stairs headed up into the darkness.

Kyah turned in a circle and swayed on her feet. She was exhausted. There was no sign of the faery who was meant to be her guide, so she went to take a seat on one of the overstuffed leather sofas. As she sank into it, she looked down and immediately jumped back up. Her outfit had changed. She now wore tan, leather leggings with black boots, and a green, leather vest with various pockets and straps, complete with a white, linen shirt underneath. The vest was cinched at the waist with a dark, leather belt adorned with yet more pouches and straps.

Grasping at her back, she felt the quiver of arrows and the bow slung over her shoulder.

“What the f...?”

The faery princess appeared and fluttered over to her. “Looks like Pan outfitted you properly for where we’re going,” she tinkled at Kyah.

“Okay...so where exactly are we? And I thought this is where we *were* going?” Kyah said, somewhat apprehensive at the idea of leaving a place that seemed somewhat safe.

“Oh. Well, no. We have just started our journey. This is a Traveller Way Station. We’re here on a rescue mission. Someone critical to completing our assignment has been hidden away here for far too long.”

Kyah crossed her arms. “So, what is this assignment? Are we doing something illegal?” Kyah hoped the look she was giving the tiny princess was as a stern one.

Perching on an armchair, Naieem took a breath. “Kyah, I know this is very new to you, but you need to understand. An ancient force of darkness has been released. Some believe that the darkness has been slowly released over millennia in the hope that the Ancient Powers wouldn’t notice. But they have. That’s why we’re here.”

Kyah raised her hand. “What Ancient Powers? You mean God and Satan or...?”

“Ah, yes. Pardon me, Traveller. I forget you haven’t had formal training on these things.” Naieem shook her head as if admonishing herself.

Kyah raised her eyebrows. *A question for another time.*

Naieem cleared her tiny throat. “The Ancient Powers include beings such as God and Satan, or Lucifer, depending on the realm. Ancient Powers also include Zeus, Pan, Thor, Gaia, Coyote, Bear, Hera, Freya...”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” said Kyah, motioning with her hands for the faery to slow down. “Are you telling me that all these mythical gods and goddesses are real?”

Naieem looked at her like she was the proud parent of a two-year-old who had just eaten her peas. “Yes! Well done, Kyah!”

Tentatively, afraid of the answer, Kyah asked, “So what about all the stories that go along with these gods and goddesses? The legendary heroes and monsters that go with them...”

Clapping her hands in delight, Naieem smiled. “Yes! All real!”

Feeling sick to her stomach just thinking about a few of those stories, Kyah promptly sat down on the edge of the sofa. She wasn’t sure if she really wanted to know more, but here she was in this new life, so she guessed she need to be prepared.

She took a deep breath. “Sorry. So, what is the mission again? And what is this darkness?”

“There is a balance to the light in the world, and that is the darkness. As things go, they are never really in balance but swing back and forth. There are those in the many realms who would keep the balance on the side of darkness by using dark magic or unleashing ancient evils.”

Shaking her head as she attempted to follow along, Kyah frowned. “Many realms? What do you mean?”

“There are many dimensions in the universe. Your kind is one of the rare races that can travel to them all. Some of us can only travel to a few.” Naieem pointed at her chest.

“Okay, I think I’m getting it.” *Unbelievable. I am dealing with a multiverse.* She nodded at Naieem to continue.

“The Ancient Powers have found that, in the realm of Avalon, Morgana le Fay has been manipulating the darkness with her dark magic. She has grown the darkness at a much faster pace than anyone could have ever imagined. We believe that sacrifices have been made, but we do not know of what kind, when or how often. She cannot continue or all realms will be affected. Some already are.”

Kyah wasn’t sure she’d heard correctly. “Did you say Morgana le Fay? As in King Arthur, Camelot and Guinevere and all that?”

Naieem nodded soberly.

“Holy...shit...” Kyah huffed, putting her head in her hands. “So we’re here to rescue...”

“King Arthur is the key to defeating her, and he is here in this Way Station.” Naieem paused and looked at her intently. “Only a Traveller can get in and out of a Traveller Way Station.”

“Of course,” replied Kyah with a dose of sarcasm.

She heaved a sigh. *What is happening to my life?*

“So...if Travellers are the only ones that can get into the Way Station, how do we know that he is even here?”

“We had a Traveller tell us that Arthur is here, but he was barred from gaining entry. He seemed to think this Way Station was keyed so that he, in particular, couldn’t get in. Before he could find another Traveller to help us, he disappeared.”

Naieem paused and shook her head. “We believe that the station is not keyed into you, as you are unknown to the rest of the Traveller community. Well, that’s our hope, anyway, and we’ve made this far.”

Standing up, Kyah paced over to the stone wall and leaned against it. “Right. But, look, before we have any more crazy talk about rescuing King Arthur, can you explain to me what in the hell just happened back there?” She jabbed her thumb at the area where she had landed. “I mean, how did Frank know what was going on? Why were his eyes silver? Who were those guys that burst into the room? And what did you mean by me having powers?”

“You ask good questions,” Naieem said approvingly. “The first thing you need to know is that Travellers are very important. They are a valuable commodity that can help to sway power in one direction or another. Some Travellers work for a price, for both light and dark forces. The reason they are so valuable is that they can travel the many realms. They can create portals between the realms themselves or use portals made by others. They can understand any language in any realm, instantly. And it is also rumored that Travellers can disguise themselves somehow.”

The faery took a breath. “I believe that the most powerful Travellers are capable of much more than we know. That is why Travellers are hunted. The beings who burst into the room back there are called ‘hunters’. Those hunters are the ones we’ve been guarding you against. They were dispatched by the more

insidious forces at work in the universe to capture you, so they can use your powers for their own gain. We believe that is why your father disappeared—because he was hunted himself. He was aligned directly with the Ancient Powers of Light. A mysterious one your father; he never truly revealed his identity to those tasked with your guardianship, though I think Pan knows exactly who he is. Most of us guardians believe he is a king among your kind. A very powerful Traveller, I might add.”

Kyah was glad she was leaning up against the stone wall. “So, my father is a king? Seriously?”

Naieem shook her head. “If he is who we think he is, then, yes, of sorts. Though probably not the kind of king you’re thinking of.”

Kyah was feeling more overwhelmed by the minute. “You said I have ‘guardians’.”

“Yes, as I mentioned earlier, there has always been a select group looking after you. Well, we are your guardians. Frank included. Most of your guardians are of his kind. Lycanthropes. They have silver eyes, heightened senses and intuitive tracking skills. It has long been believed that there is some kind of relationship between the Traveller race and the lycanthropes. The lycanthropes were on watch months before Pan involved himself.”

“Uh...we are talking about werewolves right?”

Naieem looked down her nose at Kyah. “They don’t like that term.”

Kyah threw her hands up. “Sorry.” She walked back over to the sofa. “There’s a lot to learn.”

Naieem nodded knowingly at her. “We are sympathetic to your predicament. No Traveller has been in your situation before. So you are very behind in your education. It is one of the many reasons I am here.”

“What are the other reasons?”

“Faery kind and Traveller kind share an understanding. We can both travel between realms. We have called upon each other for assistance throughout time.” The faery gazed into the distance as if recalling her saddest memory. “We have seen much in our travels between worlds. It gives us a mutual appreciation for what the darkness can do.” With a sigh, she looked at Kyah directly. “That is

why I am here. Mutual kinship. And a desire to stop the darkness from reaching my own realm and my own people.”

Kyah nodded solemnly. “So you said you were waiting for me to come into my powers? Has that happened, er...?”

“Frank let us know that you had started displaying some of the typical signs of a magic user coming into their powers. The headaches, lack of sleep, losing all sense of time. You will probably have other symptoms as time goes on. You will have to let me know if anything happens so I can help.”

Kyah nodded and filed all this away for later thought. “All right. Well, what are we supposed to do now?”

“Maybe we should see if those doors in the hallway will open for you.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Palms sweaty, Kyah walked down the corridor and paused at the first of the closed doors in the long hallway. She leaned in and placed her ear on the wood. It was an old habit from her days in foster care. She had learned the hard way that it was best to take a moment to learn to what might be happening behind a door before walking through it.

Hearing absolutely nothing, she held her breath and touched her hand to the doorknob. The knowledge that the stories she had thought were just stories were really true in some way, playing out in different realms, completely freaked her out. Who was to say that touching anything was safe anymore? For all she knew she could be vaporized or turned into a toad.

Turning the doorknob this way and that yielded no results. So she moved on to the next door and then the next. She tried each in turn until she reached the large double doors at the end of the corridor. None of them opened for her.

With her emotions a mixture of frustration and relief, Kyah returned to the sitting area. Naieem was fluttering around opposite the fireplace, over a red and gold circular pattern set into the stone floor.

“What do you think it is?” Kyah asked

“I think it’s your way into those rooms. I’m sensing Traveller magic embedded into these stones somehow.”

Naieem looked up at her and shrugged, causing Kyah to snort out a laugh.

It's like the blind leading the blind right now. Super.

“So what do you think it does?” Kyah prodded.

“I think you stand on it. You should then have access to the rooms. I’m not sure how it works though. I don’t believe you will be harmed as you are a Traveller.”

Kyah gave Naieem her version of the evil eye. Naieem just gave her another shrug.

She heaved another deep breath. “Well, it works on Star Trek. So it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Naieem crinkled her brow at her. Her expression turned to one of concern as Kyah stepped into the colored circle of stones.

Kyah waited for something, anything, to happen. “Okay, nothing. Any suggestions?”

CHAPTER FOUR



Kyah's eyes snapped open and her heart jumped into her throat. The tiny faery princess was no longer floating in front of her. Stepping off the magical transporter, she turned and saw herself still standing there with her eyes closed. "Holy...crap..."

She glanced down at herself. She could see the floor through her hands! Whipping her head back up, she looked at her physical self again before taking a shuddering breath. She might be outside her body, with no idea what the hell was going on, but she had a job to do.

Kyah made her way to the hallway. The doors had completely disappeared. But the area at the very end of the corridor, where the double doors should have been, emitted a soft, golden glow.

All right. If there was ever going to be a sign, I think that'd be it.

Giving her solid self one more glance, she walked toward the warm light. Focusing on the glow, she thought she could hear someone talking, but she couldn't make it out. It was almost as if it were someone cutting in and out of cell phone call.

Shaking her head to tune it out, she turned to face the golden light. *Well, Pan said to stay in the light, so here goes.*

She walked though the light and found herself in a very large room. Just like the room she had just come from, it was entirely lit by candlelight and a roaring fireplace off to her right. But it was so large, she wondered if it were a ballroom.

There were floor to ceiling windows in front of her, but she couldn't see anything out of them; the glass was completely black.

There was a small door set in the wall in the left corner of the room. The only furniture to be had was a large, overstuffed chair in front of the fireplace.

Turning toward the only thing in the room that she could actually investigate, Kyah started to walk toward the chair.

Getting closer to the chair she heard a sudden movement come from the chair. Stilling herself, she waited to see who or what was sitting in the chair.

Whoever or whatever was in the chair sat up slowly until she could see a head of short-cropped, blonde hair.

Her heart thudding in her chest, she stepped closer, and the person turned their head slightly.

Finally registering her presence, the figure swiftly stood and turned to face her.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"You can see me?" she stuttered.

For whatever reason, she had assumed that she was invisible, like a ghost. *Apparently not...*

"How did you get here?" he asked, his brows lowering. He took a step toward her. "Who are you and how did you get in here?"

He stalked toward her, and she could see his expression shifting from anger to rage.

"You shouldn't be here! No one should be in here!" he shouted at her. He stopped and stared at her. "Get out!"

Kyah stumbled backward and out of the room. Propelled by an invisible force, she was swept back to the transporter and slammed back into her body.

She landed haphazardly on her backside with the faery buzzing around her head. She was sweating profusely and could almost smell the fear on her skin.

Princess Naieem zipped around her frantically "What happened?"

Shaking her head, Kyah straightened up. "I don't know. I think I left my body for a few minutes. I got myself down the hallway into one of the rooms. It had a man in it. He was very angry that I was there."

The faery stilled. "There was a man in the room?"

"Yes, definitely a man. A very angry man, like I said."

"What did he look like?"

"Well, he had short, sandy blonde hair, light blue eyes, and he was tall. He had the build of a swimmer or a wrestler." She racked her brain for more details. "You know, I couldn't tell you what he was wearing. I know he had clothes on, but I was scared out of my wits. I felt like he wanted to kill me just for being in the room."

The tiny faery just nodded thoughtfully. "What did the room look like?"

"It was big, ballroom-sized. There was a large chair in front of the fireplace and there were large, black windows. There was this little door in the room too, in the corner. You know, it was kind of weird, because everything else just seemed so oversized."

"Did you see the doorway you walked through after you came through it?"

Puzzled, Kyah replied, "Actually, no. I didn't see it. I think I came in through where the double doors were, though."

"From what you've just told me, I don't think the man in the room could see any doors at all. That's why he didn't understand how you got in. How did you know to go into that particular room?"

"There was a golden glow in the wall at the end of the corridor and I recalled Pan telling me to stay in the light. So I walked through it."

The tiny faery smiled at her then. "Well done, Kyah, well done."

Kyah looked at her narrowly. "Well, spill the beans, I can tell you know something."

The tiny faery smiled, clasped her hands together and did a big loop-di-loo.

She stopped inches from Kyah's face. "Yes, yes I do! We have found him. You have found King Arthur! I also think we have a way out."

"That's King Arthur?" Kyah shook her head. "Um, no. No way am I going back into that room. That man has some very serious anger issues."

"Of course he's angry. He's been trapped there for a millennium or so. I think you would be angry too if you saw some person who was able to get in and out when you haven't been able to."

“Are you sure we need him? Why can’t someone else help defeat Morgana?” Kyah threw up her hands. “You know, he doesn’t look like he’s been there for a thousand years.”

Naieem shrugged. “Time works differently here in the Way Station. It will unbalance Morgana if Arthur returns. And maybe an unbalanced Morgana is not a good thing, but it *will* help us stop the darkness.”

Kyah swallowed hard. It was all so much to take in.

Naieem fluttered forward a bit and put her tiny hands on one of Kyah’s fingers.

“Do not give up, Kyah,” the faery said in the gentlest of voices. “This is your purpose as a Traveller, to travel between realms. This is in your nature, your calling. Leaders of the realms fear and despise you for your powers. You are considered both a treasure and a monster. You have the tremendous responsibility of choosing light over darkness. And your choices can influence many realms. That’s a tremendous burden for one being. You take on more than any leader of any realm in the many universes.”

Kyah stared into space, tears slowly making their way down her face. She was overwhelmed by the sheer weight of everything she had learned in such a short amount of time.

“This is so unreal,” she said.

The tiny faery kept hold of her finger. “I will not leave you. I will be your guide and, hopefully, we can be friends. I have lived long and know much. I am here to help you, however you need.”

Kyah looked into the little princess’s face. In her current mental state, it wouldn’t have taken much, but it was the offer of friendship that made her break down into racking sobs. She had never in her life had a real friend.

In between sobs, she tried to get out a thank you.

When she finally felt the tears drying up, she stepped back, and nearly buckled under the exhaustion that swept over her. *When was the last time I actually slept?*

Princess Naieem flew to her forehead and gave her a butterfly kiss. “Rest for now, dear friend. We have many adventures in front us.”

CHAPTER FIVE



The sound of the roaring fire started to penetrate Kyah's sleepy brain.

Slowly opening one eye before the other, she rolled onto her back to stare at the ceiling. *If I lie here long enough, maybe all of this will just go away.*

She was no longer feeling overwhelmed, as if the weight of the world was on her shoulders, but she was definitely feeling encased in old sweat and grime.

A bubbly Naieem fluttered into view. "Ready to free King Arthur?"

Oh yeah, riiiiight...that. King Arthur, the enraged dude down the hall she was apparently supposed to save. The actual King Arthur...how was she supposed to wrap her mind around that? Like, ever?

"So you really think I'm supposed to march in there and somehow convince a really angry king—not just really angry, angry times a thousand years—to come with me because I'm there to rescue him? I mean just how is that going to work exactly?"

"You'll have to convince him who you are. Then we'll walk out that little door."

Kyah stared at Naieem in disbelief. "Riiiiight...just like that, huh? I really don't think it's going to work out as smoothly as all that." She rolled her eyes and sat up. Glancing around, she frowned. "Nothing's changed."

"Nothing changes here. We are in time with time."

Kyah wasn't sure she needed any more information than she already had to

digest, but she sat up straighter and asked anyway. “What does that even mean?”

Naieem smiled at her. “The Way Station has different rules when it comes to time. We are not sure how it all works, but we believe the Travellers have some kind of power over how much time goes by here. It sounds like the room Arthur is in, is a space of time that is progressing very slowly. Maybe because you haven’t come fully into your powers, you are not influencing time in these rooms, so time seems to be passing by normally. Not to worry, we do have the assistance of an Ancient Power; no matter what happens when we leave here, Pan will get us to the right time and place.”

Kyah nodded, feeling a headache coming on. Digging deep for some kind of resolve, she stood up, stretched and jumped around just to get some energy back.

She looked over at the tiny faery. “Should we go back to the double doors then?”

The princess landed on her shoulder and nodded. Kyah walked to the large double doors at the end of the hall.

This time, when she tried the first handle, it clicked, and she opened the door. Beyond it stood a pool of liquid silver. *Well, this is familiar, at least.*

“So I guess it looks like I just have to walk through this.” She cocked her head to one side. “This isn’t going to take us back to the bedroom in the house I was cleaning, is it?”

“If you concentrate on King Arthur like last time, it should take you to him.”

“Well, here’s hoping.”

Taking a deep breath, Kyah kept her eyes wide open and walked through the silver pool.

At first, she could only see a dull light and nothing else. She could feel her legs moving but had no sense of whether she was actually moving forward. For all she knew, she could be on a treadmill going nowhere.

“Something’s wrong,” shouted Kyah. She felt as though her ears were stuffed with cotton.

She felt a tiny hand on her neck. “Think of the King and the room he is in, Kyah. This is your realm, it will do your bidding and no one else’s.”

What? My realm? She took a breath. *All right, that’s okay by me.*

Kyah thought about her last encounter with King Arthur. She was immediately pulled forward at a dizzying speed. She went with the motion until she heard a pop in her ears. Then she stopped and the light faded. Shaking off the feeling of motion sickness and working her jaw to clear her ears, she let her eyes slowly adjust to the light in the room where she had first met King Arthur.

This time, she was on the opposite side of the room to where she had entered before. Her back was to the bank of black windows. As she stood trying to get her bearings, a soft, glowing light began to materialize opposite her. The glowing light solidified into a very faded version of herself.

“Holy shit,” she whispered.

As Kyah stood rooted to the spot, she witnessed the entire scene that she had lived through just a few hours earlier.

When the King advanced upon the earlier, faded version of herself, her figure began to glow. Then there was a pop and she just disappeared.

Once she was gone, the King reached out a hand. Kyah watched the rage drain from his face.

“Please, help me,” he whispered. He hung his head and just stood there.

Standing as still as possible so he wouldn’t notice her, Kyah studied him. He was about six feet tall but very well proportioned. Finding herself looking him up and down, she blushed a little bit and rolled her eyes. He was wearing a similar outfit to her, minus the bow and arrows. *So, that’s why Pan outfitted me this way.* She sent a mental ‘thank you’ to the Ancient Power.

Before approaching him, she moved to ready her bow and arrow. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. She notched an arrow to her bow expertly, even though she’d never done it before in her life.

Pointing the weapon at King Arthur, she slowly advanced toward him. She stopped when she thought she was a safe distance away.

“I’ll help you if you stop yelling and being scary,” she said.

He whipped around to face her and took a step back as though ready to defend himself. He stared at her in shock, his mouth hanging open.

“My name is Kyah,” she continued. “They call me a ‘Traveller.’ Do you know what that means?”

The King finally closed his mouth and gave a crisp nod.

“So you know that I can get you out of here, then?”

The King found his voice. “I do? I am not sure how you think you can get me out of a room with no doors.” He waved his arms at the four corners of the room.

Biting her lip, Kyah followed his gaze, but, indeed, there was still a little door set in one corner. *That’s fitting; very Alice in Wonderland.*

Turning her eyes back to the King, and still pointing the arrow at him, she spoke with a surprising amount of confidence. “I can get you out.”

He raised an eyebrow. His look of disbelief was combined with the biggest dose of arrogance that she had ever seen on someone’s face.

She scowled. “Are you going to behave yourself and not come rushing at me in a rage?”

At this blunt question, the other eyebrow went up. Then he smirked and threw up his hands as if in surrender.

Kyah lowered her arrow, keeping it notched but pointed at the floor. She moved toward the small door, still keeping a safe distance between herself and the tall, handsome, but angry man. She blushed again as she caught him smiling at her, his arms crossed over his chest.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she took a deep breath to get her focus back.

She rolled her shoulders and narrowed her eyes at him. “Before I help you, you need to tell me how you were brought here and by who.”

His smile disappeared.

At first, Kyah thought that he had suddenly turned into a statue. She couldn’t deny the possibility after all the things she’d been through so far.

When he’d been standing like that for a little too long, she whispered to Naieem on her shoulder. “Should we do something? He seems frozen.”

Naieem came out from hiding in Kyah’s hair and fluttered over to buzz around the King’s head. When she was done, she hovered in front of his face.

At this, the King came back to life. He stared at the tiny faery princess. “I remember you...you were there with me on the Isle.”

He smiled, then stepped back and bowed.

Princess Naieem nodded regally in response and the King straightened up. The faery gave the King a long look before flying back to Kyah and repositioning herself on her shoulder.

The King sighed, looked at Kyah and the faery princess in turn, and began to tell his story.

Kyah settled on the ground, her weapon forgotten as she listened in awe.

After he had been injured in his legendary and fateful battle with Mordred, Merlin had called to the faery kingdoms to assist him and keep him safe until his return as the Once and Future King. Arthur had eventually recovered from his injuries on the magical faery isle, and had resigned himself to waiting until his time came to return to rule his people. However, there was no leaving the faery island. And it was surrounded by a mist to deter anyone from coming who was not meant to be there. The faery folk were very protective this place of refuge.

Arthur spent his days reading and doing weapons drills, preparing for his eventual return to his kingdom. But the faery warned him that dark forces were at work trying to prevent him from returning.

Legend had it that upon his return, a golden era would ensue, and peace and prosperity would be enjoyed wherever he ruled. This was something the forces of darkness wanted to prevent; they would rather destroy him instead.

One day he went to a bathing pool, something he did often. He checked it carefully and didn't notice anything out of place. So, without any care in the world, he jumped in as he normally would and found himself here. And he'd been in this same unchanging room ever since.

Kyah leaned back on her elbows. "Can you remember what the pool looked like when you jumped in?"

"I didn't notice anything wrong with it until it was far too late," King Arthur said. "It was like light had come alive and joined with the water. It became a pool of light."

Kyah crinkled her brow at this. *That sounds familiar.*

As she digested everything he'd told them, parts of the conversation that she'd had with Naieem earlier clicked into place. She sat up and stared at the floor.

“This is why I am feared, isn’t it?” she said quietly to Princess Naieem.
“Someone like me did this. Am I right?”

The faery gave her a nod.

Kyah swallowed. No wonder her kind was feared. She resolved right then and there that she was going to be on the good side of this business. She’d never let anyone use her to imprison someone or take them away from their home. And if she got good at all this travelling, maybe she could find her father and he could explain a few things.

However, she couldn’t do any of that if she stayed here sitting on the floor.

Standing up and replacing her gear on her back, she held out her hand to the legendary king. “Well, are you ready to leave here, or what?”

CHAPTER SIX



Kyah walked toward the little door in the corner of the room, the faery on her shoulder and the King following behind her.

The King threw her a confused glance. “Where are we going exactly?”

Naieem whispered in Kyah’s ear. “No one can see the portals except Travellers.”

Kyah was readying a question in her mind when she felt the faery’s little hand on her neck.

“Not now,” Naieem said. “I’ll explain later.”

So, keeping an eye on the tiny door, hoping if she kept it in her sights it wouldn’t disappear, Kyah smiled gamely. “We are walking toward a very small door, which apparently only I can see, but which I believe is our way out.”

She reached for the doorknob and pulled open the door. She had to go into a low squat, almost kneeling, to even look through the doorway. Getting a glimpse of what was on the other side, she smiled and stood up. “Well, I don’t know where we’re going, but it looks like we’re headed for the great outdoors.”

The King just raised his eyebrows and shrugged. “I just see a corner. You do mime very well.”

“Oh.” Kyah had been hoping he would see the door when she opened it. She rolled her eyes. “Well, thank you, but, no, I wasn’t miming. Trust me, there is definitely a door there.” She paused and looked up at him. “You’re going to have

to go through on your knees, I think.”

King Arthur crossed his arms in reply.

“I’ll make sure you don’t hit your head on your way through,” she said with a smile.

Arthur sighed, then knelt down, but not directly in front of the door. After some jockeying and guidance from Kyah, the King positioned himself in front of the doorway. With one of her hands on his head and the other on his shoulder, she gave him a nod to proceed.

He shuffled through the opening and she chuckled. *What I would give for a camera right now.*

Once he had gone through, she heard him inhale sharply. Alarmed, Kyah followed as soon as the King’s feet were clear, Naieem still on her shoulder. When she was through, she turned and looked back. There was no door behind them. She sighed. *Of course there’s not.*

The King stood and stared at their new destination, his eyes glinting.

“You’ve brought me home,” he said softly. He turned to Kyah. “I am eternally in your debt. There is no repayment for what you have just done for me.”

She nodded, not knowing what to say. She felt more than a little uncomfortable being owed a debt of such magnitude by someone like King Arthur. Shaking her head, she looked around. She could smell salt on the moist air.

Arthur paused for a moment, then orientated himself in a particular direction and started to walk as if he knew where he was going.

They were in a big, open, grassy field, with rolling hills in every direction. Kyah thought she could make out a mountain range in the hazy distance but she couldn’t be sure. The direction Arthur was headed in seemed to be the same direction she was getting the random whiffs of salty air from.

We must be close to an ocean. She took off after him at a good clip. He was a tall man and she almost had to run to keep up. *This is going to be a long walk.*

They passed low stone walls and walked by small stone homes with honest to goodness thatched roofs. Kyah saw smoke coming out of the chimneys and

people walking about doing chores.

I'm definitely not back home. From the clothes hanging out to dry, she could tell they were made of that homespun stuff that you saw at renaissance fairs back home. *Well, you'd better get used to this Traveller business. I think you're going to be seeing some really different stuff from here on in.*

They stopped a few times to rest. The more they walked, the stronger the smell of salt became. The wind was definitely picking up.

Arthur stopped when they reached the edge of a cliff. Kyah looked down. The sea went on for what seemed like forever.

Arthur stood there with the most intense expression on his face. It was like seeing someone reunited with a loved one after being apart for a long time, blind to anything else around them.

She placed her hand on his arm in the hopes of bringing him back to himself. "Are you all right? Do you recognize this place?"

"Yes, below these cliffs is the home of the Lady of the Lake and her people. This land is my home, my kingdom." He stared out at the ocean.

Kyah stood there gazing at him. It was only just hitting her that she was in the land of King Arthur. How surreal had her life become in only a few hours?

He looked a little intimidating standing there, a grim look settling on his face. The sea breeze tossed his hair around.

Kyah had to rip her gaze away; it was way too much like a scene out of every sword and sorcery book that she'd ever read. She couldn't help but smile. Although, that was all stuff she'd only read and imagined. Everything that was happening here was very real. Her smile faded.

Without a word, the King turned and stalked along the cliff. Suddenly, he stepped over the edge.

"Arthur!" Kyah ran after him, her hand outstretched, before realizing he had just stepped onto a set of stone steps leading down the side of the cliff.

The King turned with a smile on his face and a raised eyebrow. "Arthur, is it?"

Kyah stood up straight, at a loss for words.

The King walked back to her and held out his hand. "No one has called me

Arthur in a very long time.” After he had helped Kyah down onto the stairs, he kept hold of her hand. “It sounds nice. I will allow you to continue to call me Arthur.”

He turned and continued his march down the narrow stairs.

Kyah stood there, her mouth hanging open. *What a pompous ass.* Still hot under the collar, she followed him down the steps.

Her temper was dampened by the arduous climb down the stone staircase. The further she went down, the windier and wetter it became. Staying on her feet took all her concentration; she feared a misstep would find her dashed and wrecked body left on the rocks below.

She was concentrating so much that she had barely registered that had made it to the bottom when her feet finally hit sand.

“Phew,” she said, wiping sweat and salt water off her face.

Glancing around, she couldn’t see Arthur anywhere nearby. A little concerned, she searched the immediate area. Panicked by the thought that he had fallen or some other horrible thing had happened, she began shouting for him. Feeling like her shouts were wasted on the whipping wind, she finally made her way to a wide stretch of sand. Squinting down the beach, she made out a group of buildings dotted along the bottom of cliff. She also spotted a figure marching diligently towards the village.

“What. A. Jerk!” Outraged that he had just left her to make it down the cliff on her own, she rose unsteadily to her feet and shook off the sand. “I can’t believe it! I can’t believe he just left me here! I could have slipped and died up there!”

She felt Naieem’s tiny hand on her neck. “Calm yourself, Kyah. The King has long been gone from these lands. He has and always will be singularly focused on his rule.” The faery paused for a long moment, as though she were thinking deeply about her next words. “Also, I fear that not everything is as it seems here. I advise against rushing after him in anger. Your eyes, ears and heart can’t be open to what must be seen if you are full of anger.”

“Okay, fine. Give me a minute,” Kyah replied, still irritated.

She walked in a loop while circling her arms, rolling her neck and bouncing

up and down, all while taking deep breaths. It was all she could think of to do to calm herself.

“All right. Let’s go.”

“Oh, we are walking? I thought you were getting ready to take flight.”

Kyah burst out laughing, picturing how comical she must have just looked.

“All right, all right,” she said with a smile. “Let’s see what has Arthur in such a hurry. He’s practically *The Flash*, for goodness sake.”

“Who is this Flash?” Naieem said.

“A comic book hero from my world who has this super power where he can run really, really fast.”

“Comic book hero? What is that?”

“Well, where I’m from there are these thin books that mostly consist of drawings of different characters with whatever it is that they’re thinking or saying drawn as bubbles above their heads.” Kyah paused, trying to figure out a better way to explain. “It’s a picture book, really, with some words explaining what the heroes and villains are doing in the story.”

Naieem didn’t say anything for a few paces as Kyah trudged through the sand towards the village.

“We have stories here, too,” she said finally. “We also have heroes and villains.”

Kyah was quiet for a while. All those ‘fictional’ characters she’d heard of might be as real as Naieem. As real as King Arthur. It was an overwhelming thought.

She slowly cut her way through winds that continued to pick up speed as she made her way toward the village. The closer she got, the more she realized that there was something very wrong up ahead.

Kyah stopped dead in her tracks and fell to her belly on a sand dune. She watched as a group of villagers ran toward the cliff walls; others were running into buildings and barricading themselves in; yet more were headed straight for her with nothing but sheer terror on their faces.

Amongst the chaos, huge, dark figures on black horses rode amok, slicing through any person within reach. Kyah’s stomach clenched. This was the kind of

single-minded brutality she had only ever seen on television. Never directly in front of her.

Figures dressed in blueish-white armor rushed into the village from the other side and attempted to defend the villagers. Their armor flashed with sparks of green in the sun.

“Oh. My. God,” Kyah whispered.

These newcomers were armed with swords and bows and arrows. They were all as tall as Arthur, with long, straight hair. And pointed ears.

“Naieem? Are those freaking elves I’m seeing?”

“Yes, Kyah, those would be the Lady of the Lake’s people.”

The elven warriors were fierce but it didn’t seem like there was enough of them to fend off the huge figures encased in black armor.

Sick to her stomach, Kyah watched as the dark figures chopped down both the unarmed villagers and the warriors defending them. She fiercely wished she could help them somehow, but she didn’t know what to do.

As she crouched there, helpless, the largest horse she had ever seen rode out toward her. Atop it was one of the black-armored knights. Kyah gasped. He was chasing down an elven woman who clutched a baby in one hand and a short sword in another. The sight pushed her out of her inertia and into action.

Succumbing to a ferocity she’d never felt before, Kyah rose to her feet and smoothly reached to her back for an arrow. She notched it on the bow already in her hand, pulled back and let go.

She didn’t pause to think about it and she didn’t even blink. She just let loose the arrow like it was something she had done a hundred times before.

The arrow struck its target, plowing straight through the eye slit of the black knight’s helmet.

The whole world slowed down. As she watched, the chaos in front of her continued, but at a snail’s pace. Kyah raised a hand. She could still move normally but everything else was moving at less than half the speed it had before.

The knight began to slowly fall from the horse.

“Holy shit,” Kyah breathed.

“It’s the power of the bow and arrow from Pan,” Naieem whispered, her voice full of awe. “The bow controls time and the arrows never miss. It is Pan’s gift to you. You must move quickly now. I don’t know how long this is going to last.”

Kyah’s thoughts turned to finding Arthur. “I think we must find this Lady of the Lake person, Naieem. I think Arthur might be with her.”

“Yes,” the faery agreed. “She would likely make her home close to the water.”

Surveying the village, Kyah noticed a hut that was slightly larger than the rest. There was nothing else special about it, but it sat next to a river outlet that seemed to come out of the cliff wall itself before draining into the ocean.

She pointed it out to Naieem. “There!”

Princess Naieem launched herself from Kyah’s shoulder and proceeded to guide Kyah through the village.

As Kyah ran towards the hut that she hoped belonged to the Lady of the Lake, she shot arrows at the black knights, weaving through the ongoing battle in the village, which still moved in slow motion. Her arrows moved full-speed, and as Naieem had promised, they never missed.

But as she made her way through the melee, she noticed that things were starting to speed up again.

“No, no, no!” she cried.

It was very easy to be brave when everyone else was slow. But could she get past the knights when the rest of the world caught up with her?

She wasn’t sure she was going to make it in time.

CHAPTER SEVEN



The Lady of Lake's hut finally rose up before her; unfortunately, it had a group of black-armored men in front of it.

A large man dragged a silver-haired elven woman out of the hut by her hair and threw her to the ground. He thundered toward her, his boot taking aim at her face.

"NO!" Kyah screamed.

She shot an arrow straight into his eye.

The knight fell to the ground and two others started toward her. They were on the same speed as her now.

Scared out of her mind, she fired arrow after arrow at the men, who joined their fallen comrade on the ground. She skidded to a stop when she reached the woman and helped her stand.

Heart pounding and shaking like a leaf, she grabbed the lady's forearms, talking faster than the arrows she'd been shooting. "Where do we go now? Where can we go that's safe?"

She knew as soon as she looked into the elven woman's eyes that she was truly standing before the Lady of the Lake.

"Is Arthur here? Is he safe?"

The Lady gave her a regal nod.

"Follow me," she said in a singsong voice that seemed completely out of place considering everything going on around them.

Now that Kyah wasn't so focused on reaching the Lady of the Lake, she could hear the sounds of battle all around her, men and women screaming in pain and fury. Doing her best not to throw up, Kyah focused on the Lady's shimmering, silver hair in front of her.

The sounds of battle receded as they approached a cave hidden in the cliff. Waves lapped at its entrance. When she went inside, Kyah found herself in a corridor cut into the rock. The walls lit up from within as if they were linked to the elven woman's approach. The inner light glinted and glowed, causing the walls to sparkle.

The Lady of the Lake reached an opening ahead, turned to her left and began to descend.

Kyah reached the opening and gasped.

"It's a lake," she said, dumbfounded.

She looked around quickly and followed the Lady, Naieem's hand on her neck steadying her.

They made their way down stone stairs, Kyah peeking at the giant lake as they went. Grass and flowers surrounded it, and there were even trees a little distance away across an open, grassy area. *How is this possible in a cave?* Nothing seemed to fit except the stalagmites scattered randomly around them.

They finally reached the bottom of the steps and followed a trail beside the lake toward a column of blue light. Kyah drew a sharp breath. Inside this column of light, a sword floated in mid-air. It was shrouded in a slowly pulsating, green light. Every so often, a globule of black would pulse by and disappear.

"It is Excalibur," the Lady of the Lake said.

Kyah jumped. She hadn't realized the Lady was standing so close.

She could feel her mouth form an 'O' as she stood there staring at the legendary sword. *Of course Arthur would want to get here as soon as possible. He wanted his sword back.*

Shaking her head, she felt like an idiot for not thinking of it earlier.

"You are safe here," the Lady continued. "My powers cannot be overcome in my own domain." She placed her hand on Kyah's shoulder.

Being told she was safe reminded Kyah why they were in this cave in the

first place and what she had just done. She had actually killed people. Suddenly feeling sick, she turned and fell to her knees, promptly throwing up in some lovely pink and yellow flowers.

She grimaced. *Some example of a great race I am.*

When she felt well enough to stand, she turned and beheld a fairy tale vision.

The Lady of the Lake had Princess Naieem cupped in her palm. She crooked her head at something the tiny princess said. Once she had taken in whatever this news was, the Lady turned to look at Kyah.

She floated toward her. “You have done much today, dear heart. You must rest now or your energy will be depleted. It will be a challenge to restore it.”

Okay...what an odd way to say I need to get some rest.

The Lady put her hand on Kyah’s cheek and she suddenly felt sleepy. She lay down in the grass, closed her eyes and embraced the soft, welcoming darkness.

Kyah awoke to the sound of dripping water.

Opening her eyes, she found herself lying on a blanket on the grass next to the lake. Sitting up, she looked down at what she was wearing because, whatever it was, it felt really comfortable. She was in a long, dark blue dress with a decorative leather belt at her waist and she felt clean for the first time in, well, she didn’t know when. Had it been a day? Two days?

Shaking her head, she figured she wasn’t up to solving the mystery of how long it had been since she was shoved through a pool of silver by what was, apparently, an Ancient Power. Looking down at her makeshift bed, she ran her hand over the bow and quiver of arrows lying next to her.

She had shot a number of arrows at the large, black knights, but she noticed that the number of arrows seemed to have remained the same. *Well, that’s interesting.*

Hearing a fluttering of wings behind her, she turned, expecting to see her tiny faery friend winging her way over. Instead, she saw Princess Naieem as she had never seen her before. She was normal-person-sized, gliding toward her carried by gigantic faery wings.

Eyes widening, Kyah stood up with a start.

“You’re big,” was all she could get out.

Princess Naieem was exotically beautiful. She was not like any person or elf Kyah had seen so far. Her skin was sparkly! And she was wearing a sheer dress.

Princess Naieem tinkled out a giggle as she touched down and walked over to Kyah. She proceeded to give her a large hug.

Kyah hugged her back tightly. “I didn’t know you could grow! Can you always?”

The large faery shook her head. “This is not usual for me. But I can reform in places like this. Places where energy converges and is concentrated. It would take all of my energy to grow large elsewhere.”

“All of your energy?” That didn’t sound good. “You mean...could it kill you if you did this outside of a place like this?”

“Yes. That is what I mean.” Pulling back from Kyah she glanced down at the blanket and smiled. “Your bow and arrows have found you again, I see.”

“They were missing?”

“When we bathed and clothed you, they disappeared when we went to touch them. I think Pan’s gift will always find you.” She turned to face Kyah again and smiled. “Let’s sit for a while. Standing is tiresome when one is so large.”

This made Kyah laugh. “Tell me about it.” She joined Naieem on the blanket. “Do we know where Arthur went?”

Naieem nodded and looked toward the floating sword in the column of light directly across the lake. “He is here. The Lady has put him in a deep healing sleep. He is tormented by the events of his past now that he is in his own realm again. The Lady of the Lake told Arthur that he has been gone twenty years from this realm. He will need a little time to come to terms with how long he has been gone. Merlin will be here soon to council him.”

At this news, Kyah straightened up. “Merlin? Really? That’s just...that’s just...” Kyah couldn’t even finish her sentence. She gave herself a mental smack on the forehead. “Wow.”

The princess looked at her with a small smile and sad eyes. “We understand that, in your realm, the people you’ve met so far are only found in stories. It

must be very overwhelming.”

“How are they only stories on my world? How come my world was left out of the magical stuff?”

“You ask good questions, Traveller,” Naieem said in that approving voice again. “Your world and universe was created by Ancient Powers who made it purposely without magic. Their thinking was that without magic your universe would be more peaceful. Less chaotic. But for all their power, they could not bypass the rules, which are simple. With order comes chaos. Although your world has no magic, it is far more destructive and chaotic than any other in the known universes.”

She shook her head. “At least the destructive nature of your universe seems to be contained there. And the reason your realm does have stories of magic is that there happens to be a portal there that has been used by some to cross over between realms. So, over time, beings of all sorts have managed to weave their way in and out of that realm for reasons too many to think about.”

Kyah stared as she put all the pieces together. “I just can’t figure out if being a Traveller is a good thing. I mean, I don’t know what I’m doing. What if I do something really bad and don’t realize it? What if by helping King Arthur I’ve started some kind of horrible domino effect?”

The Lady of the Lake silently appeared by the blanket and sat down with them. “Travellers are good, bad and everything in between. Like all things in the universe. We never know what Travellers will do. We only know that they bring change and we must be prepared for whatever that is.”

“Well, not everyone likes change. So it looks like I need to be on the lookout for those hunters.”

Both otherworldly ladies nodded.

Pondering it further, Kyah could feel a familiar creep of anxiety as she considered the impact that she could have on entire worlds. *Not just worlds, entire universes, apparently.*

Before she could become immobilized by the weight of those heavy thoughts, she asked, “Well, how do I know what to change?”

The Lady laughed. “Make no mistake, Traveller, you will have an impact on

the many realms, but you forget that you are not the only force at work here. There are many Ancient Powers in the many realms. Pan is such a one—as am I. We will help you when you need it.”

Kyah turned to the Lady with relief and saw determination and friendship on her face.

“In my domicile,” the Lady continued, sweeping her hand at the lake, “and other places like this, I rule as no other can. You will always be welcome in those places. You will just need to enter the waters, call out or think of my name, and I will be there.”

Kyah smiled and moved to hug the Lady. When she went to pull back, she felt the Lady breathe on her neck.

“I will always be with you,” she whispered.

As Kyah pulled away, she felt a cool spot on her neck. She reached up to touch the place that felt strange. It was on the left side of her neck under her ear.

Princess Naieem spoke up. “It is the mark of the Lady of the Lake. It looks like a brushed, dark blue circle.”

“Oh,” Kyah said wonderingly. “Cool. Thank you, Lady.”

The Lady laughed. “You may call me by my name. It is Nymue.”

When she said her name, there was a slight shift in the sounds around her, the dripping echoes that Kyah had gotten used to. It was as though all other sound was drowned out and the name was the only thing that could be heard.

Kyah glanced at Naieem, who looked frozen. The Lady appeared for a moment both solid and liquid at the same time.

The Lady of the Lake spoke in a low octave, singsong voice, almost as if she was speaking under water. “You must repeat my name so that I will know your call.”

“Nymue,” Kyah said, and the sound seemed to boom off the walls in the cave.

The Lady nodded. “If you say my name, no one else will understand it. Do you understand?”

Kyah nodded.

And, then, like a rubber band, everything snapped back in place. Naieem

unfroze, the Lady became solid, and the sounds around them went back to normal.

Nymue stood and nodded at both Kyah and the Princess. She then proceeded to walk across the water to the sword floating in the column of light.

Kyah stood and stared. *I don't know if I'll ever get used to seeing this stuff.*

Nymue stood in front of Excalibur, stared at it for a bit, and then nodded her head contemplatively.

“Are they talking to each other?” Kyah asked the princess.

The faery tinkled out a laugh. “I don't think so. The Lady of the Lake's power has a long reach. She may be talking to another Ancient Power in some other realm for all we know.”

A breathy “oh” was all Kyah could muster in response.

She couldn't even imagine what else she would learn when Merlin arrived. *Merlin*, she thought. *Holy cow.*

Part of her was excited and part of her was afraid of anyone new she might meet. Knowing that there were people, gods and other creatures out there that wanted to destroy her was making her nervous.

Naieem put her hand on Kyah's arm. “Do not despair, Kyah. You are strong and have proven to be resourceful. You will do well.”

Kyah turned to Naieem. “I don't want to be worried about who I meet all the time.”

“It will pass, in time. You will learn to be watchful and careful, but you will live—and that is what matters most.”

Kyah nodded and looked back across the water at the Lady, wondering just how long that life was going to be.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Nymue paused next to the column of light, and a solitary figure in a long, hooded robe carrying a gnarled, ebony staff appeared beside her.

Finding this a bit alarming, Kyah took a few steps closer to the edge of the lake. The Lady, on the other hand, did not seem at all surprised that a man had appeared out of nowhere.

Nymue and the robed figure both turned to look at her. Kyah couldn't make out the stranger's expression but the look on the Lady's face was somber.

As if it were an everyday occurrence, the lake produced a pathway of stone leading across the lake to Nymue. The Lady nodded at her as if giving her the okay.

Kyah nodded back and proceeded to walk across the stone path as quickly as possible. When she reached the other side, she released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She glanced back at the stone path, but it was no longer there. Kyah smiled to herself. She wasn't even surprised. *Looks like you're getting used to this place already.*

She turned to face the stranger and he removed his hood.

"So this is the Traveller, then," he said in a deep, rumbling, yet scratchy voice.

He was fairly tall, probably close to six feet, and had short-cropped, white hair and sharp, dark eyes. The man was old, but she couldn't place his age because he carried himself as though he were much younger. He had wrinkles

around his eyes, making Kyah think he must laugh a lot. She also noticed that he had a similar look about the eyes as the elves she had seen earlier. *Interesting.*

“Are you Merlin?” Kyah asked.

The man nodded at her, a smile adding to the wrinkles around his eyes. Kyah couldn’t help but smile back.

“Merlin and I have been in discussions all morning regarding Excalibur and Arthur,” said Nymue.

Kyah raised her eyebrows. *All morning?* Nymue had been with Kyah and Naieem at least some of the morning.

“Excalibur cannot be gifted,” Merlin said. “It chooses a worthy wielder. Last time, it chose Arthur. In Arthur’s hands, it was a great weapon and it provided him with much wisdom. But Excalibur was, shall we say, ‘damaged’ during the last few years of Arthur’s reign. We believe Morgana’s machinations were releasing the darkness even then. She was poisoning Arthur’s mind, which, in turn, darkened some of the light that Excalibur contains.”

“I am the Keeper of Excalibur,” Nymue explained. “But by keeping Excalibur suspended here, she has been away from the world for many years. When the sword is at her best, she can be a source of great wisdom and loyalty in times of need, as Merlin said. But we fear that she may have lost her purpose to the darkness. It has been a long time since I felt the sword’s presence. We can only hope that by keeping her here in this place, suspended in time, that we have somehow slowed the progress of the darkness. Now, however, we need to release Excalibur. The sword will be a tremendous force in the battles to come. But for that to happen, we need someone to wield the sword. Someone who can fend off the darkness. And no other beings in the universe have shown as much ability to withstand the darkness as the Traveller race has.”

Kyah approached the edge of the column of light containing the sword. She stared at Excalibur for a while, until she noticed it had become a little too quiet around her. Turning, she found both Merlin and the Lady of the Lake staring at her expectantly.

“Wait. What? Me? But isn’t this King Arthur’s sword? Won’t he be more angry than usual if I have it?”

Merlin burst out laughing. It was a great big belly laugh that made Kyah feel a bit more relaxed, but she also felt a little foolish for some reason.

“Yes,” Merlin said, when he had recovered, “he will be angry. He and I will have to have a long talk before you both set out on your mission.”

Kyah stiffened and turned to face Merlin, shaking her head. “No. Way. I am not going on a quest, or whatever, with the angriest, most pompous man I have ever met! I might as well use Excalibur to kill myself right now.”

Merlin sobered up. “Ah, Excalibur will never harm you, Traveller. You and Excalibur need each other. Excalibur needs to see the light inside you to come back to herself, and you need Excalibur if you’re going to be the Traveller that everyone hopes you will become. As for Arthur, he must learn to trust himself again if he is ever to be worthy of wielding Excalibur as he once did. Yes, he is an angry man. His whole life was skewed by the darkness, changed from what it should have been. His anger has grown while he’s been imprisoned. He has suffered much at the hands of a Traveller—he has much to be angry about. This journey for him will be a journey back to himself. Back to who he was before he was the Once and Future King.”

Merlin paused and a faraway look crossed his wizened face. “Once you know Excalibur, you will never un-know her. She will grow strong while you wield her. Arthur will hear her again as well—if he chooses to do so. This will also be part of Arthur’s journey. He needs to become reacquainted with his old friend. To hear her again, like he once did.”

“Could he hear her before he was taken by the Traveller?” Kyah asked, as she tried to fit the story she knew together with what she was being told.

“No, he could not,” Merlin said in a sad tone.

“What will she sound like?” she asked.

“It is a different experience for everyone,” the Lady of the Lake responded. “Some feel a presence; some feel more confident or stronger. A Traveller has never wielded Excalibur before, so your experience will not be like anything Arthur has experienced. When he is ready, you should ask him.” The Lady smiled at Kyah as if to reassure her.

Kyah straightened up and stood tall. “What do I need to do?”

All at once, the light surrounding the sword brightened from blue to white. She tried to see beyond the column of light, but she couldn't make out a single thing. The glare hurt her eyes, and when she looked around, Merlin and Nymue were nowhere to be seen. *Somehow, that doesn't surprise me.*

Heaving a sigh, Kyah squared her shoulders, put one foot in front of the other, and walked into the column of light. When she was fully inside the white light, she starting breathing normally again, relieved that she hadn't been incinerated or something even more horrific.

She gazed at the detail of the sword close up. "Beautiful."

The sword stopped pulsating and burned so brightly Kyah had to shield her eyes. When the light died down, the floating sword was no longer encased in the pulsing green light with the random black globules.

Kyah stared at it. This sword was not nearly as large as the swords those black knights had wielded. It seemed more her size and had a strong, plain, silver grip with green jewels in the hilt. The pure white blade was patterned with fine, graceful, silver engravings that looped and swirled along it.

The knowledge that she was supposed to take the sword was making her hands sweaty. Holding her breath and trusting in the Lady of the Lake and Merlin, she reached out and took hold of the grip.

Nothing happened.

Letting out a long breath, she lifted the sword and was turning to walk back out of the column the way she had come when she realized that her feet weren't on anything solid anymore.

The ground had completely disappeared. Then the white light around her blinked out and she was suspended in darkness save for the light shining from the sword.

Kyah gripped Excalibur with both hands and peered across the void. There were small points of light out in the darkness. As her eyes became acclimated, the light from Excalibur dimmed to a more demure glow. Looking all around her, she realized she must be looking at stars. Some were very bright and some were dull.

"Holy. Shit. Am I in space?"

She shook her head at this silly notion, but felt like she wasn't too far away from the truth. Then the stars started to disappear, as if a cloud were moving in front of them. Something was out there, and it seemed to be consuming the light around it.

"The darkness," she whispered as it dawned on her what she was actually seeing.

Not for the first time since her new life had begun, she felt fear. The longer she watched, the more she realized the darkness seemed to be growing. More and more starlight disappeared.

As she watched the stars blink out, she slowly realized that the darkness was coming right at her.

Feeling nauseous, she tightened her grip on the sword with slippery, sweaty hands. She tried to move her feet, but couldn't. It seemed her fate was to face the oncoming darkness suspended in nothingness.

Okay, Excalibur, I hope we can work together because I don't think we want that thing getting by us.

The sword's glow kicked up in intensity until it was almost blinding, but the darkness seemed to gain speed.

The dark cloud slammed into her and she swung the sword down in an ungraceful chop, hoping that she had sliced the thing in half.

The light from Excalibur remained bright, refusing to be consumed. But as the darkness made contact, she felt a numbness seep through her, coupled with a bone-deep despair. She had never felt anything like it in her entire life. She felt so much sadness she wasn't sure she could go on living.

But the next moment, the darkness was gone. She was bathed in the pure light of Excalibur and the overwhelming feeling of despair lifted.

The menacing cloud no longer blocked out the stars all around her. *I hope it's gone and it's not coming back anytime soon.*

One star in particular was glowing brighter than the rest. It got bigger and brighter before it exploded, blinding her.

Kyah squeezed her eyes shut against the flashing light.

When she could see the familiar dark behind her eyelids again, she opened

her eyes. She was standing on solid ground once more, Excalibur still in her hands.

Sighing with relief, she turned to find both Merlin and the Lady of Lake gazing at her, their expressions thoughtful.

Nymue gave her a nod of approval and Kyah relaxed. Whatever had just happened, she was safe, and she had the sword.

Then she noticed Arthur standing on the shore staring at them. His expression? Not happy.

“You did well,” said Merlin, dragging her attention away from the King.

Kyah blinked and swayed. *That’s weird. He sounds so far away.*

“I feel so heavy,” she said.

All at once, she felt as though she could barely hold herself upright. The last thing she saw was Nymue reaching out for her before everything faded.

CHAPTER NINE



Kyah woke on the shore of the lake across from where Excalibur used to be.

Naieem sat next to her, still in her full-size form. Kyah pushed herself up so she could sit with her new friend.

The faery put her arm around her and gave her a squeeze.

Heaving a big sigh, and working out the kinks in her neck and back, Kyah finally stood up. Excalibur was in a plain, brown, leather sheath alongside her bow and arrows. They were laid out on the blanket next to where she had been sleeping.

“I see that you’ve decided to awaken from your beauty sleep,” Merlin said to her immediate left.

Kyah jumped. “You could announce yourself, you know.”

Merlin just chuckled and poked her side with the end of his staff.

That’s gonna leave a bruise. She massaged her side. Now thoroughly irritated, she glared at the smiling wizard, which only prompted him to burst out laughing.

Kyah sighed. She supposed she was being a bit bitchy, but then she *had* just woken up.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s just...I’m starving and I’m a little cranky.”

She closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she saw a wonderful lunch spread out before her. Roast chicken, steaming vegetables,

mashed potatoes, gravy, assorted fruits and a few pies to finish it all off.

Kyah sat back down on the blanket and tucked in, not even caring where it had all come from. *Hopefully, this not eating for long periods isn't going to be part of my new reality.*

Finally glancing up from her eating extravaganza, she noticed that Arthur had joined her.

“Sorry,” she said sheepishly, “I didn’t even notice you there.”

Arthur just grinned. “It's good to see a lady eat her fill. Too many ate like birds in my day.”

Kyah could only nod, recalling pictures in history books of ladies with impossibly skinny waists. She wasn’t quite sure what time period Arthur was referring to, but it didn’t sound good.

She shook her head, and Merlin piped up. “What are you thinking, Traveller?”

Kyah, still feeling the weight of everything that had happened since her arrival, heaved a tired sigh. “Please just call me Kyah. I’m more than just a Traveller—I hope.”

Merlin broke into a knowing smile and nodded.

“Is there any way to learn about all these realms?” she asked. “Their histories, current politics, people...”

The wizard nodded. “After you are done with your mission here, you will be making your way to the City of the Gods, where great knowledge is shared.”

“City of the Gods? Is that here?”

“No. You will have to travel to the realm of Elmiria to reach the City.”

“Oh. Will other Travellers be there?” she asked, hopefully.

“Not likely. A Traveller hasn’t been in the City in a long time. We would likely have less trouble these days if more of them were less self-important and took the time to learn.” Merlin shook his head. “The City has a great library that houses all this information. You will be enrolled at a school there.”

Kyah raised an eyebrow.

Merlin smiled. “You will learn about combat skills and strategy, and undertake weapons training.” Merlin swept his hand over her bow and arrow and

Excalibur. "You will also have some magic lessons and you will learn politics."

"So, there will be other people there too? Not just me?"

"Yes, yes, of course! A great many races are in attendance in the City. Future and current leaders, potential magic users, military prospects and many, many others attend the school for many, many reasons. Not everyone attends full time. Some come to consult and learn from a particular Scholar in Residence. Arthur will be there as well. He will be taking different classes than you and he will also be teaching."

"I see," she said, feeling a bit overwhelmed at the idea of having to attend some kind of school. She had never attended college. "So, I can just get in, then? There are no tests I have to take to get in?"

"Oh, there will be plenty of testing on your journey there."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm confused."

Merlin just nodded, with a smile that said he wasn't surprised.

Kyah suspected that the wizard was having a grand time laughing at her.

She rolled her eyes. "How do the school officials, or whoever's in charge, know I'm even going there? And what kind of tests are there going to be?"

Merlin just continued smiling.

Kyah wanted to slap him but decided to wait him out instead.

"All Travellers are welcome at the school any time they choose to show up," he said, relenting. "The Ancient Powers seem to know when they start on their journey. That part continues to be a mystery to us mere mortals. Nonetheless, there will be various tests along the way. You will not know what is a test and what is part of everyday life. I suspect that they will want to figure who you are so they can go about selecting an appropriate curriculum."

That makes sense. Another thought struck her. "How long will I have to go to this school?"

"That all depends on you. If I was one of the Powers, I would want you to have as much knowledge as possible prior to setting you loose upon the realms."

"So I could potentially be there for years?" she said with a bit of hope in her voice.

Merlin smiled a knowing smile. "You will not be able to hide at the school,

Kyah. While you are undergoing instruction, you could be called upon by the Powers at any time to perform a duty or be a mediator or set a situation to rights. Whatever the calling is, you will be compelled to answer.”

Stiffening at the thought of being compelled to do something against her will, she blurted out, “So, I’m a slave, then.”

Merlin chuckled. “No, you silly girl. Being a Traveller, you have a built-in system that only you answer to. It is what brought you to save Arthur, ultimately. Pan did have a hand in steering your ship, so to speak, but the decision was yours. I believe this will be the way of it for you until you learn enough to have more control. It will be something that comes to you over your long life.”

“Long life?”

“We may not fully understand the race of Travellers, but we do know that you are no mere mortal.” Merlin sighed and shook his head. “That is not to say you can’t be killed, because you can. But you can suffer tremendous injuries and live if you have the right connections.” Merlin nodded at Naieem, who had fluttered over to join them. “We do not really know how long you will live, just that it will be longer than most normal beings; you could even be immortal.”

Merlin shrugged, which was not very comforting. For some reason, she had expected him to know just about everything. *Better let some of these assumptions go.*

She sat there with her mind blank for a moment and then burst out laughing. “C’mon! You’re joking right? Immortal, not mortal...me? That just seems too far fetched, even for here.”

She sobered up when Merlin glowered at her. *This is not a guy I want mad at me. Oops.*

“Um...sorry,” she said. “But that just seems so...out there.”

“I believe that, as a Traveller, time is part of how you are made. This is no joke, Kyah. The decisions that you make will follow you for your entire life. And it could be a very long one.”

It was a sobering thought that any one of her mistakes could follow her for who knew how long.

Merlin went on. “There are many reasons for you to make it to the City of

the Gods, but this reason is probably one of the most important. They can help you understand what you are and they can help you find out who you are.”

Merlin gave her a long look that she didn’t know how to interpret. She crinkled her brow.

If I’m not mortal, what am I? One more question to add to the list of things I need to ask my father. If I can find him.

CHAPTER TEN



Not long after they'd finished eating, Nymue appeared beside them. "It is time for your journey, Kyah. There will be many dangers outside my domain, but I believe you will succeed with your present company."

"Wait...right now?" Kyah exclaimed, feeling like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Yes. We must go while the Dark Knights are on the hunt further to the south of us," replied Arthur. He started gathering up some saddlebags. "The Lady has put together provisions for us, food and clothes for the journey."

"So, these Dark Knights...they were the ones out there attacking the village? They attacked the Lady of the Lake!" Kyah dragged a hand through her hair. The thought of traveling out there with a bunch of scary guys like that on the loose made her feel sick to her stomach. "We can't go back out there. I don't even know how to use Excalibur! I can only use the bow because it's enchanted!" She paused as a thought struck her. "Wait a minute, how do you even know where they are?"

"Through those who are loyal to me," replied the Lady of the Lake. "Not everyone was in the village that day. I knew they were coming. I also knew you would be there. Many left at my urging. Those who remained were warrior families who chose to stay to give the village a semblance of normality."

Kyah stared at Nymue in disbelief. "There were kids out there."

The Lady approached Kyah and grasped her upper arms. “My people volunteered to stay with me. The warrior families knew their possible fate. Do not fear for them. Do not be anxious for them. No women or children were harmed. The warriors fought off the Dark Knights and many of the villagers have returned.”

Kyah let out the breath she’d been holding and sagged a little. “Thank you for telling me. I was worried about them after what I saw. And then we left so quickly.” She shook her head as though to shake out what she had seen and done that day. “All right. Next question, then. Just where are we going? Do we know how to find Morgana le Fay?”

“My sister is in Camelot, by all accounts,” Arthur replied flatly.

“Oh,” was all she could think to say. “So let’s say we are successful in defeating her and putting the darkness back in its bottle or whatever.” Merlin snorted at her description and she glared at him. “How do we get to Elmiria? Do I just wish up a doorway or what?”

Merlin put a hand over his eyes. “You could *conjure* up a doorway, but we don’t believe you are that powerful yet. Your father could do it, but your powers are yet to be determined.”

At the mention of her father, she stiffened

Merlin cleared his throat and continued. “Other powerful Travellers and beings like the Ancient Powers or even the faery have already placed doors throughout the realms. You just have to know where they are.”

“Oh, well, great!” she said. “Then you know where this portal is.”

“No, not exactly. Magic portals are funny things. They will appear to those that are sensitive to them, but they do not appear in the same place all the time. The only portal we know of is inside Camelot. So you will have to look for it when you are in the castle.”

“Oh.” *Well, how is that going to work?*

Her thoughts must have been written all over her face because Merlin chuckled at her again. “Do not worry about the ‘how’ right now, Traveller. Your only mission is to arrive alive in Camelot. Help will be there when you need it.”

“Okay. Well, it looks like I should probably get changed, then, and get ready

to go.”

Nymue sang something and Kyah’s body felt heavier suddenly. Looking down, she saw she was back in the outfit she had arrived in.

“That’s amazing,” she whispered in awe.

The Lady of the Lake smiled at her and patted her shoulder before turning away and walking toward the other end of the lake.

Kyah picked up her weapons. *Who would have thought I’d ever be carrying weapons around?*

She started to put on her quiver and felt a hand on her elbow.

“Let me help you put those on properly,” said Arthur.

First, he helped her with the sword.

Hmm...not as heavy as it looks.

Then, he fitted her quiver to her back, crossing the leather straps over her chest in an X. Finally, he added the bow.

When he was done, Kyah turned to him and smiled. “Thank you. I suppose I’ll have plenty of practice getting these on and off every day.” She paused shyly. “Would you help me learn how to use them as well?”

Arthur’s eyebrow went up. “The road will be hard on you as it is. Learning weaponry as well will make the journey even more difficult. Are you sure you want me to teach you?”

She gulped at the seriousness of his tone, but gave a sharp nod. *I need to learn so I can defend myself!*

“Very well. I will not go easy on you.”

Kyah gave him another sharp nod and swallowed hard again. The thought of learning how to use the weapons was making her hands sweaty. But she squeezed her eyes shut and balled her hands into fists. *You need to do this*, she said to herself.

When she opened her eyes, she realized that Arthur and Merlin had walked off after the Lady.

Kyah ran to catch up, arriving almost out of breath. *Okay, so running with weapons on your back is no fun.*

At the end of the lake, the Lady walked toward an opening in the cave wall.

This tunnel looked wide enough to squeeze four people in at a time. Just like when they had first entered the cave, the sides of the tunnel lit up, making the rocky walls look almost transparent.

The going was tough up the steady incline and Kyah found herself stopping to try and catch her breath.

“Lady,” called out Arthur, “we need a moment to rest.”

He threw Kyah a pointed look.

She didn’t really care about anything at that moment. She was just relieved that they were stopping. She took the opportunity to sag against the wall. *Arthur was right; this journey is going to be tough on me.*

Finally catching her breath, she nodded at the group and they kept walking up the long and steady incline. It dawned on Kyah that they must be somewhere in the cliff side, walking to the top.

After what felt like an hour, Kyah made out a fine crack of light up ahead. When they walked through the opening, she found herself looking at some impossibly tall, rectangular stones that must have been carved from extremely large rocks. They were enormous.

They drew closer, and Kyah gazed around her suspiciously. *No way! This is freaking Stonehenge!*

Shocked at seeing something familiar from Earth, Kyah stopped dead in her tracks and turned in a slow circle.

“I never knew that these were so big...” she whispered.

“You know of this place?” asked Nymue softly at her side.

Kyah gave her several slow nods.

“This is on my world too,” she said, still in a whisper. “They are a mystery there. No one really knows how or why they were built.”

Finally, she tore her eyes away and looked at Nymue. The Lady was looking down at her and smiling.

“I built them. They are part of my home,” she said simply and walked back toward where Merlin and Arthur were waiting, leaving Kyah standing there with her mouth hanging open.

Looking back one last time, Kyah couldn’t see any indication of where the

cave opening was. Shaking her head, she walked over to Arthur and Merlin.

“These are familiar to you?” Merlin said.

Kyah just nodded silently, absorbing the idea that there were structures and not just different beings that crossed realms.

“So things can be in multiple realms at the same time?” she asked Merlin.

“Yes, depending on the power of the builder. Not all beings have as great a power as that.”

“Have you been to my world?”

She studied Merlin thoughtfully, recalling the myths and legends from the tales of King Arthur.

Merlin offered her a big smile. “You have heard of me, then?”

Kyah smiled back. *Everyone wants their five minutes of fame.* “Yes, you are widely known. A legendary wizard from the King Arthur stories. I’m pretty sure you are even in the dictionary. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were known worldwide.”

Merlin’s smile grew. He turned and walked away without answering her question.

Arthur just chuckled. “You do know what else he is called besides Merlin don’t you?”

Kyah tilted her head to the side, thinking hard. A light bulb went off. “He is also known as the Traveller between Worlds!” She stared at Merlin’s back. “So, wait, I’m confused. Does that make Merlin a Traveller as well?”

“Oh, no. Well, I don’t think so. If he is, he has hidden it very well. He is a druid of great standing. They say he is half human, half Fae, and that’s why his power is so great. We will never know.” Arthur stared at Merlin, sadness and wariness mixed with fondness on his face “If I know anything about Merlin, it’s that he likes his secrets.”

Kyah wanted to ask him a hundred more questions, but by this time, they had cleared the ring of stones. There they found a pair of horses. Princess Naieem was back to her tiny self, sitting on the head of the chestnut-colored horse. The horse was nodding and stomping its feet as though they were having a conversation.

Smiling at this, Kyah walked up to the tiny princess. "I am so glad to see you! I was worried I would be leaving you behind for this trip."

The princess buzzed near her nose, making Kyah go cross-eyed trying to look at her.

"I said I would stay with you," she chittered at her.

Not for the first time, Kyah wondered if this was how hummingbirds would sound if they could talk. Smiling at the knowledge her friend would be with her on this trip, she looked at the horses and sighed.

"I don't know how to ride a horse," she said in a resigned voice.

She was starting to feel as though there was no end in sight to the number of things that she needed to learn and get used to in this new life of hers.

"Ah, do not worry," chirped Princess Naieem. "These are my good friends. I was off finding them while you were eating with Merlin and Arthur. They are Fae-bred horses."

Of course they are.

Kyah followed her over to the chestnut horse.

"This is Fire. The other horse is Night."

Night was the shiny, black horse.

How original.

"Fire is willing to have you as a rider. He knows you don't know how to ride and has assured me he will help you the best he can."

"Okay. Great!" Kyah found herself giving the horse a big smile. *Did he just wink at me?*

Naieem buzzed over to Kyah's shoulder and whispered in her ear. "Night is a little bit of a snob, honestly. He will only let the King ride him."

Night turned and stamped his foreleg a few times.

Naieem shook her head at the horse.

Not sure what to make of this interaction, Kyah turned her attention to Arthur and the saddlebags. He had already strapped Kyah's bags onto Fire and was moving over to strap his own onto Night.

Great, more stuff to learn. Feeling overwhelmed at the newness of everything around her, Kyah sighed again and watched Arthur mount Night.

She walked up to Fire.

Okay, you can do this. Just be gentle and learn.

She grabbed the pommel on the saddle and put her foot in the stirrup.

“So sorry,” she whispered to Fire. “I don’t know what I’m doing—I’ll do my best.”

Fire shook his mane gently.

Heaving herself awkwardly into the saddle, belly-first, she lurched and pulled her other leg around. Some scooting into the saddle, and she was there. *I did it!*

Smiling at her accomplishment, she looked over at Arthur.

He shook his head at her and looked up at the sky like he was praying for them. Grabbing the reins, he then turned Night away from the cliff and toward the hazy mountains she’d seen when she first came through the portal.

Still smiling at having accomplished getting onto Fire without making a spectacle of herself, she turned to look back at Merlin and Nymue. They nodded at her and held up a palm in goodbye.

She nodded back and waved at them.

Then she picked up the reins and somehow managed to turn Fire around. The time had come to follow Night and Arthur to Camelot to fight the scary Morgana le Fay. And find a portal to another world.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



They finally stopped for a rest after going at breakneck speed for what felt like hours.

Kyah had never felt so sore in her entire life. Slithering off the back of Fire, she slowly waddle-walked over to a log. At first, she thought it would be a great idea to sit on it, but the pain in her backside made her think the better of it. The grass looked far softer. When she finally managed to lower herself down, she promptly lay on her side and heaved a long sigh of relief.

“You shouldn’t do that,” said Arthur.

He was busying himself setting up camp. Kyah didn’t care what he was doing as long as she didn’t have to walk or ride anywhere for a while.

“Shouldn’t do what? Lie here quietly not bothering anyone?” she retorted, irritated that Arthur was bothering her when it was obvious she was having a hard time moving.

“Your muscles will start to seize up if you don’t walk for a bit. You’ll have trouble standing back up even now.”

She scowled, more irritated by the minute. “Well, I wouldn’t be so sore if we weren’t riding like the hounds of hell are on our ass! What’s the big hurry anyway? There’s no one around. We haven’t seen a single person for miles.”

Kyah waved her loose hand around for emphasis but continued to lie on her back. Her entire lower half throbbed; it felt like it was on fire.

“We need to get to Camelot before the Dark Knights learn that I’m headed

there. No one can know that I am here. Not yet. It would be disastrous. I no longer rule, I don't have Excalibur and I do not have the forces to take back Camelot. So, we need to be subtle and quick about getting there."

Arthur squatted in front of Kyah and held out his hand.

Kyah glared at him, but took it.

It ended up taking both of Arthur's hands to eventually help her stand, her muscles screaming for her to lie back down. Kyah whimpered the whole way until she was fully upright. Well, not quite upright. *I must look like a crone.*

Arthur escorted her around the small clearing in baby steps.

As her muscles warmed up from the little bit of walking, Kyah grudgingly started to notice that she wasn't in as much discomfort. Very sore, but not in pain.

By the time they made it fully around the clearing, Kyah was standing tall and not feeling so cranky. They finally stopped at their starting point and she went to move away from him.

When Arthur didn't let go of her, she looked up. He was staring at her like she had grown two heads.

She raised an eyebrow. "Never seen a woman sweat as much as me before?"

He shook his head like she had startled him back to reality, dropped her hand like a hot potato and walked away. She had to catch her balance he left her so quickly.

"Geesh, calm down. I was just poking fun. But thank you for helping me," she shouted after him. "You were right," she muttered, more to herself.

She thought she heard Arthur mumble 'you're welcome' under his breath. She heard Princess Naieem chuckle near her ear.

Kyah rolled her eyes and walked toward some trees. "I'm going to relieve myself. No peeking!" She shook her head, thinking about what her life had become. "Okay, keep watch, Naieem, while I, uh, do my thing over here."

Naieem fluttered off to who knew where.

"Okay, fine, then. Don't be a lookout."

Wandering back to camp without the tiny princess, Kyah noted that the Once and Future King really was quite industrious. He'd made camp, gotten a fire

going, and had some kind of meat cooking on a makeshift rotisserie.

I'm not sure I want to know what that is.

It smelled heavenly, whatever it was. And bedrolls were already laid out. It was fine camp indeed.

“Well...you’ve been busy. I didn’t think I was gone all that long.”

“You weren’t. I’m used to this. My knights and I were on many campaigns together. Everyone pitched in at camp.”

“Oh, well, thank you for doing it all this time. I’ll learn. I promise.”

“Since you’ve mentioned learning,” Arthur began, in a way that made Kyah hunch over and squeeze her eyes shut.

Oh, no, please oh please, no lessons tonight.

“There will be no lessons tonight. You were right, I was being terribly unkind to someone who is completely untrained. My mind was focused on getting to Camelot. We will start training tomorrow. We will stay here and ride out the morning after. You need a little break from riding.”

Whooshing out a big sigh, she smiled at him. “Thank you, I appreciate that.” She relaxed in the knowledge that she would be getting a break. “How long will it take us to get to Camelot?”

“It should be about one and a half cycles of the moon before we get there.”

She looked at Fire and then back at Arthur. “You mean I’m going to be riding a horse for over a month?” She dropped her head into her hands. The thought of being constantly sore for weeks on end was not good.

She jerked her head up when Arthur started to laugh.

He laughed so hard it was a moment before he could talk again. “You’ll get used to it. It should only take about a week for your muscles to adapt. Usually, it takes longer, but we will be on the road constantly, so you will have little choice but to get used to it.”

“Okay,” she said in the most resigned voice she could muster.

Arthur got up and took their dinner off the rotisserie. He ripped the meat in half and gave her a share.

Right, no plates or silverware. This is roughing it, I suppose.

To her surprise, she made short work of the meal and felt sleepy shortly after.

Cleaning herself up from dinner, she crawled onto her bedroll, pulled up the heavy blanket and felt her eyelids droop closed.

Kyah woke to someone shaking her. She kept her eyes closed and swatted the annoying hands away. But the shaking continued.

Irritated, she opened her eyes and sat up. Arthur was crouched over her. She was about to start shouting at him when he pushed her back down and put his hand over her mouth.

It was dark save for a sliver of light starting to show through the trees. Kyah froze.

They lay there motionless until Naieem came buzzing over.

“We need to go,” she said urgently. “They are coming. They are far enough away to give us a head start. We must hurry!”

Standing and hauling Kyah up with him, Arthur grabbed their rolls and practically ran to the horses.

Kyah tried to be more alert, but she was kind of addled from being jerked awake. She started to hear noises off in the distance. There was clanging accompanied by grunting that sounded like it was coming from several large animals.

Holy shit! She turned to run after Arthur, who was loading up the horses. They were already saddled.

“What’s going on?” she said. “Who are they? Do you need help?”

Arthur kept moving.

“Get on Fire,” was his only response.

She turned and mounted Fire like she’d been doing it for years. It was a little smoother this time thanks to the adrenaline rushing through her veins, even though she was shaking. She could hear the noises getting closer.

Naieem buzzed back just as Arthur mounted Night. She said something that the horse nodded at. Arthur brought Night closer to Fire and looked at Kyah in a way that scared her. The look on his face said he knew something terrible was coming. Terrible things were about to happen.

Arthur spoke softly and sternly. “You will need to hang onto Fire with all the strength you have. Let him run and just hang on. We will be going much faster than earlier in order to outrun them.”

Kyah gave a shaky nod. “Who are they?”

“Ogres. And they are hungry.”

He looked at her and then behind her toward where the noise was coming from. He turned Night in the opposite direction and they started to ride.

As they approached the row of trees at the edge of the clearing, the first of the ogres burst out of the opposite tree line with an animal yell. It must have been at least eight feet tall, with overly large muscles and a distorted face. It was the kind of face associated with generations of inbreeding—the kind you only ever saw in horror films.

Frightened, Kyah whipped her head back around to watch where they were going. It seemed that they had already gotten up to the speed that they were at yesterday. It was then that she noticed the trees start to blur. To keep hanging on, she had to lower herself down to hug Fire’s neck. Her eyes were watering and she couldn’t see Arthur or Night anymore. She couldn’t really hear anything except the air as it rushed by.

Oddly, the ride was really smooth, as if Fire weren’t pounding his hooves in the dirt. She looked down. Below Fire’s knees there was nothing but a cloud of fire. She gasped. But the forest didn’t seem to be catching on fire and there wasn’t a burn path behind them. She couldn’t see any ogres behind them either. Not sure whether to be more relieved the ogres weren’t right behind them or more worried about the fire underneath their feet, she continued to hold on for dear life. *When this ride is over, I have some questions for the Once and Future King.*

The landscape started to solidify again as they slowed down. She hugged Fire’s neck, feeling off balance. Looking down at his hooves, she saw the fire cloud had started to diminish, and she could hear again. She heard Night huffing immediately off to her right.

She sat up. Night and Arthur were beside her again. Arthur was looking down at Night, muttering what sounded like encouraging words and patting his

neck. Night was lathered up, foaming at the mouth a little. His breathing was labored.

Fire was in the same state. She patted the horse and whispered some encouraging words herself. She followed Arthur to a creek where they both silently dismounted and let the horses drink.

Arthur went to his saddlebag and brought out two apples. Giving one to Kyah, he nodded his head at the horses. He gave Night his apple and Kyah bestowed hers upon Fire.

When the horses had gobbled down the apples, she watched as Arthur used different brushes on the horses' coats.

"We will walk for a while from here," Arthur said. "We have outdistanced them for now, but we will need to keep moving if ogres are in the area." Arthur paused. When he spoke again it was as though he were talking to himself. "They never used to be this close to Camelot."

They set off, walking side by side with the horses.

"Okay," Kyah said. "So were the Ogres going to rob us and eat the horses?"

She patted Fire's neck. It made her sick to think of it.

Arthur turned to her with a haunted look in his eyes. "No, they wanted to eat us."

Turning away, he missed Kyah's stricken look.

He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut. "They probably would have eaten the horses as well. They eat anything and anyone. Though children are considered a delicacy."

Kyah had to concentrate not to vomit.

Fire nodded his head up and down. She felt Naieem's tiny hand on her neck.

"Will Fire and Night be all right?" she asked.

"Yes," the faery said. "They just need to recover their energy. We will keep walking until we make camp again."

"Like I'll ever be able to sleep in the woods again," Kyah muttered.

CHAPTER TWELVE



H *e's trying to kill me!*

It was Kyah's tenth lap around the lake that they were camped next to and she was breathing hard. There was a pack loaded with what felt like *all* of their supplies on her back. She glanced at Arthur. He looked like he was just out for a jog and only had a slight sheen of sweat on him compared to the waterfall running down her face.

Caught up staring at the annoying man, she tripped and found herself falling. But her face-first descent was halted with a sudden jerk and she was unceremoniously yanked back onto her feet.

"You need to pay better attention to your footing," barked Arthur. "That's the third time you've tripped on this run alone."

Panting, she tried to catch her breath. "I. Can't. Breathe."

Arthur just shook his head. He walked around and took the pack off her back.

Kyah fell to her knees and put her head between her hands.

"We'll take a break here and walk back to camp. We'll work on your swordsmanship after lunch."

Sitting back on her heels, Kyah eyed Arthur as he whipped the heavy pack onto his back like it was filled with helium balloons. She raised her eyes to the sky. *I hate him.*

Arthur stood in front of her and held his hand out to help her up. Then,

without hanging around for the break he'd promised her, he started to walk back to camp. At least he was purposely walking slowly for her benefit. Her entire body felt stiff and sore. Moving her legs took a tremendous effort.

After a few minutes of slow walking, Arthur turned and picked her up. Kyah yelped.

"What are you doing?" she shouted, though she liked that her legs were no longer moving.

"You can't even walk. You've been moaning every step of the way."

"Oh. I didn't even notice."

Arthur shook his head. "I've pushed you to your limits these past weeks. You've improved a great deal. But you are not one of my soldiers to train. You are not from my world. I'm sorry."

He looked a little angry, and Kyah realized he was angry with himself.

Okay, maybe I don't hate him.

"You're trying to help me so that I can defend myself. Hopefully." Thinking about her sore muscles, she added, "I'm just not what you would call athlete material."

"I'm responsible for your training," Arthur said curtly. "I should know better. No more training for today. We will take a day or two to rest."

She was about to say more but decided to keep her mouth shut. He didn't seem to be in a chatty mood and taking a break sounded great.

When they reached camp, Arthur instructed her to change into something that she could swim in.

Limping over to her pack, she went behind a tree to change, unable to stop herself moaning as she walked. She changed into a dark shift.

Coming out from behind the tree, Kyah stopped dead in her tracks.

Arthur was in what looked like boxer briefs.

She clamped her mouth closed before he noticed it hanging open and reddened. But, boy, he was lovely to look at.

He's looking at me oddly. Thinking he might actually be looking at something behind her, she glanced back in case there was something odd going on back there. *Nope. Nothing.* Turning back, she raised an eyebrow in a silent

question.

“Get in the water,” he barked.

Okay...and we're back to our regularly scheduled programming.

She approached the edge of the lake and stood on the little beach.

Arthur came and joined her. “Don’t swim. Just try to float. Floating in the water will help to relax your muscles and help with the stiffness.”

Well, thanks for that information, buddy. Would have been nice to know sooner.

Seeing the look on her face, Arthur crossed his arms. “Typically, when training soldiers, we don’t encourage this too often in order to help them get stronger faster. My mistake again.” He shook his head and then waved his hand at the water. “I’ll watch so you don’t drown.”

“Great. Thanks.”

She waded into the water, thankful that the lake wasn’t freezing. She strode out until her feet couldn’t touch the bottom anymore and started to float. She gazed up at the sky. With her ears under water, everything was drowned out. She closed her eyes and started to relax.

This is heavenly.

Her sore muscles were loosening up one by one. There was no one barking at her to ‘tighten her form’ or ‘watch her weak spots’ or ‘pay attention to her footing.’ It had been a grueling few weeks.

Kyah was beginning to think that ogres were the better option.

Arthur was a brutal and relentless taskmaster when it came to her training. But she had to admit to herself that she was proud of what she had accomplished with his help so far. No one had ever pushed her so much.

He never faltered, even when she could tell he was losing patience with her. He just kept telling her, ‘Believe you can do it and you will.’ She told herself that he must believe in her at least a little bit not to have thrown in the towel by now.

The thought made her smile. *I should thank him sometime soon.*

Kyah began to feel numb. She’d never felt so relaxed.

Next thing she knew, she was swallowing water. Her eyes snapped open. She was underwater! Panicking, she clawed at the lake.

Her hand came into contact with something and, the next moment, she was being dragged up to the surface by her elbows.

Coughing, sputtering and digging her fingers into flesh, she clung on. Someone was talking. Then a hand was on her head, stroking her hair. She calmed down.

Finally steady enough for the world around her to register, she realized that Arthur was towing her to shore. When they reached the beach, he picked her up, and her arms and legs wrapped around him like a vice. She was so close she could hear his heart beating in his chest.

Arthur carried her to camp and put her down gently.

Kyah stood with a wobble, staring at a spot on his chest, her mind blank.

She heard Arthur's voice as though it were coming from far away. "I'm going to build a fire so you can get warm."

He led her over to her bedroll and wrapped a blanket tight around her.

The next morning, Kyah felt like she had been steamrolled by a polar bear.

She moaned and tried to roll over. Something blocked her. She turned her head to see what it was and came face to face with Arthur. Luckily, he was fast asleep. She slowly turned her head back. She felt a weight on her waist and looked down to find his bare arm there.

Squeezing her eyes shut for a second, she lifted up the blankets to check that she was fully clothed. She let out a little sigh of relief. *That wouldn't make things awkward or anything.*

She recalled Arthur building a fire, helping her change, and then hand-feeding her some food. Finally, he had let her lie down. What had been wrong with her? It was like her brain had shut off. *Did I really fall asleep in the lake?*

"Idiot," she whispered.

Although lying next to Arthur felt nice, very nice if she was honest, she had to move. The longer she just lay there, the more awkward it would be when he woke up. Besides, he was just helping her so he could get Excalibur back. Right?

Nodding firmly to herself, she squirmed out from under Arthur's arm and

rolled up onto her feet. As quietly as she could, she padded over to her sack and rummaged around for clean clothes, glancing at Arthur every few seconds to make sure he wasn't waking up.

Tiptoeing over to a bush, she changed and resolved to spend some time hand-washing all her clothes.

Hearing a buzzing, she glanced up from tying her tunic. Naieem flew into view.

"Arthur was worried about you," she tinkled.

Kyah rolled her eyes. "He was just worried that he wouldn't be able to complete his quest if something happened to me."

Naieem tsked. She shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't think that's it."

Kyah sighed. She walked out from behind the bushes and found Arthur standing there. He had a sword in his hand and was looking seriously pissed. *Uh oh.*

"Just what do you think you're doing?" he shouted at her.

She jerked back like she had just been slapped. "I was just changing into clean clothes."

Arthur looked her up and down. He stormed over to his pack, snatched it up, stalked over to the trees and disappeared.

"Good morning to you too," snapped Kyah. "What's his problem?"

Naieem fluttered right in front of her nose. "Like I said, he was worried about you."

"Okay, but he doesn't have to be a jerk about it. Geesh."

"Kyah." Naieem folded her arms again.

Uh oh. Here comes a lecture.

"Everyone in Arthur's life is essentially gone or not who they used to be. Even before his battle with Mordred, he lost his mother and father. His sister is lost to the darkness and his wife is banished. Any friends he did have here are likely gone as well. Arthur can be rude and angry but he is loyal. He would give his life for any of his friends. You are one of those friends now. He owes you a great debt and would willingly die trying to repay it. Do not mock that."

“Oh. Right,” whispered Kyah.

It was the first time she’d considered that Arthur might need a friend as much as she did.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



The rest of their journey passed without incident, with Kyah getting fitter and stronger every day. By the time they made camp next to a lake a day's ride from Camelot, she felt ready to face anything.

That night, they ate dinner in silence. Arthur seemed tense, and she decided it was best not to provoke him.

The next day, he was even more on edge.

"We will reach Camelot tomorrow," he said abruptly when she had finished eating breakfast. "We need to infiltrate the town."

"What?" Kyah said.

Arthur stared at her and sighed. "We can't just enter the town in broad daylight as we are. We have to wear disguises and sneak in."

"But why?" Kyah said.

"I don't want anyone recognizing me," he responded.

"Do you really think any of your friends are still in town?" she said without thinking.

Arthur's lips thinned and his face went a little pale. He got up and busied himself putting the supplies away and getting the horses ready for the ride.

Kyah bit her lip, at a loss for words. She didn't know what else to do, so she started cleaning up camp. Naieem fluttered over to her shoulder.

"I can't believe I said that," Kyah said.

"Some things can't be helped. Just try and be supportive. It's no wonder

Arthur is anxious. He doesn't know what he's walking into."

Kyah nodded, still feeling bad that she had spoken so carelessly.

She glanced over at Arthur. He seemed to be lost in thought, but at least the thin-lipped look was gone. *I have a feeling it's going to be a very long day.*

They mounted and raced off, leaving the tranquility of the lakeside camp behind. Kyah gave a silent farewell to the lake, wondering if Nymue might possibly hear her. It comforted her to think of the Lady of the Lake as connected to all the lakes in this realm. The thought put a smile on her face. The road ahead was going to be tougher than she had imagined, and she needed the comfort.

Arthur was silent the entire day.

Leaving him to brood, Kyah took in their surroundings as they rode through the beautiful countryside. They stayed off the main road that Arthur had told her led to Camelot. He seemed to be taking them on a meandering path to avoid them being spotted.

They rode toward mammoth mountains that just kept getting bigger and bigger as they approached. Eventually, they were forced to ride close to the road.

Arthur held up his hand. He was still for a moment then quickly dismounted.

"Get down," he whispered with some urgency.

She dismounted and followed where he led. Hidden by trees and brush, they hunkered down to see who was passing on the road.

Kyah was sure they would be noticed. Her heart was beating fast and she could hear her own breathing. She focused on the breathing technique Arthur had taught her and worked on slowing her breaths down.

Arthur caught her at it and gave her a glimpse of a smile and a nod.

Well, finally, he's come to life!

As they crouched there, a long line of wooden wagons with cloth tops approached. *A gypsy caravan?*

All the wagons were decorated in a mish-mash of colors. They clanged as they went as pots and pans banged together. There was stuff hanging from every available space. The noise was starting to give Kyah a headache.

They stayed hidden until the caravan passed.

Kyah turned her head to say something to Arthur but he shook his head

sharply, his face pointed in the direction the caravan had come from. *He's waiting for something.*

Sure enough, it wasn't long until a group of men strode by. Kyah stifled a gasp. They wore the same kind of black armor as the Dark Knights who had attacked the village, and they seemed to form an escort around someone in the center of their group.

A figure wearing flowing, black robes.

As they passed, the robed figure slowed and glanced to either side of the road. Whipping off the hood, it turned out to be a woman with shiny, jet black hair woven into an intricate braid. She had very light eyes. Either blue or purple. Kyah couldn't tell from where she crouched. She tried to see between the knights without being spotted herself.

A deep purple dress peeked out from underneath the woman's black robe. Atop her head sat a delicate, silver circlet.

Must be somebody important.

The lovely lady and her guard continued without stopping, the woman eventually putting her hood back up.

Once they had passed by, Kyah glanced at Arthur. He was staring at the road as if in a trance.

Kyah put a hand on his shoulder. "Arthur? Are you all right?"

He jerked as if he was, in fact, coming out of trance. He shook his head slightly and, without a word, rose, gathered the horses and walked away from the road.

They walked for a while until Kyah decided she had had enough of the silent treatment. "I think we've walked far enough away from the road don't you?"

Arthur stopped, turned and stalked back to Kyah, grabbing her chin and jerking it up so she couldn't do anything else but look at him.

She waited, breathless.

When Arthur spoke, his voice was deadly serious. "We could never be far enough away from that woman. She is deceptive, deadly and heartless. She will stop at nothing to get what she wants. Do you understand?"

She nodded and he dropped his hand from her face.

Slowly, she reached up to touch her jaw to make sure it wasn't dislocated.

Arthur winced.

"Who is she?" Kyah managed to ask.

"My half-sister, Morgana le Fay."

"Oh, whoa. Well, looks like we found her."

Arthur nodded. "We need to scout the town. We'll have to get larger cloaks to hide our weapons under and conceal our faces. It would appear something is going on, maybe a festival of some kind. If so, luck's on our side. Blending in will be much easier with all the strangers in town."

Kyah nodded, but something was bothering her. "Isn't Morgana a witch of some kind?"

Arthur nodded. "She is a dark druid, which is far worse than any witch."

"Dark druid? I've never heard of such a thing." She scowled at the look on Arthur's face. "Okay, fine, I don't know anything about druids at all. Except stories which seem to be all about druids being one with nature."

Arthur smirked.

"So, educate me!" she said, frustrated.

The King relented and started talking.

Apparently, in general, druids were inherently neutral parties who worked within the boundaries of nature. They tended toward nurturing and healing practices, as these were of most use.

It was rare, but after many, many years of training, it was possible that a new druid would go it alone and turn dark, for reasons unknown.

Arthur had never understood what tempted Morgana to take up a life of darkness. "I only know that she waged war upon me and could not be reasoned with. Morgana was consumed by a lust for power—a frightening amount of power. We feared that Camelot was only the beginning for her. No amount of power will satisfy her in the end."

Arthur stared ahead. "Her wrath toward me will be great. I killed her son, Mordred. She will seek vengeance."

He stopped again for a minute and then turned to look at Kyah's shoulder. She realized he was looking for Naieem, who peeked out from behind her hair.

“It is curious, though, to see her walking with the Dark Knights,” Arthur said, addressing the faery. “She never used to travel with a group. Is it possible her power has diminished?”

Naieem fluttered between Arthur and Kyah so they could both hear her. “She expended a great deal of energy before the battle with Merlin, gathering Mordred’s army to battle you and your knights. She was also severely diminished after her battle with Merlin. It is possible that her dark powers are broken.”

“How can her powers be broken?” Kyah asked.

“Although powerful, dark magic is fragile. It’s like a delicate palace of glass built up over time, over layers of ritual and sacrifice. When Merlin fought her, it was his intent to drain her. She would have had very little power left after their battle.”

“Why didn’t he kill her?” asked Kyah, a quiver in her voice. She was a bit shocked to find herself talking about killing people so easily.

“It’s not the druid way,” Naieem said. “Willful killing leads you down a dark path. Merlin walks the line between light and dark. An act like that would push him over that line. A line he is not willing to cross for anyone.” The faery paused. “It would be very scary indeed if Merlin followed the darkness.”

Naieem shivered and fluttered back to Kyah’s shoulder, putting her hand on her neck as if to find comfort there.

Kyah put her hand to her shoulder and the faery touched it.

“Keep your eyes open,” she whispered. “Morgana le Fay is a master manipulator and a master of disguise as well. Arthur does you a service by giving you such a severe warning. She is a true servant of the darkness.”

Kyah turned to Arthur, who still had that haunted look on his face.

“That is why I must kill her,” he stated in a cold, stilted voice.

They mounted and continued in the direction of Camelot.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



They made camp for the night in the woods away from the road. The next morning, they crested a hill that gave them an incredible view of the castle and the surrounding town.

For Kyah, it was as if she had stepped right into a storybook. “It’s beautiful.”

The castle was a bright, shiny structure. It had the look and feel of an enormous beacon of light, visible for miles.

Arthur explained that though the castle was a work of art, it also had structure and purpose. It was both a fairytale vision and a strategic military stronghold.

From where Kyah was standing, she could make out garden plots sprinkled throughout the castle’s interior grounds, as well as park-like areas outside the castle walls, positioned throughout the surrounding town.

“It’s amazing,” Kyah said.

Arthur nodded. “I designed it so that the people would be able to grow their own food, either inside the castle in times of siege or outside the grounds every day. The castle gardens provide all the food for the castle residents and servants, so it’s not dependent on taking food away from the people of the town.”

“It’s just so pretty,” Kyah said, her gaze still roaming over everything.

Arthur nodded again. “My Queen had her say in the design of the castle as well.”

Kyah turned her head slightly, hoping to get a glimpse of his mood. He

looked the same as he had ever since they had left the part of the road where they had seen Morgana. Resigned but determined.

Arthur remained silent, staring intently at the town and the castle as though searching for something.

“What do you see?” asked Kyah

“I’m not sure. From here, the castle and the grounds look much the same as when we marched off to battle. Some of the grounds look a little improved. Other things look like they have been neglected.” He pointed to the town. “See that building with the bright red, tiled roof?”

Seeing as it was by far the brightest, standing out amongst the grey and brown roofs of the town, Kyah couldn’t miss it. She nodded at Arthur to continue.

“Leading up to the battle with Mordred, my knights and I would meet there to discuss battle plans and strategy. We would meet in secret. There were far too many spies in the castle itself. Merlin would meet me there as well to give me news of the rest of the lands.”

“Okay. What about it, then?”

“I think it's time to go into town and see if any of my old friends and supporters are still alive. We can only hope that there are some still about who will help us.”

Naieem fluttered around them. “Let me scout ahead— Hopefully, I can find out about who the current rulers are and the condition of the town. I should be back by noon time.”

Arthur nodded, and she zipped off.

“We need to be careful,” whispered Kyah. “Something seems off. I mean, I see people down there. But it’s kind of quiet, don’t you think?”

Arthur gave her a slow nod. “I was thinking that as well. It is odd. We will head back into the trees and wait for news from Naieem.”

Lunchtime came and went. They were still waiting when the sun’s last rays disappeared from the sky and dusk descended.

Kyah paced back and forth across the small area where they waited, pausing every two rounds to stare up the hill where Naieem had last been with them, hoping to see her flitter into view.

“That isn’t helping. Please sit down,” commanded Arthur.

“Well, I’m worried. Your Camelot is beautiful and all, but right now I’m kind of creeped out.”

“‘Creeped’ out?” repeated Arthur slowly, clearly not understanding the expression.

Kyah sighed and sat down across from him. “Never mind.”

Before she had a chance to get comfortable, Arthur handed her oil and a whetstone to sharpen and polish Excalibur with.

She looked at it with her eyebrows raised. *Really?*

Arthur shrugged. “As a warrior, you need to learn to distract your mind with everyday tasks. It’s a far better alternative to thinking about all the possible ways to die in battle. It calms the mind.”

Kyah gave a sober nod, but also felt a small smile tug at her lips at Arthur calling her a warrior. She took the oil and stone and worked Excalibur the way that Arthur had taught her. She did feel connected with the sword when she was sparring with Arthur during training, but there were no other feelings and no voices.

Remembering that Nymue had said to ask Arthur about his experience with Excalibur when he was ready, she studied him for a moment. “So, remember the day I took Excalibur?”

Arthur just looked at her like she was a total dumbass.

That’s a word I’ll keep to myself. I think Arthur would find a way to use it on me regularly.

She cleared her throat. “Well, I was just wondering what it was like for you when you had the sword. The Lady of the Lake said to ask you about it sometime.”

Arthur nodded. “To the trained and experienced warrior, Excalibur is a great weapon. But she is also more than that. In times of real danger, where death seems imminent, she will make herself known by enhancing your skills or giving

you extra strength or clarity of mind. That was how Excalibur worked for me when I wielded her. I am not sure what your experience will be.”

“You have been very understanding about me having the sword now. It must be hard. I didn’t truly understand what was being asked of me at the time.”

Arthur sighed and nodded again. “The fault lies with me. Towards the end, Excalibur was no longer with me. She was just a sword. I had lost her. I was so consumed with rage, paranoia and fear that I could no longer hear her. So, she left.”

By this time, it was completely dark. Looking up, Kyah saw that the stars had decided to come out.

Ever since they’d come to this realm, Kyah had noticed that everything seemed brighter. The light was softer, more inviting if that was possible. And the sun always seemed huge in the bright blue sky. Her gaze wandered down from the night sky to the top of the hill again.

There was a flittering speck bouncing their way rather quickly.

“It’s Naieem! She’s back!”

Standing up and smoothly sliding Excalibur back into the scabbard on her back, Kyah was about to start running to meet her when she felt Arthur put a hand on her shoulder. She halted mid-stride.

“Wait,” he said in a low tone. “Something isn’t right.”

Rooted to the spot, she shifted from foot to foot, eager to see that Naieem was okay and find out why she had been gone for so long.

Finally, Naieem flittered to a stop and hovered before them. Instinctively, Kyah put her hand out, and Naieem unceremoniously plopped into her palm.

Arthur pulled Kyah farther back into the trees and pulled them down into a crouch.

Taking her eyes off of Naieem, who was not looking at all like herself, Kyah turned her gaze up the hill to see what Arthur was staring at. The crest of the hill was now occupied by two still figures encased in darkness. Dark Knights.

Hearing only her heartbeat, she stared as the Dark Knights were joined by a figure all in white. It was a woman with waist-long, blonde, curly hair and a crown on her head. Arthur stiffened.

The sounds of them talking reached her, but it was just jumbled voices. Then the woman in white turned, walked back toward the other side of the hill and quickly disappeared. The Dark Knights waited only a moment after she had left before they turned and followed her.

Only after they had gone did Kyah let go of the breath she'd been holding. She sat down in a cross-legged position and took a good look at Naieem.

The faery looked like she was meditating. She had a pearlescent glow about her, but her skin was sallow. Kyah crinkled her brow.

She jumped when Arthur whispered so close to her ear that she could feel his breath. "She'll be fine. She's recovering her energy. Something must have happened in town."

Thank you, Captain Obvious.

As she watched, Naieem's skin brightened in increments. In just a matter of minutes, she was looking normal again.

The faery slowly opened her eyes.

She smiled as she looked up at Kyah. "Thank you, Kyah. Your kindness and concern have aided my quick recovery."

"Oh," said Kyah, not understanding what Naieem meant. "Well, I'm not sure how I did that. But you're welcome."

"I can take energy from other magical creatures when I need to."

Somewhat startled at being called a 'magical creature,' Kyah gaped at her. "I can share my energy with you? I didn't know I could do that to help you. You should have told me before."

Naieem tinkled out a laugh and shook her head. "No, silly. Your energies get released into the universe. Since I'm so close to you right now, I can use them before they go elsewhere."

Oh.

Naieem looked at Arthur. He'd positioned himself practically on Kyah's back so he could look over her shoulder.

"Not everything is as it seems in Camelot, Arthur. I am sorry to have caused you to worry, but I stayed because I had a bad feeling. I saw nothing overtly strange in the activities of the town. But the humans were not quite as boisterous

and noisy as they normally are. Also, there weren't as many humans as there should be."

Naieem went on to explain that she had traveled from roof to roof, staying within the shadows. The closer she had come to the castle, the stranger things had become. There were even fewer people, and, finally, the faery had realized what else was missing.

"The reason the town wasn't as noisy as you would expect was that there were no children playing and shouting in the streets. I saw no sign of children anywhere."

"Oh no," whispered Kyah.

Naieem nodded with a grave expression on her face. Arthur continued to maintain a rigid silence.

He knows something.

Naieem's flight had ended at the edge of town. Her sights had been set on the Gypsy camp, where she could see the bright colors of the tents going up. Beyond the colored tents there was an open field being set up for a tournament, complete with stands for onlookers.

As the sun had gone past the noon hour, Naieem had held her position in the shadow of one of the closest tents to the open field. Here she had watched as people from both the town and the castle made their way over. And as the sun had started to dip and the torches had been lit around the arena, a crowd had finally filled the stands.

"What was odd about this crowd was the silence. The only sound was the shuffling of feet as people made their way to their seats," the faery said. "The more I watched, the more overwhelming the sense of wrongness felt. It was making my wings itch."

Kyah raised her eyebrows at this revelation. *Good to know.*

As Naieem had continued to watch, the crowd had become even more silent and still. She had known then that something very wrong was about to happen.

Children had been brought out in chains and positioned in the open area so that they were facing the crowd. They had all been filthy, the chains so large that some could barely walk or stand up straight. All the children had been painfully

thin and obviously suffering, but not one had made a sound.

After the children had been brought out, the master of ceremonies had stepped up to the main platform to stand behind a podium, facing the crowd. The platform had an ornate throne positioned on it that was light in color, almost white. He had announced that Her Majesty The Queen was in attendance and that all were to rise.

Everyone had risen in silence when the Queen had entered, dressed all in white and with a large golden crown on her head.

Naieem looked at Arthur. "Arthur, I don't know how this could be, but it was Guinevere. And that's who was on the hill just now."

Arthur remained silent, but Kyah could feel him breathe heavier at her back.

The faery clenched her tiny fists. "What I saw next is something I will never un-see for as long as I live. Queen Guinevere announced that they had selected two participants to pay the town tax."

Naieem explained that a hysterical woman had then entered the field, wielding a sword she could barely hold. Keeping it at waist level, she had faced off against one of the Dark Knights.

"The Queen then announced that if the winner of the bout was a taxpayer, they would be able to select a child to return to the village." Naieem stopped talking for a minute, unable to continue.

"The Dark Knight slaughtered the woman," said Arthur in clipped tones, as though saying it hurt his jaw.

Naieem nodded. "The other participant was a man; he also lost." She took a shaky breath. "At the end of the two bouts, the Queen was joined by Morgana on the main viewing platform. Guinevere nodded at Morgana from her throne and Morgana walked down the field to the line of children. She walked slowly along the line until she stopped in front of a little girl. Then she placed her hand on the child's head and the girl collapsed to the ground."

Naieem stopped again but managed to continue. "She did the same with a boy. I do not know if they live. Several robed figures came forth to remove the chains and carry them off toward the castle."

"What did she do to them?" whispered Kyah, tears falling down her face.

“I think Morgana was stealing their energy. Children have a tremendous amount of energy.” The faery choked on her next words. “Only someone full of darkness would take a child’s energy. The children may yet live, but in a deep sleep that they can’t wake themselves from.”

“We have to go in,” said Arthur.

He stood up and started preparing to leave.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Winding their way through town a few hours before midnight, Kyah could only think about how tired she was. The more she thought of a bed, the more achy and tired she became. She was grateful that they were making quick progress towards the inn. So far, they had been able to wander through town without incident and no one had accosted them.

Before they had broken camp, Kyah had asked Naieem how it was that the Dark Knights had come to follow her.

“After Morgana stole the last boy’s energy, she turned as if looking for something and looked right at me, almost as if she could sense me there. Several Dark Knights turned and looked at me as well. When they started to move toward me, I flew here as fast as I could. They were following me pretty closely. I only lost them on the hill, when I made it into the woods.”

Naieem had paused as if she wasn’t sure she could say out loud what she was thinking. *Who knew faeries could fidget?*

“It’s all right. You can tell us, whatever it is. We probably need to hear it,” Kyah had said to her.

Naieem had nodded and stopped fidgeting. “Morgana could sense me because of the energy of the innocent coursing through her body.”

At this point, Kyah had objected and said she and Arthur were able to see her.

“The faery only make themselves known to those we want to see us,”

Naieem had explained. “The innocent, however, can always see us.”

Kyah had sensed that she was shaken by this. “So what is it?”

“If Morgana can see the faery folk, she can capture them and take their energy too. If that happens, this realm will surely be destroyed. She will be unstoppable.”

Naieem had said this with such conviction that it had filled Kyah with a sense of impending doom.

They came to a halt, and Kyah’s attention was dragged back to the present. They had stopped in front of the old tavern with the red roof that Arthur had frequented in his previous life at Camelot.

“Arthur,” Kyah whispered, “maybe this isn’t such a good idea. What if the wrong person recognizes you? They could turn us in to Morgana for all we know!”

Hidden under his hood, she couldn’t make out his face when he turned to her.

“We must go in. If the innkeeper and the others are still alive, I’m sure they will offer us help.” He paused and stared at the building. “I think we are going to need it.”

Kyah sighed. “Okay, then. But we can’t use your real name, for goodness sake, and we need to try to keep your face hidden.”

“Fine.”

Super.

Being inside a building after living outside for a month felt a little claustrophobic. They weaved their way through the throng of people, and Kyah tried to calm her nerves.

Though people were talking and drinking, there was definitely a somber mood to the entire bar. It was definitely not as loud as a place like this should have been.

Arthur found a dark corner where they could remain somewhat hidden from the crowd while being able to see the entire bar. They had full view of the front door and a direct route to a side exit if they needed to get out quick.

Somebody’s done this a bunch of times.

Giving Arthur a glance, she understood for the first time that this man’s

previous life here had not been his own. He had lived most of it dealing with the constant threat of danger.

She looked down at the table. *That's no kind of life at all.*

Looking back up, she saw a rather round, balding man heading for their table. He plopped two tall mugs down, spilling frothy ale over the tops.

He glanced first at Arthur and then at Kyah. Arthur hunched over. He seemed somehow smaller with his hood up.

Clearing her throat, Kyah held the man's gaze. "Do you have stew and bread?"

The man tilted his head, nodded once and left.

"Good job," whispered Naieem.

"It's the only thing I could think of," whispered Kyah.

The ale was the strongest alcohol she had ever tasted. Coughing into her hand a little, she considered asking for water but decided against it, imagining the sanitary conditions at an establishment like this. Choking down the ale, she noticed that Arthur was doing the same, minus the coughing.

"Did you recognize him?" she asked.

"Yes," Arthur grunted. "He had hair last I knew him. He's rounder now too."

The man returned with stew and bread, all of which smelled wonderful to Kyah.

"Thank you," she said.

The man nodded but glanced at Arthur again before going back to the kitchens.

"You need to keep your face hidden better," Kyah said. "I think he might have recognized you. That's the second time he's paused at our table."

"Don't worry about Gregory—we want him to recognize me," Arthur said. "He's loyal."

"Things change and people change," Kyah retorted. "I wouldn't put any eggs in anyone's basket here."

Arthur glanced at her with a smirk. "Eggs in a basket?"

Kyah just shook her head and sighed.

"Sir Galahad would say similar things. Always a riddle with that one,"

Arthur said, his voice far away.

Gazing down at her bowl, Kyah cleared her throat. "All right, eat up. Who knows when we'll be able to eat next?"

"Next time Gregory comes to the table, ask about a room for the night," said Arthur.

Kyah just looked at him.

Arthur shook his head slightly. "Relax. No one knows or cares who we are. We also can't afford to be separated right now. We don't know what Morgana is doing."

Kyah nodded and proceeded to devour her food like she'd never eaten a day in her life.

When Gregory came back for their dishes, Kyah was able to secure a room for the night. This time, he didn't look at either of them, making Kyah a little suspicious.

"Keep your guard up, folks. Something's up," she whispered.

Arthur grunted and kept scanning the crowd.

"Have you recognized anyone else?" she asked.

Arthur gave a quick shake of his head.

The door to the inn burst open and two Dark Knights walked in. They glanced around the room as if looking for someone.

Gregory approached the men and they appeared to have a stilted conversation, Gregory shaking his head at them several times.

The knights looked around one last time and left. Gregory walked back to the kitchen without stopping at anyone's table.

Funny. Kyah had noticed that the inn owner's usual behavior was to stop and chat with various townspeople on his way to and from the kitchens.

A serving girl came out of the kitchen, holding a tray with two mugs of ale on it. She made her way over to their table.

She put the mugs down, keeping her eyes on the table, and spoke in a whisper, barely moving her lips. "Gregory says that supplies are in your room. You cannot stay here or you will be dead by morning. Make your way to the Gypsy camp. No one will look for you there." With that, she walked away.

Arthur grabbed his ale, downed it and stood.

Kyah followed him up to their room where, true to the serving girl's word, there were two burlap sacks. Taking a peek, she found them full of dried meats, some bread and a bunch of apples.

Arthur took the bags, tied them together and slipped them over his shoulder, like saddlebags.

He marched over to the window, opened it and stuck his head out.

"Well," said Kyah, standing there with her arms crossed over her chest, "you aren't seriously thinking of climbing out that window, are you?"

Arthur silently walked by her on his way to the bed and ripped off the sheets. He tied them together, secured one end to the bedpost and threw the makeshift rope out the window.

No way!

Kyah was still shaking her head when he marched over and grabbed her hand.

"We're going out the back door," he announced, leading her out the room and down the hallway to a darkened stairwell.

"I can't see," whispered Kyah.

"Just walk carefully like you did down the cliff stairs," said Arthur. "Just faster this time," he added.

Kyah made a face at his back and blindly followed him down the stairs to a wooden door.

The back entry into the kitchens stood just to the right of the exit. Kyah followed Arthur's glance. She could tell he wanted to go in and see his old friend.

He shook his head and slowly cracked open the door to the outside world. Once he'd checked it was all clear, they bolted out of the inn and ran full-tilt toward the stables. Kyah saddled her horse faster than she had thought possible.

Under Arthur's instruction, she tied pieces of burlap sack to Fire's hooves, then, instead of mounting, they simply walked their horses out of the stable. Arthur turned and put his fingers up to his lips as they exited the stable.

As Naieem guided them forward, it was obvious how strange the town was

as it was eerily quiet for such a large town. No one was out and about with the exception of patrolling groups of Dark Knights

They made painfully slow progress through town having to slip down dark alleys and hustle down shadowy side streets to avoid the patrols. They finally reached the last building at the edge of town when they paused before making a dash across an open field toward the Gypsy camp.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



They were weaving through the tents and caravans, a mind-boggling combination of colors and patterns all around them, when Arthur stopped abruptly.

Kyah smacked into his back nose-first. “Ow. Why are you...?”

Peeking around Arthur’s arm, she saw a figure standing in front of one of the more plain tents surrounding them.

It was a person dressed all in white. Kyah straightened, thinking for a second it might be Guinevere, but as the figure approached, she realized it couldn’t be. They had a knobby, wooden staff in their hand, complete with leaves actually growing on it, and their walk seemed familiar to her, though she wasn’t sure why.

She felt Arthur relax into a fighting stance next to her, so she did the same.

A gnarled hand reached out of the white robe and removed the hood, revealing an incredibly aged but familiar face.

“Pan?” she whispered incredulously.

Pan gave her a secretive smile. His eyes twinkled and sparkled. *It’s really him!*

“I see our mutual friends at the Red Roof Inn have assisted you,” he said. “I will send a group to check on them.”

He looked to his left and motioned with his hand. A group of men and women materialized out of the darkness and took off toward town. He turned

and motioned for them to follow him into the tent he'd been standing in front of.

Arthur directed a confused look at her. Kyah shrugged, and they followed Pan into the tent, leaving the horses outside.

Pan walked to the back of the tent, where a pile of large pillows acted as a seating area, and turned back to face them.

Kyah paused mid-step. He had transformed himself, and the rheumy, old man in white robes had been replaced with the face and form she was familiar with. He was still in robes, but these were more on the silvery side. *A little shiny for my taste but, hey, who can question the fashion sense of an Ancient Power?*

Arthur's step faltered, but he continued to follow Kyah through the tent. Taking Pan's lead, they sat on the pillows, and Pan directed a blatant stare at Arthur.

Kyah cleared her throat in the awkward silence. "Arthur, this is Pan. He is the one who helped me find you in the Traveller Way Station." Kyah moved her gaze slowly back and forth between the two.

Arthur nodded at Pan. When he spoke, it was haltingly, in a low voice, as if it were hard for him. "Many thanks, Pan. I am in your debt."

Pan continued to stare at him for several beats.

Kyah rolled her eyes. *I think he's purposely trying to make us uncomfortable.*

Pan burst out laughing and glanced at Kyah appreciatively. "You seem to know me very well, Traveller."

Kyah stiffened. *Was he reading my mind?*

She was about to accuse him of it when Pan sat up in a cross-legged position, a serious look coming over his face. The lights in the tent flickered.

"Morgana and Guinevere have committed a great crime here that needs to be addressed by the keeper of this realm," Pan said authoritatively, looking at Arthur. "It is fortuitous that the Traveller has joined us at this time. It would appear the Fates are with us." Pan gave her a nod.

The look he gave her was somewhat fatherly and, dare she say it, peppered with respect. Not used to being given respect, Kyah felt herself sit up a little taller and nod back. A small smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

"Have you found out what it is Morgana is planning and what she's been

doing here?” asked Arthur

Pan nodded grimly and explained how Morgana and Guinevere had come to team up. Guinevere had been bitter and resentful that her life at Camelot had been taken from her and that she had to live out her life in the convent. Her exile had fuelled her hatred, and she had sworn revenge on everything Arthur loved. Morgana, the walking darkness, had been drawn to this profound hatred and made her way to the convent. On her way, she had gathered followers who were susceptible to her kind of dark influence.

Arthur nodded at this. “The Dark Knights.”

Pan returned Arthur’s nod and continued.

With the help of her followers, Morgana had struck the convent down, murdered all the inhabitants and taken Guinevere away with her. Bonding over their hatred of Arthur, they had manipulated and murdered their way back into Camelot, and Guinevere had claimed the throne.

Morgana had influenced the Royal Advisory Council through threats, intimidation and torture, and eventually there were none left to oppose them.

Then things in town changed. Within a year, the Queen imposed heavy taxes that were impossible for the townspeople to pay. If someone couldn’t pay in coin, then their food was taken, then their livelihoods and, finally, their children.

“Do you think that the children can be woken from their induced sleep?” asked Kyah, her eyes as round as saucers at all this talk of murder and torture.

Pan nodded. “I believe that they could eventually recover the energy that was stolen. But they are lost to us until Morgana is gone. We believe Morgana will remove Guinevere when she is no longer necessary, seize Camelot and eventually take over all of Avalon. Those would be dark and terrible days for all the inhabitants of the realm. If she gets her way and reaches the level of power she desires—it will have repercussions across all the realms.” Pan gave Kyah a meaningful look. “It would be up to you and those like you to fix that mess.”

Kyah could only manage an ‘Oh.’

“I assume, since you’re here amongst the Gypsies and you’ve been watching this unfold, that you’ve been formulating a plan,” Arthur said.

Pan straightened up and his demeanor transformed as he shed this older,

wiser persona for his younger, preening self.

He offered the King a big smile, a twinkle in his eye. “Well, of course! I am so glad you are so astute!”

Pan stood with a flourish, and the lights in the tent returned to normal as he walked over to a table.

He turned and gave them an exasperated look. “Well, come over to the table then, children.”

Kyah and Arthur glanced at each other. Naieem just giggled, fluttering over from Kyah’s shoulder to stand on the table in front of Pan.

Pan greeted her with a formal half bow. “Greetings, Princess Naieem.”

Naieem twittered something that made Pan smile as if they were old friends.

Who knows in this place?

Coming over to join them, Kyah saw drawings of the castle all over the table, complicated blueprints she would never have expected to see in this realm.

“These are so detailed,” she said looking at Pan.

“Thank you,” said Arthur.

She turned to Arthur. “You drew these?”

Arthur nodded absently, staring at the table as if caught up in his own thoughts.

“Our King Arthur has many talents,” proclaimed Pan with a flourish of his hands over the blueprints. “He was rigorously trained by Merlin in engineering and architecture, as well as the arts.”

“How did you get these?” Arthur whispered.

“Well, I stole them, naturally,” said Pan, speaking as if Arthur were a buffoon, despite having just stated how brilliant he was.

“I had them hidden away in my study, in my bedchamber,” Arthur said.

“I *also* have many talents, and can be very persuasive,” Pan said with a glint in his eye.

Arthur squeezed his eyes shut as if trying to shut out the picture this conjured up. “I don’t want to know any more details of how you stole them.”

“Are you sure? It is a brilliant tale of intrigue and seduction, if I do say so myself.”

Inferring from this that Pan had possibly seduced Arthur's wife or half-sister, Kyah decided to interrupt before Arthur worked his way into a hissy fit of kingly proportions. "What is your plan, Pan? And stop irritating Arthur."

Pan smirked at Kyah's firmness. "You are no fun." He glanced back down at the drawings before regarding the three of them. "It is a simple plan. We sneak into the castle, imprison Guinevere, remove Morgana once and for all, and free the children and townspeople."

Kyah just looked at him. "And we are going to do this all how?"

"That is why I'm here with the Gypsies. They are at work within the castle as we speak. They will help us figure out how to capture Guinevere. We can then imprison her on another realm." Pan sighed. "Things are progressing quickly. I believe that Morgana has sensed a new presence, but she cannot place it. I think it will prompt her to take action, and soon. This is going to be messy and we are going to have to be quick on our feet."

He turned to Kyah. "You will have to get into the castle and act as a serving girl. You need to find the portal back to Elmiria to complete your quest."

Kyah closed her mouth, realizing it had been hanging open.

Arthur was looking at her with some concern.

"I'm okay," she said. "This is just a little weird for me is all."

Arthur didn't drop his stare and Kyah started to get fidgety. Glancing around, she saw everyone was wearing the same look.

What the...?

"Okay, did I miss something? Why are you all looking at me like that?"

"Kyah, you will be in the castle alone," chirped Naieem. "None of us can go with you. Morgana would sense my magic. She would recognize Arthur. They don't know you, so you are our only way out of here."

"Wait...wait...wait a minute...how come Pan can't just take us where we need to go? He's the one who's an Ancient Power and all that."

"I cannot directly interfere," Pan stated seriously. "The consequences of that would be far worse than what we are dealing with now." He looked past her and smiled. "Greetings. It's about time you joined us."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Kyah spun around and beheld Merlin standing there. He nodded at them all to continue.

Kyah took a breath. “So, your big plan is that I get to skulk around the castle playing maid while the rest of you do what exactly?”

Pan just smiled. “You will be there with the Gypsy folk, so you will return here in the evenings. And you will need to be careful; pretend that you are a mute. Your way of talking will give you away.”

“Oh.”

Despite all the things that had changed at Camelot, the trade agreement with traveling caravans was still in practice, Pan told them. As instigated under Arthur’s rule, they were allowed to camp outside the castle as long as they volunteered some of their time in service, as the castle could always use the extra help.

Arthur kept quiet as Pan laid out his plan—until the mention of Guinevere.

“What are we going to do about her?” he said, a note of sadness in his voice.

Merlin placed his hand on Arthur’s shoulder. “Her lot in life is not your fault, dear boy. She had a choice. Morgana manipulated it to her advantage, yes. But the choice was Guinevere’s to make.”

Arthur nodded in silence.

“We believe we can draw Guinevere out by teasing her with glimpses of you,” Merlin continued. “Just enough to push her over the edge. We hope that

she will confess these sightings to Morgana. So, either Morgana will murder Guinevere because Guinevere has seemingly lost her mind or Guinevere will seek out Arthur and we will take things from there.”

“What will you do with her?” whispered Kyah, looking at Arthur’s pinched face.

“We will put her in a deep healing sleep in a realm no one can travel to.” Pan paused. “Not even Travellers are allowed to wander into the realm of the gods. We will watch over her and see if she can heal herself of the darkness she has embraced. If not, we will have to take her essence and seal it away for eternity.”

Kyah blinked. “Okay, I’m not sure if I’m following this. Are you actually saying that Guinevere can’t die for some reason? So you have to store her... essence someplace?”

“Yes,” Pan said simply. “Stories are a product of thought, so they become part of the universe. These legends stay forever in the minds of the people and other beings that read and sing about them. So even if we did try to kill them, and, believe me, many have tried, it just cannot be done. In this way, we can at least control the essence of the legend so that no further harm can be done to the realm they occupy or, worse, to multiple other realms.”

“Oh,” Kyah said. It was all so confusing.

Naieem chimed in. “Don’t worry, Kyah. You’ll learn everything you need to know about our worlds when you get to the City of the Gods. We’re here to teach you too.” The faery gave a sweep of her hand to indicate the present company.

“All right, all right,” Kyah said. “So, when do I start work?”

“You will go in with a group of Gypsies in the morning. Like all the Gypsies, you’ll be assigned random duties throughout the day. Your tasks will take you to most parts of the castle. We hope that you’ll be able to see or sense something of what Morgana is up to. The servants are also very good observers. Try to get close to them. They know far more than any castle resident would like them to.”

Arthur smirked and nodded.

Pan continued. “You will work where you are assigned. You will tell us what you see at the end of every day.”

“So are the Gypsies in on this spying thing, then?”

Pan gave her a small, secretive smile. “Yes, they have agreed to help us.”

She felt as though he was keeping something from her, but she already had enough to wrap her head around. *Something to ask about later when I’m at this school in a whole new realm.*

Kyah tried to quell the butterflies in her stomach. “So, how come Morgana can’t sense that you, Merlin and Naieem are sitting right outside her back door? I mean, shouldn’t she be marching out here right now?”

“I am able to block my presence and the presence of those with me,” Pan stated. “I am allowed that little loophole because I am not supposed to interfere, remember?”

If playing seduction games in order to steal maps wasn’t interfering, Kyah wasn’t sure what was. But she decided to mind her mouth on that thought.

“What about me?” she said. “I can do some kind of Traveller magic, can’t I?”

Merlin cleared his throat. “You will be masked by the Gypsies. Gypsies are interesting in that their particular kind of magic is part of the realm that they reside in, so you can’t really pick up on it. It’s one of the reasons they are discriminated against and ridiculed in some realms. It is universal to fear what one does not understand.”

“Oh. Well, how will I be masked?”

“Pan and I will be talking to the Gypsy elders to come up with a good solution.”

Getting nervous at all this talk of ‘masking’, Kyah started to sweat. She wiped her forehead and looked at Merlin. He seemed sympathetic, but he was also smiling at her like a doting grandparent looks at a child who’s just spilled milk.

Curiosity crushing her anxiety, she asked, “What is it now?”

“Do not worry about the process, Kyah. The Gypsies have their simple ways. They will not change you or anything like your wild imagination is telling you. I believe they will give you something like an amulet or a piece of jewelry. You should wear it at all times. Even in this camp.”

“Oh.”

Kyah put her hands on the table, leaned in and sighed. Pan grunted out a laugh.

She glared at him. “I’m so glad you find this hilarious.”

Pan threw his hands up as if in surrender. “It is my nature to enjoy the mischief and mayhem in life. I am Pan, after all.”

She shook her head at the table. “Can I at least get some sleep before I am subjected to this masking amulet doohickey and then further subjected to being a maid for an evil Queen?”

Feeling dejected and overwhelmed, Kyah looked up to find Pan and Naieem giving her that worried expression again.

She shook her head and sighed again. “I’ll be fine. This is all just...it’s just a lot to absorb, okay? I would like to get some real sleep in a real bed before I have to face tomorrow.”

Pan nodded. Naieem prepared to launch into flight.

Kyah smiled at her faery friend. “Naieem, thank you for keeping me company for so long. But I think, just for tonight, I would like to be alone.”

Naieem seemed a little put out, but Kyah didn’t have the energy to feel bad about it. She felt as though if she didn’t get to a place away from people constantly watching her and worrying about her that she would lose her mind.

At that moment, two Gypsies entered the tent. They glanced at Pan, who nodded at Kyah. Without a word, she turned and followed them out toward another tent that was quilted in a variety of bright colors.

They left her to walk inside alone. There were actual nightclothes laid out and a steaming washbasin sat on the table next to the bed. The tent was simple, with a small, wooden table and chair atop a canvas laid out in an attempt to keep mud and dirt out. All in all, she wasn’t going to complain.

She sat on the bed for a few moments, staring off into space in complete bafflement at what her life had become in just a month’s time. When she had been on the road with Arthur, she’d lived in the present and thoughts about the dangers of her new life hadn’t really affected her much. It had been more like she was at boot camp or on some extreme camping trip, and she’d been too busy

and too tired to think about what she was really doing here. But now they'd walked right up to danger's door, it was a different matter.

Tired of feeling confused, but not wanting to get angry about it again, Kyah stood up and busied herself cleaning up to get ready for bed.

All clean and in a fresh tunic that fell to her knees, Kyah stared up at the tented ceiling from her cozy bed, puzzling over the turn of events in her life. She would be in an actual castle tomorrow, on a mission. Although she knew that it would bring her into close proximity with two very scary women, she was excited to see Camelot from the inside.

Relaxing at this simple thought, the sounds of the night around her faded and she finally fell asleep.

The little girl giggled at the ducks in the vibrant, green park.

Kyah watched the man in the sharp, stylish clothes play with the child and longed to know what it was like. To be so happy and carefree. To be so joyfully oblivious to everything else around you.

The man and the little girl's hands touched and he whisked her up into his arms.

He spun the little girl around in a circle and they laughed. Kyah smiled and wished she could be a part of their happiness.

She felt a deep sadness when they walked away from the pond and her post in the trees. The man paused and turned his head slightly as though something had caught his attention.

Her heart skipped a beat as the man looked directly at her. No matter how hard she strained, she still couldn't make out any distinct features except his sharp, green eyes.

Remembering he had been trying to tell her something in the last dream, she strained to hear him again and took an involuntary step forward. His hand reached out and he shouted something at her. It was muffled, as though he were shouting through a pillow.

She started to walk forward and this time he shook his head at her almost

violently, reaching his hand out like he was trying to grasp a lifeline.

This time when he shouted, the words boomed across the park. “Go back!”

Kyah’s eyes snapped open and she found herself sitting up ramrod straight in her cot, clutching her breast. Her heart felt like it was going to beat itself right out of her chest.

She was breathing in and out slowly to calm herself down when she realized her face was wet. She touched her cheek. *I’ve been crying. That’s a first.*

Soft light filtered in through the tent fabric. *It must be morning.*

Swinging her feet to the floor, she noticed someone had been in while she had been sleeping. On the chair, on top of her clothes, a piece of jewelry had appeared with a folded piece of paper next to it.

Reaching across, she picked up what looked like a bracelet, except it was too large for her wrist. It was made of braided leather and had a hammered bronze medallion in its center. The medallion had little scratchings carved into it.

Curious, she picked up the note.

Traveller,

This arm cuff will disguise your presence and make you impervious to scrying. Wear it on your upper arm and do not ever take it off.

– *Merlin*

“No ‘Good luck, Kyah. Hope you make it back.’ Great. Very heartwarming,” she mumbled to herself.

Shaking her head, she put the cuff on and got ready to leave her tent.

As she prepared herself to seek out the Gypsy group that she would be working with, she thought back to her dream and the man's voice echoed in her head, telling her to 'go back.'

But go back where?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The Gypsies Kyah went into the castle with that day made it very clear that she should never be caught working alone. The servants worked in pairs or in teams of four or five so that no one was ever by themselves. It seemed that those who wandered off alone in the castle never came back.

It didn't take long to discover that Guinevere was even more feared than Morgana, and, somehow, it didn't surprise her. For some reason Kyah couldn't put her finger on, Guinevere creeped her out. Morgana she knew was up to no good. Kyah was afraid of that one, no question. But Guinevere?

Whenever the Queen walked past, the servants would quietly whisper to themselves as if they were praying, making hand motions as though they were drawing something in the air. And when she was in the same room as them, the servants did everything they could to not look at her directly. They spent much of their time staring at the floor in her presence.

When Kyah glanced sideways at the Queen, she saw a lovely woman who seemed happy with her lot in life. In the beginning, she just couldn't figure out what made her so creepy, and she found the servant's actions confusing.

When she reported their behavior to Merlin and Pan, Merlin informed her that the servants were likely performing hedge-warding spells.

Kyah crinkled her brow.

"Your average peasant always knows a hedge witch of some kind," Merlin explained. "A witch who is well trained in herbs and earth magics. She likely

taught one of them a small incantation for warding off evil and they shared it with the entire serving staff.”

At the end of her first week in the castle, Kyah was in the kitchens and overheard the cook (who had been there even in Arthur’s day) telling the new staff horrific stories about the Queen.

“I’m telling you,” the cook said, “you lot need to steer clear of the Queen, and steer clear of the dungeon areas. There’s some frighten’ goings on down there.”

She stared them all down and told them about the time the Queen had hauled a servant away to the dungeons for looking at her the wrong way.

The Queen had deliberately left the dungeon doors open so the entire castle could hear the screams as the servant was tortured.

“Said she was makin’ an example of ‘em,” said the cook.

On another occasion, a member of the royal court had been whipped to death by the Queen herself in the dining hall, right in front of the rest of her guests and the serving staff. His crime had been paying too much attention to another female. The woman had been beheaded in the courtyard. And the Queen had, apparently, taken great joy in dispensing her justice, laughing as she did so.

Kyah didn’t find it difficult to picture Guinevere in one of her infamous white gowns, soaked in blood and giggling as though she had just heard a good joke. The thought gave Kyah goosebumps whenever she caught sight of the Queen and, at the same time, made her nauseous. The servants dubbed her the Bloody Queen.

Fitting.

After two weeks of spying in the castle and becoming sympathetic to the plight of the servants, Kyah came to appreciate the complicated communication network they had set up. It was a veritable powerhouse of information, and Kyah was pretty sure that this was how spying became an art form.

One of the more invaluable pieces of information she’d picked up had been about the east tower. It was always locked and had been for two years, she had learned.

Several servants had been in the area early one morning, planning to get a

head start on their assignments for the day. Before they had set out for work, they had heard the familiar clanging of armor. They had hidden themselves in a room and watched as a pair of Dark Knights had appeared in the corridor, one of them carrying a limp child through the door that led to the tower. Before the Dark Knights could come back out, the servants had run out of there as fast as they could to find work in an entirely separate part of the castle.

Acting mute, Kyah often felt like people assumed she was deaf as well as dumb, and she did not correct them. She used this misperception to glean all the more information when everyone, including the royal residents, chatted amongst themselves.

On a typical day, Kyah would report her findings to Pan and company at the end of her shift, and the weeks went by with little new to report. Though she cleaned rooms all over the castle, there was no sign of this portal she was meant to be looking for.

Kyah was getting frustrated with the lack of progress. The only thing she'd figured out so far was that she hoped Pan and Merlin could handle Morgana and Guinevere without any help from her, because the two women scared her. They scared her a lot.

One day, at about noon, bells started to peal throughout the castle.

The two companions she was helping, two bedchamber maids carrying laundry to the launderers, stopped dead. They turned toward each other, faces as white as the sheets they were carrying.

One of them dropped her laundry and ran to vomit out the window.

Kyah made a face, hoping nobody was underneath it.

The other maid grabbed Kyah's arm, jerking her around. "We have to go to the courtyard. Something bad must be happening. Whatever happens, do not call attention to yourself. Keep to yourself, do you understand?"

The girl sounded frightened out of her mind. Kyah nodded silently, hoping that, whatever it was, it was something they could use to their advantage.

As they walked, they were joined not just by servants, but other royals who,

for some reason she hadn't figured out, chose to live here.

Maybe they're waiting for one of them to kill the other so they can move up the chain. Maybe even rule. They're just waiting it out.

Shaking her head at this epiphany, Kyah looked around the massive courtyard.

As they stood there, the wrought iron gates were raised.

A contingent of Dark Knights marched through them, followed by Guinevere on a white horse. Both the horse and the lady were decked out in a grand arrangement of flowers.

Kyah only just managed to stop herself from rolling her eyes. *She'd be better off dressed in red and black like any normal villain.*

As they paraded into the courtyard, Kyah noticed a figure trailing behind Guinevere. It was a man, from what she could tell. He had a lame leg and his clothing and hair were bloody.

Wow, somebody sure did a number on him.

Kyah slowly inched forward through the crowd, curious as to who this person was that the Bloody Queen had decided to parade in front of everyone. Only a row back from the front of the crowd lining the courtyard, she hoped to overhear a name she could take back to her companions in the Gypsy camp.

Behind the limping man, the final knights entered, and after them came Morgana. She walked in with an ebony staff in her grip, bringing up the rear. She had a chilling smirk on her face. Kyah tore her gaze away from that smile; it put her on edge.

As they passed, Kyah's eyes widened. She inhaled sharply and immediately looked down, thankful to be hidden from the procession as she started to shake.

Please let this be a mistake.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Getting herself under control, she slowly brought her head back up to look at the severely injured man. Now he was closer, she would recognize him anywhere.

Kyah stared at the prisoner, unable to form any further thoughts. Her attention went to Guinevere as the woman paced her horse back and forth in front of the crowd.

The Queen raised her voice so as to be heard by the assembly. “Everyone take a good look at this man. Look! At! Him!” Guinevere ran her gaze over the silent crowd to check she was being obeyed. “I have heard rumors that this man is the Once and Future King returned!” She followed this statement with a beautifully executed maniacal laugh. “The Once and Future King is dead! This man is an imposter! Anyone claiming to be King Arthur will be punished!”

Kyah wanted to run to Arthur—but she was rooted to the spot in sheer terror at what was playing out before her. *This is it. This is the moment we’ve been waiting for. Pan and Merlin are going to swoop in and duke it out with Guinevere and Morgana. They’ll win, of course, because they’re the good guys and then we’ll be on our way to Elmiria.*

Guinevere stopped short of her prisoner and dismounted.

Any time now, guys.

The Queen walked over to Arthur, who was swaying on his feet, and gripped a patch of his hair. She snatched his head up so the crowd was forced to look at him.

Kyah could have sworn she heard muffled gasps as though some recognized him.

Glaring out at the crowd, Guinevere let go of his hair and summarily smacked him in the face, so hard his head snapped back. He fell, landing hard on his back, his head landing against the hard-packed dirt with a sickening thud.

Kyah stood there with her hands clenched, holding back tears and trying not to vomit.

Where are they? Where are you guys?

She was still waiting for the others to come and save the day, but her gut was churning telling her that her hopes were going to be dashed.

Her big display over, Guinevere was escorted into the castle by her guard. Morgana followed closely behind, looking like a cat who had just snuck in a lick or two of cream.

The knights dragged Arthur to the exterior dungeon entrance and disappeared. When they had cleared the courtyard, the bells began to peal again.

There were those around her who started to walk away as though this were a

normal, everyday event. But there were others who continued to stand and stare at the spot where Arthur had been.

Some were royalty and some were servants. All looked old enough to have been around back when Arthur had ruled.

It hit her square in the stomach then: Help wasn't coming.

Following the majority of the crowd and clutching her arms across her middle, Kyah hurried to the area where they reported for work every day in hopes of catching up with the Gypsies to figure out what had happened.

When she reached the kitchens, she found the entire kitchen area was crowded with shouting serving staff.

Posted at the double doors opposite was a contingent of over-sized Dark Knights.

One of them held up a hand and, for the first time, she heard one speak. "No one is allowed to leave the castle. Servants' quarters will be in the northeastern tower."

The voice that came out the helmet was not normal. It was monotone, almost robotic, and scratchy, like the guy had laryngitis or something.

Making eye contact with several of the Gypsies who had come to the castle with her today, she nodded and they made their way to the designated tower. There, they stood inside a common room at the bottom and waited. A few more Gypsies entered the room and sat down with their arms crossed; then a few others arrived and took out their pipes.

Kyah just sighed. *Gypsies*.

After working with them pretty closely these last few weeks, she was pretty sure they could chill out at the bottom of a volcano as it was erupting without a problem.

"What just happened?" she asked. "Does anyone know?"

They all stared at her, and then one of them chuckled.

An old woman turned to her companion, who looked none too happy. "You owe me a silver."

Kyah realized then that the majority of the Gypsies didn't know she could speak—she was always silent on the way in and out of camp, and reported

directly to Pan's tent whenever she was there. She had assumed that Pan was keeping the Gypsies in the loop. *Guess not...*

"How did you know?" asked Kyah as the bet loser slapped a silver piece into the woman's hand.

The old woman bit the coin.

Gypsies.

Shaking her head at the pair, Kyah crossed her arms as she waited for the woman to reply.

"You aren't the only observant one, my dear. We've all been watching you with some interest. Although, some of us are more observant than others." She poked her sharp elbow into the ribs of her companion. The other woman let out a hearty grunt.

"Well, then," Kyah said. "What have you observed?"

The woman cackled. "I was on the battlements this morning and overheard the guards talking about how some beggar raced in before dawn like every ogre in the realm was chasing him. Morgana greeted him at the gate and gave him a few bags. The guards thought the bags were coin. He took 'em and raced away again."

Kyah frowned and attempted to decipher this. Had someone betrayed Arthur? Or was this part of Pan's plan to get Guinevere?

Her thoughts turned to worry wondering if this was part of a plan, what happened to Merlin and Pan?

The woman gave a knowing smile. "I see that you're catching on. We all have our reasons to be in this castle, missy. Don't ever forget it."

Kyah uncrossed her arms and plopped down on a spare chair. "Well, looks like we're stuck here for a while."

One of the men cleared his throat. He was tall, with shoulder-length, curly, black hair. Kyah turned toward him. *He'd be quite attractive if it weren't for the unbrow.*

"Stuck?" he said. "Oh, miss, you've been with us these few weeks and you think we would go someplace and not know how to sneak out?" He shook his head at her and gave her a big, toothy smile.

Kyah stood up so fast the chair she was in fell over. “Wait. You know how to get out of here?”

“Well, of course,” he replied with a confident shrug. “We are Gypsies, after all.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



The servants went about their business over the next few days as though there were nothing strange going on.

The castle was quiet, which set Kyah worrying about what that meant for everyone. A constant question ran through her mind while she carried out her mute duties: What was happening to Arthur?

On the third morning, Kyah approached the old Gypsy woman. She had gleaned from her companions that the woman who had won the bet was called Gilsa.

They had also told her that Gilsa was a Gypsy elder, which, as far as Kyah could work out, meant she held some kind of leadership role. It was clear she was important—and someone that Kyah needed to talk to.

Kyah found her ensconced in a corner of the common room, knitting something. To Kyah, it didn't look like much of anything.

"Gilsa? Do you have a moment?"

The woman kept knitting and didn't look at her.

Kyah cleared her throat. "Um, I was wondering if you knew of a way to get into the dungeons without facing the guards. Or...or if any of the servants had been to the dungeons and seen or heard from Arthur."

Kyah lapsed into silence. She was nervous, and it didn't help that the woman still hadn't acknowledged her.

"Right. Okay," she mumbled. "Thanks. Good talk."

She turned away. *I guess I'll have to go seek help elsewhere.*

Gilsa sighed, bringing Kyah's attention back to the corner. She watched as the old woman ever so gently placed her knitting to one side before raising her gaze to study her.

For an elderly woman, she had the sharpest, clearest eyes. It was a common trait amongst the Gypsies. They all had bright gazes that seemed to take in everything in a matter of seconds. Kyah was fairly certain that their casual attitude was just a distraction to make you believe that they weren't really paying attention to anything.

From working with them these past few weeks, she knew they didn't miss a single thing. And their memories were astounding. Over the last few days, she had overheard them relay detailed directions to each other concerning different exits from the castle, the patterns of the guards' schedules, and even the movements of Morgana and Guinevere. With these people around, there didn't seem to be a need for advanced spy technology.

Feeling as though Gilsa was trying to peer into her mind, Kyah stared at the floor until she heard the woman hack out a dry chuckle. "Deary, you have a long journey in front of you."

Kyah crinkled her brow at the woman.

"Yes, servants do go down into the dungeons. Many of our caravan have been there since we arrived." She paused. "The Once and Future King is there. A couple of our number have seen him and they say that he is alive. From what they can tell, no further harm has befallen him since he was put in the dungeons. From our eyes and ears elsewhere in the castle, it would seem that neither Morgana nor Guinevere have been to see him since he was put in his cell."

"Oh, that is such good news," Kyah breathed.

"For now," Gilsa said.

Not sure what to do with this cryptic response, Kyah sat down opposite her. Thoughts swirled around in her head. She needed help on another matter, otherwise, when Arthur did get out, they'd still be trapped.

She took a deep breath. "Um...so, even though I'm here to report everything I see and hear to Pan, I'm actually here to look for a portal...have you seen

one?”

The old woman shook her head. “I have not seen a portal, Traveller.”

Stricken, Kyah gaped at her. “How...how do you know to call me that?”

The woman smiled at her in a way that made her feel as though she had completely missed something.

“We know you,” was all she said before turning and picking up her knitting again.

Come the end of the sixth day locked up in the castle Kyah was feeling defeated. She slowly made her way to the tower. All the Gypsies were in the common room talking in hushed, excited voices.

The voices stumbled a bit and then quieted as she moved farther into the room. She stopped when the tall, curly-haired man with the unibrow approached her. She’d found out his name was Jacob.

“Come, sit,” he said. “We have news of the children.”

After trudging through the castle in a state of depression, Kyah was brought back to her senses. She sat down expectantly.

“Michael here will tell the story.” Jacob pointed out a small man she wasn’t sure she had ever noticed in the common room before. “Michael is good at sneaking in and out of places.”

There were a few muffled laughs and coughs, and Kyah had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. *Okay, so the guy’s a stealthy thief.*

She decided that nodding at the man was a better idea.

Michael nodded back and she listened as he told the room his story.

For the last three weeks, he had made his way around the castle memorizing the ins and outs of every single corridor and room.

Kyah raised an eyebrow at this, not sure she really believed the man until she glanced around the room and found others nodding as though this was to be expected.

Michael explained that he had noticed a pattern in the change of guard. A castle guard was never paired up for duty with a Dark Knight, and the knights

didn't stay in the guardhouse.

It turned out the knights were staying in the southernmost tower, on the lower levels. Michael had snuck in behind one of the Dark Knights and managed to stay the night in hiding in the knights' common room.

Kyah's mouth hit the floor. Michael caught her look and gave her a wink, causing her to sit back and shake her head. *He. Is. Crazy.*

Past midnight, Michael had made his way from his hiding spot to their sleeping quarters. But the Dark Knights were not in beds sleeping, as you would expect. They were standing in rows, facing the wall. Completely still.

Kyah felt the creep factor rise. She threw a quick glance around Michael's audience; she could tell they were just as freaked out as she was.

Not wanting to disturb them, Michael had made his way past the knights' chambers and up the narrow stairs to an open area. There he had found a group of missing children. There were at least a dozen, all chained to the wall.

"They were dirty and emaciated," he said gruffly. "It smelled like they hadn't seen a chamber pot in some time."

Squeezing her eyes shut, Kyah felt bile rise in the back of her throat.

Michael paused for a few moments, his jaunty storytelling momentarily suspended.

Eventually, he went on. "Well, I stared for a moment, as you might expect. And that's when I saw it. There was a door at the opposite end of the chamber. I walked by and the poor tykes didn't even know I was there." Michael shook his head.

He had opened the door without picking the lock and made his way around to another narrow staircase that came out near the back of a courtyard. "It's the courtyard that we use to sneak in and out of here. Well, when things were normal, anyway."

Michael stopped speaking and looked around. His gaze landed on Kyah and he winked again.

Kyah did roll her eyes at him this time. "Do we know how to get the other children out? I think the ones that are kept in a deep sleep are in the east tower."

"We do," Gilsa said. "That will take the efforts of myself and a few others."

Our magic will be put to good use there. We were able to open the door successfully a few days ago.”

“This will have to be done in two parts,” Jacob said. “We’ve already sent a couple of us out of the castle to go and get more help. There are not enough of our tribe here in the castle to carry all of the children. Once the others arrive, a group of us will go out and meet them, and then we will reconvene and split into two groups. One group will head to the south tower to release the children chained there and another will head to the east tower to carry out the sleeping children.”

Everyone nodded grimly.

Feeling as though she was missing something, Kyah frowned at the tall man. “When is this going to happen?”

“Tonight,” he replied.

Kyah closed her eyes. “Can we get Arthur out too?”

When her question was met with nothing but quiet, Kyah opened her eyes. Jacob was hanging his head.

“What’s going on that you’re not telling me?” she demanded.

“We cannot get Arthur out tonight,” Gilsa said softly. “Not without risking the children.”

Kyah stood rooted to the stone floor. “But Arthur will die there if we don’t save him. We cannot leave him here to die.”

Kyah felt a hand on her shoulder. Focusing, she raised her head to find Jacob looking at her with his sharp, Gypsy eyes.

“Arthur knows what’s at stake,” he said quietly.

Kyah shook her head violently.

“No,” she whispered. “No, no, no...”

Her voice seemed to come from far away.

Feeling a firm grip on her elbow, she allowed herself to be escorted to her room.

“You must rest,” Gilsa said at her side. “It is going to be a very long night.”

“I can’t leave. I can’t leave Arthur here.”

“You will save him, Traveller. Of that I have no doubt.” The Gypsy elder

gazed at her so sternly that Kyah looked away. “Just not tonight.”

With that, Gilsa turned and walked away.

Kyah lay down on her bunk, the old woman’s words echoing in her mind. She would help save the children tonight, but she was coming back. There was no way she was going let those two monsters kill her friend.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Kyah took a deep breath. The Gypsies were calm and relaxed, totally confident that they could easily exit the castle unnoticed. She just had to trust them.

Apparently, slipping in and out of the castle was a favorite pastime of theirs. They'd done it a hundred different ways, and they joked about their nightly forays as they prepared for the night's work.

Kyah shivered—she was glad she didn't usually have to go about the castle at night. Even during the day, the air was heavy with fear and anxiety, but at night, the darkness was oppressive.

How the Gypsies maintained their air of nonchalance and fun, Kyah couldn't figure out. *I'll have to ask. That would be a useful skill to have.*

She followed the group through yet another dark hallway and heard someone at the back stifle a giggle. *Gypsies.*

But the sound was a comfort and elicited a smile from her rather than the usual head shake.

Kyah's musings on the Gypsy nature were interrupted when the group stopped.

Looking beyond the few Gypsies in front of her, she could just make out the outline of a door in the darkness.

It really seemed as if the Gypsies knew the castle better than the people who worked and lived here. They knew the guards' schedule by heart, and stopped

like clockwork to avoid roaming patrols on their rounds. Often, the passageways they took looked like they had long been forgotten.

At the back of the group, they even had a cleanup crew, tasked with making sure any disturbed dust didn't reveal their movements. While the 'dust monitors' did their thing, everyone stood around in patient silence, as if this were a normal part of everyday life.

Meanwhile, I'm standing here listening to how loud my heartbeat is.

Jacob was clearly the leader of the group. He oiled the door, but then stood there as if waiting for something. Kyah held her breath as the sound of clanking armor came from the other side of the door. The guards tromped by and she breathed out.

Okay, they may seem a little lackadaisical but they definitely have their wits about them.

Impressed, but still aware of her heart pounding in her chest, she bit her lip as Jacob silently opened the door.

With a glance both ways, the all clear was given and they all walked out, the dust patrol doing their thing at the back. They proceeded calmly across the small courtyard as though they were all out for a walk.

Ahead was the stone wall that circled the entire castle, covered with ivy.

Kyah prepared herself for the sight of a door hidden under all the greenery, but when the ivy was pulled back, there was nothing but stone wall behind it.

Oookay, this cannot be good.

She wouldn't have thought it possible, but the thump of her heartbeat in her ears picked up the pace and got even louder. Taking a moment, Kyah calmed herself as Arthur had taught her so she could think.

Thinking of Arthur also helped. He needed her—she had to be strong. Who knew what Guinevere was doing with him at this very moment?

Meanwhile, the Gypsies didn't appear at all worried by the lack of an exit and this calmed her further.

She frowned as Jacob swept the ivy aside and motioned the others through as if there was, in fact, a door there. They walked toward the wall with all the confidence in the world and disappeared through it.

Kyah's jaw dropped. She was alone with Jacob.

She approached the very solid-looking wall with trepidation. It didn't shimmer or look anything like she had experienced so far.

Jacob chuckled. "Traveller, for one such as you, this should not be a fearful walk."

Her head snapped up and her mouth hung open. "How do you know what I am?"

"We Gypsies travel and see much. We know your kind. We are kin in some ways."

Kyah shivered, recalling Gilsa's words. 'We know you,' the old woman had said. She felt an all-consuming need to understand what in the world they were talking about.

Jacob patted her shoulder. "Do not fear it. You are the Traveller. This is your door, after all."

Raising her eyebrow, Kyah stared at the stone wall.

Well, I've done weirder things over the past few months.

She headed straight for the wall and kept walking right through it.

It was like there was nothing there.

One minute her foot was entering the stone, the next she was on the other side of the outermost wall of the castle on the edge of the town of Camelot.

She stumbled at the sight of an open field. It was empty. There was no one waiting for her.

Confused and a little panicked, she started to turn in a circle. When she was facing the castle, she spotted her companions squeezed up against the wall, frantically waving at her to join them.

She ran back to the wall without waiting to figure out why they were hugging it. She had just made it when the familiar, heavy clang of armor came from directly above them on the parapet.

The usual casual attitude of the Gypsies disappeared in those few seconds.

Kyah glanced down the line of Gypsies either side of her and saw nothing but determination on their faces. She sensed absolutely no fear amongst the group. Some of the Gypsies even looked a little angry as they listened to the

knights patrolling above.

The noise faded as the patrol moved along the wall.

After an agonizing wait, Jacob gave the signal to move forward. The Gypsies were as quiet and stealthy as cats as they made their way across the open field to a copse of trees in the distance.

Kyah felt like she was the loudest, clumsiest member of the group, but did her best to copy their movements.

Once they reached the trees, they were greeted by a dozen more Gypsies, all dressed in black, from the tops of their heads to their feet. It reminded her of pictures of desert tribes she'd seen on Earth.

This new group was loaded down with supplies. Each Gypsy carried two backpacks and held several weapons in each hand. In complete silence, they started handing out backpacks and weapons. Kyah was gifted a long knife. Wishing she had her bow and arrows with her instead, she nodded her thanks.

Ever since they had left the castle, the Gypsies had completely dropped their jocular demeanor. Everyone had hard eyes and a stiff jaw, completely focused on what they were about to do.

Kyah's group moved into the trees while the new group remained at the tree line staring at the castle.

Kyah took a few hesitant steps and watched as the Gypsies pulled dark materials out of their packs and started to strip down. No one else was bothering to hide themselves behind the surrounding trees, so, squaring her shoulders, she stood amongst a few of the women and followed suit. *When in Rome...*

When everyone had changed, they wrapped their heads and faces in black cloth so only their eyes were showing, mimicking the others. Then they joined the line of black-clad Gypsies watching the castle.

At Jacob's signal, the whole group dropped into a crouch and began to move smoothly but surely through the field.

It was slow going. It seemed there were a dozen times where Kyah felt a hand grab her elbow or hand on her back, shoving her down and stopping her in her tracks.

Glancing to one side, she saw a girl who couldn't have been more than

fifteen. The girl gave her a steely look, put her finger to her lips and pointed up toward the castle. There were dark shapes moving along the parapet wall again.

Whoever is keeping watch up ahead has got to have eagle eyes and the best hearing ever.

After what seemed like hours but was likely less than thirty minutes, they were back to hugging the same stone wall as before. Waiting for Jacob's signal, they all passed through the wall and made their way without incident back into the castle. Once they were inside, the Gypsies remained silent and still. Kyah couldn't read their faces.

Sticking to old, unused corridors, they somehow made it to the southern side of the castle. They stopped in a hallway and one Gypsy went ahead, stopping at a door.

Sliding back a slot in the door, he whispered something into the space, a wickedly curved knife in his hand. He waited stiffly while listening to whispers on the other side. Then, visibly relaxing, he motioned everyone to move forward as he opened the door and entered the room.

Kyah walked in, and her group mingled with yet more Gypsies dressed in black, their heads and faces fully wrapped as well.

The only difference between the groups that Kyah could see was that this new group had symbols written in dark blue paint on various parts of their clothing.

She looked about to see if she could recognize Gilsa amongst the group, but the old woman was nowhere to be seen. The Gypsies moved smoothly and confidently around the room, with the same rigid set to their sharp eyes.

This new group paired off with the new arrivals, proceeding to mark them with the same dark blue paint. As they painted the symbols on, they softly chanted something in a language Kyah didn't understand.

"These will help to hide our movements through the castle and help us fight against the dark forces at work here," whispered the woman painting her.

She stepped back and made a gesture with her fingers. Her middle and forefinger touching her thumb, she turned her hand under and touched these fingers to the space between her eyebrows.

Kyah started to do the same.

The woman grabbed her hand and shook her head at Kyah. “It is not for you.”

Oookaaay...

The woman walked away and the Gypsies formed themselves back into two groups. The apparent leaders of the groups moved forward and spoke in whispers before the first group left, leaving Kyah’s faction standing silently in the room.

Jacob motioned everyone to huddle together to listen. Ignoring several whispers of excitement, the Gypsy laid out their plan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



They made their way toward the southern tower, the castle utterly still and quiet.

Sweaty and jumpy, her heart pounding, Kyah was sure that at any moment their little group would be discovered. Not quite trusting in the magic, blue paint affixed to their black clothing, she had to keep reminding herself to breathe. It seemed her body believed holding her breath would help her be stealthier somehow, but it wasn't doing anything for her nerves.

Finally, with no small amount of relief on her part, they reached the door that led to the Dark Knights' chambers.

Kyah recognized Michael's slight form as he slithered past the group. He moved forward to the door and placed his ear against the wood.

Really? This is what I'm doing now? Listening at doors like I'm a twelve-year-old eavesdropping on the adults?

Feeling tense as her confidence in the whole operation dwindled, she watched Michael open the door and go into the dark hallway beyond. He was back in seconds, but it felt like the longest moments of her life. He signaled the okay and they went through the entrance in pairs.

Jacob went in with her. Probably because they all knew she had no idea what she was doing. Not for the first time this evening, she wondered why they had included her when they could easily have exchanged her for someone more experienced.

Shrugging off the thought, which only added to her anxiety, she held her breath as they walked into the hallway. It was empty except for a few Gypsies.

Michael closed the door without a sound behind her. He made his way to the front of the group then motioned them forward, and she followed along with Jacob. Several of the Gypsies remained behind and stood by the door to act as lookouts.

She could see the stairwell at the end of the hallway that led to the tower.

Passing an open room, she observed the Dark Knights standing inside like toy soldiers, exactly as Michael had described. There were no beds in the room, just the knights, standing in full armor. Their weapons hung on the wall behind them.

Shivering at the creepy sight, she stuck close to Jacob and Michael as they filed up the tight, spiral staircase.

As they approached the top, Kyah had to cover her nose and mouth at the overwhelming smell of open sewer wafting down the stairs. Once they entered the room, it was almost overpowering.

Eyes watering, she went to her post as Jacob had outlined in his plan. Standing at the door that exited the room, she placed her ear against the wood to listen as the others picked the locks on the unresponsive children's chains.

Kyah shut her eyes; she would never ever be able to un-see what was in this room. The kids were so thin they looked almost alien. The only comparison she could make was to old photos and movies she'd seen showing scenes from the Holocaust on Earth.

Trying not to vomit, she concentrated on her breathing and was grateful for the cloth that completely covered her mouth.

Kyah jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned. Jacob was looking at her with watery eyes. He jerked his head back to the room. She nodded and followed him as he turned back to the grim scene.

The children were out of their chains and wrapped up like burritos in blankets. The poor things needed the padding. Their rescuers were hoisting them onto their shoulders.

The four Gypsies who had been keeping watch joined them, which made

Kyah sign in relief. She didn't want to leave anyone in this place.

Jacob picked up a child and Kyah followed suit. Picking up the kid was like picking up a large, empty backpack. Kyah could feel rage beginning to sweep over her as she shifted the almost nonexistent weight across her shoulder.

Jacob faced her and leaned forward. "Clear your mind of anger, Traveller. That is a place of darkness. Do not let Morgana in. We are here to care for the children. What happens to Morgana is in the hands of the gods."

He gripped her shoulder and gave it a squeeze, and she screwed her eyes shut, clearing her mind of the monsters in the castle so that she could concentrate on seeing the kids in a safe place back at camp.

Jacob didn't let go of her shoulder until she opened her eyes again, still feeling upset, but calmer. He gave her a reassuring nod before turning away toward the exit. Each Gypsy carrying a child, they left the cesspool of a room.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, they made their way to the southern courtyard Michael had mentioned. This was not somewhere Kyah had come across during her duties in the castle.

Michael was in the lead. They all waited by the wall until he gave the signal to move forward.

It was a rather pretty courtyard, with benches, flowering trees, reflecting pools and flowerbeds. It seemed surreal to be in such a pretty spot with their burdens. Making it to the end of the garden, they found a trellis door.

On the other side of this door, they were meant to meet the other group, who hopefully also carried precious cargo.

Feeling the strain of the evening wearing on her, Kyah really hoped they had made it. It seemed like the other group would have had a greater chance of getting caught, as they actually had to use magic and, unlike her group, did not have the option of a back door out of their tower. They would have had to retrace their steps in order to meet them here.

The moon was still high in the sky. With all that they had done tonight, it felt like the whole night had gone by, but, in reality, it was likely only about two o'clock in the morning.

Michael finally gave the all clear and they went through the trellis gate.

Kyah went weak at the knees at the sight that greeted her on the other side.

From her count there were nine Gypsies there, and eight had children on their shoulders. The ninth was Gilsa.

Gilsa returned her look with a nod.

Kyah nodded back and turned her gaze away, wondering how it was that the old woman was walking around as agile as the rest of the Gypsies who seemed to range in age from mid-twenties to late thirties. *The questions just keep racking up.*

From this location, they would have to make their way to the camp by skimming the edge of the town, avoiding the patrols. The plan was to be out of sight of the town before first light.

Unfortunately, the guards patrolling the town seemed to have another idea. There were far more of them than when Kyah and Arthur had made their initial foray into town to visit the Red Roof Inn.

Tired and sore from all the crouching, running and more crouching, they finally made it to the Gypsy camp.

With the atrocities that had been done to the children, Kyah's exhausted mind had fully expected to see the camp in disarray, with something having gone horribly wrong in their absence. But it was none the worse for wear.

The entire contingent of Gypsies made a beeline for a large, colorful tent that dwarfed the rest. It had to be four times as large as the largest tent in the camp. Kyah was nonplussed. *How in the world didn't I notice it before?*

She was about to follow the Gypsies into the tent when Jacob came out, blocking her entry.

"I'll take the child inside," he said gently. "Only the tribe is allowed inside this tent."

"What? Why? What's in there?"

Jacob silently took the child from Kyah and went back inside the tent. When she took a step to follow, staves crossed in front of her. Jerking back, she looked to either side. Two Gypsy guards smiled at her.

Crossing her arms, she stomped her foot and turned to make her way to Pan's tent. Spotting it moved Kyah into a run, exhausted and sore as she was.

Before she reached the entrance to the tent, Naieem came winging out. Tears filled Kyah's eyes at the sight of her friend.

The faery fluttered by her ear. "Are you okay? Did you see Arthur?"

Kyah just nodded, unable to speak.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Running into the tent, Kyah's eyes had to adjust to the light before she could make out the scene before her.

Glinting in the center of the room was a large round tub, and Pan and Merlin were both hovering over it.

Kyah crept forward, wondering what they were looking at and imagining the worst. Had Guinevere discovered the children were gone? Was she torturing Arthur?

Her mouth went dry. Neither Merlin nor Pan made a sound, but from the look on Pan's face, he was straining to hear something. Something bad. Merlin was watching intently.

Pan looked up and nodded before lowering his head back over the scene playing out in the tub of silver liquid.

Guinevere was pacing back and forth in front of Morgana. Kyah twitched at the vision of the Bloody Queen living up to her nickname. She was covered in blood spatter. It wasn't just on her clothes, disturbing enough as that was, but speckled all over her face and arms. Her long, flowing, blonde hair and the flowers set around her head were also covered in blood.

Sick with worry over Arthur, and knowing without a doubt where all that blood came from, Kyah couldn't turn away. It was like watching an accident happening in slow motion.

Guinevere flailed her arms around, her face contorted.

“Why now?” the Queen was saying over and over.

She was oblivious to Morgana watching her like a cat watching a mouse.

Morgana slowly rose out of the throne-like chair on which she’d been lounging. They were in someone’s bedchamber. Kyah assumed it was Guinevere’s room. Who else would have a mini throne in their bedroom for goodness sake?

Leaving behind her slick, ebony staff, Morgana placed herself in front of Guinevere and touched her face as if to calm her. She spoke too quietly for them to hear, but seemed to be uttering words of comfort. They looked at each other as only lovers do.

Kyah raised an eyebrow. *That’s a new twist.*

Morgana leaned in. As Guinevere returned the kiss, she jerked suddenly and then jerked again.

Guinevere looked down at herself as Morgana continued to stab her, muttering words Kyah could not understand, but which seemed full of dark purpose. Words that made Merlin and Pan straighten and go pale.

As they continued to watch, Morgana allowed herself one last plunge of the knife and Guinevere stilled. Morgana then dropped the blade and licked her bloody palm clean with the relish of a kid licking a spoon covered in chocolate, before turning her now bloodied face to Guinevere and giving her one last kiss.

Morgana let go of the dead Queen, who fell at her feet in a pile of red and white. The dark druid straightened and turned to face them with eyes as red as the blood on her face.

Kyah backed away from the tub. Morgana really was looking right at them.

Merlin made a jerky swiping motion with his hands and the light from the tub vanished.

Pan and Merlin silently turned to look at Kyah.

Kyah whirled around, and loudly and violently threw up in the corner of the tent.

Naieem landed on her shoulder and patted her neck. “It’s all right, Kyah. You’ll be all right.”

Kyah stood on shaky legs, glad at least that she was able to stand.

She shut her eyes and leaned against a tent pole. "I'll never be all right ever again."

A hand touched her shoulder, and she blinked, gazing into a pair of liquid, amber eyes. It was Merlin.

"Kyah, do not worry yourself about telling us everything you have witnessed. We saw everything from here." Merlin nodded over to the tub.

Even though Merlin had clearly meant to offer her comfort, it only angered Kyah. Pan looked up at the tent ceiling and shook his head, mumbling 'Merlin' like Kyah would usually mumble 'Gypsies.'

"Where were you both? I waited for you to come! You never came!"

She pushed Merlin, but it was like pushing on solid rock. She pushed a bit harder, pounded her hands against his chest and cried.

The wall became soft and comforting.

"No one helped him," was all she could get out.

There was a rumble in the soft wall. She started to feel a little better and pushed away.

She did a double-take. Merlin didn't look quite so old anymore.

"You're younger," Kyah said.

Merlin chuckled. "Something to be explained some other time." He helped her stand.

She looked over at Pan, who was smirking at Merlin.

Pan's eyes became serious when he turned to face her. "You need to know it was Arthur's idea to be captured."

Kyah's knees went weak. She would have collapsed if Merlin hadn't been holding her up.

"What? Why would he do that?"

Merlin replied in a sad but frustrated tone. "Our efforts to draw Guinevere out were a failure. Arthur thought, by allowing himself to be captured, that we would be able to penetrate the grounds of the castle, but the darkness is much stronger here than we thought. We could not go in without being detected, and many, many others would have been killed if we had entered the grounds regardless. We could not let that happen."

“That’s why she herded us all into the towers,” Kyah said slowly. “So she could kill us all if you entered the grounds. Like fish in a barrel.” She frowned. “But how come the Gypsies could still manage to get in and out undetected?”

“Ah,” Pan said, “as I mentioned before, they have the oldest of magics. So old that it is now part of who they are as a people. You almost cannot distinguish between them and the magical energy that is constantly around us.”

Oh. “The leader mentioned that I am kin to them in a way. What did he mean by that?”

Merlin piped up. “Well, it is rumored that your father is the Gypsy King but that remains to be verified. We do believe however, that they have some ability to travel, though no one has yet witnessed or sensed them traveling realms.”

“So that’s why I have to study at the City of the Gods and not with the Gypsies.”

Merlin and Pan glanced at each other and Pan gave Merlin a nod as if giving him permission.

“You could study with them—that is your choice,” Merlin said. “But if I were you, I would complete your quest with Arthur and Excalibur and reach the City of the Gods. If you want, you can continue to learn from them there.”

“Okay.” She looked between them. “But what was that all about?” Kyah waved her finger between the two of them.

Pan sighed. “In the past, Travellers who have studied with the Gypsies have not turned out well. There were several who learned all they could, and gained a significant amount of power but, then, as a result, ultimately turned toward the darkness. Many Gypsies have perished because of them. You can try to approach them, but I don’t know if they will take you.”

Kyah nodded and looked at the floor, thinking that this was a conversation for another time.

“So you both looked...well...a little worried when Morgana was speaking, as she, you know...” Kyah waved her hands nervously, not quite wanting to say the words ‘stabbed Guinevere to death.’ She cleared her throat. “What was she saying and how bad is it?”

“Morgana just stole Guinevere’s essence at its darkest,” replied Merlin. “It is

likely that, over time, Guinevere will now disappear altogether from the realms. Morgana has gained far more power from the darkness than we ever could have imagined.”

“Um...what? So are you saying that if I went back to Earth and reread the King Arthur story, Guinevere would play a lesser and lesser role until she just wasn't in the story anymore?”

Merlin nodded at her, unsmiling.

Kyah sat down on the closest chair. “But that changes the whole Arthur story. It will change him and this town and...and who knows what else.”

Pan spoke up then. “I think you are starting to see why it is Travellers are so important. You are also starting to see why it is the darkness cannot be allowed to consume whole worlds. Those who believe that it can be manipulated must be stopped in any way possible. If we stop Morgana, and we must, we can salvage Guinevere's essence over time.”

The tent fell into a profound silence. Thinking of Morgana and Guinevere always brought her back around to Arthur.

She rallied. “Okay, so what's the new plan? How are we going to get Arthur out of there?”

Pan looked at her approvingly. “You will draw out Morgana with Excalibur and weaken her while we clear the castle.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“No,” said Merlin, not unkindly. “But you will have to get some rest first.”

“Well, that's a relief. I've been up for over twenty-four hours and can't even think straight.” She paused and stared off into space. “Do you have anything that I could eat or drink that would make it so I won't dream?”

Merlin looked at her with sadness. Pan came forward to kneel in front of her.

She could see the tiny dots of light that twinkled in and out of his black eyes. Someday she hoped to understand what it was that was making them sparkle.

Pan touched her face. “Sleep, Kyah. You have done well.”

His voice sounded as though it came through several layers of cotton, then he blurred and faded into darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Waking up in the tent she hadn't seen in over a week, Kyah was relieved to hear no shouting or screaming coming from the camp.

Her first waking thought was that Morgana was going to be very angry once she discovered that her young prisoners were no longer available for her to leach energy from.

Thinking of the children, she readied herself in the fresh tunic and trousers someone had kindly left out for her and went seeking the huge, multi-colored tent.

Finding absolutely no sign of it, Kyah gave up looking and went to find breakfast instead. She hoped to run into some of her companions from the night before to ask how the children were recovering. She arrived at the cook's wagon, but couldn't find a familiar face in the crowd.

She downed her breakfast, and waved as her faery friend fluttered into view. "Naieem!"

She stood and held out her palm.

Naieem landed in her usual graceful way and looked up at her with a bright smile. "Kyah. We were so worried about you." Her smile grew. "We are all so proud of you. Well done on the rescue."

Kyah smiled and, for the first time in her adult life, she felt proud of herself. *Maybe this is what I'm supposed to be doing after all.*

She sat back down and looked around at the Gypsies gathered for breakfast.

Facing Naieem, she lowered her voice. She couldn't help but feel that something shady was going on.

"I can't find the tent that we took the children to last night and I can't seem to find anyone from the rescue either."

Unexpectedly, Naieem broke into a loud, tinkling peal of laughter.

Crinkling her brow, Kyah glanced up to find the other Gypsies smiling over at them. When she looked back at her friend, the faery was shaking her head.

"Oh, Kyah, it is so easy to forget you are new to this world. Do not fret. There is nothing amiss. The Gypsies have ways of using earth magic to hide themselves. The elders consulted with Pan last night and it was decided that the healer's tent should be hidden from any scrying attempt Morgana may make to discover the missing children."

"Oh. Well, where are Jacob and Gilsa and...well, everybody else that got out of the castle last night?"

"It takes much earth energy to conceal the healers, so the strongest are in the tent hiding it from view. Morgana has spies everywhere."

A thought struck her. "So, wait a minute, everyone that worked in the castle was a strong earth magic user?"

"Of course! They would be the only ones that could escape Morgana's notice. Others would have been found out."

Oh.

"Can you tell me how the children are doing?"

Naieem clasped her hands together and fluttered her wings. "They are all on their way to recovery. Some of them were able to eat a little soup today."

"Even the ones that were in a coma?"

Naieem looked at her questioningly. "Coma?"

"Oh, sorry. The ones that were asleep."

"They are still asleep and will remain so until Morgana is no more. The healers are feeding them, though, and moving their arms and legs about." Naieem fluttered out of Kyah's palm. "Pan wishes to see you in his tent. He has some information he would like to share with you regarding your trip to the City of the Gods."

Excited at finally learning a little bit more about where she was supposed to go next, she got up and followed Naieem.

When Kyah entered the tent, it seemed to have acquired a small library of books, maps and scrolls. The collection was strewn across every available surface.

Pan was lounging on the pile of pillows reading a large, dusty tome. The book was floating in front of his face so he didn't have to hold it.

Lifting both eyebrows at this display of magic, Kyah sat on the pillows across from Pan. "Naieem says you have something to share with me about the City of the Gods."

At first, her question was greeted with silence. Then, without any warning, the book snapped closed, spun erratically, and popped out of existence.

Kyah jerked back, her mouth hanging open. She shut it with a snap when she heard Pan laugh.

"If you thought that was good, you're in for some real fun in Elmiria."

"Are you going to tell me about where I'm going, then?"

"Yes, it is time. And it is likely we will have no time to talk in the near future. Once the children are discovered missing, things will move quickly."

Pan stood and walked over to the table to rummage through a pile of scrolls. He returned with several in his hands. Kneeling before her, he moved as if to drop the scrolls on the floor but they rose from his hands and gently unfurled themselves.

The images displayed before her were definitely not the inky sketches she was expecting. They were more like flat-screen displays, with vibrant colors, and moving pictures.

On one scroll, Kyah had a bird's eye view of a whole world spread out below her. As she stared, the landscape moved by until the view hovered over a valley, close enough to show beige, stone homes glimmering in the sun's rays. There were gardens, mature trees and small pools dotted along gray, stone pathways set out in an intricate pattern that looked like delicate calligraphy from above.

Massive mountains enclosed the entire valley. Kyah thought that they were far and away taller than the mountains behind Camelot. These mountain ranges

disappeared into the clouds.

“It’s beautiful,” Kyah whispered, completely forgetting where she was.

“Yes. This is the valley of the Fae Lords in Elmiria.” Pan paused. “You will be starting your journey to the City of the Gods from here. You will be met at the portal by King Louris.” He nodded at Kyah when she tore her eyes away from the view to look at him. “Yes, he is the King of the Fae Lords. He meets all visitors at the portal along with his personal guard. You will also be greeted by Sa’alan. He serves as the King’s Ranger.”

“Ranger?”

“He is the King’s second in command. It is the job of the Ranger to act as ambassador to the other settlements on Elmiria.”

“Okay. So you’ve already spoken to them about us?”

“Yes. They have agreed to meet with you, Arthur and Naieem. You will be able to stay for a number of days while you recover from this battle and gather provisions. Sa’alan will be acting as your escort on the journey to the City of the Gods. He will guide you and help you when necessary.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Kyah looked back down, not quite sure how to feel about meeting these people.

“I’m glad that you keep mentioning Arthur as though he is still going with me,” she said.

Serious now, Pan looked at her with those strange black eyes. “Even Ancient Powers have hope, Kyah. Never forget that.”

Kyah swallowed hard and looked back down. “Can you show me the City of the Gods?”

He had raised an arm to indicate another scroll when they were interrupted by shouts coming from outside the tent.

Pan and Kyah stood up as Naieem flew in through the flaps.

“Come quickly,” she said. “It’s Morgana.”

Kyah followed Pan out of the tent and was startled by the crowd rushing about outside. She took a deep breath and followed Pan as he smoothly made his way through the panicked throng. She wasn’t sure where they were going until

she saw a grey-robed, hooded figure ahead.

Pan stopped when he reached Merlin's side. The wizard was holding a small dish in his hands. Though much smaller than the big tub they had looked in before, it held the same liquid silver, which distilled into a picture under her gaze. It showed one of the turrets of the castle, a dark figure standing at the top.

Kyah blinked. The figure was surrounded by an inky haze of some kind.

The more Kyah tried to make out what it was, the more agitated she became. The stillness of the two powerful figures at her side was disconcerting.

"What is that?" she whispered.

"That is Morgana, wrapping herself in darkness," Merlin replied.

How is that possible?

When Kyah had faced the darkness, it had felt like a living force, full of despair. Something to defeat. Not something someone could manipulate enough to wrap around themselves.

Why would she want to do that to herself?

Kyah hadn't understood the full extent of Morgana's power until that moment.

She jumped as a sonic boom echoed across the field. The grass was bending and moving like a wave on the ocean coming to the shore. The wave of wind, or whatever it was, was headed straight for them.

Kyah glanced over at her companions. They stood rooted to the spot, watching the wave approach.

The wind slammed into them and in it she heard a voice. "Return the children or die!"

Turning her head to shield her eyes, Kyah could see the Gypsies out and about in the camp had also heard. Everyone had come to a complete standstill.

Before she could turn her eyes back to the bowl to see what Morgana was up to, she spotted Naieem coming at them full speed from the forest behind the Gypsy camp.

Naieem went straight to Pan's palm.

"They are coming!" she panted, gulping down air.

"I see," said Pan simply, turning and walking back to his tent.

Naieem hopped into Kyah's hand.

"Who is coming?" she asked, full of dread.

"The ogres," her faery friend cried. "They are coming for the town!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Kyah swallowed hard. “Ogres? Here?”

Naieem said no more, taking off after Pan.

Kyah glanced back at Merlin, who remained silent and still. Backing away from him and turning toward Pan’s tent, she ran after Naieem.

Scooting inside the tent, she found Gilsa and Jacob talking with Pan in low, urgent voices.

“What’s going on?” she asked as she walked quickly over to the table they had gathered around.

Gilsa answered her. “We need to move the children out of the camp before Morgana finds a way through.”

Pan was staring down at the table. “I must consult with the other Powers on this matter. There may be a way for me to intervene if this has an impact beyond Avalon.” With that, he faded into nothingness.

“Uh, what just happened? Did he just leave us?” Kyah asked, feeling a little panicked that the powerful god had just disappeared.

“He has gone to seek council with the other Powers,” Gilsa said. “He will not leave us to the fate that Morgana seeks.”

“We will move the camp tomorrow night when the moon is at its peak,” Jacob said. “Our earth powers are strongest then.”

“How are you going to do that? It’s a big camp—won’t Morgana notice?”

Gilsa laughed and Jacob smiled. Before they could say it, Kyah did. “I have

much to learn, right?”

They both nodded.

Gilsa explained that they could use their collective earth powers to camouflage the camp and move it away without a sound.

“But, still,” Kyah argued, “it’ll look like the camp just disappeared. That’s kind of noticeable.”

“Not if I can help it.”

She turned at the sound of Merlin’s voice. He stood at the entrance of the tent.

“But I thought you couldn’t use your magic here,” Kyah said. “Wouldn’t that spur Morgana on and make things worse?”

“Ah, not if we have Pan’s help. You will learn what it means to have a Power on your side.”

Merlin walked in and removed his hood. Kyah sucked in a breath. *He is totally aging backwards. What the hell is happening here?*

Merlin just chuckled. “Another time, Traveller. Another time.”

Ugh!

Merlin sidled up to the table. “I will create a mirage. Hopefully, it will be enough to fool the patrols. It will not be enough to fool the ogres, of course.”

“What do you mean?” Kyah asked. “Why not?”

“They have a keen sense of smell. They are particularly good at sniffing out children. So they will naturally head straight for them.”

“Well, where will you all go?” she asked Gilsa and Jacob.

“We will take them home,” Jacob said. “There is a natural doorway not too far from here that we use to stay in touch with our tribe there.”

So, Gypsies have their own home universe. Who knew?

Kyah caught Merlin’s eye. He nodded ever so slightly.

She couldn’t help but smile back. She was catching on a little as to how this Traveller business worked.

Her gaze drifted down to one of the scrolls that Pan had shown her earlier. It was floating millimeters above the surface of the table, the equivalent of a flat screen with high resolution.

What she saw there was not at all comforting.

A large group of ogres was making its way through the forest outside the town of Camelot. They were slow, which was a bonus, and they also seemed to get distracted easily, which was also a bonus. At one point, they wandered in a meandering circle until one of them, the leader she supposed, realized and got them back on course. She guessed they were headed toward the camp—and the fresh scent of children.

The thought made her queasy. She clearly remembered the sight and sound of the monsters from when they had happened upon her and Arthur's camp. She did not want to see them up close ever again.

“Kyah, this is where we are going to need your help,” Merlin said. “We need you to use the bow and arrows Pan gave you to take out most of the ogres. There will be a group of Gypsies assisting you. They are familiar with the beasts and have volunteered to hunt them down before they strike the town.”

“Um, what?”

Merlin raised his eyebrows at her. “Did you think that you were just going to sit in your tent and wait for it all to be over?”

Kyah just stood there like a ninny, staring at him.

Merlin shook his head and sighed like he was a little disappointed. Kyah looked down at the scroll.

“Kyah, this is the role of the Traveller. This is what you will be doing on all the missions before you. You do not get to work behind the scenes. You are directly involved, one of the forces at work in the realms that you visit. It is best you learn this now before you get to the City of the Gods, or I fear that you will not pass the trials laid out before you gain entry there.”

Trying to stomp down on the fear that was building up in her belly, Kyah looked up at Merlin again. She knew that if she didn't help with the weapons that had been given to her, the children might not get out this situation alive.

She straightened up. “I will do what I can to help. I have hardly any battle experience, though. I've been in one so far and that was kind of by accident.”

Merlin flashed her a big smile.

She narrowed her eyes at him, realizing she had just been manipulated.

Merlin began talking again before she had a chance to start shouting at him.

“Do not worry, Traveller. Time will be on your side. You can use your arrows as the Gypsies drive the ogres towards you.”

“We’ve used this strategy before with the dumb beasts,” Jacob said. “Fortunately, we will have you with us this time.” The scroll panned out and he pointed at a clearing between the town and the approaching ogres. “We will set you up in a tree here.” He indicated a clump of trees at the edge of the clearing. “The others will circle round and divert them, driving them towards you. They will come out here.” He pointed at the opposite side of the clearing to where Kyah would be.

“But why would they want to come towards me?” she asked.

“We will be placing some articles of the children’s clothing in the clearing so that they can pick up the scent.”

Kyah nodded, getting the gist of the plan.

“Once all the ogres are in the clearing, we will signal you like this.” He gave some kind of trilling whistle that hurt her ears a little, being so close to him.

“I can help,” came a tiny voice from somewhere near Kyah’s elbow.

Everyone paused and looked at Naieem. “I can see much further and have far better senses than any of you. Not to mention my powers are far stronger in the forest than anywhere else. I will keep watch for you all and tell Kyah when you are getting close. I can count the number of ogres heading her way.”

Jacob nodded at the faery. “Our thanks, Princess.”

Naieem nodded regally in return.

Kyah smiled in relief that her friend would be with her.

Naieem smiled up at her and winked.

Feeling slightly better about the whole thing, she found she wasn’t even all that mad at Merlin for manipulating her a little bit. *I think I needed it.*

Watching the ogres, she noticed that their slow progress had halted. “What are they doing now?”

“They are big and dumb. They expend a lot of energy when they’re on the move—it takes more thinking than they’re used to. They will likely sleep until dawn,” said Gilsa.

“Lucky us,” said Kyah.

A few hours later, Kyah was donning a black outfit again, complete with head wrappings, weapons and backpack. She and a group of Gypsies readied themselves to head out to meet the ogres before morning.

On their way out, they stopped when they saw Merlin standing at the edge of the camp.

He walked up to Kyah and placed another medallion cuff on her arm. “One cuff to disguise you amongst the Gypsies, the other to disguise your weapon.”

“Thanks,” Kyah said.

Merlin nodded at her and, without another word, encouraging or otherwise, he walked back into the camp.

She sighed. *I suppose I should get used to the lack of encouragement around here.*

She was still shaking her head when Naieem fluttered through the group toward her. Kyah smiled at the faery princess. Naieem gave her a big smile back and took a seat on her shoulder.

I have Naieem and that is encouragement enough.

The team was silent for most of the way. This group of Gypsies was entirely different from the group she had worked with in the castle. They were more hardened, as though they had seen terrible things. Maybe even done terrible things. They didn’t move like the others either. They made Kyah think of her own modern day military. If they had held automatic weapons in their hands and worn helmets, they’d fully look like soldiers.

Once they’d set up camp quickly and efficiently, one of them approached her. It was a woman she thought was named Fran, and not someone she would want to upset.

“We will sleep for only six hours,” she said. “After the moon passes its highest peak, we will move you to your post in the trees. The remainder of us will rattle the ogre troop and drive them to you. Naieem will be our go-between.”

Fran gave her a bedroll and a canteen of water, then turned and walked back to her own spot.

“There will be no fire tonight, Kyah,” Naieem chirped. “Your backpack has some jerky and bread in it. Please eat, then rest.”

Yeah, right. I don't think I'll be getting any sleep tonight.

Kyah felt like she was shaken awake only minutes after she had closed her eyes.

Looking up, she could just make out Fran staring down at her. “It's time. Eat a little. Get dressed. We leave in fifteen.”

Feeling as though she was in boot camp, she dragged herself out of her cocoon of blankets. As she started to move, she could feel her body aching from sleeping on the ground. Instead of eating, she decided it was a better idea to do some stretches and get her gear ready. She would eat a bite or two of the jerky while she waited in the trees.

Kyah moved to join the silent group of men and women waiting in a cluster close by.

Once she joined them, a group of about half a dozen Gypsies took off at a run in one direction, while another group took off in the opposite direction. Fran and one other remained with Kyah and Naieem.

“We will take you to your post now.” They turned and ran in another direction.

Not having done much running since her training with Arthur, Kyah hoped that it wouldn't be a very long distance.

They only ran for about fifteen minutes, but at the sprint they were keeping up, Kyah was out of breath by the time they stopped.

Leaning against the closest tree, she caught her breath. Then she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“This tree will work. Up you go,” said Fran.

The man who had accompanied them moved over and kneeled, his hands ready to give her a boost up the tree.

Kyah looked up and saw a branch directly above her. She placed her foot in

his hands and, in moments, she was on the tree branch. When she looked down, the pair had gone.

Scanning the clearing, she could see that they had almost cleared the tree line already. “Geesh. It’s way too early for this.”

Looking around and up, Kyah made out a path through the branches to a spot that looked high enough to serve as her post. It had a branch that looked sturdy enough to hold her.

As soon as she had made her way onto the branch, Naieem fluttered in front of her. “I’ll be back.”

The tiny faery zoomed off, leaving her in the quiet forest.

Kyah set about clearing some of the leaves and smaller branches from her view and then got herself in a comfortable, stable position. Getting out her bow, she pulled an arrow from her quiver, but didn’t notch it yet.

Then she sat there. Waiting. The sky started to lighten, meaning that the teams had probably already harried the ogres into moving.

For what seemed like the thirtieth time, her gaze swept the edge of the clearing. This time, she noticed movement through the trees. She readied herself as Naieem reached her.

“They are coming!” Naieem pointed directly in front of Kyah’s position.

She nodded at Naieem and waited.

In scant minutes, she heard the grunts and hoots of the ogre’s progress towards her. They were moving faster than she had thought they could from what she had seen in the scroll.

They burst into the clearing. They sniffed the air and moved slower when they were out in the open.

Kyah notched an arrow. She drew it back quickly and aimed at the ogres.

Flustered, she kept watching, waiting for time to slow down.

“Naieem,” she whispered. “Time is still the same. It’s...it’s...not slowing down.”

Naieem fluttered in front of her face. “What did you do the last time it happened?”

“I just started shooting arrows.”

“Are you sure? Think back, Kyah. Be patient with yourself.”

Kyah closed her eyes and tried to remember that day at the beach. Snapping her eyes open, she knew what she had to do.

She notched the arrow again, brought the bow up and pulled back slowly like she had done at the beach. At the time, she had been unsure of herself and hadn't known how the bow worked.

If I draw back slowly, even slower than at the beach, that should give me more than enough time.

When the arrow was drawn all the way back, time slowed to a crawl. Nodding to herself, she let her arrows fly into the ogres. They barely moved as she shot them one by one.

When the last ogre was in her sights, time started to speed up again, but her arrow hit its mark.

Time returned to normal, and most of the ogres fell to the ground. The remaining two cowered and grunted at each other until the Gypsies burst through the trees. The two teams surrounded the ogres and dispatched them in an amazing display of speed and knife skills.

Kyah made her way down the tree and walked over to where the hunting group was standing. The Gypsies looked grim.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“While we slept, about six of the ogres left the group,” Fran said. “It appears they headed that way.”

Kyah followed her pointing finger across the clearing. She frowned. *So what? Let's go get 'em!*

As the adrenaline from her shooting spree left her, she realized why the group was so tense.

The escapee ogres were still headed for Camelot and the Gypsy camp.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



They approached Camelot at a run. As they drew closer, bells began pealing.

When their group came to the edge of the wood overlooking the town, they were met by utter chaos.

People were screaming and running in every direction while ogres knocked walls in and tried to grab them. They were destroying the town.

Fran turned to the group, mouth open ready to lay out orders. But instead of saying anything, she just stood there, gaping. Frozen like a statue.

The only way Kyah worked out that she hadn't been turned into stone was that her eyes were still moving. Really not wanting to see what was behind them, she slowly turned to be greeted by a sight that was really out of this world.

Pan was standing there.

He wasn't dressed in the outfit she had become accustomed to; gone were the shiny robes and his skin no longer had a green sparkle to it. This was the Ancient Power, the God Pan standing behind them. He was completely green and dressed in an all-leather outfit that matched his black eyes. His eyes, however, were frightening. They were still black with no whites, but the little twinkles had turned into bright swirling masses that looked familiar to her. The more she stared, the more she thought she recognized them.

Her mouth hung open. *No way. Those are...those are freaking galaxies floating around in his freaking eyeballs.*

There was absolutely no expression on his face. She wasn't sure if he even saw them standing there.

He suddenly brought his hands straight up in the air then sharply brought them back down so his arms were pointing toward the town of Camelot.

At first, nothing happened...and then she heard a deep growl from within the forest and the sound of something big making its way through the trees. She saw birds take flight as whatever it was approached.

As it came closer, the ground trembled, and the trees and bushes shook. All the while, Pan stood there, arms outstretched.

The trees seemed to move out of the way as something emerged. She could only describe it as a jumble of rocks put together so that it was humanoid in shape. It lumbered over and came to a stop next to Pan, who still stood there with his arms stretched out.

The Gypsies remained rooted to the spot.

It was only when giant bears came crashing out of the woods that everyone came out of their daze and stumbled back. The bears raced to reach the giant rock creature and Pan.

Pan finally lowered his arms and walked forward. Her group scrambled to one side as the group lumbered by.

Pan stopped walking and let the creatures charge into town to take care of the ogres.

Looking back into town, she could see that a new threat had joined the ogres while they had been distracted by Pan calling the beasts. The Dark Knights had joined the melee.

Pan turned his glowing black eyes toward the dumbfounded Gypsy group. "It is time. You must go."

He then turned, walked a few steps toward town and promptly disappeared.

Fran was the first to recover, of course. She knelt down and drew her plan out in the dirt with a stick. "We'll split into two groups and move around each side of the town, then splinter off into pairs and work our way in."

She stood back up and looked at Kyah. "You're with me."

"I'm going to head to the camp and see if I can help Merlin there," tinkled

Naieem.

Fran nodded. "Let them know what we're doing here."

Her heart pounding and palms sweating, Kyah followed Fran into the town. She heard screaming and the sound of metal clashing against metal. Then the sound of bears growling and roaring rose above it all. It was oddly comforting.

They came to a stop at the end of an alley. Fran looked around the corner, peering up and down the intersecting street. She turned back to Kyah and started moving her hands around like she was using sign language.

Kyah shook her head and did her best to look utterly confused.

Fran looked frustrated and was about to try again when Kyah reached out and stilled her hands.

"I don't know what you're doing. You'll need to whisper it to me," she said, hopefully low enough that no one else heard her.

Fran huffed and hauled her back down the alleyway. "There are three Dark Knights around the corner. They have some townspeople huddled together in front of them. There's an ogre standing some distance away blocking the street. I need you to get to the roof, silently. Keep an eye on the ogre. When you see me run out, cover me while I take out the ogre, then start shooting at the Dark Knights."

Kyah swallowed hard and nodded. *She was saying all that with her hands?*

"Well, are you going to go or do I have to carry you up to the roof?"

Snapping out of it, Kyah turned on her heel and darted through the open door beside them, hoping not to run into any trouble.

It was a foolish hope. There was a man standing in the middle of the room in front of his very small children. He was holding a machete.

Kyah immediately threw her hands up. "I need to get to your roof. Can I get there from here?"

The man lowered his machete and moved to show her the stairs behind them.

"Thank you. Stay hidden—there's an ogre and three Dark Knights out there."

The man scrambled to the floor and opened a hatch.

She didn't wait to see if they made it safely inside. She raced up the stairs and down a very short hallway to another set of stairs leading to a hatch in the

roof.

Slowly opening the hatch, she looked around. Not seeing anyone or anything on the roof, she scrambled out, trying to keep herself as low as possible as she did so.

Kyah moved to the edge of the roof to see where she was. Peeking over, she could see the group of knights harassing the huddled group of townsfolk, shouting threats and waving their swords in front of them. The ogre had moved a little bit closer to the group and was watching the action unfold. He seemed a little too interested in the huddled mass in front of him.

Moving to get a better view, Kyah spotted what had gotten his attention. In the very center of the group, a woman was holding a sleeping baby—hard to believe, considering all the noise.

Well, I hope the poor thing is asleep, anyway.

Looking over her shoulder toward the castle, she could see Morgana standing on the outer wall, completely still. She was enveloped in her shroud of inky black, her gaze fixed on the town.

Kyah tore her gaze from the scary woman just in time to see Fran run out of an adjacent alley, as slick as a cat. Just as smoothly, she jumped up and neatly carved through the ogre's throat. She gracefully landed on her feet and scampered off in the opposite direction, disappearing down an alley as the ogre fell face forward onto the road.

That's my signal.

Kyah stood up and slowly drew her arrow back, taking notice as time slowed in tune with the motion of the bowstring.

Neat. She let loose the arrow, quickly followed by two more, taking down the knights.

Kyah moved quickly, but as she turned to go back down to the street, she caught sight of Morgana moving along the parapet. The darkness swirled around her, moving the way it had on the other occasions she had seen it. But Morgana was looking right at her.

Oh shit. I don't think these medallions are hiding me anymore. Her heart rate picked up speed as she launched herself through hatch into the house and back

down to the street just as time started to pick up speed once more.

By the time she reached the huddled group, time was back to normal again and Fran was running toward her from a completely different direction.

That woman is quick.

“Everyone, please go and hide,” Fran said.

Kyah helped a few of them up, receiving a few words of thanks before the townsfolk made their way down an alley.

Kyah took a moment to look down the street. What she saw there was like nothing she would ever have seen on Earth. From the look on Fran’s face, it was a sight she had never seen before either.

Pan stood amongst the bears, who had taken various flanking positions around him. Behind them, the moving boulder was making its way through town, back toward the forest.

Fran gave her a look and they both took off at a run, Kyah hoping that the rest of their party had made it through the battle alive.

As they went, Kyah realized that the town had grown quiet. It was a relief. They ran toward Pan and his group of bears, seeing other members of their original hunting party also making their way towards them. She counted ten and smiled.

When they reached Pan, his skin wasn’t as green anymore, though it still had some sparkle. His eyes were still glowing, galaxies floating by within them.

Kyah found she couldn’t look at him directly for long and turned her gaze down the road.

When a group of them had gathered, Pan spoke. “Morgana called the ogres here to distract us in the hopes she could get to the camp. She failed in that effort.”

“I thought you couldn’t directly intervene,” Kyah said.

He turned his head ever so slowly. Kyah swallowed as her mouth completely dried up.

“I was able to get permission.”

Oh.

He continued. “What Morgana has done affects more than this realm now.

But she did not anticipate that the Ancient Powers would be on hand to help.”

Everyone in the group smiled at this, and nodded at him. Pan nodded back and brought his hands up over his head with a thunderous clap.

The bears that had been keeping him company disappeared.

“Time to make our way back to camp, my friends. We have work to do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



As they walked to the camp, Pan informed them that it had been hidden from Morgana. The bulk of the people in the camp had also left, leaving only a few Gypsies behind.

When they made it back to the tents, Kyah was able to rest, get cleaned up and have a decent meal before they all met back in Pan's tent.

There, Merlin and Pan revealed their plan to weaken Morgana, capture her and hopefully rescue Arthur while they were at it. All using Kyah.

"But she'll kill me!" Kyah wailed. "I have no magic."

Merlin looked at her as if she were being slow. "You wield Excalibur and have Pan's gift—the bow and arrows."

"We have a cat-and-mouse game in mind, if you will hear us out," Pan added.

She crossed her arms over her chest and took a deep breath, remembering that, as they were talking, Arthur was likely dying—if he wasn't dead already. "Okay, fine."

Pan grinned at her. "You will re-enter the castle the same way you left. This time, you will be armed with your weapons, but you will enter alone." He paused and looked at Naieem. "Princess Naieem will be with me. I will need her assistance to craft the vessels needed to capture the essence of Morgana and house the essence of Guinevere, if that is possible at this point."

Pan and Naieem nodded grimly at each other.

Merlin took over outlining the plan. “Morgana will sense the sword. She has been hunting Excalibur for many years now.” Merlin held up a hand, staving off the question before it exited Kyah’s mouth. “Morgana hasn’t been able to sense Excalibur while you’ve been here due to the huge effort Pan’s been making to camouflage it. The closer it was to Pan, the easier it became to hide it. So it has been undetectable to her.”

Pausing, Merlin looked at her with concern in his eyes. “Pan will lift the camouflage spell when you are far enough away from Morgana that she cannot immediately get to you, but close enough that she can sense you.” He placed his hand on her shoulder.

His hand was now almost completely smooth, with no liver spots.

That’s a neat trick, this aging backwards deal.

Noticing that she was looking at his hand, Merlin just smirked. “A question for another time, my dear.” He grew serious again. “You do have magic about you and in you, Kyah. Do not make the mistake of thinking you don’t, just because you don’t understand who you are or what you can do yet. You won’t be shielded by the Gypsies, so Morgana will sense *you* as well. As most of us magic users can.”

“But I have the arm cuff,” Kyah objected.

“It was the Gypsies’ presence that imbued the cuff with power. It will not work when you are alone and far from any of them. And it can’t hide Excalibur.”

Kyah stiffened. “So she’ll be able to sense me inside the castle, even before Pan reveals the sword?”

“I will be able to cloak both you and Excalibur up to a point. But, yes, she will know who and what you are as soon as the cloak is lifted,” said Pan grimly. “She will want to drain you as much as she wants to drain Excalibur. The bow and arrow will be ineffective against her powers.”

Kyah sighed. *Of course it couldn’t be that easy.*

Merlin gave Pan a subtle nod, and Pan continued slowly. “We know that you have your schooling ahead of you, but you must know now that the magic in you is far older than Merlin, much older than even myself. It is as old as time itself and that alone means power beyond measure. It is why it is so critical you get

your training: so you cannot be manipulated out of ignorance and can learn to defend yourself by any means necessary.”

“But I don’t feel magical,” said Kyah, dumbfounded. She looked down at her hands, feeling like her life just couldn’t get any weirder. She couldn’t detect anything special about herself.

“We believe you will feel something when Pan lifts the cloak from you,” Merlin said. “Sometimes, cloaking magic makes magic undetectable even to those that *have* the magic. The magic is almost...nullified by Pan’s spell.”

Merlin gave his explanation slowly and deliberately, as if he was trying to soften what he was saying

“Oh. What should I expect, then? Is it painful?” Kyah’s apprehension was ratcheting up by the minute.

Merlin shook his head. “I shouldn’t think so. But, as we have said in the past, we know *of* the Travellers, but we don’t know a lot about them. We’ve attempted to understand them, but they are secretive. We know enough to provide training, but that is more about magical concepts, practices and weapons. Other than that...” he paused and looked at her, “your kind is truly a mystery. We don’t know how you will react. We hope, whatever happens, that it will be quick.”

“In any case,” added Pan, “we will be watching you from the silver pool.” He indicated the tub where they had witnessed Morgana murder Guinevere. “We will come if Morgana tries to take you before King Arthur can be saved.” He continued before she could protest. “We understand that you underestimate your value to the realms, but you must appreciate that you are far more valuable than any king anywhere. If we cannot save Arthur, we will capture his essence and let the natural progress of the legends occur.”

Frowning at that last statement, Kyah shook her head to clear it—it was too much to take in all at once.

She took a deep breath to steady herself. “If we are going to do this, I want to do it right now, while I’m really not thinking too hard about Morgana draining me—or trying to kill me!”

“That’s the spirit!” Merlin said, landing a shoulder punch that almost knocked her over.

Pan nodded at Naieem.

The faery took flight looking exactly like she'd stepped out of a fairy tale, even trailing sparkling faery dust in her wake. She zoomed up to Kyah's head and circled her, covering her head to toe in the dusty stuff.

Pan clapped and Kyah felt something shift. She was heavier all of a sudden. Looking down, she found she was clad in the outfit Pan had first given her, with Excalibur and the bow and arrows on her back. She felt clean and refreshed, as if she had been scrubbed down after a nice long sleep. In addition to the brown and tan leather outfit, she wore a green-gold breastplate and forearm bracers, and had armor plating on the fronts of her boots. There was even a weight on her head. She reached a hand up to feel a metal circlet on her brow.

Seeing that Pan had an odd expression on his face, and that Merlin looked like he wanted to burst out laughing, she grew concerned, and turned to look at the mirror across the room.

The green and gold made her red hair and green eyes brighter than they were normally. The circlet was the same green-gold as the armor, complemented by molded leaves woven into the circlet itself. Looking a little closer, she noticed a sunburst etched in its center. Her thick, fishtail braid was woven with strands of green-gold thread and tiny green-gold nuggets.

I look like some kind of woodland princess warrior.

Merlin chuckled behind her.

Turning, she caught Pan frowning at him. Looking between the two, Kyah felt her mouth forming a question, but Merlin walked up to her swiftly, took her by the arm and whisked her outside.

The Gypsies outside paused what they were doing to stare at her. Some even bowed, causing Kyah to raise her eyebrows, but she nodded back.

Turning to Merlin with her eyebrows still raised, she found him watching her silently.

"It is time for you to coax Morgana out." He gripped her arm almost painfully. "Remember, we are with you. Even when it feels like you are alone and lost in darkness, the light will come." He looked pointedly at the circlet on her forehead. "I suspect the light will always be with you." He paused.

“Morgana will try to take the light from you for her own purposes and bring Excalibur into her darkness. Stay in the light, Traveller—it will not fail you, even if it seems like it is the end.” He looked at her sternly as if trying to drive his words directly into her brain with his eyes.

Kyah nodded, feeling anxious.

Merlin nodded back.

Turning in the direction of the castle, she took a deep breath and put one foot in front of the other. She didn’t look back.

Kyah was able to skirt the town, which didn’t seem to be very active in the aftermath of the battle, and meeting no guards or Dark Knights on patrol, she found herself creeping along the exterior wall of the castle far more quickly than she had expected.

She made her way to the spot in the wall they had used to get in and out when they had brought in help to remove the children. Watching for guards up above, she hoped that there weren’t any waiting behind the wall.

Stepping through with Excalibur in her hands, she encountered no one. Letting out a breath, she sprinted across the small courtyard to the door, again with no problems.

But when she reached the door, she had the overwhelming sense that something wasn’t right.

Maybe I’m developing intuition with all this sneaking around I’ve been doing.

Trusting in her newly developed instincts, she backed away and hid in some nearby trees, positioning herself to watch for another way in.

Standing there in the bushes, preoccupied with looking for a new entry, her attention came back to the door when it clicked and opened slowly.

Expecting to see Gypsies or servants, she stifled a gasp when she saw Morgana framed in the doorway. She looked around for a few moments, glancing right past Kyah as if she wasn’t there.

Kyah remained utterly still as Morgana exited the hidden passageway and

walked across the courtyard. Kyah eyed the door. Going that way would be a very bad idea. She would bet any amount of money that it was now filled with knights waiting for the unwary.

Taking a chance, trusting her gut and that Pan's cloaking magic would hold up for some time yet, Kyah followed Morgana at a distance.

Watching Morgana was interesting; she noticed that even the Dark Knights had a tendency to avoid her if they could.

Morgana made her way from courtyard to courtyard. Finally, she stood before the main entrance of the castle.

Knowing she couldn't follow her in that way, as it was typically lined with guards, Kyah decided to take a chance on the servants, hoping no one would raise the alarm.

Entering through the open doors of the kitchen, she found the staff were busy as usual. But all work immediately paused as they stopped and stared at her.

Kyah had momentarily forgotten how she was dressed. She couldn't have stood out more amongst the people she had got to know over the last few weeks. She kicked herself for thinking she could just walk through the kitchen without attracting too much attention.

She took advantage of their shock at seeing her dressed for battle, carrying a sword in her hands, and quickly strode through them, holding her finger to her lips.

"Keep working like nothing is going on. Sorry to interrupt."

They all continued to stare.

Kyah made it past the countertops. No one moved to sound an alarm, and she heaved a sigh of relief.

She was making her way up the stairs out of the kitchens when the most peculiar feeling ran through her body.

Her breath caught as her back arched. She stared at the ceiling and felt something ancient, yet familiar, arc through her body. As quickly as it had come, it left, leaving Kyah the most energized she'd been since landing in the realm of Avalon.

Seeing light reflected on the wall next to her, she realized that both Excalibur

and the sunburst in the circlet were glowing.

“Well, that’s not going to help me stay hidden,” Kyah whispered, sheathing Excalibur and readying her bow instead.

It suddenly hit her that she needed to get moving or Morgana would discover her here near all these people.

Squeezing her eyes shut, believing that help would come for her if she needed it, she glanced up the staircase and started to run.

She made it up the stairs effortlessly, then rounded a corner to find several Dark Knights standing in the corridor. She shot two arrows before they could even draw their swords.

Dropping to one knee, she readied another arrow and sensed an inky darkness crawling her way.

This is it. Morgana knows I’m here.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Getting up, she replaced the bow on her back and took Excalibur out.

Running down the hall, she tried to escape the sensation of slime crawling over her skin.

Okay, that's new and unpleasant.

Only a little grateful that she could now sense the darkness better, she found herself running into a hallway with open arches on one side that overlooked the throne room. Speeding along it, she caught something reflecting the light.

Skidding to a halt, she looked to her left across the throne room to another hallway, similar to the one she was in now. Walking closer to the banister, she could make out a shimmering pool of silver halfway along it through one of the arches.

She smiled to herself. *I've found it! I've found the portal—finally!*

The smile was short-lived, the sensation of slime on her skin returning.

Kyah ran along the rest of the hallway and down two levels. She was making her way toward the southernmost tower, hoping to lead Morgana away from the front of the castle where Merlin would breach.

Morgana would hopefully be so overcome with her need to get to Excalibur that Merlin would be able to enter the castle relatively undetected. His job was to get the people out of the areas closest to the front of the castle where they thought the final confrontation with Morgana would take place. That is, if Kyah could out-distance and outlast her.

Every so often, Kyah heard Morgana giggle, the sound carried in the air itself.

It was the creepiest thing she had ever heard in her life.

The darkness was grasping at her and she tried to think positive thoughts to keep herself going. She had found the portal! Which meant they could leave, and the release of her powers, which did make her feel rather magical, seemed to have given her a tremendous amount of endurance.

All this running to stay ahead of Morgana probably wouldn't be possible if that hadn't happened.

She paused briefly once she reached the southernmost point of the castle. The awful sensation of being so close to the darkness she could brush it away with her hand had receded. Hoping that she hadn't completely lost Morgana, Kyah chewed her lip.

She was wondering whether to retrace her steps when a door behind her shattered, splinters blasting toward her. Covering her face, she stumbled to the ground.

When she stood up and turned, Morgana was standing there.

"Give me the sword!" she screamed.

Kyah's heart stuttered in her chest. She whirled and took off running back the way she had come. Morgana's bizarre giggle followed her. She shuddered.

She ran past the throne room to a set of stairs that led up a level and fled toward the tower where the servants had been confined not too long ago.

I'll try to put some distance between us, but I have to keep stringing her along.

Once in the servant's quarters, she waited again to see if she could feel the sensation of slime crawling on her skin but felt nothing.

Her breathing was out of control. She took a moment to calm it. She breathed deeply and tried to free her mind of the racing fear.

When her head was clear, she felt the slime again—and it was almost overwhelming. Morgana's giggle echoed up the stairwell and the next moment a large ball of black, crackling energy zoomed by her head, crashing into the wall on the opposite side of the room. She raced to the damaged doorway. Clearing it,

she turned to find Morgana advancing on her. The doorway crashed down in a pile of stone and dust.

Morgana screamed, a chilling screech that raked over her bones and made her teeth ache.

Turning, Kyah ran down the winding staircase to another corridor. Heads popped out of doorways and she yelled at them to hide and lock themselves in their rooms.

Kyah sheathed Excalibur and pulled her bow from her back, keeping it in her hands as she ran. She could tell Dark Knights were close. She rounded a corner and came face to face with two of them. She didn't even bother to slow time; she just pulled back, shot them and kept running.

The sensation of the slime crawling on her skin almost made her knees buckle. *Just breathe, Kyah!*

Keeping up the pep talk wasn't easy, her rational thoughts having a hard time competing with the knee-buckling fear. *She's right on top of me!*

Heart thudding, Kyah looked around and realized where she was. She ran back toward the throne room, hoping she would have enough room to maneuver.

I hope Merlin has had enough time because I'm out of it.

Hoping she would have room to dodge whatever Morgana threw at her, Kyah put her bow away and pulled Excalibur from the scabbard. She wished, not for the first time, that she could take Morgana out with an arrow.

Morgana entered the throne room cackling, carrying an inky blackness with her that seemed to drip onto the floor. Her eyes and hair matched the inky blackness that writhed around her. She looked skeletal, her eyes shrunken into her skull, her dress hanging loosely from her shoulders. Her whole being seemed to crackle and spark as though she struggled to contain all the energy she had stolen.

She gathered the darkness into her hands and began throwing dark, sparking balls of energy at Kyah.

Kyah dodged and weaved. The balls missed her and hit the walls, creating cracks and holes wherever they land. Kyah fell to the ground as one of the deadly balls of energy exploded into the column behind her.

Then Morgana was on her. Excalibur flared.

“Give me the sword!” she screamed, her black eyes flaring.

Kyah scrambled backward, escaping her grasp.

Morgana drew on the darkness and formed it into a lightning bolt sword.

Of course. Of course she can pull a lightning bolt sword out of nothing. Just great...

It was then that Excalibur revealed her true nature and purpose. The sword flared to life and Kyah felt the power travel up her arm.

Morgana swung for her, but Kyah fended her off in a series of complex twists, turns and blocks. Then Kyah attacked.

As they came together in a complex dance of magic and steel, Kyah fought with the skill and confidence gifted her by the sword, but she was beginning to feel faint. Though Excalibur still glowed faithfully, Kyah felt like she was fading away. It was almost as though her body didn’t belong to her anymore. She was pretty sure she couldn’t let go of the sword even if she wanted to.

They battled on. Her mind was no longer clear but her body kept moving.

As they crossed swords near the glass doors leading out to the massive terrace outside the throne room, Kyah glimpsed her reflection in them—she stumbled, but Excalibur steadied her. She didn’t recognize the person holding the glowing sword.

The glance at the glass told her she was dying a slow death as the seconds ticked by. Her eyes had sunk back into her skull, her cheekbones flared out sharply, her hair had faded from glowing red to a grey brown and her armor was loose. The hands that held Excalibur were bony.

What’s happening to me?

A sweet voice rang inside her head, as though it were coming from far away.

“I am using your energy to help you survive. I will not kill you, but the evil before us surely will if I do not do this. I will not let go of you, Kyah, Keeper of the Sword and Traveller of the Realms.”

The voice was familiar, like but not quite the same as the voice of the Lady of the Lake. Awe welled up inside her. Excalibur had spoken to her and it felt wonderful.

Spurred on and trusting Excalibur, Kyah focused on the fight. Every little bit of energy she had left she would use. She felt at peace. She would fight Morgana till the end and die for the people of this town if need be, if that's what it took to set them free. Though she hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Kyah tried to redouble her efforts, but Morgana forced her back, and she fell to her knees. Her body was failing and she wasn't sure she could go on, even with the help of magic.

Catching her reflection in the glass doors again, she saw a vision of herself superimposed over the skeletal figure she had become. She was a warrior, fiery and beautiful, and strong and fierce. She smiled.

"This is who you are. Do not forget," breathed Excalibur.

Morgana cackled manically, and advanced until she was standing over her.

Her opponent, too, looked worse for wear. Her skin was stretched far too tight over her bones and covered with sores, boils and cracks, all of which were oozing black goo and green pus. The stench rising from them permeated Kyah's haze and she gagged.

"You're mine now," Morgana hissed at her.

Excalibur's voice came from far, far away, so far that Kyah almost couldn't hear her. *"Help is here."*

One second Morgana was looming over her and, then, with a flash of light, she was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Kyah lay there simply staring at the spot where Morgana had been. It was all she could manage.

Merlin appeared at her side. He kneeled, laid a hand on her forehead and muttered a few words. Then he stood and walked toward Morgana, who was rising from where he'd blasted her across the room.

Kyah was gazing after him, too weak to cry out, when her body convulsed. She arched toward the ceiling, gasping for air and letting go of her sword.

Collapsing on the floor, she was finally able to roll over onto her knees. Reaching for Excalibur, she quickly grabbed the sword, dragging it to her.

She crawled toward the glass doors, comforted to see that she looked a little better. She was still thin, but not skeletal.

Taking a deep breath, she hauled herself upright and turned toward the battle. Merlin was blasting Morgana with powerful magical energy. It actually looked like he was having fun.

Kyah shook her head.

Merlin threw her a glance. "Go get Arthur! He's in the dungeons!"

He looks younger than me now! How is that even happening?

Merlin summoned wind and ice into the room, sending blasts of air and energy hurtling toward Morgana.

But he still found the time to frown at Kyah. "Go now! He needs you!"

Kyah jerked back to her senses. She turned and managed a jog out of the

room, descending level after level until she reached the dungeons. She expected to find them heavily guarded and traded Excalibur for her bow.

The hallways leading to the dungeon area, however, were curiously empty. Deciding not to question why, she hurried through them and down to the cells.

The first row was empty, with one exception. Running to the wall to get the keys she'd seen on a hook, she opened the cell door.

The prisoner was in relatively good shape. He followed Kyah out of the cell, tears in his eyes.

She nodded at him. "I'm here to free everyone. Where are the rest of the prisoners?"

The man trembled, but headed for a set of stairs. Kyah steeled herself for what she was going to see next as she followed the former prisoner down to the torture chambers and another series of holding cells. The cells down here were barely large enough to allow a man to sit upright. There were no windows, no fresh air. Just the acrid scent of decay, feces and fear.

Stiffly walking along the row of cells, she placed her hand on the man's shoulder, in part to comfort him, but also to reassure herself.

When she withdrew her hand, a small spark passed between her hand and his shoulder.

He turned toward her, and Kyah saw him transform before her eyes. All at once, he didn't look so tired or starved.

He gazed at her, eyes wide. She had no explanation for what had just happened, so she simply nodded at him, and they continued along the cells, freeing prisoners as they went.

At the end of the hall of cells, they walked into a large room, and she stopped short.

Arthur was chained to the wall, covered in blood, so much so that he almost blended in with the brick wall behind him. Kyah could see that his skin was broken in ways that defied her worst imaginings. As her brain processed what her eyes were seeing, she started to panic.

I'm too late.

She scrambled for the right keys on the ring she'd picked up, but nothing fit.

She glanced around the room frantically, finally spotting another set lying on one of the tables.

Please let these work.

Shaken to the core, she freed his feet, which looked broken in several places. Trying not to be sick, Kyah then unlocked the manacles securing his wrists.

With his full weight leaning on her, she lowered herself to the ground, laying him on her lap gently.

He was breathing, but barely.

She carefully touched his face. "Arthur, you're going to be okay. Help is coming. Please be okay."

She could feel the damage done to his back through the blood seeping into her clothes.

Tears streaming down her face, she reached around and unsheathed Excalibur, placing the sword on Arthur's chest, and wrapping his hands around the hilt.

"This sword is yours."

As she stared down at the friend who had taught her so much on their journey together, Kyah realized that she cared for this man more than she could ever admit to him.

"Please don't leave," she whispered to him. "Please don't leave me here." She cupped his head in her hands and placed a kiss on his forehead.

She lay him down on the ground. There was nothing she could do for him; she had to find Merlin. Hopefully, he had contained Morgana.

"Thank you for being with me here," she whispered, wondering if this was the last time she'd see him alive.

She gave him one last teary kiss on his lips.

Kyah rose from the floor, finally tearing her eyes away. It wasn't too late. She just had to get Merlin.

She was leaving the room, shepherding the freed prisoners ahead of her, when something glinted off the wall beside her. Turning her head, Kyah saw a beautiful display of soft, blue light reaching out of the room they'd left behind.

She spun around. Arthur was floating in the air, encased in the soft, blue

light. It pulsed ever so slowly, trails of bright, white light zooming around Arthur within his cocoon. It reminded Kyah of electrons orbiting an atom.

“What is happening?” she breathed.

As she stared, faery women with crowns on their heads materialized in the light—they were the ones zooming around him. One paused and smiled at her. *Naieem!*

Arthur’s body rotated as she watched, a glowing Excalibur gripped in his hands. His body started to heal, pearlescent light dancing around him.

The light began to pulse, faster and faster, until a blinding flash of light knocked Kyah onto her back.

When her sight cleared, Arthur was standing there, bare-chested, his skin free from all the horrific damage.

Kyah shuffled over to him in relieved disbelief to see him looking like himself again. Her mind couldn’t seem to process the change as fast he had been healed.

When she finally reached him, she threw her arms around him and gave him the biggest hug she could.

He returned her hug tightly.

“Okay,” she gasped. “Too tight...can’t...breathe...”

Arthur let go, grabbing her arm to steady her as she stumbled back.

He stared at her in horror. “You’re injured!”

Kyah blinked and looked down at herself. She was covered in blood.

“No,” she said gently. “That was you.”

Arthur glanced at the wall he had been chained to and then back at her.

He nodded slowly. “I remember now. Thank you for coming back for me.”

Kyah stood there swaying, tears falling down her face.

Arthur wrapped her in a gentle hug. He patted her hair and muttered nonsensical, comforting words while Kyah cried, happy that her friend was back.

Interrupted by a cough and a jangle of keys, they broke apart. Kyah turned to see the first prisoner she had freed standing at the door.

“I just wanted to thank you, miss. Everybody’s out now. I don’t speak for the others, really, but I, for one, will be forever in your debt.” He gave them a formal

bow, then turned and fled.

“You’re welcome,” said Kyah weakly after his disappearing form.

Arthur handed Excalibur back to her. “She still belongs to you.”

She accepted the sword. “We should go and find Merlin. He was battling Morgana in the throne room. The portal is up one level in a hallway overlooking it.”

Jogging out of the torture chamber, Arthur grabbed weapons out of the guardroom on their way back up.

As they exited the dungeons, the sounds of fighting reached their ears. The way to the throne room was entirely blocked. Everywhere Kyah looked, Gypsies were fighting Dark Knights with the help of some of the freed prisoners.

“This way,” she shouted at Arthur.

She grabbed his hand and they sprinted up a stairwell to the hallway that held the portal and overlooked the throne room. Dark Knights were waiting there if they had been expecting them.

Kyah reached for her bow and knelt at the top of the stairs. She took out several knights in a row in her usual fashion, putting arrows right through their eyes.

Arthur stood at her side and gaped. “You do know there are other body parts to aim for?”

Kyah just smiled and shrugged. When the last of the knights fell, they ran to the banister to look down at the throne room. They reached it in time to see Merlin stalking over to Morgana where she lay on the ground, pointing his staff at her.

“Away with you, Morgana le Fay.”

Merlin muttered a few more words that Kyah couldn’t catch and Morgana sagged, her eyes wide open. A black, inky cloud rose from her body and started to float up and away.

There was a pop right next her ear and Naieem appeared, surrounded by a diminishing golden glow.

Kyah gave her friend a smile before turning her attention back the throne room.

Pan arrived carrying a plain canister. He opened it and waved his hands about.

The winds Merlin had summoned picked up and Kyah felt like she was at high altitude with her ears about to pop.

There was a clanging of armor from both ends of the hallway as more Dark Knights arrived.

Kyah reached for her bow but Naieem shook her head.

“It’s time to go now, Kyah.”

Kyah nodded, backing away from the railing and grabbing Excalibur in the bow’s stead.

The portal was waiting for them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Kyah, Arthur and Naieem raced down the corridor to the spot on the wall where Kyah had seen the liquid silver portal.

“Where are we going?” shouted Arthur.

“Toward that opening up ahead!” Kyah shouted back. She was relieved it was still there.

“I don’t see it,” Arthur said.

Wielding Excalibur in one hand, and without breaking stride, she grabbed Arthur’s hand in the other. “This is it! Don’t let go. Just run with me.”

She glanced at him, he nodded at her and they ran full tilt toward the portal, Arthur seeing a stone wall, Kyah the shimmering opening.

They went through together and floated through a grey haze. Time slowed down and they moved in slow motion, Kyah trusting that the portal would take them where they needed to be. Then time sped up and they fell with a crash, landing on a hard surface.

Distant clamoring echoed in her ears for a moment and she shook her head dazedly, closing her eyes. Her hearing felt dulled, stalled in time for a second, but it quickly sped up to normal.

She heard Arthur groaning and rolling over, and she let out a groan herself.

That is definitely going to leave a mark.

Rolling to her hands and knees to help with the vertigo, she finally felt brave enough to open her eyes. The sight that met them was a familiar one.

“We’re back at the Way Station,” Kyah said, somewhat mollified.

She sat back on her knees and looked around. Yep, there was the roaring fire, the couches and the darkened staircase.

“Huh,” she said.

Naieem buzzed over. “Look!”

The faery pointed fervently in front of her.

That’s new.

There was now a pair of double doors in the sitting room.

She turned to Arthur, who was sitting cross-legged, his head in his hands.

“Arthur? Are you all right?”

“I feel like I’ve had too much wine and ale.”

Making a face and feeling his pain, Kyah stood up and walked over to the doors. She wasn’t ready to open them just yet.

She turned to look down the hall toward the double doors where Arthur’s prison had been located. She could only see a wall there now.

She stood and walked over to the corridor.

“Interesting,” she muttered.

All the other doors were still there, but they looked dull and uninviting. They definitely gave off a ‘no entry for you’ vibe.

Walking back to Arthur, who had managed to stand up, she turned around once again. “Huh.”

“What are you going on about?” he asked, coming up next her.

“Well, there used to be a door down the hall that was the way into your former prison.”

Arthur stiffened up. A stricken look came over his face and his hand gripped the hilt of his sword, white-knuckled.

Any other person would have taken a step or three back, but Kyah knew better. He wasn’t the same angry man she’d found here originally.

“Not to worry,” she said gently. “It’s just a stone wall now.” She nodded at the new double doors. “Do you see that?”

“Yes, I see doors—why?”

“Interesting,” mumbled Kyah.

Heaving a tired sigh, Arthur shook his head, walked over to one of the couches and unceremoniously dropped into it.

Kyah sauntered over to the opposite couch and stood silent for a moment. “Are you starting to feel better?”

“Yes. Oddly, the headache lessens the less you talk.”

Kyah made a face at him and turned away. She paced the length of the room. When she turned around, she caught Arthur watching her with a small smile on his face.

She smiled back. “Feeling better now?”

Arthur chuckled and stood. “I think it’s time to go through those doors, don’t you?”

Kyah looked at the doors and her shoulders sagged a bit. What was waiting for them on the other side?

Nodding at Arthur, she approached the large, ominous double doors. *Did they get bigger while I wasn’t watching?*

Shaking off the notion, she reached out a hand and the doors began to open slowly of their own accord.

Kyah and Arthur glanced at each other nervously.

As the doors opened, they were showered in blinding light. It was impossible to see through it, but Kyah swore she could hear muffled voices on the other side.

Oh great.

Taking Excalibur out of her sheath, Kyah steadied herself for what was to come. Arthur silently drew his sword as well.

“I hear voices,” whispered Kyah.

Arthur snapped a nod in her direction.

They stalked through the doorway, Naieem on Kyah’s shoulder, Kyah and Arthur ready to do battle.

Blinking to clear her vision, Kyah found herself in a large, white, marble room. They had stepped into a gathering of folk who looked just like the Lady of the Lake’s people. *The Fae!*

Some wore armor and others were dressed in long, flowing tunics. One wore

a crown. Silence descended as the group stared wide-eyed at the trio.

The Fae man in the crown and officious-looking robes was the first to recover. He made to approach them.

Arthur stepped forward and put his sword out in front of Kyah, blocking him from getting any closer.

The crowned Fae stopped in his tracks. Kyah glanced around. Everyone was staring at Arthur as if they had seen a ghost.

Arthur stood there, battle ready, a white-knuckled grip on his sword.

Realizing she had to speak to break the odd tension, Kyah raised her hands. “My apologies, everyone. Please relax. We have journeyed long and hard to get here. I was told by Merlin and Pan that I must travel to the City of the Gods to begin my training as a Traveller. My companions are Princess Naieem and,” she swept a hand at Arthur, “this is King Arthur, the Once and Future King of Camelot and the Protector of the Realm of Avalon.”

The Fae with the crown nodded regally at them. “Pan foretold your arrival. We have been expecting you. I am King Louris and you are welcome in the Lands of the Fae Lords.”

His smile was warm and inviting. Kyah couldn’t help but smile back.

King Louris swept a hand toward another Fae male dressed in tan and brown leather. “This is Sa’alan. He is my Ranger and will be acting as Ambassador on your journey.”

Sa’alan stepped forward and nodded at them. Kyah nodded back.

Everything is very congenial so far. Mentally, she heaved a huge sigh of relief.

King Louris wasn’t quite done with the introductions. He indicated another individual, who was dressed in black armor, fine, red swirls painted on his breastplate. “This is Captain L’Antha. He is the captain of my guard. He will be choosing several of his men to go with you on your journey, along with Sa’alan.”

“Oh. Um. Okay. Thank you very much,” said Kyah.

We thank you for your hospitality and your protection King Louris,” Arthur said.

For the first time, he sounded like a king and not the pompous ass that she’d

become accustomed to.

“We would like a respite—we need to recover from the trials of our last journey. We have had many a battle and we are tired beyond measure.”

Arthur turned to Kyah and Naieem as he spoke, his gaze lingering on Kyah for a moment or two.

Returning his look with raised eyebrows, Kyah noticed the exhaustion around his eyes.

“Yes, Pan informed us that you would require a much-needed rest and supplies,” King Louris said. “We will take you to the palace, where you will be staying. You will find peace and refreshment there as well.”

“We thank you,” replied Arthur.

It took everything Kyah had not to burst into giggles at the formality of it all. She jerked and made an almost burping sound, covering her mouth and half her face to conceal it.

Arthur turned to look at her and raised an eyebrow. He had lost his serious face and a smirk tugged his lips.

Returning his visage to blank formality, he turned to face the King once again.

The King and Sa’alan nodded at them, and led them out of the marble room.

“We must rest and prepare for our journey while we are able,” Arthur said.

He eyed Excalibur on her back and gave her a knowing look, lowering his voice to a mutter. “Don’t tell anyone what sword you carry.” He paused, as if he wasn’t sure about his next words. “You know, you look different.”

He gave her one last look then trotted to catch up with the Fae.

She wasn’t sure what Arthur meant and her exhausted mind barely cared. All she wanted to focus on accomplishing was getting food in her belly and sleeping in a real, honest to goodness bed.

When they walked outside, she could see the rolling landscape from Pan’s scroll through the moonlit darkness. She glanced up at the sky and saw not one moon there, but two. One of them was so large she felt like it took up most of the sky, but the much smaller moon outshone the larger one and was by far the more spectacular, surrounded by shining rings.

Looking around her, Kyah realized she felt at ease in this place. She glanced at Arthur ahead, peppering Sa'alan with questions, the friendly Fae King at their side. And she glanced at Naieem, fluttering at her shoulder and glittering in the moonlight.

For the first time in what felt like a long time, she relaxed. The journey ahead might not be an easy one, but for the moment, she was safe and she was with friends.

We did it. We made it! A slow smile spread across her face. *I got them here.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for reading this first book in The Traveller series. I hope you enjoyed Kyah's adventure and I hope you are looking forward to where she is going next.

I'm calling this book, a 1.5 Edition as this book needed just a sprinkle more love. So, no new content or change in story at all. So, a big thank you to everyone that provided feedback!

I also want to thank my editor Sara for helping me become a better writer and my illustrator, Deranged Doctor Design for the cover!

As always, Thank YOU reader for picking up my book and supporting my work. I hope we can all go on many more adventures together in the future!

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S.E. Wright is from Central New York, and studied Civil and Environmental Engineering at Clarkson University in Potsdam, NY. She currently lives in Portland, Maine working as a full-time environmental engineer and dreaming up stories in her spare time.

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