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On Pain of Death

By Declan Cummings

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A fat droplet of rain fell from the branches above, landing squarely on the top of my head. The chill shattered across my scalp. Cursing, I looked up at the dark forest canopy. A steady wind had carried the heavy clouds to me, and the rain that had followed threatened my bowstring. I would have to find something soon or return to Sir Pelleas empty-handed.

Inhaling the scent of earth in rain, I trotted between the trees, scanning the area for signs of life, but besides the foliage leaning in the wind, nothing stirred. Back at camp, the supplies were nearly out, so anything would provide a welcome break from the boiled potatoes and stale biscuits. I stepped over a mushroom-covered log and imagined how Sir Pelleas would smile if I came back to camp with a deer or even a wild pig. How the lopsided grin would break out from under his short, messy beard.

My foot sank ankle-deep into mud and I realized I had been smiling myself only as it dropped from my face. Looking up again, I saw sky showing through a break in the tree cover, rain falling freely to the ground. I wrenched my foot free, flecks of mud clinging to my tall leather boot. I crossed the wet clearing and took cover once again under the boughs overhead, but more and more drops shook loose as the rain fell heavier and the wind picked up. It would be potatoes again, then.

I kicked at a pile of wet leaves, then heard something bolt away through the underbrush. It was a large doe. I jogged after it. It would stop soon and I could catch it when it paused to see if I was still there.

I lost it when it disappeared behind a cluster of elm trees, but was able to find where it had ran through a bush. No longer hearing it crash through the foliage, I slowed even more, stepping forward, pushing aside a thin shrub. There it was. It stood, wide ears

perked up, listening. The skin under its brown coat twitched, muscles tensing. I drew an arrow from the quiver at my belt and nocked it. Running my fingers along the bowstring, I checked to see how the rain might have affected it. Nothing that would throw off my aim too much. I slowly drew the arrow to my cheek and placed the arrowhead over the doe's heart, directly behind the shoulder blade. I exhaled and released the string.

The doe bolted at the sound but not before my arrow sank deep into her chest.

I walked back, carrying the doe across my shoulders. I stepped into the clearing and took in the campsite, just two small tents flanking a smoldering fire. Hiding from the rain under a tree on the far side of camp were Pelleas's horse, Gallamist, and mine, Gyb. Standing there, beside them, dark hair wet and stuck to his head, was Pelleas. He fed Gallamist a handful of oats, humming to himself. As I crossed the camp, I watched him scratch Gallamist behind the ear. Then he noticed me and his smile grew, exactly like I had imagined, and I couldn't help but match it.

"Ah, the fruitful hunter returns," he said in a voice both deep and soft. Tall, with a body built for a battlefield, he walked toward me.

"She made me work for it," I said, "took nearly the entire day."

Pelleas laughed. "Well, if she made it easy, it would hardly be worthwhile, would it?" He helped me set the doe down. He walked to his tent and disappeared inside for a moment, emerging again with a thick rope. Tying it around the deer's back legs, he threw it over a thick branch of a nearby tree, hoisting the deer into the air and tying it down. He drew the knife at his belt, knelt down and sliced into the doe's stomach.

"I wouldn't have minded if it was a little easier," I said, lifting my shirt to cover my nose as the stench of the deer's insides washed over me.

I left him to dress and skin the carcass and stepped into my tent, unstringing my bow and setting it aside. I pulled off my leather padded jacket and my sweaty shirt, then stepped back outside. Pelleas had pulled out the doe's intestines and was starting to tear the skin away from the muscle.

"Would you like any assistance, sir?"

"I don't think so. No," he grimaced as he sliced through a particularly resilient piece of flesh, "room. 'Too many cooks spoil the broth.'"

I looked around at the wet camp. A campfire would be near impossible.

"Did you manage to keep any firewood dry?" I asked. "We could have venison steaks tonight and salt the rest."

"In my tent," he said, gesturing with the bloody knife.

I retrieved the wood and built the fire, striking a piece of flint against my dagger blade. As the wood caught flame and began to burn, I sat back and watched Pelleas finish cleaning the deer. When he was done, he brought the carcass into the woods, disappearing. He came back a short while later, red covering his arms to the elbow, and poured a bit of water from our water skins over them, washing away the blood. From the pile near where he had butchered it, he took two slabs of meat and brought them to me.

I put them on a cooking pan and set it near the fire, then started to take the rest of the venison and cover it in salt, preparing it to be stored. As I did this, Pelleas sat down on a log near the fire and stared into it. His face sank, muscles in his cheeks loosening and the corners of his mouth dropping into a frown.

"Tomorrow I think we should ride toward Lady Ettarde's castle," he said.

I looked at the slab of meat I was pressing salt into. "Has it been a week already,

sir?"

He looked up at me, cocking his head. "What does that matter? If it's been a week or not?"

"It has been most regular, when we go to her," I said, "I just thought—"

The corners of his lips tugged up, slightly. "I do not think we must serve as a calendar for them, Aaron. No," he stared back into the fire. "I wish to see her tomorrow. It will be different this time. It has to be."

I nodded. After all, it didn't affect me if we went more often, although I feared if it happened too often the embarrassment might finally get to him. I looked up at the darkening sky, sunlight fleeing behind the rainclouds. I would need to hurry to finish salting the meat before nightfall.

The next morning we emerged from the narrow dirt trail, fully armored and carrying our lances, the sudden sunlight blinding me for a moment, my eyes accustomed to the darkness under the trees. My eyes adjusted as we rode through the tall grass toward the road, running through a cleared section of the forest. This section of the road was deserted, Pelleas and I the only travelers in sight.

I looked at Pelleas, polished steel armor incandescent in the sunlight, but he was staring at Gallamist's pristine white mane, a frown deepening as he stroked the horse's fur.

"Sir?" I asked.

He ignored me, or perhaps didn't hear.

He drove Gallamist toward her castle, the clop of our horses' hooves the only sound to challenge the bird songs coming from the woods. The trees lining the road were

beginning to change with the late-summer weather, hints of orange and yellow poking through the green. We rode in silence, passing hundreds of nearly identical oaks. We followed a bend in the road and came upon a natural clearing, tall grass replacing the trees.

Pelleas slowed and walked Gallamist onto the grass. I followed. He stopped several paces away from the road and didn't make any indication of moving further.

"Are we stopping here for a while, sir?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

I paused, waiting for a reason, which he didn't provide. I thought about urging him to do something, anything, but I knew he wouldn't listen. I sighed and let Gyb graze near Gallamist. Pelleas stared down at a patch of grass, no different than any of the other patches of grass, but he looked at it as if it gave him answers, as if it could tell him the secrets of Lady Ettarde's heart.

I looked up at the sun, squinting against the brilliance of the heavens. It was hot. No longer under the protective shade of the trees, I began to sweat. I tugged at the tunic I wore under my breastplae, but it hardly helped. We waited without words. After a few minutes, bored, I began checking my equipment. My sword and shield both seemed to be in good condition, although I did find rust growing on my dagger where the blade met the plain steel crossguard. That would need to be scrubbed clean. I was wrist deep in my saddlebags, rummaging around, looking for anything interesting, when Pelleas let out a sob.

"She doesn't love me, Aaron," he said. Tears trailed down his face and wet his beard.

“Sir, don’t think about that” I said, smiling softly, hoping to comfort him. “People fall in love all the time. Sometimes all it takes it patience and persistence.”

“But what if she doesn’t? What if—”

Hoofbeats interrupted him, coming from down the road, the way we had come. He turned to the noise, hand tightening on his lance. Riding toward us were a knight and man-at-arms, the knight wearing elaborately gilded armor, gold leaf over red-painted steel. His helmet hung from a strap on his saddle. A warm smile peeked out from under a dark moustache. Pelleas relaxed his hand on the lance. The other knight wore only leather armor over chainmail. I peeked at Pelleas and saw him wipe away the tears.

“Hello, good knight,” he said to the knight in the red armor. “May God send you much worship.”

“Thank you,” the knight said, “I pray for God to also send you much honor and worship.”

Pelleas looked down and stroked Gallamist’s mane. “Ah,” he said, “I may lay that aside, for sorrow and shame comes upon me after worship.”

The knight’s face scrunched in confusion; his moustache wiggled as he opened his mouth to speak.

More hoofbeats came from the road, this time from the direction of Lady Ettarde’s castle. These were her knights. There were six of them, riding two abreast, all wearing her crest: the red lioness on a yellow background. I looked at Pelleas. He smiled a small, tight-lipped smile and put on his helmet. He drew down his visor, masking his face, then nodded at me. Saluting the knight in the red armor and his companion, Pelleas hoisted his lance and rode toward Lady Ettarde’s knights.

“Who are these knights that ride against your master?” the knight in red asked me.

“And should we provide assistance?”

“No, he can surely handle them himself,” I said. “A lady of these parts sends her knights to shame Sir Pelleas and to bring him before her.”

The knight looked aghast. “Why ever would she command such a thing?”

“Sir Pelleas, you said?” the shabbier man asked, “That’s Sir Pelleas?” He gazed at Pelleas. “If the rumors are true, those knights will perhaps need reinforcements.” He turned to the knight in red. “Sir Pelleas won a tournament of over 300 knights, unseated everyone he tilted against. Dedicated the prize to Lady Ettarde, who—” he trailed off.

Pelleas kicked his horse into a gallop, charging at one of Lady Ettarde’s knights who had broken out ahead of the others. I could only see his back as he lowered his lance, a brilliant shining man atop a brilliant white horse. He looked like God’s justice incarnate, riding down upon the dark smudge of the chestnut horse and Ldy Ettarde’s knight.

They clashed. The horses’ muscles rippled under their skin and Pelleas’s armor shook with the impact; his lance struck the knight directly in the chestplate. Pelleas continued on as the knight tumbled out of his saddle, lance falling from his grip. Pelleas pulled his horse in a wide arc, circling back so he could ride back toward the remaining five.

“Quite impressive,” the knight in red said. “His form is remarkable.” He turned to his companion. “Please, continue.”

“Ah, yes. He gives the Lady Ettarde the prize, a beautiful crown, made of solid gold with a ruby the size of your thumb fixed on it. But Lady Ettarde, a spiteful woman,

spurned him. Told him she would never love him.”

“I don’t think the ruby was quite so large,” I said, but the knight in red didn’t seem to notice.

Pelleas lowered his lance again, leaning forward slightly. Gallamist’s tail swished wildly. There was a thunderous crack as the second knight’s lance shattered against Pelleas’s shield, but Pelleas managed to stay on his horse. The knight didn’t. He landed on his back and laid for a moment, stunned from the impact.

“Sir Pelleas has been coming to her ever since,” the red knight’s companion continued, “week in and week out, begging her to love him, professing his love, but she will not warm to him.”

“How long has this been going on?” The red knight asked me.

“Nigh on two months, I believe.”

We fell into silence as we watched Pelleas ride toward the third knight. Neither of the two landed a solid hit, lances pinging wide off shields. They circled for another pass.

I looked again at the knight in the red armor and I noticed he wore a green sash, then noticed the crest on his shield, a plain blue circle on a white background. My eyes widened. Could it be? One of King Arthur’s Knights? “Sir? Your sash,” I paused for a moment. “You are a Knight of the Round Table?”

Pelleas’s lance struck Lady Ettarde’s knight directly in his helmet, whipping his head back and toppling him off his horse.

The knight smiled, the white of his teeth only peeking out from under his moustache.

“I am indeed. I am Sir Gawain, knight and nephew to King Arthur himself.”

I stared at him. This man was nephew to a figure of legend, a man who was said to be chosen by the pagan gods themselves to rule this land. But he looked so ordinary.

“What is he like? King Arthur, I mean. Are the stories true?”

Sir Gawain laughed. “What do the stories say?”

“That he is over seven feet tall and the most handsome man in the entire country, that he was visited by a lake nymph and given Excalibur and that he conspires with a pagan warlock.” I smiled at the absurdity.

He smiled back. “I cannot speak for how handsome is he, but the rest is correct.” He laughed again. “Although I do not know how Merlin would like being described as such.”

A knight crashed to the earth.

I stared at him, mouth slightly open. He nodded.

“He is extraordinarily tall,” he said.

“And the,” I paused, “magic?”

“Do you not believe in the old gods, boy?” Gawain’s companion asked.

Looking between the two of them, I didn’t answer. Did they truly believe all of this? Or were they lying? It would make sense for Sir Gawain to spread stories of Arthur’s “divine right” to rule, as he would benefit as well.

“Faith is a good thing, Wallace,” Sir Gawain said, “he mustn’t believe as we do.” He stared into my eyes. I looked down. “Although in this case I think his faith may be misplaced.”

We fell into silence. Pelleas charged at the second to last knight. The knight hesitated before riding to meet Pelleas. As they approached each other, the knight pulled his horse to the right, riding back toward his companion. The last man was larger than the

rest, and wore armor of a finer quality, with gold lionesses embossed onto his helmet. It was Sir Roger, leader of Lady Ettarde's knights. He hated Sir Pelleas

Roger gestured angrily at the knight who had retreated, then at Pelleas. The knight didn't turn to face Pelleas. Roger drew his sword and swung it at the man, who blocked it with his shield, then rode some distance off. Shaking his head, Roger sheathed his sword and turned his horse toward Pelleas and hoisted his lance. He kicked his horse's sides, hard. Roger leaned far forward, thrusting out with his lance. There was a clamor as the metal-tipped lances scraped against metal shields. They both rode past. They turned. Gallamist's mouth frothed and sweat raced across his skin, but Pelleas carried his lance as firmly as with the first knight. They raced toward each other, Roger again leaning almost out of his saddle, Pelleas planting himself more firmly in his. His lance struck Roger in the chest, whose lance glanced off Pelleas's helmet. Roger reeled back, almost losing his seat but managing to stay on. They turned again. This time, Roger aimed his lance low, hovering between Pelleas's legs and Gallamist's head.

"That dog," Sir Gawain whispered.

I nodded agreement. It was a disgrace to aim for a knight's horse in a joust. Roger had never treated Pelleas or me with particular respect or grace, but this was a new low.

Pelleas pulled the reins to the right and rode Gallamist away from Roger in a wide arc. He came to a stop and threw down his lance. He slung his shield to his saddle and took off his helmet. Glaring at Roger, he pulled his sword from its scabbard and threw that to the ground as well. The knights, most of them limping slightly from their fall, all circled around him, swords drawn.

"He's surrendering?" Sir Gawain asked. "So that's it? They win?"

I grit my teeth. “He loves that horse more than about anything. Probably more than me.” I looked down. “Besides, he would have let this happen after unseating Sir Roger. This is how he sees her every week.”

The knights tugged Sir Pelleas down from his horse and removed ropes from their saddlebags.

“What are they doing?” Sir Gawain asked.

The knights forced Pelleas under Gallamist’s stomach and began to tie him to his horse, wrapping the ropes around Gallamist and around Pelleas, around his arms and legs, locking them in place against the horse. Gallamist tried to step away from them, but they held his reins tightly.

“What in—?”

I rode toward them, drawing my sword and holding it, hilt out, in one hand, raising the other to show I wasn’t a threat. The knight who was collecting Pelleas’s weapons also took mine.

“No, not this time,” Roger said, “you can stay here. I’m sick of worrying about you while Lady Ettarde talks to this cocker.”

“But Sir Roger,” I said, but trailed off, not wanting to upset him. If Roger forced me to stay behind, how could I help Sir Pelleas if they decided to hurt him?

“Come on, sir,” the knight who had refused to fight Pelleas said, “he never causes any trouble.”

“Not from you, George,” Roger said.

Another knight spoke up, “It’s not his fault his master is this way. No need to take it out on him.”

“Fine,” Roger said, glaring at the two knights. He turned to me. “You can come, but a half-step out of line and I will dump you on the roadside and send your horse off into the woods.” He mounted his horse, turned, and rode away.

The rest of the knights scrambled to mount their own horses, George taking hold of Gallamist’s reins. I spurred Gyb forward, falling into line with George and the other knight who had defended me.

“Thank you,” I said.

The other knight removed his helmet, long blonde hair falling down and brushing his spaulders. He was clean-shaven and smiled.

“No need to thank me. I’ve no love for your master,” he shrugged his shoulders and winced, “or his lance, but you’ve always seemed a decent lad. Leaving you here would only make it a hassle to find your master when we kicked him out of the castle.”

“Sir Roger can be a bit,” George paused, thinking, “rash on occasion. Sometimes he needs to be tempered, as a rule.”

As we began to ride, I looked over my shoulder. Sir Gawain and his companion were still there, watching us. I turned back.

I rode between the two in silence, their act of kindness not extending to keeping me company. The knights spoke amongst themselves, gossiping about the stablehand’s “secret” relationship with the baker’s daughter or how the huntmaster is getting old. I watched the trees go by, imagining life as a knight, serving under Sir Pelleas. How we would talk about what was happening around us, almost as equals. Pelleas treated me well, but there was always the expectation that I should be learning something from him, and while I did have much to learn, we were always separated by the knight-squire

contract. The way these knights spoke to each other, about whatever they wanted without consequence, was what I wanted with Pelleas. That casualness, the familiarity. I looked down at him, strapped to the belly of his horse, armor jangling as he shook. He had told me after the second week that it wasn't as bad as it seemed, that he was able to almost relax, the ropes keeping him supported. He said he was more worried about how Gallamist was feeling. He always spent time once they returned to camp to tend to the chaffing skin, rubbed raw by his armor.

“You enjoying the view down there?” one of the knights asked Pelleas.

“I feel as though I've seen it before, but lovely nonetheless,” Pelleas said.

“Look at that, boys, our sad hero is getting smart with us.” The knights chuckled. “I suppose you would like it down there. So close to dirt. Must feel like home.”

I felt a brief flash of indignation on behalf of Pelleas, but he didn't respond, ignoring the jibe, so I pushed back the feeling and imagined what would happen today when Pelleas spoke to Lady Ettarde. Perhaps she will finally see the Pelleas I knew, instead of the Pelleas she assumed he was. Perhaps she will take him as her husband. Then he would knight me, like he said he would. I was twenty-one already, and he had said that I had proven myself at the tournament in all the ways a squire could, and that I was ready for knighthood. As soon as all this business was through, Pelleas would rule alongside Lady Ettarde and I would serve under them.

Roger's horse, directly in front of Gallamist, shat, dung clumping to the ground and rolling, mere inches from Pelleas's nose.

George laughed. “I bet you liked that,” he said. “Like looking in a mirror.”

The other knight I was riding alongside laughed, then pinged his lance off Pelleas's

spaulders, the metallic clang filling the air. I winced

“You’re lucky,” Roger said, turning in his saddle, “that she tells us not to rough you up any. If I had my way, we would make sure you never bothered her again.”

My heart beat faster as I watched Pelleas’s face, intentionally blank, swaying with the motion of Gallamist’s stride. His hair swished down in front of his eyes, masking them. He endured so much in the pursuit of Lady Ettarde, had so much faith.

The knights fell silent after Roger’s comment, avoiding looking at either Roger or Pelleas. We continued riding.

The drawbridge lowered, chains rattling, heavy wood thudding against the ground. We crossed it, passing over the thick moat. The castle gate loomed in front of us, 30 spans at least of metal-studded oak. As we approached, the doors split, slowly opening to reveal the thick tunnel leading to another door. The smell of damp stone and earth filled my nose as we passed under murder holes, the clapping of our horses’ hooves echoing around us. The second door opened and sunlight spilled inside, reached forward and, combined with the light streaming in from the outer door, illuminated the tunnel. We rode through the doorway and into the castle grounds. A guard stood to either side of the doorway.

“Bringin’ ‘im in again, eh?” the guard to our left asked. “It been a whole week already?”

“Like clockwork, that one is,” the guard on our right said.

“Yes,” Roger said, “he has an annoying persistence that I hoped would have faded by now. Is the Lady in her audience chamber?”

“I reckon so,” the left guard said.

Roger rode forward, the rest of us following.

“Oy,” the right guard called, “Sir Henry’s riding a bit stiff, eh? That one knock you all on yer asses again?”

I chuckled alongside the two guards, and a faint laugh drifted up from below Gallamist.

“Shut your mouth,” Roger said down toward Pelleas, then turned to me, “and you too. Lady Ettarde never said we couldn’t hurt you.”

I looked down at Gyb’s reins. We rode toward the towering keep. Everyone had ceased their day-to-day activities to watch their Lady’s knights and their captives. The blacksmith stared out from the smithy, pausing with hammer poised above red hot metal. Farmers stopped peddling their meat pies or vegetables long enough to glare at us. Children left the small pond they were casting rocks into and followed our procession. They had all heard rumors of Sir Pelleas and how he harassed their lady, as it was told. They saw him come every week, in chains or strapped to Gallamist. Some looked prepared to throw stones or mud if not for the knights so close to us.

These peasants knew nothing of Sir Pelleas, though. Living their lives here, listening in on the latest gossip over a mug of ale or over the plow in the fields, they made assumptions and passed judgement on my master, but they didn’t understand. I looked down at a man wearing a tanner’s apron, eyebrows drawn down, angry, over large blue eyes. What did this man know of my master? Of knighthood? What did he know of the Sir Pelleas who struggled day and night for a woman whom he loved, who played this game with him? It was this tanner’s Lady who continued to bring Pelleas in front of her, only to tell him that she didn’t love him and send him away. But he hated my master. He

didn't know the Pelleas I knew.

Ahead of us, the keep rose up, rectangular and 80 spans tall at least, thick stone walls broken only by arrow slits and small wooden windows. We stopped in front of the entrance, a short staircase leading to a thick wooden door. Holding halberds, undecorated and deadly, were two armored guards flanking the entrance. Ettarde's lioness reared up on their heavy gambesons.

The knights dismounted, armor jangling as they thudded to the earth. I waited until George nodded at me to follow suit, swinging my leg over Gyb and dropping down. Roger walked to Gallamist and cut the ropes holding Pelleas to the horse's belly. He slammed onto the ground, grunting as his face connected with the dirt. I rushed to his side, but he waved me away. Nose bleeding, he rose to his hands and knees, paused, then to his feet. He stood up, taller than most of the knights there. Roger sneered.

He led us up the stairs, boards creaking under our weight. These guards didn't joke with the knights as we approached. Eyes flicking up and down our bodies, they appraised Pelleas and me, gaze pausing on our belts and boots, searching for weapons.

"We took their weapons already," Roger said.

The guards glanced at each other and nodded, then opened the heavy doors. One of the knights ushered me forward.

We entered a long, narrow hallway. Torches lined the walls, flanking suits of armor and tapestries depicting grand tournaments. Seeing the tapestries reminded me of the tournament two months ago. Of Sir Pelleas, armor shining in the sunlight, riding against dozens of knights, unseating them all, one after the other. Of him ripping his helmet off as Sir Broderick, the last, had fallen, Pelleas beaming at me and telling me that we'd done

it. How happy he'd been. I remembered him standing before the spectator stands, accepting the prize and dedicating it to a face I couldn't distinguish. I remembered how focused he had become. Focused on her.

At the end of the hallway were steps leading to a wide doorway, to Lady Ettarde's audience chamber. I followed the knights and Sir Pelleas as they climbed the stairs, hoping that this time I would be allowed inside. As we approached, the door opened and a young man stepped out. He was tall with a thin waxed moustache, fuller over the right side of his mouth. He was slight and well dressed, clearly more used to reading than jousting. Standing before the knights he seemed a sapling beside a mighty oak. I glanced at Pelleas, who glared at the man.

"And who might you be, sir?" he asked the man.

George, the knight behind Pelleas, shoved him forward. "Shut your mouth and keep moving."

The man with the moustache smiled, his moustache wiggling slightly, and walked past us. Pelleas turned to call after him, but was shoved again. Roger stepped into the doorway.

"My Lady, we have him," he said.

"Bring him." Her voice came like wind through autumn leaves. Crisp and firm.

"Alright," Roger said, turning toward Pelleas, "come along now. Don't try anything stupid." He smiled wide, revealing straight, yellowing teeth. "Or maybe do. I'll be right here." He patted his sword.

Pelleas stepped into the room after Roger and I made to follow them. George stepped in front of me.

“Sorry, lad,” he said, “but you don’t have any business in there.”

“But I have to—”

He held up his hands. “I already stuck my neck out for you once. Wait here.” He turned and followed the others through the doors, leaving me with a knight I wasn’t familiar with.

The knight looked at me, chewing on his cheek, lifting his sword in his scabbard a few inches, then letting it fall. Lifting it, it clicking back in place.

The door opened and Roger emerged, grinning his yellow grin. Pelleas shuffled forward, pushed along by George. Pelleas’s face was blank, mouth a thin line, eyes staring straight ahead. He walked past me.

“Sir?” I asked.

Sir Roger laughed. “Your master was not pleased with what Lady Ettarde had to say.”

I jogged after him, trying to keep pace. “Sir, what did she say? What happened? Are you well?”

He didn’t respond. Roger and George followed close behind us to make sure Pelleas left promptly, but he made no attempt to stray from the absolute shortest path out of the castle. I asked him what happened? What did she say? Was it really that bad? Why won’t you answer me? What did she say? I responded to each of his silences with another question. Pelleas only slowed to collect Gallamist from the stables. The gate was opening as we approached and Pelleas mounted Gallamist and rode off, hardly waiting to see if I was coming. I took our weapons from the knight who held them.

As I turned to leave, Sir Roger said, “I hope to see the two of you soon.”

We arrived back at the campsite as the sun began to sink below the trees. Sir Pelleas hadn't spoken the entire time, nor had he taken his sword when I tried to give it back. He stopped Gallamist and dismounted, then tied the reins to the post we had placed. I dropped to the ground and did the same. Still silent, he walked into his tent. The sound of metal clamoring crashed out, and I ran to the tent and pushed aside the flap. He had sunken to his knees, not having bothered to take his armor off.

"Sir, your armor," I said, gesturing for him to stand. He did, and I began loosening straps and unfastening each piece, moving them onto his armor stand. He stood, rubbing his left wrist with his other hand, as I removed the last piece.

"She said she will kill me, Aaron," he said. "She will kill me if she sees me again."

My eyes widened. "What? Why? Sir—"

"She said she had tried to get through to me peacefully, but since that had not worked, that driving me away by force would have to do." He stared at his hands, pinching one of his knuckles.

"But why not drive you away from the beginning, if that is what she wanted?" I asked. "Why bother at all to bring you to her? It had seemed like she wanted to see you."

Sir Pelleas nodded. "It comes as quite a shock to me as well."

"What will you do now?"

"Perhaps this is a test," Pelleas said, "to prove my love in the face of despair. Back home, in the isles, Sir Gregory proclaimed his love for months on end until his Lady Margaery gave him her hand. I will simply need to get to her in a different way." He fell silent.

I watched him look at nothing, mouth turning down into a deep frown.

“Come outside, sir. I will prepare dinner. Food always makes things better.” I took him by the shoulder and led him outside.

He sat down on a log near the firepit while I lit the fire. The kindling that Pelleas had stored the day before took to the flame quickly, and I placed smaller twigs and thin branches on top.

“If I may, sir,” I paused, unsure how to phrase the question. I had never asked him about this before. “Why her?” Pelleas’s eyebrows fell and he glanced sharply at me. “There were a number of other ladies at the tournament, many of whom had eyes only for you. Now that Lady Ettarde has done this, I wonder if it might be wise—”

“Because none of them hold a candle to her,” Pelleas snapped, then closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He smiled at me. “Because whenever I looked up into the stands and saw her there, cheering, I felt something inside me stirring. I watched her laugh and smile and I imagined us talking, laughing, together. I imagined her smiling at me. The thought of her touching me ran through my head, over and over, until I could almost feel it.” He stared deep into the growing flames. “Besides, I don’t want someone who will throw herself at me. I want a woman who makes me earn her love. I want someone—” he paused, thinking.

“Someone who orders you killed on sight?” I asked with a slight smile, hoping he wouldn’t get angry again.

Pelleas laughed a big-bellied laugh. “Yes, I suppose that does complicate things.” He chuckled again. “But I still have hope. I will just have to change tactics.”

I smiled at him. “I’m sure you will think of something.” This seemed more like the Pelleas I knew. I fetched a pot, vegetables, and a chunk of the venison from my tent

and set it all out.

“Hurry and put the stew over the fire, then get your practice sword. And perhaps also your padded armor.” He stood and stretched his arms. “Our training session tonight will be cathartic, I believe.” He laughed. “At least for me.”

I groaned.

I woke and tried to sit up, but my arms gave out underneath me, aching. I had forgotten what a talented fighter he was. He had been going easy on me during our practice sessions, but last night he had shown me how much more there was to learn.

I struggled past the pain in my limbs and stood. Leaving the tent, I saw that Pelleas hadn't yet woken up. I gathered firewood and crouched near the fire pit. Striking flint against my dagger, I nurtured a spark until it grew and began to consume the wood. I set the pot of stew from the night before above the flames, and placed some of the stale biscuits onto the rocks ringing the pit. They would be warm when Pelleas emerged.

I waited, but there was no sign that he had woken up and I was forced to take the bread off the rocks as they began to burn. Stepping to his tent, I peeked inside. He was sprawled across his cot, light blanket draped over him. Compared to the day before and how he had been, encased in armor and unhorsing knight after knight, he seemed so small and fragile.

“Sir,” I said softly. Pelleas didn't respond. “Sir.” A little louder. He grunted and rolled over. “The sun has been up for hours. You have to get up.”

“Bugger off.”

“Sir, you told me that a knight must always awake before—”

“Fine, fine.” He threw off the blanket, revealing his muscular body, scarred from

years of battle. “Get out of here, I will be out soon.”

I turned and left the tent, pushing back the image of Sir Pelleas. I made sure everything would be ready for breakfast and thought about what Lady Ettarde had told Pelleas. What had changed? And why go through all of this in the first place? There was no reason for her to not love him, so why play this game? He had proven himself an astoundingly talented knight and that he loved her. He was loyal, and strong, and handsome, and—

“What’s for breakfast, then?” Pelleas emerged from his tent, eyes red, wearing trousers and a tunic.

“The same as dinner, I’m afraid.” I handed him a bowl and piece of brown bread.

“I don’t know what I expected,” he said with a chuckle. He sat down and took a bite.

“What will we do now, sir?” I asked. “Do you have a plan to get a message to Lady Ettarde?”

“Not yet, but we will think of something,” Pelleas said, giving me a small smile. “Until we do, however, I think we should perhaps move camp. Her knights, or at least Roger, will probably be searching for us.”

“Of course, sir. As soon as we eat I’ll begin to take down the tents.” I took a quick bite of stew.

We emerged from the trees and, not seeing any of Lady Ettarde’s knights, rode in the opposite direction from her castle. Pelleas stared down at Gallamist’s mane, stroking the fine white hairs. I watched him for a moment, then watched the trees slowly passing by. Sunlight streamed down, the high leaves on the branches highlighted against the

shaded lower leaves. Songbirds called out to each other, begging to be noticed and loved. I searched for them, but couldn't find them, lost as they were in the canopy.

Do the birds all find a mate? They must, mustn't they? I looked back at Pelleas. There were so many birds in this forest, it seemed odd that there would be any who couldn't find another. My gaze fell to the forest floor and there I saw a small brown bird, chirping on a low branch. It puffed up its light pink chest, belting out a charming tune. I smiled. It hopped from one branch to another. I watched it sing, turning my head as we came up even with it. Then, from the shadows, crept a red fox. It snuck toward the bird, eyes fixed. The bird chirped happily. The fox pounced and snapped the bird up in its mouth.

I looked down and scratched at Gyb's neck, troubled. The poor bird. It had been so beautiful, never hurting anything, only searching for its own happiness. But these things happen.

"Aaron," Pelleas said.

I looked up and saw a lone figure approaching from further down the road. As we got closer, I saw the red, gilded armor. It was the man from the previous day. Sir Gawain saluted when we came within earshot.

"Good day, sir knight," he called.

Pelleas saluted back. "Good day to you."

"It is good that I found you, I have been searching the entire morning for you."

The man smiled, looking between the two of us.

"Why?" Pelleas asked.

"I seek adventure," Sir Gawain said, grandly, as though that should explain it all.

When we didn't respond, he continued, "I was touched by your plight, as I witnessed it yesterday and as your squire explained it to me." Pelleas glanced at me. "He said nothing unflattering, I assure you. I would ask, though, why you tolerate such abuse?"

Sir Pelleas cocked his head. "What is your name, sir knight, and what is your interest in these matters?"

"He is Sir Gawain, sir," I said, watching Gawain. He sat easily on his horse, loosely holding the reins of his stormy gray horse. He looked pleased to have found Pelleas, ignoring how distressing the whole situation might be for him.

"Sir Gawain? Of King Arthur's court?" Pelleas looked Sir Gawain over, finally focusing on the crest on his overcoat. A plain white background with a plain blue circle.

"The very same," Sir Gawain said, smiling.

"I have met Sir Kay, but we have never had the pleasure. My name is Sir Pelleas, born in the Isles, over which I am lord."

"May God grant you mercy, Sir Pelleas. Sir Gawain, son of King Arthur's sister and King Lot of Orkney."

"May God grant you mercy as well, Sir Gawain." Pelleas moved Gallamist closer to Gawain and his horse, and they clasped arms.

"Well Sir Pelleas, how fares your efforts to woo Lady Ettarde?"

Sir Pelleas looked down, picking at something on Gallamist's reins, although I knew they were recently replaced and should be pristine.

"Not well. She has instructed her knights that I should be slain on sight."

"No," Gawain exclaimed. "Why? Is it a test? A way to prove your love and dedication?"

“Perhaps, but her knights were hateful and treated me unfairly. They would relish the chance to kill me, whatever the Lady’s intention.” Pelleas looked up at Sir Gawain and frowned. “I fear that even now, they may be pursuing me.”

Sir Gawain sat up straighter in his saddle and smiled. “Mourn not, good knight, allow me to help you. I promise you by the faith of my body to do all in my power to get you the love of your lady.”

Pelleas looked at me, smiling too. “The Lord has answered our prayers, Aaron, and has sent Sir Gawain to help us.”

“It seems that way, indeed.” To Sir Gawain I said, “The word of a Knight of the Round Table goes a long way, but I wonder what your motivation for helping my master is.”

Sir Gawain’s eyebrows lowered and he looked sharply at Pelleas. “Do you always allow your squire to speak this way?”

Pelleas put up his hands, palms facing out. “Aaron has been my friend and constant companion for almost five years now and has been with me through all of this. Our bond is closer than that of many squires and their masters. Although he still could remember to extend the courtesy due to those such as yourself.” His gaze lingered on me for a moment, nodding slightly, before turning back to Sir Gawain. “Although I find myself wondering the same. Your assistance is much appreciated, but I am curious.”

“Of course,” Sir Gawain said, “I travel these lands, always seeking adventure and a chance to help those in need. And a fellow knight’s plight is the worthiest of all. I would help you and, in exchange, I desire only the gratitude of my fellows and that you would tell tale of the altruism of King Arthur’s knights.”

“I think you need no help in doing that,” Sir Pelleas said with a laugh, “but if you help me I will certainly spread word of your good will. They will sing your name across the Isles.” Pelleas glanced at me for a moment. Was he asking me what I thought? Wasn’t this his decision? I nodded slightly. He smiled. “What is your plan?” he asked.

Sir Gawain smiled and clapped his hands. “Splendid. I will go to her, this Lady Ettarde, with your helmet and your horse, which will be more than enough to convince her that I killed you and get me in her good graces. And then—”

“Just the helmet will do, I believe,” Pelleas said.

Sir Gawain paused, taken slightly aback. “I, uh, believe with your horse it—” he trailed off, then glanced at me. “Right. Just the helmet. She will come to cherish me and when she trusts me, I shall reveal the truth, telling her of your exploits and your graces. I will paint of you a picture, in which she will see the knight I see, and she shall come to love you.”

Pelleas considered the plan. I wasn’t sure what Sir Gawain could tell her that she would not have already heard, but he was a Knight of the Round Table. If anyone could accomplish such a task, it was him. Pelleas seemed to reach the same conclusion and smiled.

“It is a good plan. I would gladly have your help. Her castle is a quarter day’s ride from here, the way we came. She rules over all these lands. You will find her before dusk.”

He dismounted and walked toward Sir Gawain, who followed suit. They clasped arms again. Pelleas then took his helmet from where it hung on Gallamist’s saddle, and handed it to Sir Gawain.

“Of course. Now, I shall ride, and in three days, I will bring her to you. Await me here upon that day.” He mounted his horse and, saluting us one final time, rode away from us, toward Lady Ettarde.

We watched him go, red armor shining like blood in the midday sun, as he grew smaller against the horizon. Pelleas turned to me, smiling wide, and I was struck by how happy he seemed already. The lines that had been growing around his eyes seemed fainter, and he looked the most content he had been since all this with Lady Ettarde had started.

“This could work, sir,” I told him, smiling myself. He nodded. “I’ve heard Sir Gawain is known as the ‘Maiden’s Knight.’ If anyone can win her over, it is him.”

Pelleas’s smile dropped, and the lines appeared darker. “The ‘Maiden’s Knight’?”

“Yes, sir. Apparently he is most courteous. Ladies adore him.”

He gazed down the road, watching Sir Gawain ride away from them. “I’m sure they do.”

I sat next to the fire, watching the wood blacken and burn. Pelleas’s contentment had faded even further as we had ridden down the road until we found a break in the woods. It had taken the rest of the night to find a suitable spot to camp and set up our tents. I had been so stupid, trying to reassure Sir Pelleas like that. Of course “The Maiden’s Knight” would upset him. He hadn’t even needed the reassurance. A log in the fire popped, sending sparks twisting into the night sky. I watched them rise, glowing scraps of the roaring flame, and when I lowered my gaze I saw Pelleas sitting on a leafy log, staring at a spot some distance to the left of me. He could probably use some food. I stood and went back into my tent, taking vegetables and some of the venison we were

salting in a pot back to the fire. We hadn't had time to clear the entire campsite, and I had to push through thick underbrush outside my tent. Pelleas hadn't moved.

I drew the knife from my belt and cut a slice of the carrot into the pot. "Are you alright, sir?"

He looked up and cleared his throat. "Yes. Sorry. Of course."

"I'm sure Sir Gawain will honor his word." The slices of carrot clunked against the bottom of the pot. "He's a Knight of the Round Table, after all. We can trust him."

"Mmhm." Pelleas stood, gazing into the fire. He shook his head, then walked over to me. Drawing his own knife, he reached toward the vegetables, then hesitated. "Carrot or onion?"

"Onion," I said.

He picked up an onion. "Back home, in the isles, was there anyone there you were sweet on?" He cut off the stem side of the onion, then halved it.

"I, uh, what? No." I looked intently at the carrot. The slices joined the growing pile at the bottom of the pot. "There wasn't anyone."

Pelleas laughed. "No one that caught your eye? The steward's daughter? You seemed to have caught her eye."

I pressed the knife against the carrot, feeling it resist for a second before passing through. I finished cutting the carrot and picked up another one. Of course I remembered the steward's daughter. She had made it perfectly clear that she would have loved any advances from me.

"No. There was no one. I hadn't given it much thought, to be honest."

"Hadn't given what much thought? Romance?"

“Girls, I suppose.” I glanced up at Pelleas. He was smiling his big, toothy smile. I looked back down, cheeks heating. “There always seemed to be more important things. Things to learn. Training.” None of the girls had ever interested me, always seeming a distraction from learning to be a knight. The opportunity to train under a knight and lord as talented as Sir Pelleas was not to be wasted.

“Ah.” Pelleas cut a strip from the onion, then held it up and looked at me.

“A little smaller,” I said, finishing the carrot.

Pelleas nodded. He cut thinner strips, slicing nearly through, making his way down the entire onion, then cut them all loose at once. Together, we finished cutting the vegetables. When we were done, I added cubes of venison and some wine from a skin and set it over the fire. We both sat back down, Pelleas on his log and me opposite him, on the leafy ground.

“Thank you for the help, sir,” I said.

Pelleas nodded. He looked down at his hands, tracing fingers over his palms. “What if he doesn’t help, Aaron?” His warm brown eyes, glistening in the firelight, met mine. “Or what if she falls for him?”

I imagined telling him that that was ridiculous. That Sir Gawain would never, that he was a man of honor. That Lady Ettarde was obviously testing him, that Sir Gawain couldn’t hope to compare to him. But he wouldn’t believe that. He might even see it as condescending, unrealistic.

“I don’t know, sir.”

I let my gaze drop and looked into the fire. I watched the flame swirl, curling around the pot and rising, splitting into a dozen angry tendrils, twining around each other.

The wood was blackened and burnt. I stood to add another log.

I stepped out of my tent and stretched my arms high, feeling the muscles in my sides and biceps ache then gradually loosen. Breathing in the morning air, I looked around the campsite. Low bushes separated the tents from the campsite, and leafy branches protruded from the log near the fire, leaving barely enough room for one of us to sit. I frowned. If we were to stay here for the next two days, it would have to be improved.

I stepped back into my tent and picked up my sword, drawing it from the sheath. My fingers slid into the slight depressions in the leather grip formed by countless hours practicing. I looked up and down the three feet of steel. Not a perfect tool for clearing a camp, and Pelleas will be furious if he sees me using it for this, but it will have to do.

Outside, I hacked into the thick bush in front of my tent. The sword caught in the leafy branches. I tore it out. A bird, somewhere off in the woods, wished the world a good morning, singing out a single, rising and falling note. I swung again, waiting for the bird to repeat its call. These birds called out, ceaselessly, relentlessly. The sword bit into the trunk of the bush. The bird chirped again.

I cleared the bush, the song of the bird becoming a constant and regular beat, breaking the work into small, manageable segments. I moved to another bush, this one closer to Pelleas's tent. From inside drifted the sound of his snores, a low growling. To avoid waking him, I worked quickly. I moved onto the log.

I removed most of the branches, then realized the bird had gone silent.

Sir Pelleas sat on the log, staring at something between his feet, elbows on knees. He hadn't noticed how much smoother it was, or how the camp was clearer, more cohesive. He hadn't said anything, just grunted his thanks when I handed him the last of the stew.

I watched a fly land in his hair, crawl down onto his ear. It grew bored and flew off. A tear glistened in his right eye, threatening to trail down his cheek, but he set his jaw, shook his head, and blinked it away. I opened my mouth to say something, but paused. What would I say that could be helpful? Yesterday, I had tried to be helpful but had made things so much worse for him. I stood and went to the horses, taking the water skins from the saddles.

"I'm going to find water," I said. There was a game trail leading through our camp. Eventually it would bring me to a river or lake.

Pelleas didn't look up.

Branches tugged at my trousers as I walked, rocky trail pushing up against the bottoms of my boots. The trees around me stretched up, covering the sky with their leaves and blotting out the sunlight. I wondered if Pelleas was still staring at the ground, lost in his own thoughts, thinking about Lady Ettarde and the "Maiden's Knight." I remembered how his jaw had set and his mouth became a thin line. What if he hated me for saying that? What if he blamed me? He is only feeling like that because of what I said. My chest tightened and my breathing quickened.

My thumb tapped against my thigh as I walked, staring down at the ground in front of my feet. I stepped over a root, half-submerged in dirt. This isn't what a squire was supposed to do for his master. I should be supporting him, not causing him strife. But

was it my fault? Who was Sir Gawain to do this to Pelleas? What kind of knight puts another knight through this sort of unease? I heard a branch break and looked up. To my right, half-emerged from a bush, was a young buck. It watched me, ears raised, back half hidden from my view. I cursed. I should have brought my bow, at least then I could have done something for Pelleas. Instead, here was a wasted opportunity, a missed meal. I kept walking. The deer watched.

I came across a small lake, the game trail running along its banks. The water stretched out, astoundingly clear for being nestled in the woods, a section of it curling around a peninsula and disappearing from sight. I approached the water, kneeling down and pulling the stopper from one of the water skins. A school of minnows swam gently under the surface, then darted away as I dipped the water skin under. Feeling it slowly fill and hearing the lapping of the water brush against the shore, I gradually relaxed, the thought of Pelleas drifting away.

I sat back on my heels and looked out across the lake. On the surface, the reflection of the blue sky was still, broken only by the image of the trees on the far shore. Dragonflies skimmed across the water, chasing flies and each other, resting down onto blooming lily pads. The muscles in my cheeks loosened, the frown lessening until I found myself smiling. I traced the shoreline with my gaze, seeing where the water met land, perfectly at ease with each other.

A flash of gray to my right caught my eye. Through the bushes, I saw something stone resting near the water's edge. I stood, legs tingling after being folded for so long. Pushing aside the bush, I saw a statue of a woman resting in the center of a ring of mushrooms, vines and moss climbing and wrapping around her limbs. She faced the

water, one hand over her heart, the other reaching out, palm up, seeming to invite the water closer. The water lapped at her feet. I stepped closer and brushed off the growth. On the base of the statue were letters, faded by nature but almost distinguishable. I rubbed my fingers over them, feeling the raised stone.

I frowned. This must be some pagan idol. I stood, disgusted. Of course, I find a place of peace among this turmoil, and the heathens ruin it with their filth. Turning from the statue, I filled the remaining water skins and left.

I fished out the second potato from the boiling water with my knife, supporting it gently with my hand as it warmed and threatened to burn my fingers. I brought it to Pelleas. Grimacing, he lowered it to rest on his trousers, then split it with his small boot knife. Steam rose and swirled, disappearing into the leaves overhead. I took my potato and biscuit from the rock on which I had set it, and sat across the fire from Pelleas. Copying him, I split my potato as well. The deer from earlier flashed through my mind, and I considered for a moment going into my tent and taking a piece of the venison, but refrained. It was curing and taking it now would only make it harder in the coming days.

Pelleas scooped up some of the potato with his hands, wincing, and lifted it to his mouth.

“Sir, be careful,” I said. It could hardly have cooled enough to be edible yet.

He looked up at me, then at the potato and, seeming to just realize how hot it was, dropped it back to his lap. A moment passed as he stared at it.

“What do you think they are eating, Aaron?” he asked.

I closed my eyes and took a breath. “Please sir, don’t torture yourself like this.” These were the first words he had spoken all day.

He once again fell silent.

The tent was completely dark, an occasional pop the only evidence of the dying fire outside. I turned my head side to side, no noticeable shift in the blackness, and listened to the sounds of night. The fire crackling. A cricket chirping. An owl hooting. I imagined Pelleas lying in the darkness of his own tent, listening to the same noises. I imagined what he would be thinking. The feeling of the bedroll pressing into my back the only thing grounding me here, I could almost feel what he would be feeling.

He might be rolling over, back and forth, unable to sleep. He would be thinking about Sir Gawain with Lady Ettarde. Maybe they too were lying in darkness. Were they isolated by it, like me? Like Pelleas? Or were they wrapped in it, the tight blackness pressing them closer together? The dull hunger he felt would remind him of life in a castle and the kitchens. Them at a table, eating together.

He might drum his fingers against his stomach, imagining her running her fingers over Gawain's stomach. Then he would slam a fist against the ground. No, Sir Gawain is a Knight of the Round Table, he will honor his word. This is ridiculous, Pelleas would think. But then... how could Gawain not fall for her? What is to stop him?

I tried to imagine Sir Gawain with Lady Ettarde, but couldn't conjure an image of her. I hadn't seen her in the stands when Pelleas declared his love for her, and his descriptions had been vague. She was beautiful, with long hair and deep eyes. To me, she was a blurry figure with sparkling eyes, but to him, she would be absolutely clear, every minute detail remembered in clarity, lying with a knight sworn to help him.

The next morning I emerged from my tent, rubbing my eyes, and saw Pelleas,

fully dressed and armed, frantically stuffing supplies into Gallamist's saddlebags. He turned when he heard my footsteps.

"Ah, good, you're awake," he said. "Hurry, pack your things. We need to leave."

I stared at him, still groggy from sleep, unable to understand what he meant.

"Aaron, pack your things."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

He walked toward me, eyes wide and furious. "We are going to her castle. Storm the gates if we have to. We will find Sir Gawain and tear him away from her. He betrayed me. I can't forgive that. We find him, and we show him what it means to cross me. We tell Lady Ettarde how dishonest he was, we tell her, we tell her—" he trailed off. Tears formed in his eyes. "Aaron, pack your things, we need to go." He grabbed my shirt and shook me.

"Sir, please."

"Aaron, we need to go," he said, then sobbed.

I grabbed his arms. "Sir, we can't go. We don't know he betrayed you, he could be—"

"Of course he did," Pelleas shouted. "He is the Maiden's Knight, you said it yourself." He pushed me back toward my tent. "She's a maiden, beautiful, ruler of all these lands. There's no reason for him to have not. Now get ready." He turned back toward the horses.

"I won't go," I said, staring at his back as he stopped, hands at his sides clenching to fists. He would surely be angry at me for my disobedience, but if he went to her castle like this, he would get himself killed. He would be gone, and I would be alone.

“Fine,” he said through clenched teeth, “I’ll go alone.” He went back to packing the saddlebags, checking the supplies and tightening straps.

“No, I won’t let you.” I walked after him, reaching a hand out toward his shoulder.

His muscles tensed, right arm reaching across his chest. “I am going,” he yelled, turning and drawing his sword, swinging it.

Slicing pain crossed my chest and I staggered back. A line of tightening pain. My hand went to my chest, feeling the torn fabric of my shirt dampening and growing heavy, feeling the split skin. My hand came away red. I looked up at Pelleas, the world blurring for a moment before I blinked.

He stood, panting, tip of his sword dripping, face still angry for a moment. Then, his eyes widened and he dropped the sword. He reached out a hand, stepping toward me.

“Aaron, I’m sorry, I don’t know what—” his voice broke.

I pushed his arm away, the movement ripping over my chest, leaving bloody streaks across his hand. I turned, the pain crackling through me, and walked into my tent. How could he cut me? I am his squire, his friend. Everything I did, I did for him.

I removed my ruined shirt, slowly, trying to not strain the cut muscles. Looking down at my bloody chest, the darker red of the wound crossed over my ribs, above my stomach but under the muscles of my upper chest. I looked around the tent, looking for bandages. They weren’t here. I let my head roll back and closed my eyes. They were in the saddlebags. I wouldn’t go back out. Maybe there was a clean shirt I could use.

The tent flap opened, the cloth swishing against itself. I looked over my shoulder. It was Pelleas. He stood, wineskin and willow bark in one hand, the cloth strips in the

other. He held them out. I took them.

“Aaron, I’m sorry,” he said.

“Leave,” I said, unstopping the wineskin and pouring wine on the cut. It stung. “Go storm the castle, if that’s what you want. Get yourself killed. I am sure I can find a knight to finish training me.” The wound was not too deep and a clean cut, but it bled heavily.

“Aaron, please, don’t be like this. It would not be possible without you.” He bit his bottom lip. “Allow me at least to help you bind it.”

“I’ll manage,” I said. I set down the wineskin and put the willow bark in my mouth, chewing on it, then took the cloth and tried to wrap it around my chest.

I inhaled sharply. Twisting tugged at the wound, shooting pain through my body. I bit down hard on the willow bark. I felt Pelleas take the ends of the cloth, fingers brushing against my sides. He wrapped the bandage again, arms curling around me for a moment, pulling it tight and tying it, the fabric pushing down on the wound. Then he left.

The lowering sun cast golden light across my tent, the walls glowing with its warmth, but I sat on my bedroll, remembering Pelleas’s eyes as he cut me, how wide they were, how angry they were. He had never been angry with me before, not like that. I ran my finger along the edge of the bandage, lifting it and letting it snap back in place. Always, in the past, he had reacted calmly and reasonably. Frustrated, sometimes, but never rash. I remembered the way he joked at Lady Ettarde’s knights when they insulted him. I remembered when, back in the Isles, Pelleas, drunk and laughing, had joked that Sir Logan’s mother had probably enjoyed the company of a few men before meeting Logan’s father. Sir Logan had thrown his ale in Sir Pelleas’s face, but he only laughed in

response, dripping with beer. He had laughed and laughed, until Sir Logan, embarrassed for having disrespected a Lord in such a way, joined in. Sir Pelleas, the Gentle Knight, they called him at home.

But the look on his face had been anything but gentle.

“Aaron?” Pelleas’s voice came from outside.

I set my jaw and closed my eyes. He had cut me. Slashed me with his sword.

“May I come in? Can we talk?” He asked.

But his hands, wrapping the bandage around me, had been gentle.

“Yes,” I said.

His hands pushed through the flaps, pulling them aside, and he entered. Eyebrows arched up over worried eyes, he sat down in front of me.

“How is it?” he asked.

I sat up slightly and the wound stretched and burned. “It hurts,” I said.

He nodded, kneading his hands in his lap. His mouth twisted, then he frowned.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, or why I did it,” he said. “You know I would never want to hurt you.”

I looked at his eyes and the bags underneath them. “But you did,” I said.

He winced. “I know I did, Aaron. I have been going mad, thinking about her, about him,” he put his face in his hands, “I had to go, Aaron. I had to stop them, but you tried to stop me.”

There was a thread coming loose from the hem of my trousers. I pulled at it, watching it split and unravel the weave. I stopped. No use ruining my pants.

“You were right, of course,” Pelleas said. I glanced up at him. “They would have

killed me if I went. The whole castle wants me dead. And if you had helped me, they would have killed you too.”

I listened to him, kind and gentle, humble and considerate.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me right now, but I am sorry.” He paused, waiting for me to say something. “Will you let me change the bandage?”

Then I remembered his hands and the memory of the anger faded slightly.

I nodded.

I woke and heard Pelleas moving outside. I stared at the top of my tent, feeling the sharp ache all across my chest. It was the third morning and Pelleas would be anxious to ride to the meeting spot, to confirm or prove wrong his suspicions. The night before he had conceded that until we were sure if Sir Gawain’s word was true, it would be best to act according to the plan. He had tended to my wound, telling me how sorry he was at every opportunity. I had told him after some time that I needed quiet to heal.

I knew I should get up, but the thought of moving, the thought of pain, scared me. The cut would have scabbed over during the night but would surely break open if I struggled to my feet.

A pot clattered to the ground outside, followed by cursing. It would hurt, but I couldn’t lie here forever. Flexing my stomach muscles, I lifted my chest, keeping my back as straight as possible. A fiery line cut across my skin. I gasped. I stood up, panting. Lifting a hand to the bandage, I felt the crunchy brown cloth grow wet with fresh blood. I put on a shirt and stepped out of the tent.

Pelleas had taken down his tent already and had the horses ready, lances leaning

against a tree. When he saw me, he smiled a small smile and took a step toward me, then stopped.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” I replied.

“It would be best to leave soon, I believe.”

I nodded.

We finished breaking down camp and left, each carrying a lance, riding toward the road where we had met Sir Gawain. The swaying and jolting of the horse walking vibrating up my body. With every hoofbeat the cut ached. I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore it, holding it with my free hand, the other carrying my lance. We arrived just as the sun reached its zenith. Gawain wasn't there.

Pelleas gazed down the road, then looked in the other direction. He frowned and checked again.

“Sir Gawain is not here,” he said. His eyebrows lowered. “But that doesn't mean anything. He never said when we should meet him.”

“True,” I said. “It is barely noon.”

Pelleas nodded, then moved Gallamist off the path so he could graze. He did so happily. The land around them was lush and full of green, the woods having been cleared for the road. Wide swaths of grass separated the trees from the path. The gray cobblestone road stretched into the distance. There was no one on it.

I stared down the road, idly flicking the reins. Gyb shifted under me, unsure of what I wanted. Patting him on the neck to apologize, I let the reins fall. He walked toward Gallamist, to the grass. He started munching.

Pelleas sat in the saddle, tapping a gauntleted thumb against his thigh, head swiveling back and forth. The pain in my chest reminded me again what he had done. What kind of true knight attacked his squire in such a way? I had heard of knights treating their squires practically like slaves before, but they were terrible men, hardly deserving the title they bore. I was lucky Pelleas wasn't like them, but still...

"Aaron, look," Pelleas said.

In the distance, down the road, was a rider. I squinted, trying to recognize the figure.

"Is it him?" I asked.

"I can't tell," Pelleas said. "But who else could it be? Though he looks to be alone. How can he be alone?" Pelleas kicked Gallamist into a trot, leading him toward the rider.

"Sir, wait," I said, coaxing Gyb to follow. "Maybe we should wait for him here? Or in the woods? We don't know that it's him."

"Nonsense."

We drew closer to the rider. He was definitely a knight. His figure was bulky, his head clearly helmeted, and he carried a lance.

"Sir, his armor isn't red," I said. The crest on the man's armor came into focus. It was the red lioness on a yellow background. "It's one of Lady Ettarde's knights."

"Maybe she gave him armor, we don't know," Pelleas said. "He will have gained her confidence, after all."

The rider slowed to a stop. He lifted the visor of his helm, which was embossed with golden lionesses.

It was Roger. His eyes grew wide and he lowered his visor again. He must have recognized us. He lifted his shield and rode toward us, his horse breaking into a gallop.

Pelleas swore, hefted his lance and lifted his shield from where it hung on his saddle.

“Sir, if he’s charging us, that means Sir Gawain hasn’t told them you’re alive.”

“I know, Aaron.” He kicked at Gallamist’s sides.

As they galloped toward each other, I realized Pelleas wasn’t wearing a helmet. He had given it to Sir Gawain. I felt my chest tighten, unrelated to the wound. Without a helmet he was extremely vulnerable. Even if Roger didn’t aim for his head, if a lance shattered, the splinters could prove fatal.

The distance between them shrank. They each lowered their lance, Pelleas aiming at Roger’s chest, Roger aiming at Pelleas’s exposed face. Pelleas lifted his shield to protect his face, but this threw off his aim, and each of their lances glanced off the other. They turned in a wide arc, back toward each other. Roger’s back was now to me.

They rode at each other, Roger again aiming at Pelleas’s face. When Pelleas lifted his shield, Roger dropped his lance, aiming at Gallamist’s chest.

The lance sank deep.

Gallamist’s legs collapsed and he tumbled forward, ribbons of blood streaking through the air, lance still stuck in his chest. Pelleas was thrown from the saddle, tucking his head down and slamming to the ground, where he was still. Roger turned his horse around.

I kicked Gyb’s sides, urging him into a gallop, riding toward Pelleas. Oh Lord, was he dead? No, he was moving. Pelleas rolled over onto his back. Roger turned his

horse around, drawing his sword. I imagined him smiling behind the cold, steel mask of his helmet. He rode toward Pelleas, making to trample him. I lifted my helmet from my saddle, pulling it onto my head. My vision shrank to a narrow slit. As we both drew nearer to Pelleas, Roger noticed me and lifted his sword. I raised my shield, still holding the reins, and lowered my lance. I reached Pelleas first and raced past him, then Gallamist, still struggling on the ground, and then Roger was directly in front of me.

My lance slammed into Roger's chest, the impact running through my arm and tearing at my chest, and, for a moment, I watched him lift out of his saddle, chestplate caving in, sword falling from his hand. Then I was past him.

Pulling the reins to the side, I turned, looking over my shoulder. Roger had landed flat on his back and wasn't moving. I rode past him, to Pelleas, who was kneeling next to Gallamist. I dismounted.

Pelleas held Gallamist's head and stroked his neck, trying to soothe the horse as he bled, but he tossed his head and panted. The lance had broken off in the fall, only a few inches protruding from the wound, the rest buried. Tears streamed down Pelleas's face as he moved toward Gallamist's back and rubbed the short hair there.

"Shh, Galamist," Pelleas said, voice soft and wavering. "Shh, it will be okay." He drew his sword from where it hung on Gallamist's saddle. He placed the point above Gallamist's heart and looked up at me, eyes puffy and wet. "Get Roger."

I nodded, feeling tears form as I watched him. I turned back toward Roger, who was still on his back, but was starting to move. I took my shield, drew my sword and walked toward him.

"You didn't deserve this," Pellas's voice broke. "I'm sorry, friend." I heard the

sound of the sword slicing through flesh and burying in the dirt below. A sob.

As I approached Roger, he struggled to his feet, pulling off his helmet and looking desperately around for his sword, then seeing it at my feet. I stepped over it. Roger drew a dagger from his belt, nose dripping blood. He looked unsteady on his feet and was breathing heavily.

“Don’t,” I said, raising my sword.

Roger lunged at me but stumbled, his leg, apparently hurt in the fall, failing to support his weight. I slammed my shield into his chest and he toppled over, dagger falling from his grip. I stepped onto the dent in his armor, pressing down. He gasped. I placed my sword over his neck.

“Sir Gawain said you two were dead,” Roger said. “You trick him? Play dead like the dogs you are?” I stepped down on his chest. He grunted. “Paid him off, more likely.”

I looked back at Pelleas. He rose to his feet, sword shining crimson in the sunlight. Marred by a splash of red, his face was the one he had worn yesterday, wrathful and violent, and I took a step back before realizing he was angry at Roger and not me.

“You fucking whoreson,” Pelleas yelled through clenched teeth, limping toward us, “I’ll kill you.” He lifted his sword.

“Sir no,” I said and stepped between them and, dropping my shield, grabbed Pelleas’s arm.

“Move, Aaron,” He threw off my grip.

“He could tell us about Gawain.”

Pelleas stopped.

“So you did pay him off,” Roger said. He chuckled, then pushed himself up,

supporting himself on his arms. “What was the plan originally? Because he sure gloated about killing you.”

“That was the plan,” I said. “He—”

“Aaron,” Pelleas cut me off.

“That was the plan?” Roger’s eyebrows drew down. “So he tells her you’re dead,” he frowned, “then what?”

“He would convince her to love me,” Pelleas said, lips tight. “Saying he killed me was only to get in her good graces.”

Roger looked between the two of us, then burst out laughing. “He was going to,” he broke off, unable to control his laughter. He laughed, full-bellied, and kept laughing. Tears streamed down his face. His laughter turned to coughing, then laughter again.

“Stop laughing,” Pelleas said, raising his sword.

Roger gained a semblance of control, then, still chuckling, he said, “If she’s so happy about you being dead that she takes him in, what could he say to make her love you?” He grinned, flashing his yellow teeth. “How the fuck was that supposed to work? Was that your plan? Or did he feed that to you and you’re just stupider than I thought?”

Pelleas glanced back at me. I frowned. It really didn’t make much sense in that light.

Roger looked thoughtful for a moment, then he smiled. “Well, let me tell you, Sir Pelleas,” he sneered as he spoke, “he has no intention of letting on that you are still alive. In fact, Lady Ettarde is hosting a feast tonight, to celebrate your death.” He laughed.

“That is, assuming they make it out of bed.”

Pelleas blinked twice. “What did you say?” Pelleas asked. His fingers tightened

around his sword.

“What?” Roger asked. “A Knight of the Round Table comes around, a handsome one at that, says he’s killed a pest that has been buzzing around her for so long, and she’s not going to take him to bed?” He grinned widely. “As much as she hated you, she sure didn’t seem to mind having a romp or two with Sir Gawain.”

Pelleas screamed and swung his sword. It sank into Roger’s neck. Pelleas ripped it out, spraying blood across himself and the grass surrounding them. Roger pressed his hands over the wound, eyes wide. Blood poured out from under and between his fingers. He opened his mouth to say something, then collapsed onto the ground.

I watched Pelleas stand there, panting, the blood of Gallamist and the blood of Roger mixing, dripping from his sword. I looked down at Roger’s corpse. Glancing back at Pelleas, tears pooled in my eyes.

“Sir,” I said. He looked up at me. “He was unarmed. He wasn’t a threat.”

“So?” Pelleas’s eyebrows lowered.

“You killed him. You killed him in cold blood.” I realized I was still holding my sword, and every instinct I had told me to swing it at the man in front of me. This man wasn’t the Pelleas who had trained me for years.

“You heard what he was saying, Aaron,” Pelleas said, “and he killed Gallamist.”

I looked back at Gallamist’s body, brilliant white fur stained with glistening red. “Gallamist was a horse.” Pelleas’s eyes narrowed. I continued. “Roger acted dishonorably and killed a horse. You murdered a captive.” I sheathed my sword. “How could you?”

Pelleas opened his mouth, then looked down at his hands, the blood already

drying onto the steel, painting his armor red. The rage, the energy in his body, rushed away and his shoulders slumped. He dropped his sword.

“Dear God, Aaron,” he sank to his knees and cradled his face in his steel hands. “You’re right.” He looked back at Gallamist, then at Roger’s body. “Oh Lord. Gallamist. Ettarde. She truly has betrayed me.”

I watched Sir Pelleas weep for a moment, then turned, taking a step toward Gyb. If this was the man that he truly was, then... I paused. Pelleas sobbed behind me, moaning her name and Gallamist’s, cursing his fate. I imagined losing a friend like Gallamist, or being betrayed by someone I loved. What would I do if Pelleas—

“Aaron?” his voice was soft, fragile.

I glanced over my shoulder at him. He looked up at me, eyes wide, shining.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

I looked at Gyb again. This Pelleas wasn’t the Pelleas I had known. But maybe he was still there, buried under the grief. I turned back toward him.

“Nowhere,” I said. “Come, we should be going. If Roger was here, others might be as well. We should bury him and move Gallamist’s body, then—”

“Leave them,” Pelleas said, face forlorn.

“What?”

“Everything dies, Aaron. What does it matter where they rot?” The tears had stopped falling and his face grew almost neutral, as if he was forcing it to be calm. His eyes held open too wide. His mouth too small.

He stood and picked up his sword, then began to walk, limping slightly, away from Lady Ettarde’s castle. I looked one final time at the bodies and took Gyb’s reins. I

followed Pelleas. We walked in silence. My blood began to settle and the pain rekindled in my chest. I couldn't reach the wound under my breastplate, but I tugged at the collar of my padded shirt and felt it unstick from my skin. It had opened up again. We walked until we reached the path back to where we had camped. I opened my mouth to ask why, then shut it. There was no point. Pelleas did whatever he wanted.

We arrived back at our campsite, the grass starting to rise up again, now free from the weight of our tents. I tied Gyb's reins to a tree and began to tend to him, brushing him and feeding him oats from his saddlebags. Lost in the task, I remembered Roger's face as the blade bit into his neck. I remembered Pelleas's face, twisted in anger. His sword slicing into Roger's flesh. Into mine.

"Will you help me out of this armor?" Pelleas asked. I looked over my shoulder and saw him struggling to reach a strap.

"Is that what a squire does?" I asked, lifting one of Gyb's legs and beginning to pick the mud out of his horseshoe.

"Pardon?"

"You taught me that a squire should assist his knight, but you also told me a knight should treat prisoners with the respect their status merits." I turned toward him and threw down the hoof pick I had been. "But now you have killed your captive, a knight, and I can't help but wonder what a squire should do, exactly." Pelleas frowned slightly, the skin between his eyebrows scrunching. "Should I help you take off your armor, or should I go gallivanting about, slaying everyone in—" I trailed off.

Pelleas stood, armor covered in blood, staring at his feet. His shoulders shook. I took a slow, deep breath. Giving Gyb one last pat, I walked toward the woods.

“Where are you going?” Pelleas called after me.

“Firewood,” I said over my shoulder.

I stepped over a long dead, overturned tree, into the deep shade of the forest.

I found myself returned to the shoreline of the small lake, gazing out over the calm waters, the stillness of it helping me slow my thoughts. I pushed back the thoughts of Pelleas, of chivalry, of morals, and sat down, listening to the insects buzzing and the quiet breeze through the leaves. The muscles in my shoulders loosened and I closed my eyes, feeling the sun warm my face.

I sat, just breathing, as my mind cleared and my anger faded. I realized I was still wearing my armor, so I tugged at the straps, chest twinging, and removed my breastplate. Lifting my padded shirt, I saw the bandages were wet with fresh blood. I unwrapped them gently, trying not to peel away what scabbing was left. The fabric pulled away, revealing the wound, sticky and red. I leaned forward and dipped the bandages in the water, then dabbed away the blood, cool water shocking but pleasant against the hot skin.

The area around the cut was red and swollen, the wound itself touched with green and white pus. I sucked in my breath. We should have treated it with more care, spread honey or cobwebs at the least over it. Plunging the bandages back under water, I watched the blood cloud out and away, then rubbed the cut, starting in the middle and working outward. Pain stabbed across the skin. I grimaced and brushed away as much dirt and pus as I could.

Fresh bandages would be better, but at least this water was clean. I rinsed them out once more and wrapped my chest again, pushing the wet cloth into the cut. When they dried, they would stay formed to the wound and hopefully pull away any more

infected tissue when I changed it.

That dealt with, at least for now, I looked back out over the water and felt the breeze pick up. Dark clouds drifted in the direction of our campsite, threatening to bring rain or worse. We would need to pitch camp, if Pelleas hadn't already, before they reached us or the night would be miserable. I rose to my feet, ignoring the ache in my chest. Glancing out again over the lake, I heard whispered words from further down the shoreline. I walked toward the sound and saw the statue of the woman. I stared at it for a moment, at her arms outstretched toward the water. Hadn't one arm been folded over her chest?

I turned away from the statue, pushing her and the noise back from my thoughts. The wind was picking up, after all.

I came back to the camp empty-handed, stepping over the dry, brittle branches. Pelleas was lying on his back in the dirt, his breastplate cast aside, straps cut. I frowned. He was crying.

"Your tent was too much trouble to set up? I asked.

"Yes."

I sighed. "Where is it? Rain is coming, you will need to set it up soon."

Pelleas lifted his head and looked around briefly before letting his head drop back to the ground. He covered his face.

"It was in my saddlebags. It's with Gallamist."

I looked down at my mentor. He was broken. I remembered how he had been before all of this. Before he had become obsessed with Lady Ettarde. When it had just been the two of us, traveling and training, offering our help to those who needed it.

Removing cruel lords from their rule, helping farmers with their fields in difficult years, saving maidens captured by bandits. I remembered how happy we had been, how happy Pelleas had been. I missed that Pelleas. That was the Pelleas I had been proud of.

I shook my head. That Pelleas was gone, or at least buried somewhere deep beneath the rage and sorrow.

“Maybe you should go back and get it,” I said.

Pelleas didn't move, or respond. He cried into his hands.

Then I thought of the early years of being his squire. I thought of the night, after a particularly brutal training session, when I was hiding away in my room. Pelleas had taught me how to parry a spear thrust the day before, but I couldn't do it. He spent an hour, stabbing at my hip with the practice spear, leaving dark bruises and welts, until I had managed to block one of every five. Then he had left without a word, placing the practice spear on the weapon rack. In my room I had sat, gently covering my bruised hip, wondering if this was what I wanted. I had cried, silently, softly, telling myself I was not made for this, that it might not be God's will, but imagining the shame of returning home to my father, telling him that I couldn't do it. The shame of leaving a life of knighthood for one of monkhood.

As I imagined the conversation, Pelleas knocked on my door. He peered in, then, seeing me crying, lowered his gaze to the floor.

“You did well today, Aaron,” he had said. “I know it does not seem like it, but these are the moments in which you learn, in which you become the man you are meant to be. When you start to become a knight. These moments are hard, painful, but you will come out stronger.” He had closed the door.

I looked at Pelleas, lying on the ground, and seeing him like this was too much.

“Fine,” I said. “Wait a moment and I will set up my tent.” I walked back toward Gyb.

“Don’t bother,” Pelleas said.

I turned back toward him. “Why?”

“I am going to die, Aaron,” Pelleas moaned.

“Don’t be dramatic.”

“I am going to lie here until I die. Once I die, I want you to cut out my heart and take it to her. I want you to bring it to her between two silver platters. Tell her what this meant to me. Tell her how I died.”

I stared at him. I couldn’t believe this. “Sir, that’s absurd. You’re not going to let yourself die. And I won’t do that.”

“Then leave me.” Pelleas lifted his head and glared at me. “If you won’t help me in this, get out of my sight.”

I felt my chest squeeze, my breath catching. I thought again about going. Then I took the tent from Gyb’s saddlebags and began to set it up.

I watched Pelleas as the sun broke the horizon, lighting the sky above the trees but not quite reaching the forest floor. It had been three nights since we returned to the campsite, and Pelleas had moved from the dirt only to relieve himself. I knew that if he didn’t drink soon, he would die, and the sharp ache in my chest reminded me that I would likely follow suit. The infection had festered, skin around the wound swelling further and becoming numb. Pelleas hadn’t noticed what was happening to me and I had not made a point of telling him. I had tried to clear away the pus and dying flesh in my tent, but had

clearly failed. The two of us dying had always been possible and we had gotten close on a number of occasions, but to watch Pelleas let himself die and to know I would perish from the wound he gave me kept me from sleeping or doing anything other than watching him and praying.

The first night, I had ignored Pelleas, figuring this was a stubborn mood and would pass, but as night had fallen the second day, it had become clear that he was determined to carry this out. All the anger I held for him faded and disappeared. The third night I had begged God to send help, but none had come.

I picked up a water skin and walked slowly to Pelleas, wincing as I knelt down next to him.

“Sir,” I said, “Please drink this. This can’t go on much longer.”

“That is the idea, Aaron,” Pelleas said, smiling weakly.

I brought the water skin close to his lips. “Just a sip.”

He turned his head. “Why would I drag this out? Do you want me to suffer?”

“No.” My eyes began to water. “I want you to live.”

Pelleas looked at me for a long moment, then away again. “What is there left for me if she doesn’t love me back?”

“You have me,” I said, desperate. “And you have the knowledge that she is alive and happy. Perhaps not happy with you, but happy.”

“I’m sorry, Aaron,” Pelleas whispered. “That’s not enough for me.”

I looked down at the ground. A pain blossomed, deeper in my chest than the infection could reach. “So you are going to die, here, far from home, cold and starving?”

Pelleas didn’t speak for a moment. “I won’t take your water,” he then said, “but if

you wanted to help with the cold, I would be grateful.”

I paused, then smiled. “Of course. I will be back with firewood.”

I turned from Pelleas and the smile dropped away. Holding my chest high to avoid irritating the wound, I found the small game trail and left the camp. At least with the fire Pelleas would be comfortable as he gave up.

It didn't take long to find enough wood to start a fire, but I couldn't bring myself to return and watch Pelleas die. I walked slowly down the trail, toward the lake, remembering the peace I felt when I was near it. I cried openly, moaning my sorrow, then was there. The water rippled gently, sunny blue streaks of sky reflecting off the surface. I dropped the wood onto the rocky shore. Putting my face in my hands, I sobbed. Soon, Pelleas would be dead and I would almost certainly be as well. Even if I survived and another knight took over my training, what was the point? Ever since Pelleas began training me, I had been proud of what I did, but that pride came from Pelleas.

On the wind came the sound of soft whispers, like there were before. I turned and, once again, saw the statue. This time, both her hands were crossed over her heart. I pressed my hand to my forehead, thinking I must be feverish, but couldn't tell, then I walked to the statue and dropped to my knees next to it. The pain in my chest seemed to lessen and the whispers grew louder. I could almost understand them.

“Dear Lord, forgive me,” I said, then I folded my hands. “My Lady, if you can hear me,” I paused and looked at the statue. She was still. “If you can hear me, my Lady, I am in need of assistance, although not for myself. My master and friend has lost the will to live, spurned by a woman he loved, and is dying. Without him, my life seems not worth living, although I too have not long in this world. Please, my prayers have gone

unanswered and I do not know where else to turn.” I fell silent. Nothing happened. I put my face in my hands.

Then, I felt a soft breeze against my fingers and heard waves lapping softly against the shore. Looking up from my hands, I saw mist slowly begin to gather on the surface of the lake, swirling toward the center. Waves rippled outward from where the mist was thickest. My eyes grew wide and my mouth fell open. Was this happening? The mist grew taller, thickening until it formed a column. I glanced at the statue. Was she answering, although my God had remained silent? From the column of mist emerged a woman. It was her.

She strode across the water, slender legs shimmering underneath her long gray dress. She was tall and slim, almost glowing, a blue energy seeming to dance under her skin. I stumbled to my feet and put my hand on the dagger at my belt. She had responded to my call, but to what purpose? She was clearly some pagan goddess and could slay me for disturbing her rest, although her large blue eyes held no malice, her eyebrows raised in concern. As she approached, the calm I had felt near the lake grew, washing over me and relaxing my whole body. She stopped before me, standing on the surface of the water.

She smiled. “So you are the one that has been visiting me. I am Ninive, a Lady of the Lake.” Her voice rose and fell like the waves washing to shore. She held her hands in front of her chest, working a strand of her straight, brown hair between her fingers.

I opened my mouth to say something, but found myself unable to form words. Every story about nymphs and dragons and fairies ran through my mind, all the tales I had scoffed at, disbelieved, suddenly became real. I remembered Sir Gawain and his

companion and what they said about Merlin and King Arthur. They had known.

“Do not be afraid, young one,” she said. “Tell me your name.”

“M-My name is Aaron,” I said.

Her smile grew and I found myself smiling in response. “Well, Aaron, you called me here for a reason. Is your master far from here?”

“No,” I said, “our camp is just a short walk from here.” I stopped myself, still unsure what this Ninive intended to do.

She stepped onto the shore. Soft waves rippled up her leg.

“Good,” she said, “but first.” She reached out a hand, first finger extending toward my chest.

I took a step back. She smiled again.

“There is no need to worry. I won’t harm you.”

She stepped close to me, the soft blue light under her skin glowing brighter as she placed her hand on my chest. I gasped. The burning pain that had covered my chest for the last three days cooled and faded, as if I had dipped my body into a mountain spring. I lifted my shirt and saw the blood and dirt and pus had been scoured clean. The cut itself was shrinking, skin knitting back together, leaving my chest smooth and whole.

I stepped back, eyes wide. “What did you do to me?” The priests of the isles had spoken of miracles worked by saints, by Jesus Christ himself, but to see this woman heal what was surely a mortal wound so easily...

“Do your eyes need to be mended as well?” She laughed. “I have healed you. Now, it sounds as if your master has not much time. Take me to him.”

I ran my fingers across my chest, feeling the unnatural smoothness. “What are

you going to do to him?”

Her wide blue eyes stared into mine and inside them I saw something deep and unknowable, unlike anything I had seen in another person.

“I will give him release from his pain.”

We arrived back at the campsite at midday, Ninive’s eyes fixed on the prone figure of Pelleas, lying near the cold fire pit. As we approached, still in the shade of the trees, his head lifted and he quickly pushed himself up onto his elbows, but then his face went blank and he sank back to the ground.

“Sir,” I said, stepping into the clearing, “I have brought someone who can help.”

We got closer and I noticed how thin he looked, skin hugging tightly to his bones and muscle after so many days without water. The bones in his wrists and cheeks stuck out, seeming to almost break through his skin, and for a moment I imagined the campsite, months from now, our skeletons picked-clean and lying white in the sunlight.

“How?” Pelleas asked, voice weak, without looking up. “How can anyone help me now?”

“Hello Sir Pelleas,” Ninive said, her voice gentle and soft. “My name is Ninive.”

“She is a Lady of the Lake,” I said.

His eyes opened and he propped himself up again. His eyes went wide when he saw her, blue energy pulsing beneath her skin in the sunlight, and he opened his mouth to say something, closed it, then tried again.

“A Lady of the Lake?” His eyebrows furrowed, and he rose to a sitting position, wincing with effort. “You gave Excalibur to King Arthur?”

Ninive laughed. “I am not that Lady of the Lake. But I am someone who can help

you. Aaron explained to me what has happened.”

He looked at me for a moment, eyes searching mine. “You can make Lady Ettarde love me?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “No. But I can take your pain, and your love for Lady Ettarde, away from you.” She strode toward him, limbs moving with a smooth, near fluid, grace. The folds of her dress rippled as she walked, floating around her. She knelt beside him. “I can give you your life back, how it was before all of this. You could leave this camp with hardly a thought for her.”

I watched her kneel next to Pelleas, promising to do exactly what I could have only prayed for, what I had prayed for. I felt confused, thoughts of the Church’s denouncement of these pagans clashing with the undeniable fact that Ninive had healed my wounds and was offering Pelleas a second life, at the same time that God had not answered my prayers.

“And if you desire,” she continued, looking intently at Pelleas. “I could also take that pain, that love, and give it to Lady Ettarde.” Her voice lowered, taking on a harsh edge. “I could make her feel what you are feeling. The pain. The loss. I could take from her her will to live, like she has taken yours.”

My legs went numb and a chill shot through my chest. I looked at the Ninive, slender and seemingly harmless, next to my dying master, and the fluid energy that had seemed like shallow water in sunlight became dark and abyssal. I thought of unknowable depths and imagined the horrors that made them their home. I took a step toward Pelleas.

“To even suggest such a thing is vile,” I said.

Pelleas didn’t respond, but continued to stare at Ninive, lost in thought.

“Sir, you are not considering this, are you?” I asked.

“Of course I am considering it,” he said, still looking at her. “She spurned me for weeks, caused me so much pain.” He nodded slowly. “Why should I not wish the same on her?”

“Because you love her,” I said.

His eyes flickered toward me. “I did.” He turned to Ninive. “Do it.”

Ninive nodded and reached out her hand and cupped Pelleas’s cheek. The ghostly blue glow pulsed, sending light out and over his face. He gasped. His skin, tight and papery, began to swell and moisten, filling out and regaining its vitality. The bones, so prominent before, slowly disappeared. As his eyes filled with her energy, he smiled, cheeks full and healthy.

“How?” He asked, staring at her.

She smiled back at him, then held out a hand. “Come.”

He took her hand and she pulled him to his feet, much easier than seemed possible. Pelleas glanced at me, smile still on his lips.

“Aaron, it’s exactly as she said. The pain is gone.” He held out his arm, turning his hand over and watching the muscles move. “I can’t explain it, but I feel nothing for her.”

“Then let’s go,” I said. “Let Lady Ettarde be.” I gestured toward Ninive. “She said we can go back to the way things were. If you don’t feel the pain anymore, there is no reason to seek revenge.”

Pelleas’s smile dropped away. He glanced at Ninive, who was looking between the two of us, face impassive. “I don’t know if she can do what she said, but if she can,”

he met my gaze, "Ettarde deserves to feel that pain. We can go back to our life after she has been punished."

"No," I said. "We can't. To do something like this," I shook my head, "It would be cruel and evil. It goes against everything that you have taught me. You taught me to treat others with kindness, never hatred. This is an act of hate. I beg you, do not do this." I took a step toward him, reaching out my hand.

He brushed aside my hand. "Aaron, I ask that you support me in this." He paused. I didn't say anything. "But if you will not, then stay here. We will come find you once this is over." He turned to Ninive, nodding, and walked to her. "I am ready."

Ninive wrapped an arm around Pelleas's waist, pulling him closer. My breath caught as I watched her press against him.

"Sir, please."

A chill passed over me and I felt a slight dampness press against my back. Mist began to creep past me and from all around us, coming from the woods and collecting around Pelleas and Ninive. It grew thicker and their faces became difficult to distinguish. I called out to them, begging Pelleas to reconsider, but the mist swallowed my voice. I stepped toward them. I had to stop them, but I couldn't seem to close the distance between us. Ninive's smile was the last thing I saw before the mist became too thick.

I was engulfed, the white moisture surrounding me and blocking out the world. I turned my head but couldn't tell which way I was facing. I screamed into the whiteness, my throat straining, but everything was silent. Reaching out with arms I could not see, I stumbled forward, sure that Pelleas and Ninive were mere steps away. I grasped at air. Nothing was there. Nothing except the chill of the mist and the ground pushing against

my boots. And that blinding whiteness.

And then I began to see something dark, a shadow against the white. Slowly, the mist dispersed, shapes beginning to take form, color returning to the world. I saw the tent, trees, Gyb. I saw the blue sky above my head. I saw the ground beneath my feet. But Pelleas and Ninive were gone.

I searching for them, checked inside the tent, behind nearby trees, but couldn't find even a footprint. My chest tightened and my breath came heavy. I sank to my knees. She had taken him. She had taken Pelleas from me, corrupting him with some unholy power and witching him away to ensure damnation. I clutched at my shirt. She had touched me with the same magic. My wound had healed, but what had it cost? Dear Lord, what had I brought down upon us?

I looked at the spot where Pelleas had lain, grass flattened against the ground. I wondered if they were already there, at her castle. Did she even need to be there? Had she taken him somewhere else? Images of her castle flashed through my mind. The blacksmith, the peasants, that looming door to her audience chamber. How long until they were there? And what would they do once they were? Was there time to stop them?

I stood. I had to try. Rushing into my tent, I pulled on my padded shirt and armor and strapped my sword to my belt. Taking my helmet in hand, I ran to Gyb, who pawed the grass nervously on the outskirts of the camp. I rubbed his neck quickly and lifted his saddle from where it rested on the ground nearby, then stepped into the stirrup and lifted myself up. I turned him toward the road and urged him into a trot.

“Get warm, Gyb,” I said, patting him, “I will need you to ride faster than you ever have before.”

When we reached the main road, I resisted the urge to push Gyb into a gallop. Lady Ettarde's castle was a two hour's ride from here. It would do no good to tire him out early and be forced to walk. Bouncing up and down with the motion of Gyb's gait, I rehearsed what I would say. Bits of speeches about morality and God's grace ran through my mind, but I discarded them. Where was God? How could he let this pagan goddess turn Pelleas from his way?

I pushed Gyb to a canter. There wasn't much time.

Gyb breathed heavily as we approached Lady Ettarde's castle. I frowned. The drawbridge was down, but something seemed odd. My eyes widened. The large chains that lowered and raised it were broken, one half hanging over the edge down into the moat and the other half still attached to the castle wall. The broken link was thick with rust and appeared to have snapped off. I stared at it. How could that have happened? Could Ninive have done it?

No one hailed us as we drew near, so I urged Gyb onto the drawbridge. His hooves pounded down on the wood, the sound echoing out against the castle walls. I looked down into the moat. The water, which before had risen nearly to the bottom of the bridge, had settled several feet lower. My heartbeat quickened.

I rode through the castle gate tunnel, then saw several bodies of Ettarde's knights and guards scattered on the ground. As Gyb walked past them I saw that some were killed by sword, bleeding red wounds on their necks, arms, or chests, but some were bloated and blue, water leaking from their nose and eyes. Sir George was among the dead, a red blossom staining the shirt over his stomach. I looked away, toward the buildings lining the streets. Eyes peeked out from windows and mostly-closed doors, but

disappeared when I turned my gaze to them. One pair, however, didn't shrink away. A man, brandishing a short eating knife, burst from a shop. He was thin and wearing a fancy tunic, probably a merchant.

"You," he shouted, "Your master did this." He rushed toward me.

"Yes, but I had nothing— No, stop." I drew my sword as he closed the distance and lifted his knife.

He swung at my leg, knife bouncing off the metal on my thigh, then started to pull at my armor, trying to drag me off my horse. I swung my sword at him, slapping the flat of the blade against his head. He staggered back.

"Back away," I said, "or next time I will use the edge."

The man took a step back, glaring at me.

I kicked at Gyb's sides, leading him up toward the keep. We approached and a scream echoed from inside, then was cut short. Two bodies, blood still wet and flowing, flanked the large oak doors. I dismounted, falling to the ground and rushing into the keep. The entrance hallway was long and empty and, at the end, the doors to her audience chamber were cracked open. I sprinted down the hall, chainmail and plate jangling with each footfall. I heard the clash of steel and another yell. I reached the steps and leapt up them.

Lady Ettarde's audience chamber was a huge room, wide with a high ceiling. Along the back wall, raised two steps above the floor, was Lady Ettarde standing defiantly in front of her throne, shoulders thrown back in a green dress, dagger in hand. Before her, Sir Pelleas, wearing a suit of armor that glowed with the same energy as Ninive, pulled his sword out from the body of a knight, blood dripping off its edge. I

didn't see Sir Gawain anywhere in the room or among the bodies. Ninive stood next to Pelleas, translucent arms raised. From her fingertips, long tendrils of water streamed through the air, twisting and snaking toward Lady Ettarde.

“Sir, no, please wait,” I yelled, running toward them.

Ettarde's eyes flicked toward me and I saw they glistened with tears. The watery streamlets reached toward her. She swung the dagger at them, bits of water splashing to the ground, but it kept coming.

Sir Pelleas turned to me, sword still in hand. “Aaron, I told you to stay at the camp.”

“Sir, you have to tell her to stop. This is wrong.”

“No,” he said, glancing back at Lady Ettarde, who had backed against the wall, fleeing Ninive's magic. “What she did to me was wrong.” He looked back at me, face solemn. “This is the righteous judgement of God.”

“Ninive, stop,” I yelled, then tried to run past Pelleas.

Pelleas gripped my arm and pulled, spinning me around, then punched his gauntleted fist into my face. White light flashed before my eyes and my nose crunched, pain flaming throughout my head. I slumped down, but he held my arm, holding me half upright. The watery tendrils slammed into Lady Ettarde, her back arched and she screamed. She fell to the ground.

I ripped my arm from Pelleas's hand. “How could you?” I stepped toward Ninive, raising my sword.

Pelleas took hold of my shoulder and pulled me back a step. I spun around, yelling, and swung my sword at him. He blocked it with his vambrace and countered with

a punch from his sword-hand, which I managed to duck under. This wasn't Pelleas. She must have changed him with her magic. Pelleas would never stray this far from God's light.

"Aaron, control yourself," Pelleas said, voice rising.

I stabbed at his shoulder, aiming for a piece of chainmail between the plate. He sidestepped and swung his sword low, forcing me to take a step back. He followed, rushing and ramming his shoulder into my chest. I stumbled back, breath forced from my lungs. Again he followed, this time swinging at my face. I remembered my helmet still hung from Gyb's saddle only as the tip of his sword slashed into my cheek, an angry line of pain tracing across my skin. He stepped close, hooked a foot behind my leg, and shoved me. Tripping over his leg, I fell back onto the floor. The impact shook through my body and I felt the blood stream down my face. I sat back and glared at Pelleas. He looked down at me and shook his head.

"It's done, Aaron," he said, then looked back at Ninive. "She has done it. There is no use in fighting it any longer. Now let this go. Sheath your sword and this anger."

Ninive approached and stood next to him. "We need to go," she said, ignoring me.

Pelleas extended a hand toward me. "Come, Aaron."

I looked at it, at the glowing blue steel, then looked at Ninive. "No," I said.

Pelleas's eyes narrowed. "Don't be ridiculous. It's all over. We can put this behind us. Things can go back to how they were."

I watched Pelleas's face and saw hope. He truly believed that. "No, sir. Not after this. All these men you've killed. Lady Ettarde. It can't go back to normal."

His eyes softened and he frowned. "What are you saying, Aaron?"

Ninive placed a hand on his shoulder. "We must go."

"Leave," I said. "Go with her. She has changed you. I do not understand how, but you are no longer the man you were."

"Sir Pelleas?" A voice drifted toward us. It was Lady Ettarde. She pushed herself onto her arms. She reached out a hand. "Please, come to me. I have wronged you so."

Pelleas didn't acknowledge her. He looked at me, a tear in his eye. "If this is your decision, then so be it." He put an arm around Ninive's waist.

Mist began to gather around them, as before. Lady Ettarde gasped.

"What is this unholy fog?" she said. "Sir Pelleas, do not leave me."

As the fog thickened, Pelleas said, "If you ever change your mind, there will always be a place for you in my court."

The complete whiteness swallowed them. I was alone with the stinging pain in my cheek and the image of Pelleas and Ninive, holding each other. The Pelleas I had known was truly gone. She had killed him. Then, as I sat in the cool fog, I thought back to the days before she had come. To him on the ground, ready to die. To him killing Roger. Or perhaps he was gone before she came.

As the fog slowly faded, I could see the flickering of torchlight and hear the sound of a woman crying. The whiteness disappeared, seeping into the stone floor and walls, leaving me alone in the room with Lady Ettarde. Pushing myself to my feet, I walked to her. She sobbed into her arm, to him lying in front of her throne, an ornate chair carved from dark hardwood. Her blonde hair fanned out around her head, covering her face and muffling her moans.

"Lady Ettarde?" I knelt next to her.

She looked up, pushing her hair out of her face. Tears streaking down her cheek and her eyes went wide. I became aware of how my face would look, half covered in blood beneath a long cut.

“Who are you?” She asked, voice quiet and wavering.

“My name is Aaron. I,” I paused for a moment, “I was Sir Pelleas’s squire. Are you well? Did the magic hurt you?”

“It did not hurt my body,” she said, then buried her face in her hands. “Oh Lord Jesu, how has it befallen me that I love now the man I hated so?”

“So she was telling the truth,” I said.

Her eyebrows, thin and graceful, furrowed. “What do you mean?”

I told her everything, about how Ninive had healed my wound and scoured Pelleas’s love for her and promised to transfer it to her. She stared at the floor, crying softly. When I was finished, she was silent for a long moment.

“So this is what he felt?” she asked. “When I didn’t return his love?”

“I believe not,” I said. “Ninive did this to you. This is what she wants you to feel. It has been imbued with the hatred she feels, with the evil inherent in her heart. She was the one who suggested this. She wanted this.” I could not know for certain, of course, but I remembered the dark depth I had seen in her eyes.

Lady Ettarde sat up.

“But why was he resolved to die in the first place?” she asked. “And why, if he no longer felt that pain, would he have her do this to me?”

“He felt that he needed to seek revenge for your betrayal, as he saw it.” Her head tilted and she looked even more confused. I looked at the ground. It was improper, but

she seemed unsure of what I meant. “Because you laid with Sir Gawain.”

“I what?” she asked, voice rising sharply. She burst into tears.

I felt like I should be more embarrassed, but suddenly, after everything, I felt only tired. “Sir Roger told us—”

She cried even harder, sobbing loudly. “Why would Roger say that?”

I realized she wasn’t indignant. “Do you mean to say that you never—?”

She shook her head. “Of course not. Though he made it clear that was what he wanted, so I removed him from the castle. But what about Roger? Where is he? He has been gone for days.”

I didn’t answer. Had Roger lied simply to hurt Sir Pelleas?

“Please, Aaron.” She scooted closer to me, folding her hands. “I beg you, tell me what happened to my Roger.”

I looked down, staring at the stone floor, not seeing it. “Sir Pelleas killed him for what he said and for killing Gallamist.”

Ettarde’s face was almost blank, frown deepening slightly, eyelids twitching.

“Gallamist?” Her voice was quiet, a forced calm, barely containing emotion.

“Pelleas’s horse.”

Her composure broke, tears flooding forth again. Her breathing came in jagged pulls, breaking and stuttering with her sobs.

“My Roger,” she wailed. “My poor, sweet Roger is dead.”

She cried there, moaning Roger’s name, George’s name, the names of her other knights. I knelt near her, unsure what to do or if I was wanted there. After a short while, she seemed to gain control of herself once again, her breath coming more evenly and the

tears flowing slower. She lifted her head, looking around. I smiled softly, hoping to provide some comfort.

She reached and picked up her dagger, stabbing swiftly toward her chest.

I lunged forward and caught her wrist.

“Lady Ettarde, what are you doing?” I asked, pulling the dagger from her hand.

“I would rather die than go on living like this,” she said, throwing her hands into her lap, “cursed to love a man who now hates me, a man who killed my best friend. My companion since childhood. What is there left for me?”

The question shook me, almost the same Pelleas had asked.

“My Lady,” a voice called from the entrance.

We turned. It was the man from outside, the one who had attacked me. He still carried the knife. He rushed toward us. Other peasants trickling in behind him, also carrying knives or woodcutting axes, along with castle staff.

“My Lady, get away from him,” he said. He pulled me away from her, tearing the dagger from my hand and lifting it to my throat. “What should we do with him?”

A young woman rushed to her side and helped Ettarde to her feet. She looked at me for a long moment.

“Let him go,” she said.

The man holding me pressed the dagger harder against my skin, almost cutting. “What? But My Lady, he is Sir Pelleas’s squire. He—”

Lady Ettarde shook off the woman holding her arm and stood tall. “You will do as I say,” her voice was stronger now, commanding. “I am still lady of this castle and you should do well to remember that.”

The man took the knife from my throat and shrank back. "Of course, My Lady."

"Besides," she said, looking at me again, "he could have killed me if he wished."

Her face softened slightly and for a moment she seemed about to cry again. She regained her composure. "Go, Aaron. Despite his faults, Sir Pelleas was a talented fighter. I am sure he taught you well. You will find a place in some Lord's court." She turned away from me, the lady who had helped her rushing to her side and holding her arm, helping her toward the door.

I watched Lady Ettarde leave, my heart beating faster. She had tried to take her own life. Would she again?

The man led me out the keep, sending a peasant to collect Gyb when we passed him. They left me on the drawbridge, not saying a word, retreating back inside the castle. I looked back, through the gate, at the world over which Lady Ettarde ruled, however temporary. Even if she did not kill herself, she had few, if any, knights, and no drawbridge.

Gyb pushed at my arm with his nose. I looked at him and scratched behind his ear, then put my foot in the stirrup and pulled myself into his saddle. Looking forward, the road stretched out before me, sun setting to my right, pink clouds streaking through the sky. I thought briefly about Sir Pelleas and the Isles. There would be no going home.

I nudged Gyb forward.