

Date Night

A King Arthurs Short Story by K. M. Shea

Britt didn't know what to expect when Merlin said he would pick her up for their date that night—their first date ever, really. It had crossed her mind that he could arrive in a horse-drawn carriage, a Mercedes-Benz, or anything in between.

So she was somewhat surprised when he pulled up on the street in front of her apartment complex in a silver Toyota SUV. It was a nice car. It still sported the new car smell, and it had a leather interior and heated seats. But it was surprisingly...practical.

“So you really have a driver's license?” Britt asked as she buckled her seatbelt.

“Indeed,” Merlin said. He waited until she was situated before shifting the car into drive. “All of us are certified citizens of the United States. We all pay taxes, and we all have our driver's license. Well, excluding Morgan, that is. She keeps failing her driver's test, but that's because she drives like a maniac.”

“How did you manage to get IDs?” Britt asked.

“The Lady of the Lake,” Merlin said. “A number of her handmaidens work for the US government.

“I don't know if that's reassuring or terrifying,” Britt said.

Merlin made a turn, navigating through the maze of city streets. “Oh, the US is not the only pie she has her thumb in. Most of her power lays in her real estate holdings and in the great number of favors the various faerie royalty throughout the world owe her.”

“I'm starting to think *she* would've made a wonderful High King of Britain,” Britt said.

“I'm forced to disagree with you,” Merlin said. “She doesn't care a jot for anybody in whom she is not emotionally invested.”

“That's true,” Britt chuckled.

Merlin spared her a soft smile, but Britt noticed he held a death grip on the steering wheel. *Perhaps he isn't as comfortable driving as he appears to be?*

Three weeks had passed since Britt had set foot inside Avalon's office building. Though she and Merlin had spent days together, much of it was spent adjusting to changes. (They moved Britt into a new apartment closer to Avalon's offices that would also allow dogs as big as Cavall, plus all of the knights insisted on meeting her mother and sister, and already she had begun to take over some of the non-profit's projects and chat with Kay about the company's financial position.)

It was Merlin who had insisted on taking her on a date. (“I want you to myself,” he had said. “Everything else can wait.”)

Recalling how Gawain and Ragnelle—Cavall's sitters for the evening—had arrived a few minutes before Merlin with the promise that the wizard would be along shortly, Britt asked, “So everyone lives together in one big mansion?”

“Almost everyone. Nymue floats around in whatever matter suits her, but yes. Everyone else lives under one roof. I'm afraid that's a habit from Camelot we won't ever break.”

“I think it's fun.”

“I don't,” Merlin muttered. “I had a wretched difficult time leaving the house without being nudged and winked at every other step.”

“Will I get to move in with everyone?” Britt asked.

“Eventually,” Merlin said evasively.

They continued to chat—Merlin explaining some of the finer details of how the Knights of the Round Table had kicked up their heels, waiting for Britt to grow older and travel back to ancient Britain—until they pulled up at a quaint Italian restaurant.

The restaurant smelled tantalizingly of garlic and butter, and Britt's stomach growled painfully as the hostess led the way to the table Merlin had reserved.

After Merlin pulled her chair out for her, Britt stared at the wizard as he seated himself. His clothes—black slacks and a dove gray sweater—made his blue eyes appear even more brilliant than usual, and his fine blonde hair was almost white in the dim light of the restaurant. He'd been carrying his coat oddly, and instead of hanging it up, he carefully arranged it on an open chair pulled up to their table.

She shook her head. "I know it's been three weeks, but I'm still having a hard time wrapping my head around this."

Merlin tilted his chin up. "Around what?"

"That you're here. With me. In the future." Britt awkwardly rested her hands on the table surface. "It's so...different."

Merlin leaned back in his chair. "The clothes we are wearing are more modern, and the setting is far more hygienic, but we're still the same people. I'm still your sideshow hack magician, and you are still the legendary High King of Britain."

Britt licked her lips. "Are we really still the same? For me it's been about a year. But Nymue said you were stuck in the cave for nearly three years, and that doesn't count all the time you spent outside the cave tracking me down and then waiting for me to grow up."

Merlin reached across the table and took one of her hands in his. "Nothing has changed. I still love you with every inch of my being and drop of magic I possess, and I am confident enough in your love for me that I know you still feel the same way."

Britt grinned and raised an eyebrow. "Cocky, are we?"

"Not at all. I know you; you love wholeheartedly. You would not so easily set your feelings aside. But even if you had, I would have the foreseeable future to beguile my way back into your affections."

She fought a blush. "You are right."

Merlin smiled arrogantly, but he sweetly intertwined his fingers with hers. "If anything has changed, it is only that *I* now also bear a grudge against Lancelot."

Britt grinned as he squeezed her hand. "I told you all to let it go."

"Forgive me if I find it exceedingly hard to let that prig skip around like an innocent sheep after being at least partially responsible for your gravest injury—and for my separation from you," Merlin said wryly.

"Although I'm glad you listened to me, I have to say I'm a little surprised you let him come forward in time with you," Britt said.

"It was a close thing," Merlin said. "We were evenly divided on leaving him behind and opting to bring him with us. The bleeding hearts of the group—Griflet and Percival—were in favor of letting him come with us from the start. In the end, Kay was the swing vote."

Britt gaped. "*Kay*? The man who taught me to hate Lancelot ever since I was a child?"

"Indeed," Merlin said. "He was afraid if we left him behind, Lancelot would cause the demise of Camelot. That was something he would not abide as he knew of your love for the place. So Lancelot came with us."

Britt smiled fondly. "That's so sweet of him!"

Merlin raised his eyebrows, but they were interrupted.

“Good evening, and welcome to our establishment! I will be your waiter for the evening.”
Britt and Merlin shifted their attention to their waiter.

Lancelot, wearing a white dress shirt and black slacks, held a small notepad and beamed down at them.

Merlin cursed under his breath.

Britt stared at the charismatic knight. “You’ve got to be joking.”

Lancelot tipped his head. “I’m afraid I don’t know to what you are referring.”

“You’re not the waiter, Lancelot. Get lost and send the real guy out here,” Britt said.

Lancelot smiled brightly. “Oh, but you see I am your waiter for tonight! Lionel and I paid off the wait-staff.”

“That can’t be legal,” Britt said.

“We weren’t really sure how much to give them. I assume \$1,000 is a day’s wages?”
Lancelot asked.

“That money better be from your own funds,” Merlin said sourly.

“It was,” Lancelot said. “But I shall need an advance on next quarter’s stipend.”

“That’s not happening,” Merlin said.

“Whatever,” Britt said, trying to move past the budding argument. “Can you just tell us what the night’s specials are?”

“I have no idea,” Lancelot said. “I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do besides carry this,” he said, holding up the notepad. “But Lionel may know.” Lancelot turned to shout across the sparsely populated restaurant. “Lionel! Do you know what tonight’s specials are?”

Lionel, wearing an identical white dress shirt that seemed to be bursting at the seams due to his muscular shoulders and chest, strolled across the restaurant. “I reckon there’s some kind of soup? That seems to be a normal special. And probably a pasta dish or two.” He, at least, had the decency to give Britt and Merlin crystal glasses of water.

“I had forgotten how helpful the two of you are,” Britt said.

Merlin scowled up at the pair. “How did you figure out where I was planning to take Britt?”

“Morgan hacked your phone and found it on your recently called list,” Lancelot said.

“She almost didn’t tell us.” Lionel folded his arms across his chest, making the buttons of his shirt pull even tighter. “She thought it was cute that ‘Britt’ was your password to swipe open your phone screen.”

“I should have guessed that hag would be behind this,” Merlin muttered.

Britt picked up the restaurant’s menu with her free hand. “If you don’t know what the specials are, you should at least go see to the other customers.”

Lancelot shrugged. “There’s only one other couple here right now, and they’re fine.”

“I think she meant for us to get lost,” Lionel said cheerfully.

“Exactly,” Britt said.

“But we ought to stay,” Lancelot said. “Being attentive is a good waiter’s job. And I want a good tip—paying off all the waiters cost more than I expected.”

“Go!” Britt ordered.

“Fine, fine.” Lancelot flipped his little notebook shut. “You can take the King out of England, but you can’t take the King out of the girl.”

Merlin scowled after the cousins with unusual fire as they sauntered off.

Noticing he was twisting his cloth napkin as if attempting to decapitate it, Britt asked, “Is everything all right?”

Instantly, he was all smiles. “Yes, everything is fine.”

“I would apologize on his behalf,” Britt said, “but for starters, I don’t want to enable him. And truly I don’t think he really is sorry.”

“No, this is definitely deliberate.” Merlin still hadn’t released her hand, so he squeezed it. “It’s nothing compared to some of the shenanigans the other knights pulled over the years.”

“They did things worse than crashing dates?”

“Much worse,” Merlin assured her. “We had to renew the spell that tethered the cave’s passage of time to the world’s passage of time sometime in the 1890s. Griflet and Bedivere slipped from our control and attended a performance of the musical, *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*. While there, they met a couple who owned a company that distributed flour. Bedivere cajoled them to rename their business, and the King Arthur Flour Company was born.”

“You’re joking,” Britt said.

“Unfortunately, I am not,” Merlin said. “Kay, on the other hand, is responsible for being the catalyst for just about every legend that mentions Lancelot’s disloyalty in love.” He grunted. “He, likely, was able to cause more damage and bring King Arthur back in fashion more so than any other knight. I had thought Morgan would keep him on a tight leash, but I forgot she was almost as absurdly fond of you as he was. By the time I realized their actions, they had already frolicked through centuries of King Arthur renaissances as we were forced to pop in and out of the cave to check on the passage of time.”

“You mean you didn’t stay in the cave the entire time?”

Merlin shook his head. “As I mentioned, there were several occasions in which we had to renew the spell. But also I did not know the exact year you were born, and we did not want to miss it. So, every so often we left the cave to inquire if America was yet a place, or to make investments.”

Britt flipped her menu over to check out the appetizer list. “Wow, so that means you probably spent more than a few years with everyone.”

Merlin stared at his menu and said in a deadened tone. “Correct.”

Britt’s phone buzzed. “Sorry.” She pulled her hand from Merlin’s grasp and picked up the phone.

“No trouble at all.” Merlin eyed the glass of water Lionel had provided before daring to take a sip from it.

Britt intended to shut her phone off, but when she swiped the screen of her smart phone, she saw the text was a message from Kay. Concerned, Britt opened it up.

You should order the spinach artichoke dip. I believe you will enjoy it.

She stared at the message, and her phone buzzed when another text message arrived.

And tell Merlin to stop holding your hand.

Britt twisted in her seat and gazed around the nearly empty restaurant. The only other customers were a couple seated across the restaurant. The woman wore a hat that covered her brown hair and shaded her eyes, though she smiled and waved when Britt saw them. Her companion hadn’t even bothered to try and disguise himself. It wouldn’t have mattered anyway; Britt would’ve recognized his mustache a mile away.

“It seems Lancelot and Lionel weren’t the only ones who decided to crash our date.”

“Hmm?” Merlin looked up from the menu, then dropped it on the table when he saw where Britt was looking. “Kay and Morgan. Of course, the overprotective brother wouldn’t let me take his darling sister out without looming in the background.”

Britt laughed and returned her attention to her menu. “And Morgan?”

“She would never miss a chance to see me squirm,” Merlin said dryly.

Britt furrowed her eyebrows and was about to ask why he would squirm over a mere date, when they were interrupted.

“Smile!” A light flashed and a camera clicked.

Britt blinked stars from her eyes and peered up at the newest arrival. “Percival, Bedivere?”

Percival smiled widely and held up a camera. Bedivere was a little behind him, fussing over his cellphone. “Yes, My King!”

Merlin growled and took another swig of his water.

“What are you doing here?” Britt asked.

“I’m here to record this momentous occasion and take photos for instant-gram!” The knight proclaimed.

“Instagram,” Britt corrected mindlessly.

Bedivere finally looked up from his phone. “Which filter would you prefer on this update, My King: Crema, Lark, or Valencia? Mind you, I can’t post this picture with the filters on Facebook,” he said.

“You have *Facebook*?” Britt asked.

“A few of us do,” Bedivere said with a guileless smile. “We were quite relieved you kept your profile as public and did not switch it to friends only, for it would have made watching you much harder.”

“I thought you two were going out with Griflet and Blancheflor tonight?” Merlin asked.

“We are!” Percival smiled. “They’re here as well.”

Merlin stiffened. “What?”

“My King!” Griflet, walking arm-in-arm with Blancheflor, charged through the restaurant’s front doors. “Fancy meeting you here! Why, what could the chances be that we would pick the same restaurant as you?”

“I’m fairly certain the act is not needed,” Blancheflor said as she looked from Kay, to Percival, to Lancelot.

Britt was tempted to pinch her eyes. “I’m beginning to think it’s a good thing I don’t live in the mansion with all of you.”

“You have no idea,” Merlin said.

Blancheflor waved off the hostess as Griflet chose a table that did not block Kay’s view of Britt and Merlin.

Lionel bustled over to their table and gave them waters.

“Thank you, but I believe we’ll all want a round of wine soon,” Griflet said.

Lionel raised an eyebrow at him. “You better get it yourself then. I’m certainly not hauling out all those glasses.”

While viewing Griflet’s pursed lips, Britt’s frustration began to melt into amusement due to her affection for all those present. “Well, so much for alone time.” She sighed. “But it’s not bad for a first date.”

She glanced at Merlin, surprised to see that he glared at his water glass as if he could melt it with his gaze. She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “Is it really that upsetting?”

Merlin scowled still, though he intertwined his fingers with hers again. “Normally it would not be, and I would only consider this a mild inconvenience. But tonight I was going to... And they all know...”

“You were going to...?” Britt prompted.

Merlin flattened his lips and refused to respond, but it didn't matter, as the door banged open once again.

In came Nymue, completely ignoring the hostess as she made a beeline for the table next to Britt and Merlin's. "I believe I made a mistake in failing to invest in parking garages. Finding a parking place on the street is a quest worthy of your best knights," she announced.

Merlin squinted at the faerie lady. "Is it really necessary for even *you* to crash this evening?"

Nymue shed her jacket. "No one was home, and I was bored."

"I can't believe Gawain and Ragnelle are the only two who refrained from crashing our date," Britt said.

"Don't you let that boy's sweet exterior fool you," Nymue said.

"Indeed." Morgan saluted Britt with a water glass. "The only reason he is not here is because he thought it would be shameful to so directly spy on you. Why else do you think he offered to watch Cavall, if not to force you to tell him of the night's events when you return home?"

"Other diners will soon arrive," Merlin predicted.

"No, they won't!" Lionel said cheerfully. "Kay rented out the place for the night."

Kay frowned slightly at the brawny man. "I did, and I can assure both of you that I'm not paying you anything for your service on top of what I already paid the restaurant."

Britt glanced across the table and patted Merlin's hand. The anger seemed to have fizzled out of him as he slumped in his chair and stared forlornly at the table top. When she stood, Merlin tried to tug her back into her chair.

"Where are you going?" he asked worriedly.

She laughed. "I'm just going to use the restroom. Does anyone know where it is?"

Lancelot shrugged. "Nope."

Britt rolled her eyes. "Of course you wouldn't."

"It's past the bar and down a short hallway near the employee exit," Kay said.

Britt smiled at her brother, then slipped through the pattern of tables, making for the restroom.

As she escaped into the ladies room, she could hear the roars of laughter as Lionel began ripping Griflet for the first date he had taken Blancheflor on.

After using the bathroom, Britt washed her hands, checked her makeup, then stepped into the back hallway, where she was abruptly yanked away. She opened her mouth to yelp, but someone slapped a hand over her lips.

"It's me," Merlin said as he tugged her along. He removed his hand from her mouth so he could juggle his jacket and hers as they hustled down the hallway and slipped out the employee exit.

"It's not necessary to leave," she said after the door shut behind them.

"But it really is," Merlin said sourly.

Britt ignored his sarcasm and continued, "I would love to spend time with just you, but we do have a *long* life ahead of us. I missed you all so terribly..."

"On any other night, perhaps I wouldn't be quite so selfish. But tonight? Not a chance. I'm going to have this night with you, even if it kills me. And *they* are not going to stop it!" Merlin declared.

Britt's heart throbbed in her chest as she and Merlin made their way back to his car. She was glad it was dark, for it hid her blush, and she gratefully rested her head on Merlin's shoulder as she clutched his arm. "Where are we going, then?"

Merlin opened the car door for her. "A hiding place, and one of the trump cards I was hoping to use the next time you get mad at me."

Britt was more than a little curious as they drove toward the outskirts of town, stopping only to pick up cartons of take-out at her favorite Chinese restaurant. When Merlin turned onto a gravel road, Britt recognized it as the long driveway to the mansion where everyone lived.

"Good thinking," she said. "No one would suspect we would come back home."

"We're not going into the house." Merlin parked his car in the impressively large garage. He carried the plastic bag of their take-out and insisted on awkwardly cradling his jacket.

Amused, Britt trailed him as he trundled across the mansion grounds, following a brick pathway around a copse of trees, and popping out next to a beautifully lit, wooden stable.

Merlin flicked on the inner lights of the barn, revealing gorgeous wooden stalls complemented with brick archways, cobblestone flooring, and more impressive architecture than Britt's apartment. The familiar smell of hay and horses brought a prickle of tears to Britt's eyes as memories from Camelot briefly surged in her mind.

"Welcome to the stables," Merlin said. He put down their food and grunted as he dragged a few hay bales into the middle of the aisle, then covered them with a pristinely clean horse blanket. "Many of the mounts belong to your knights, but this one is yours. His name is Camelot."

A large, golden-colored buckskin—with a perfectly combed black mane and tail and a fuzzy black muzzle—blinked his liquid brown eyes at Britt and pushed his muzzle against the bars of his stall. Camelot was quite large, even larger than Roen had been. As Britt stepped closer to the stall, he breathed out of his nostrils, and the ache to ride and race the wind filled her heart. "Thank you." She paused. "For being so thoughtful about everything."

Merlin smiled faintly and patted the blanket-covered hay bale next to him. "I had a long time to plan for it."

Britt planted a kiss on Camelot's muzzle, then joined Merlin. She opened a carton of sesame chicken and picked at it with her chopsticks. "Selfishly, I'm glad you brought me here. When I first got back, there was so much I missed about medieval England that it was easier to push it all away and ignore the pain. I didn't even know how much I missed horses." Britt cleared her throat, trying to dislodge the lump that had taken up residence there.

Merlin set his food aside and wrapped an arm around Britt's shoulders, scooping her against his chest. "You've given up so much, lass. More than anyone should have to." He kissed her forehead sweetly.

Britt also put her chicken aside and leaned into Merlin, wrapping her arms around his waist. They sat there for several quiet minutes, Merlin combing his fingers through her hair as Britt listened to the beat of his heart through his tailored shirt.

When he awkwardly cleared his throat, Britt pulled back and picked up her food again. She paused, her chopsticks raised halfway to her mouth, when Merlin went down on one knee in front of her hay bale. "Merlin?" She asked wonderingly.

Merlin held his oddly bundled jacket across his knee, his shoulders set, and his expression serious. "Britt Arthurs, as you know, I am wildly and madly in love with you, so much so that I will ruin the fabric of time itself to be with you. I ask, would you tie yourself to me forever and marry me?"

Britt gaped, and her chopsticks fell from her unfeeling fingers.

Merlin forged on. “I know this is all rather sudden—for you anyway—but when I nearly lost you, I promised myself I would never let the chance escape me again. And no matter how much time we have together, I know it will never be enough for me. So, would you do me the honor?” He hesitated in the silence, then started speaking a little too quickly. “If you wish to delay the wedding and not get married for some months, I completely understand. But if you are willing, I would still like us to be spoken for as the knights of Camelot would speak for their lady loves. Although, I suppose, in this case, perhaps I’m in the role of the lady?”

He’s babbling again, Britt thought. He must do that whenever he’s really nervous.

Merlin opened his mouth to continue, but Britt leaned forward and silenced him with a kiss. She tried to fill it with all the love she felt and the joy that had colored her life since she realized he was still alive.

Merlin seem to appreciate it, for he tugged her forward until she tumbled into his lap, breaking their kiss.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Merlin said, a faint blush heating his cheeks. “But I decided to depart from tradition.”

Britt tucked a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear and tried to shift so Merlin’s jacket didn’t jab her back. “What tradition?”

“The engagement ring. I thought long and hard about it, and in the end I decided a silly little rock had no way of representing everything our love is. So instead, I got you this.” Merlin tossed his jacket aside, revealing a scabbard gilded with gold. The leather surface was buttery smooth, and the goldwork was styled into miniature pictures—one was a sword in a stone, another was a perfect representation of Camelot, and another showed two horses and a stag.

“It’s sized to fit Excalibur, and it’s enchanted—not anything as strong as Excalibur’s old scabbard was, though.”

Britt ran her fingers across the golden horses and deer. “How is it spelled?”

Merlin cleared his throat. “It’s enchanted so I’ll be able to find it—and you—no matter where you are. Past, present or future, I will know.” He shifted slightly. “I did the spell work myself, but Nymue checked it over. If you like, I’m certain if we work with her and Morgan, I can attach some stronger enchantments to it.”

“No.” Britt shook her head. “It’s perfect.”

“Are you certain?” Merlin asked. “If you like, we can still pick out a ring...”

Britt finally tore her eyes from the scabbard. “It’s perfect, Merlin,” she repeated. “And it proves to me just how much you know me and how much you love me. It’s *exactly* what I want.”

Merlin’s shoulders heaved, and he took a great gulp of air. “Good! I didn’t want to mess this up.” Without further ado, he renewed their kiss, wrapping his arms securely around Britt.

Britt clung to him, her heart welling over with the knowledge of his love. When they finally parted, she rested her head on his shoulder. “So I take it everyone else knew you were going to propose tonight?”

“Yes,” Merlin said sourly.

Britt laughed as she pressed her forehead against his neck and clutched her engagement scabbard.

Centuries ago, Blaise—Merlin’s mentor—had said the modern day legends of Camelot weren’t about her Kingdom—at least, not in its entirety.

At the time, Britt hadn’t quite believed him, but now she could see it.

No legend could ever convey Kay's steadfast care or Gawain's faithful loyalty. In particular, no story could *ever* properly express the depth of love between Britt and Merlin. Neither wars nor time itself could part them.

So now, she finally understood what Blaise was trying to tell her. Britt was forevermore the founder of the Round Table, the love of Merlin, and the High King of Camelot. Long Live King Arthurs!

The End