

## The New High King

### A King Arthurs short story by K. M. Shea

“Once the giant was defeated, it was quite simple to free the lady. Sir Lanval did most of the work, but it was a jolly good adventure!” Sir Tor beamed at the Knights of the Round Table, in a cheerful mood as usual.

Mordred rubbed his chin. *At least that hasn't changed.*

“Yes, thank you, Sir Tor,” Sir Ulfius said. “I believe that brings this meeting of the Round Table to an end. Unless you wish to say something, My King?”

Mordred pushed his shoulders back and smiled. “Only that I’m exceedingly proud and happy with the Order of the Round Table, and I would like to thank every one of you for making Britt’s vision of Camelot carry on. That is all.”

Various emotions flickered across the knights’ faces—sadness, affection, and pain at a wound that still ached.

It had been a year since Merlin and a number of Britt’s closest knights sealed themselves in a cave in hopes of meeting Britt in the future. It had been even longer since Britt had left, but the gaping hole of her absence was still felt, though it had dulled to an ache rather than the stabbing sensation that had plagued everyone in Camelot for months.

As knights began standing and taking their leave, Sir Ywain trotted up to Mordred. “My King, I wish to tell you that I shall return to my lands in a week.”

Mordred smiled. “You miss your wife, do you?”

“Like a thirsty man misses water,” Ywain agreed.

“I shall be sad to see you go, but please pass my greetings on to Lady Laudine, and tell her we are grateful she could spare you from her courts.”

“Spare me? That’s a pretty way of putting it,” Ywain grumbled. “She kicked me out of the castle and said if I didn’t return after completing three quests, she wouldn’t let me back in!”

“Your lioness tearing up her tapestries might’ve had something to do with it,” Mordred said lightly.

“She was just playing!” Ywain insisted.

“That’s an excuse to make for a kitten, not a lioness, cousin,” Sir Agravain said as he and Sir Bors joined the conversation.

“Exercising your big cat, though, will make a wonderful excuse for excursions in the future,” Sir Bors said. “I have plans to visit the Lady of the Lake in a month’s time. Would you care to join me?”

Mordred tilted his head. “I thought I’d heard the Lady of the Lake banned you from her presence.”

Bors laughed. “So she claimed. But ever since Lancelot and Lionel departed, I’ve been allowed into her halls.”

“The Lady of the Lake has a hall?” Agravain asked, frowning his eyebrows.

“Indeed. It is located under her lake,” Bors said

“Underwater? Please, Sir Bors. Come up with a more believable idea,” Agravain scoffed. “I am not some green knight you can try to feed exaggerated tales to!”

“I’m surprised with you, Agravain,” Ywain said. “Knowing our Aunt Morgan, I should think you would more readily understand the use of magic.”

“I do,” Agravain insisted. “It is merely that I also know Sir Bors is related to the biggest boaster Britain has ever seen.”

Mordred chuckled. “Now you are starting to sound like Britt.”

There was a pained pause, but Sir Bors was the first to recover. “I have a proposal to make. As you are leaving soon, Sir Ywain, I think we should hold a hunt before your departure.”

“A hunt!” Ywain’s eyes lit up. “Yes—if you do not mind, My King?”

“I think a hunt might be just what we need,” Mordred said.

Even Agravain began to smile. “Wonderful! I have a new bow I should like to try for the occasion.”

“Is it the one the faerie lady gave you on your last quest?” Ywain asked.

“Yes!”

“If that is the case, you had best start praying we hunt deer, and not boars,” Sir Bors said.

“It doesn’t matter what we hunt, it will certainly be an entertaining time!” Ywain said.

“Here now; I’ll go tell Tor. Will you clear it with your seneschal and counselors, My King?”

“I will, but I’ve no reason to think they would object,” Mordred said.

“I should think not,” Agravain snorted. “With Kay-the-tightfisted gone, there’s no one to halt our festivities.”

“Sir Kay was a genius at treasuries,” Bors said. “I appreciate it more now that I have been looking over the financial records of my father’s kingdom.”

The trio of knights bowed to Mordred, then moved on, the promise of entertainment mingling with their newfound responsibilities.

Britt was not the only one who left a hole in Camelot. Kay, Gawain, Lancelot, Merlin, and all who had shut themselves into the cave were sorely missed, and their absence had caused great changes in Britain’s political landscape.

Agravain was now the heir to the Orkney throne, and it seemed that Bors would inherit his uncle’s kingdom, as well as his father’s.

Mordred pinched his eyes shut. Britt’s breathtaking smile was still fresh in his memory, but what he most missed were her sarcastic jokes, and the quiet moments in which he witnessed her astute emotional observations. “She always knew what to say,” he murmured.

“Perhaps, but you certainly take after her in that area.”

Mordred jumped in his chair, smiling when he realized it was King Pellinore who addressed him. “While the compliment warms my heart, I must disagree. Britt had great understanding of the power of words and wielded them perfectly. Even if I see a situation, I struggle to find the words to say.”

“That’s because you’re not Britt,” Pellinore said. Though his words stung a little, he softened the blow with an understanding smile. “It is a good thing that you fight to uphold the principles and morals she established, but you must do so in your own way. I’m the same. I haven’t that golden voice or enchanting smile Britt had. But I have my honor, and my vassals know they can trust me. So that is how I rule.”

Mordred rested his fingers on the scratched surface of the Round Table. “Truthfully, I don’t feel like I can rule as a true king. The men here are my friends. Who am I to give them orders?”

Pellinore shrugged. “Men followed Britt because she made them think they could be better. They fought for her because they believed in her. But wouldn’t you fight just as hard, if your friend asked you to?”

Mordred frowned as he thought. “I see your point.”

Pellinore grunted. “Just don’t spend your time thinking of how the previous High King casts a long shadow. It’s a waste of time, given that she came from such a radically different place that you could never emulate. And I believe if she were to know how you felt, it would sadden her.”

Mordred nodded. “Thank you, for your advice and your continued presence in Camelot.”

The older king smiled. “I’m glad I can be of service. If you ever need any encouragement or advice, I would be honored if you were to confide in me.”

“I will,” Mordred promised.

Pellinore clasped his shoulder, then left.

Mordred stood, groaning a little as he stretched his arms above his head, then made for the door. *I’ll be holding court this afternoon, but since I have a few extra minutes, perhaps I should make an early inspection of the armory...*

When Mordred left the hall, he found Guinevere waiting for him in the passageway.

“My King,” she said with an elegant curtsy. “The ladies have finished sewing and hemming the banners for the summer festival. I spoke to the seneschal, but he requested that I pass the information on to you as well.”

“Thank you for your hard work,” Mordred said as he ran a hand through his hair. “You finished far more quickly than expected. Isn’t the festival not for a number of weeks?”

Guinevere smiled. “It is to be held in two weeks, my King.”

Mordred stiffened his shoulders to keep from hunching them. “Two weeks?” *I had forgotten it was so soon. Blast! That means the preparations are running behind.... I’ll have to speak to Sir Bodwain after dinner tonight and look over the accounts.* He shifted his attention back to Guinevere and smiled thinly. “It is fortuitous, then, that I spoke to you. Thank you, Lady Guinevere.”

Guinevere nodded, but she squinted slightly and wrung her hands. “My King, if I could be so presumptuous...”

“Yes,” Mordred prodded when she did not continue.

“May I speak to you, elsewhere?”

“Of course. Did you have a location in mind?”

Guinevere nodded, and she led the way down the hallway. Mordred followed her all the way outside the castle, across the courtyard, and up a staircase that spilled out onto the castle walls.

Some of the tension eased in Mordred’s frame as he stared out at the green lands surrounding Camelot. “So what is it that is weighing on your mind, Lady Guinevere?”

“In truth, I must confess there was not any one thing I wished to speak to you about,” Guinevere admitted. She sheepishly looked down at her hands, nodded once, then pushed her chin up and met his gaze. “It appeared, to me anyway, that you needed a moment of quiet. Britt frequently walked the walls when her duties were too much for her to handle, so I thought perhaps you would find comfort in it as well.”

Mordred felt a real smile warm his lips. “You’re right.... I had nearly forgotten. Britt frequently walked the walls at night—or after a particularly aggravating encounter with Lancelot.” He chuckled.

“Perhaps,” Guinevere tactfully said, smiling.

He smiled as he leaned against a crenel in the sawtooth pattern of the wall, and watched a farmer drive by in a wagon pulled by two oxen. “I must extend my thanks and gratitude for the new role you play in Camelot.”

“’Tis nothing,” Guinevere said.

Mordred shook his head. “You have organized the ladies and become the social driving force behind Camelot, all without using your rank as Leodegrance’s daughter or Britt’s close friend as a crutch.”

His praise brought a slight blush to her cheeks. “I’m thankful you have allowed me to stay here, my King.”

“It is I who am thankful! You have been invaluable.”

Guinevere giggled, but her smile was soft as she joined him at the wall. “Britt always seemed to expect more of the ladies of Camelot, and more of me. Her belief in us was...freeing. Now, I wish to test the limits of my abilities and see what kind of person I can become.” She paused, and her face turned nearly as red as her red gold hair. “I apologize, saying such silly things.”

“No, I know precisely what you mean. I witnessed it many times among the Knights of the Round Table. Britt could move a stone wall if she tried.” Mordred glanced speculatively at his companion. He knew Britt had enforced many of her new rules to protect women and give them more options, but since her exit, it had become apparent that very few women were comfortable taking up the reins of their newfound freedom. In fact, Mordred doubted any would’ve done it at all if Guinevere had not remained in Camelot and followed in Britt’s footsteps by breaking the previously ironclad expectations of society.

The noble-blooded lady had proven on multiple occasions that she was an excellent ally to have in the castle, and Mordred was forever thankful that she was willing to corral the ladies of Camelot.

“Do you have a riding horse, Lady Guinevere?” Mordred asked on an impulse.

Guinevere bit her lip. “No, My King has been kind enough to allow me to use his personal stables.”

“How would you like a horse of your own?”

The young lady blinked. “Of my own?”

“Llamrei—Britt’s white palfrey has not had a rider since she left. It’s a shame for such a magnificent horse to be without an owner. But while I ride Roen, I’ve no use for a palfrey trained as Llamrei is.”

Guinevere slowly nodded. “I should very much like to accept her. Thank you.”

Mordred rested his thumbs on his sword belt. “Consider it my thanks for all you do.”

“No thanks are necessary. It is my pleasure,” Guinevere said simply. She turned on her heels and glided towards the stairs. “I shall leave you, for I am certain you need a moment of silence.” She paused at the top of the staircase. “But, my King...please do not over-extend yourself. You are in a very difficult position, and I know you wish to see Camelot thrive for a multitude of reasons. Britt, if she could see you, would be very proud of what you’ve done. But neither she, nor any of us in Camelot, wish to see you drive yourself to an early grave.”

Lacking the courage to view her expression, Mordred stared at the forest surrounding most of Camelot. “Do you really think she would be proud?”

“I know it,” she said simply. “And, perhaps it is presumptuous of me to say so, but I greatly admire you and admire your loyalty for remaining here when you could have easily left with the others.”

Mordred turned around just in time to see Guinevere bob a curtsy and disappear down the staircase. Feeling lighter than he had in days, he rested an elbow against the crenel and watched the men and women scurry back and forth across the courtyard of Camelot...through his city.



After both the hunt held in Ywain's honor and the summer festival, Mordred finally had a few days to himself. He informed Sir Ulfius and Sir Bodwain of his plans, and then set out for Baron Marhaus' lands with a number of guards to serve as his escort.

*The festival went well...though Sir Ector did not attend. Not that I blame him. Camelot is, I imagine, a reminder of his children.*

"If you'll excuse the interruption, milord," the captain of the guard said, disrupting Mordred's thoughts. "The front scout has returned."

The scout that had been sent ahead was a giant Scotsman who smiled frequently and tended to call Mordred "laddy."

"All is well—no signs of blackguards or bandits," he reported.

"Thank you," Mordred said to both the captain and the scout. "How far ahead is the village?"

"You ought to start hearing grazing sheep soon," the Scotsman said. "Once we pass the herds, the village is just a short ride away."

"Perfect." Mordred shifted in his saddle, then flicked a thatch of his horse's black mane back into place. His horse, Roen, nickered happily. "We'll spend the day with the village, camp there for the night, and return to Camelot on the morrow."

The guard and captain exchanged looks.

"Forgive me, milord, but is that possible?" the captain finally ventured.

"What do you mean?" Mordred asked.

"Won't Baron Marhaus press us into accepting his hospitality?"

Mordred frowned, more than a little puzzled. "Why would he?"

The Scotsman raised a bushy eyebrow. "Because you are the High King of Britain?"

"Ah. Yes." *I had forgotten about that.* This was the first time Mordred was visiting this particular village as King of Britain. Previously, he had always come as a mere knight—and with the Knights of the Round Table swarming the area on quests, he wouldn't have been at all noteworthy.

Mordred shifted in his saddle. "If he finds out about our visit, I suppose we will hear from him. But we haven't come here for the Baron, but for a shepherd who goes by the name of Arth."

The guards nodded and began to settle back into place, but Mordred felt excessively awkward. *How many kings go about paying social calls on shepherds?* He cleared his throat. "Sorry. I know it is rather...eccentric of me."

"Kings—good kings anyway—associate with all sorts of folk. Hermits, sons of cow herders, guards, and even shepherds, milord," the captain said.

"By good kings, you mean Britt," Mordred said.

The captain didn't even blink. "She is one example. But you are another."

Mordred twisted in the saddle to study his guards, his gaze flickering from man to man.

They had been Britt's private honor-guard, handpicked by Sir Kay himself. Mordred knew them from the hours he would spend with Britt on the castle walls at night. *I expected they would treat me differently. But they've continued with their air of familiarity and watchfulness.*

Several of the guards met his gaze and smiled, then bobbed their heads in bows.

Mordred faced forward once again, their painless acceptance buoying him.

When they reached the village, it was near midday, and the man Mordred was particularly seeking out—his long-time childhood acquaintance and friend—was mending the wooden fence of a small pen.

Smiling, Mordred nudged Roen into the village. “Arth—Arthur!”

The well-built man looked up and smiled. “Mordred, you blackguard! Finally gave your responsibilities the slip, did you?”

Mordred dismounted and slapped the shepherd on the back. “Indeed. It has been too long since I managed to visit you last.”

“Let us stable your horse, and come in! My wife is out with the children, but she will be back not an hour from now.” Arthur began to stride off, then paused. “I apologize, but I don’t think we have room for *all* your horses,” he said, nodding to the guards.

The captain of the guards smiled and bowed slightly. “It is no problem at all. We will begin pitching our camp at the outskirts of the village—if it pleases milord.”

Mordred waved to him in agreement. “That would be perfect; thank you.” The guards parted as Mordred led Roen into a small stable, which he would share with goats and various poultry.

As he settled Roen into his stall, he grinned at Arthur—Sir Ector’s foster son who was meant to become King of Britain but had run off, married a shepherdess, and gone by the name Arth ever since. “I forget, you have two offspring now,” Mordred said. “I hope they do not take too much after you and are not driving their mother insane?”

Arthur laughed from deep in his chest. “My daughter shows signs of my temper, but thankfully, our son seems to have inherited his mother’s sweet disposition. Even so, I know she will be grateful for the help when we leave.”

Mordred slipped Roen’s bridle off his head and patted his velvety black neck. “You’re leaving? Where will you go, and why?”

“I apologize. I forgot I hadn’t yet told you—I planned to send word when we were settled in. After a lot of thinking, my wife and I decided to move back to Bonmaison lands. We will live with Sir Ector and his wife.”

“So you’ve told them where you’ve been all these years since you ran off with your wife?”

Arthur slipped the saddle from Rowan’s back and snorted in laughter. “My father has known almost as long as I’ve been gone. He discovered my location the summer King Britt was crowned.”

Mordred had to pause to allow the new information to make sense. “You didn’t tell me so when I approached you about Britt before I entered Camelot’s courts.”

Arthur raised an eyebrow. “How else did you think I knew King Arthur was really a female? Or that I knew as much about her as I did?”

When Mordred had been sent to Britain under his brother’s orders, Mordred had more or less figured out that the Arthur on the throne was not, in fact, the true Arthur who was a foster son of Sir Ector. Though he had never met Sir Ector in a formal setting, he had spent much of his youth in Britain with various lords that were allies to his father and had several run-ins with Kay and Arthur.

Kay did not remember the episodes, for both Mordred and Arthur had been young boys, allowing Mordred to continue with his anonymity. But before approaching Camelot, Mordred

had sought out the real Arthur and learned as much about King Arthur, Britt, from his childhood acquaintance as he could.

Mordred was too embarrassed to admit he hadn't thought much about the method in which his friend had acquired such knowledge, so he changed the topic. "May I assume Kay knew as well?"

Arthur shook his head. "No, and that is something I regret. He was my brother, but in my selfishness and worry that he would be angry with me, I lost my chance to say goodbye.... That's why we are moving back to Bonmaison. Ector has been nothing but the best of fathers, and in a short amount of time, he lost his eldest son and his much-beloved daughter. He, and my foster mother, need support. I was afraid I lost the right to be that support due to my brash conduct, but over the past few months, I've realized that even if I have, my foster parents still deserve every comfort that can be afforded to them."

"I am glad, for I know how you loved your family," Mordred said. He paused for a moment, then grinned. "Does this mean I can expect to see you in Camelot's courts?"

"No!" Arthur said sourly. "I've no use for prancing knights and pretty ladies. You know that!" He eyed him and looked like he might smack Mordred with a wooden bucket if further provoked.

Mordred looked around the stable for listening ears before turning again to look at Arthur. "You know, it is your fault I am in this position. The throne really is yours, and while I never would have let Britt stand aside for you, I am perfectly willing to return the throne to you, the rightful son of Uther Pendragon."

Arthur draped an arm over Roen's neck. "No. I may be the son of Uther Pendragon, but it is in blood only. That angel-faced woman, Britt Arthurs...She was the true High King of Britain." Arthur smiled at him. "And now, you are."

"But I'm not even British," Mordred said.

"Neither was Britt," Arthur pointed out.

Mordred said nothing.

Arthur walked around Roen so he could slap Mordred on the back. "You are a good King, Mordred. I'm happy it is you on the throne."

Mordred finally cracked a smile. "It is my honor to watch over Camelot." He paused, thinking of his friends that remained with him—Ywain, Bors, Pellinore, and more. And for a brief moment, he thought of Guinevere with her beautiful hair. "And I know it will forever be my home."

"Amen," Arthur said in all seriousness. "Come, you must be hungry after your ride. I'm no cook, but my wife, Edla, has managed to teach me a thing or two about food preparation."

Mordred followed his friend, but he was still deep in thought.

It was as Arthur had said, he was now the High King.

Mordred would very likely miss Britt for the rest of his life, as would everyone in Camelot. But he was coming to accept his position and find contentment. It was the same for all the loyal knights who remained in Camelot. The land continued to prosper; the valiant knights were still riding out on quests, and peace reigned.

And while everyone would make certain that Britt was never forgotten, Mordred knew she would want most of all for everyone to be happy.

*Perhaps that should be the goal of my kingship. Not to imitate Britt, but to see that everyone thrives.*

The End