

## The Third Legendary Knight

### A Sleeping Beauty Short Story by K. M. Shea

Briar waited a full two weeks after her wedding ceremony before she began hatching plans to make Franco and Delanna legendary knights.

Bestowing the legendary halberd on Franco would be a cinch, but Delanna's crossbow might become an uproar. To be frank, she wasn't sure if the Magic Knights of Sole would allow it—and her grandfather was sure to put up a fuss.

So, Briar decided the best way to prepare them for this future was to simply not tell them.

Unfortunately, she needed to learn a bit more about the process. Giving Faro to Isaia had been an act mostly driven by need and adrenaline. She deeply hoped she didn't have to put her life on the line every time she named a legendary knight, or she was going to have to start avoiding Aeternum Hall completely.

*I need to learn more...*

Thus, on a fine winter afternoon, Briar barged into the Magic Knight's hall.

"Ah, the legendary knights! How fortunate, for you are just the men I wanted to see," Briar said with her most dazzling smile.

The five legendary knights were gathered around a table, peering at a map, though with Briar's arrival, they all stood.

A footman hovered at her elbow. "Your Highness, you must make an appointment should you wish to speak to any of the Magic Knights," he said. "Impromptu visits are quite...inappropriate."

Briar planted a hand to her chest and did her best to look startled. "I must make an appointment to see my own husband?"

"You just said you wanted to see the legendary knights, not solely your husband," the footman pointed out.

Briar frowned and turned around to address her ladies in waiting. "Are any of you going to help me?"

Lady Delanna studied her nails. "You usually do quite well on your own."

Jewel rolled her eyes. "You are just hoping he will lay a hand on Her Highness, so you can shoot him."

"Perhaps."

The footman turned white and swallowed loudly. Thankfully, he was further spared by Sir Artemio, the Legendary Knight of the Mace. "It's fine, Loris, you may go. The Princess may enter these halls whenever she wishes, provided she does not disturb any training knights."

Briar went back to smiling. "Thank you for your kindness, Sir Artemio."

Sir Artemio bowed slightly.

"Is there something we can help you with?" Sir Jacopo, the Legendary Knight of the Saber, asked.

“Yes.” Briar glided forward, doing her best to appear artless but curious. “I’m here on a bit of a scholarly mission. You see, I have a question about the legendary weapons.”

Sir Lucio—the Legendary Knight of the Dirk—tilted his head and raised his eyebrow. “What of them?”

“I’m afraid it was never really explained to me the actual process of bestowing a legendary weapon on a knight, and it has left me terribly ignorant. For instance, must the weapon be bestowed in the middle of a battle?”

“No,” said Sir Virgilio—the Legendary Knight of the Lance—with a charming smile. “Your interaction with Isaia was quite rare—normally members of the royal family don’t storm the enemy with us knights. If you know far enough ahead of time, a celebration is thrown, and the weapon is bestowed in a public ceremony.”

“I see,” Briar said. “And what again are the requirements to be granted a legendary weapon?”

Sir Artemio tapped the tabletop. “There are no requirements per say. Our records only say it must be whomever the weapons select.”

Briar forced herself to appear interested instead of whooping like she wanted to. “Whomever the weapons select? Do the records say *exactly* that?”

“Yes.”

She nodded once, then twice. “How illuminating—though I must say the sound reasoning of my mind shivers at the thought of weapons having preferences.”

“It is a bit odd,” Sir Jacopo said with a kind smile, “But it is not so much that the weapons have likes and dislikes as much as it is the magic in them weighing everyone and finding someone who fits the mold of a legendary knight.”

“The magic keeps the system clear of corruption,” Sir Lucio said, his dark eyes narrowing. “That’s why their decisions are absolute.”

Briar suspected he meant to frighten her a bit, but at that moment she could have chortled. This was exactly what she wanted to know! *In other words, if I can handoff the crossbow to Delanna, once it accepts her, no one will be able to take it back! But I don’t want it to be some secret thing—that wouldn’t be fair to Delanna.* The last thing Briar wanted to do was make the first female legendary knight—the first female Magic Knight ever—think she was something that was unwanted and needed to be hidden.

“Have more legendary weapons begun to stir, Your Highness?” Sir Artemio asked offhandedly.

“Yes,” Briar said, furrowing her brow. “Two of them.” She shook herself from her reverie and smiled. “Thank you for your help. It was most illuminating.” She began to march back out of the hall, the newly acquired information swirling in her brain.

Laughingly, Sir Virgilio called after her, “Aren’t you going to tell us who the new legendary knights are?”

“Nope!” Briar grinned impishly over her shoulder, and she caught all the knights shifting their gaze from her to Isaia, as if expecting her husband to force it out of her.

Isaia blinked. “She’ll tell us when she’s ready.”

Faced with this refusal, the legendary knights almost choked on their shock as Briar laughed and blew her wonderful husband a kiss.

She waltzed out of the hall and into the freezing cold, barely registering her ladies swarming around her. *Now...how to pull off the greatest surprise in this decade?*

It was going to be so *fun!*



In the end, Briar had to adjust her plans to allot for her grandfather’s picture of decorum and her parents’ love of celebrations. Sir Artemio tattled to King Giuseppe about her little trip to the hall and about her reveal that two of the legendary weapons were stirring.

King Giuseppe, an avid devotee of tradition, insisted that Briar bestow the weapons in a public ceremony.

Briar agreed to do so—provided she could keep the identities of the knights a secret until the very moment she was to bestow the legendary weapon.

Her parents blithely agreed, but Giuseppe—who perhaps better understood the clever side of her brain—lowered his great eyebrows at her and narrowed his gaze.

“You are planning something,” he said.

“I am *always* planning something,” Briar said, smiling sweetly.

The king relaxed marginally. “True. Call for the advisors—we’ll have to make a public declaration of the ceremony.”

“Aren’t you going to try and wheedle out of me who the future legendary knights are?” Briar asked.

“No,” the king said plainly. “I trust the weapons to make the right choice, and I know you are not fool enough to get yourself killed trying to pass them off to the wrong knight.”

“Beppe, you’re going to make me blush,” Briar joked. She would have stayed to tease her stony grandfather some more, but she caught sight of Isaia lingering in the doorway.

“Off with you,” King Giuseppe said when he noticed the subject of her attention.

Briar kissed the king on his cheek, then slipped from the room and joined Isaia in the hallway. She curled her arms around his waist and leaned against his chest—intending to hug him—but her otherwise taciturn husband slid his hand under her jaw and leaned over so he could kiss her on the lips.

Warmth invaded Briar’s body, and she sagged against Isaia—the kiss robbing her of her mental capabilities. When they finally broke apart, she sighed happily and rested her head on his shoulder. *I don’t think I’ll ever be anything less than deliriously happy when we kiss...* Having gone so long loving Isaia and believing he only desired friendship—not to mention the years Isaia spent making himself deny his affection—had made them a rather demonstrative couple to the amusement of nearly everyone.

She tucked her head under his chin. “Did the legendary knights send you to try and ferret out who is getting the weapons?”

Isaia kissed the top of her head. “Yes.”

“So are you going to seduce it out of me?” Briar asked.

This question made the guards standing in the hallway cough and blush painfully.

The corners of Isaia’s lips tugged upwards in an understated smile. “No.”

She smiled mischievously. “Why not? I think it would be fun to try—and you never know, it might work.”

“I’m not going to try because I see what others have realized but not yet grasped.”

“And that is?”

“In the span of a few months, you will have granted as many legendary weapons as King Giuseppe has in his lifetime. The weapons are stirring and calling out to you—perhaps because you are the only one who is willing to see those most would deem unworthy.”

“You are absolutely worthy of being a legendary knight,” Briar said.

“Perhaps, but I have been knighted at the youngest age in several generations...” He hesitated.

Briar pulled back slightly so she could look up at his face. “What is it?”

“The weapons that are stirring...it’s the halberd and the crossbow, isn’t it?”

Briar blinked. “How did you know?” She wondered briefly if she talked in her sleep.

Isaia shook his head. “It was a guess. Faro is the only legendary weapon I can truly feel, though I can tell when another active legendary weapon is close. This past week, I noticed two more sensations—like seeing new stars in the sky.”

“Fascinating,” Briar said. “I wonder if that could be used to our advantage in battle somehow?”

“Briar, these two knights will be a bigger deal than you think,” Isaia said.

She laughed uneasily. “Oh, I wouldn’t say that.”

“You don’t understand,” Isaia said. “The crossbow hasn’t been bestowed since the days of the Queen of Hearts. If you found a knight worthy of it, it will be the first time it has been used since the original knight of the crossbow possessed it.”

Briar tried to process that new information and figure out how it would affect Delanna. *It might help ease her way a bit...if being the Legendary Knight of the Crossbow is such a big deal, perhaps they will accept her more easily.* Briar wasn’t sure her hopes were valid, but she did know it meant she could expect great things from her dear friend.

She nodded slowly. “Thank you, Isaia, for telling me.”

Isaia intertwined his fingers with hers and squeezed her hand. “Of course.”

Briar smiled up at her husband. “Do you have enough time for a quick ride outside Ciane?”

Isaia caressed her cheek with his free hand. “Always.”

As Briar leaned into her husband, a final stray thought swept through her mind.

*Are the weapons calling out because they know I’ll hear them...or because they know we will need every legendary knight we can get in the near future?*



Briar smiled and waved to the crowds that had gathered on the snow-dusted royal lawn. It was mostly citizens of Ciane and farmers from the surrounding area, but there were several rows of chairs filled with fur-wrapped nobles and governmental workers.

Briar stood on the top of a wood dais that had been raised solely for this occasion. Her four ladies-in-waiting were lined up behind her, and King Giuseppe, Princess Alessia, and Prince Consort Filippo were seated in grand chairs off to the side. The Magic Knights of Sole surrounded the area, all dressed in their prized anti-magic armor and carefully lined up so they might pay their respects to the two new legendary knights.

It was a warm day for winter—barely a breeze stirred, and the sun shone with such force, birds flew about and chirped happily.

Briar was thankful for her practical wool cloak—which was dyed lavender and edged with silver embroidery that matched the silver crown she wore for the occasion—though her palms were clammy, and her heart thumped painfully in her chest.

Now that the moment had come, Briar was tempted to turn on her heels and run. Not because she feared what would happen after, but because the magical weapons made her spine tingle, and she was not looking forward to the binding when ruler and knight clasped the weapon between them and she could feel the magic activating.

It was like being internally inspected from head to foot—which was a thousand times worse than if she had to prance naked through a field because the magic could comb through her thoughts and her heart.

*Nonsense. I'm just being silly. I have faced Carabosso, and I know who these weapons have decided on. I can do this.*

Briar lifted her chin, inhaled deeply, then shouted over the murmurs of the crowd. “Thank you for coming to celebrate with us and witness the bestowal of *two* legendary weapons!”

She paused and let the crowds roar their approval, then continued. “Today, we will welcome the Legendary Knight of the Halberd and the Legendary Knight of the Crossbow.” She gestured to the two weapons—one on either side of her—that had been carefully placed on velvet cushions.

“Those who have been chosen by these weapons are just and upright,” she continued. “For they have been measured and found worthy. And so I call forth Sir Franco!”

The crowds roared and Franco—positioned near the dais thanks to Isaia’s maneuverings—gaped up at Briar. He moved only when his friends pushed him forward, and he staggered up to the dais. “Me, Your Highness?” he asked, barely audible over the shouts of approval.

Briar smiled at the boyishly handsome knight. “You, Sir Franco.”

Franco sagged to his knees and bowed his head.

She picked up the halberd, shivering slightly when she felt the ghostly touch of its magic. She paused and let the weapon prod the conversation. “Because of your noble heart, you are to be the Legendary Knight of the Halberd. Do you trust me?”

Franco hesitated then nodded. “I do, Your Highness.”

“Then take your weapon.”

Franco stood, licked his lips, then took the halberd from Briar.

Briar motioned for him to lower the blade at the tip of the spear-like weapon. She gingerly pressed her palm against the sharpened edge, staining it with her blood.

The crowd had gone silent with reverence, watching with baited breath.

Briar closed her eyes and felt the weapon whisper to her. She drew in a breath and shouted for all to hear. “Pierce...*Zanna!*”

The wind roared and whipped around Franco and Briar, churning up snowflakes and bits of ice. Briar sucked air in through her teeth as the sense of *something* looking her over rankled her. The wind tickled the back of her neck, then the bond clicked into place. The raging wind twirled around the halberd and was sucked into the blade.

Franco turned to the crowd and stabbed his halberd forward. A barrage of wind tumbled from the blade, whipping hair and cloaks alike.

When the wind subsided, Franco held the halberd above his head, and the courtyard was filled with stomps and shouts of approval.

Relieved, Briar exhaled and let herself smile. She glanced at her parents—who were beaming with pride as they clapped. King Giuseppe met her gaze and raised an eyebrow, though he also clapped.

When the cheering subsided, Briar’s mother began the official royal greeting. “We honor you, Sir Franco, legendary knight!” Princess Alessia said.

She continued on, but Briar didn’t hear it—for now came the tricky part.

“Delanna?” she asked.

“Your Highness?” she murmured. She took a few steps closer to Briar so she could discreetly speak.

Briar carefully weighed her words. “If you had the chance, would you become a Magic Knight?”

“No.”

Briar froze. *What?!* “Why? Isn’t it all you ever wanted?”

“It is true that before I met you, I would have done anything to be a knight. But now there is nothing in this world that could dissuade me from serving you, Briar Rose.”

“And if I call on you to serve me in a different capacity?”

Delanna hesitated. “I don’t understand.”

Briar looked over her shoulder and offered her confidante and friend a grin. “Do you trust me?”

The worry in Delanna’s brow smoothed as she nodded her head and smiled with affection. “Yes.”

“And will you serve me?”

Her smile became something more than fondness, and Briar could almost tangibly *feel* the strength of their friendship. “Always.” Though it was a simple word, it was weighed down with so much more.

Delanna had given Briar the spindle to set off her curse and had stood with her against Carabosso. Though Sole society dictated she be a demure lady, she had risked everything to support Briar.

“Then I promise you that I will see the repercussions of my next act through, and I will stand with you as well,” Briar said.

Her mother had just finished the royal welcome, and the cheers hadn’t even subsided as Briar picked up the legendary crossbow. The weapon’s magic swept over her, prompting her to speak. “And now, because of unrivaled courage, I name the Legendary Knight of the Crossbow: Lady Delanna.”

Briar pushed the crossbow into Delanna’s arms, moving with such agility Delanna’s expression barely registered the shock, and no one had the chance to object. She smeared her still bleeding palm up and down the string of the crossbow.

The instant her blood touched the string, words filled her mind. “Ignite...*Fiamma!*”

A ring of fire burst up around Briar and Delanna. It shed no smoke, and the flames did not burn them. Instead, it playfully circled around their feet. The magic was different this time. Instead of being inspected, Briar almost felt like she was enveloped in a warm hug. It lingered longer than the magic had for Franco, and when everything snapped into place, it was abrupt enough to make both the girls stagger a step.

Her eyes wide, Delanna raised the crossbow, took aim at the sky, and shot a bolt. The arrow ignited with fire that formed the hazy shape of a bird. It flared, then burst, sprinkling the area with warm sparks.

Briar’s heart raced as she stared out at the crowd.

The silence was choking.

The first claps came from behind Briar. She whipped around to see Jewel, Silk, and Velvet clapping faster and with more strength than was proper.

Firra and Donaigh whistled and yipped, and their voices seemed to break the spell of shock, for soon the crowds also cheered. It took a few moments for their approval to reach the same volume it had for Franco, but from the dais, Briar could see the shining faces of young girls as they stared up at Delanna with admiration. If Briar had broken the mold of what a Sole princess should be, Delanna just shattered the limits society placed on women.

Not everyone was so glad—already some of the stodgiest nobles and Magic Knights were scowling, but it was done.

Lady Delanna was the Legendary Knight of the Crossbow—a right no one could deny her.

Fearfully, Briar glanced at her parents. Princess Alessia was clapping, though her face was frozen in shock. Prince Consort Filippo was equally as surprised, but when he met Briar's gaze, he winked.

"Welcome, Legendary Knight of the Crossbow!" he shouted.

His voice shook his wife from her astonishment, for she immediately glided over to Lady Delanna with a smile. "Yes, we honor you, Sir Delanna, legendary knight!"

Briar slunk to the sidelines, joining her father and grandfather as her mother made the welcome speech.

Sir Artemio and the other legendary knights had discreetly moved closer.

"You should have told us," Sir Artemio said.

"And give you the chance to stop me? Never," Briar said.

Sir Lucio twirled a dirk between his fingers. "You had no right. You may be a princess, but we Magic Knights are independent."

"I believe it was *I* who gave you that pep-talk a few mere months ago, Sir Lucio," Briar said.

"You are asking too much of us, Your Highness." Sir Virgilio shook his head. "To bring a *female* into our ranks?"

"It was never Briar's choice," Isaia interrupted. The legendary knights all peered at him.

"I know she is your wife, Sir Isaia..." Sir Jacopo began carefully.

"That doesn't matter. Briar didn't choose the knights, the weapons did. We, more than anyone else, should understand that." Isaia said.

His words silenced the knights, though Briar could tell it was not the end of the matter. She glanced at her grandfather, who wore his usual unreadable expression. "You do not object?" she asked.

A barely-there smile slanted across the king's lips. "You have spent your short career as a princess doing your best to upset the nobles and gentry. I think it about time you choose a new target."

Briar laughed. "You're feeling vindictive!"

"It is good for the magic knights to feel the pressure of your '*support*' so they stop ambling about the palace like puffed-up peacocks." King Giuseppe wryly said.

"I haven't given you enough credit, Beppe. I thought you would be upset with having a female Magic Knight," Briar said.

"I had prepared myself for much worse," the king said. "I thought you would dredge up a foreigner."

"That's a marvelous idea!" Briar said.

Sir Artemio's eyebrows twitched. "Your Majesty, please refrain from giving the princess more ideas."

Briar laughed, though her shoulders stooped with relief when Isaia moved to stand next to her. He kissed her forehead and whispered, "Well done."

She wordlessly grabbed his hand and squeezed it, finding strength in his support. She let go only when her mother finished Delanna's official welcome. Gathering her courage, Briar drew her shoulders back and moved to rejoin the two new knights.

"This is not the end of the matter, Your Highness," Sir Virgilio said.

Grinning, Briar glanced back at the knights. "You're right. It's just the beginning."

Franco bowed when Briar drew closer. "Your Highness, thank you."

Briar smiled. "I have done nothing, Sir Franco. It is all of your own doing—so thank *you* for your service to our country."

Franco flashed his dimples, and Briar turned her attention to Delanna.

The beautiful lady held her crossbow and stared down at it with a mixture of awe and shock. Only when Briar placed a hand on her shoulder did she stir. "I-I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything."

"But...in all my childhood dreams I never hoped...a *legendary knight*, me?" Delanna shook her head. "I cannot believe it."

Briar hesitated. "I'm afraid not everyone will be happy for you. Your welcome into the Magic Knights might be difficult."

Delanna smiled. "Change often is an unwelcome thing...but I am glad. You make me proud to be here, Briar."

"I will miss you greatly." Briar blinked, trying to keep her eyes from misting up.

"I won't be far off," Delanna said. "And should you ever need me, I will come."

"I'm afraid I will hold you to that," Briar said. "Things aren't right in the continent yet. There are many who have great need of the Magic Knights."

Delanna tilted her head and studied Briar.

"What?" Briar asked, self-consciously pulling her cloak closer.

"I was just thinking. When your parents sent you off to live in the country...that might have been the act that saved us all."

"I try not to dwell on my role, lest I overestimate my own importance," Briar said dryly. She paused, then held out her hand. "I'll fight for you, Delanna. I'll do my best to support you."

Delanna took her hand and squeezed it. "And I will protect you with everything I have."

"Together, then."

"Together."

The End