

I was supposed to be listening to the babbling courtier in front of me, but in truth I was only paying her the politest bit of attention. I had no idea who she was, although it was clear she thought herself very important, nor did I care about what service her brother had rendered to Uther, though she insisted on recounting his every action. She was merely another person in a seemingly endless parade of faces spouting blessings that were little more than thinly veiled pleas for favoritism. The panoply had begun at my coronation and had hardly let up for a moment since. I'd barely had a moment free to breathe, much less speak with my new husband, for he was assailed as frequently as I.

I let her jewel-encrusted highness babble on, scanning the revelers for the few people with whom I actually wanted to speak. I spotted Isolde right away, her flaming curls impossible to miss. Looking for my father, I noticed Lyonesse sulking in a corner and I couldn't help but smile inwardly that tonight hers was not the highest head in the room. Passing over Uriens, Pellinor and several other lords, I finally spotted my father deep in conversation with Father Marius, whose pinched expression betrayed his displeasure. Next to him were Lot and his wife, Ana. Arthur's gray-eyed, honey-haired sister was the only woman to swear loyalty to me at my coronation, and I felt an immediate kinship with her.

A light touch on my arm brought me back to the present. My companion's eyes widened and she curtsied, quickly disappearing among the crowd. I looked up into the rugged, handsome face of Kay, Arthur's foster-brother and champion, and smiled.

"My lord, your timing is impeccable," I said with a sigh of relief.

Kay nodded, his mouth slightly upturned. "Your highness, they are ready to begin." He gestured to the servants soldierly lining the outer walls.

“I – oh yes.” I had forgotten about the ceremony to precede the evening meal. “Pray, tell them to begin.”

Kay whispered a word to Arthur, who dismissed the man who had held his attention, and then disappeared into the crowd.

A single heavy thud vibrated through the room, quieting each mouth as it reached the ears. Guests turned toward the drummer’s call as members of the royal family scurried back to their assigned seats.

Kay emerged from the crowd, his booming voice reaching even the remotest shadows. “Lords and Ladies of Britain, tonight we bear witness to the most joyful day in living memory of our people. Our King has taken a wife and we have crowned her our Queen. She is for us Sovereignty made flesh, a symbol of the goddess who commands us all from birth to death and again in rebirth in the next life.”

I glanced at Father Marius, whose disgust was plainly written on his wan features. *Good. If my father insists on traveling with that pious troll in tow, let him see the true beliefs of this land and its people. Perhaps he will realize how far in the minority his brand of fear-based piety is, I thought.*

A group of men hefted the table in front of us, moving it out the way so the guests had a clear view of those seated on the dais. Kay continued, “Long ago, we proclaimed Arthur our King, but now, Sovereignty must have her say.”

Taking his cue, Arthur knelt before me, head bowed low, and two servants appeared, one on each side of me. I touched Arthur’s shoulder with my left hand, and with my right, offered him one of the small dumpling-like pies from the servant’s platter.

“Arthur, King of the Britains, may you never hunger, and may the land be always fertile under your guidance.”

He bit off half of the pie and I ate the rest, indicating that our rule should be equal.

From the servant on my left, I took a goblet filled with wine and held it out to him.

“May you never thirst, and may our land be spared from draught, disease and all other calamity under the protection of She in whose name I act.”

Arthur drank from the cup like a child as I tipped it up for him, his gaze never leaving mine. I swilled down the dregs, and offered him my hand. We both rose to our feet and the crowd exploded in cheers and applause.

After we were seated, hands still entwined, the table was placed back before us and the feasting commenced.