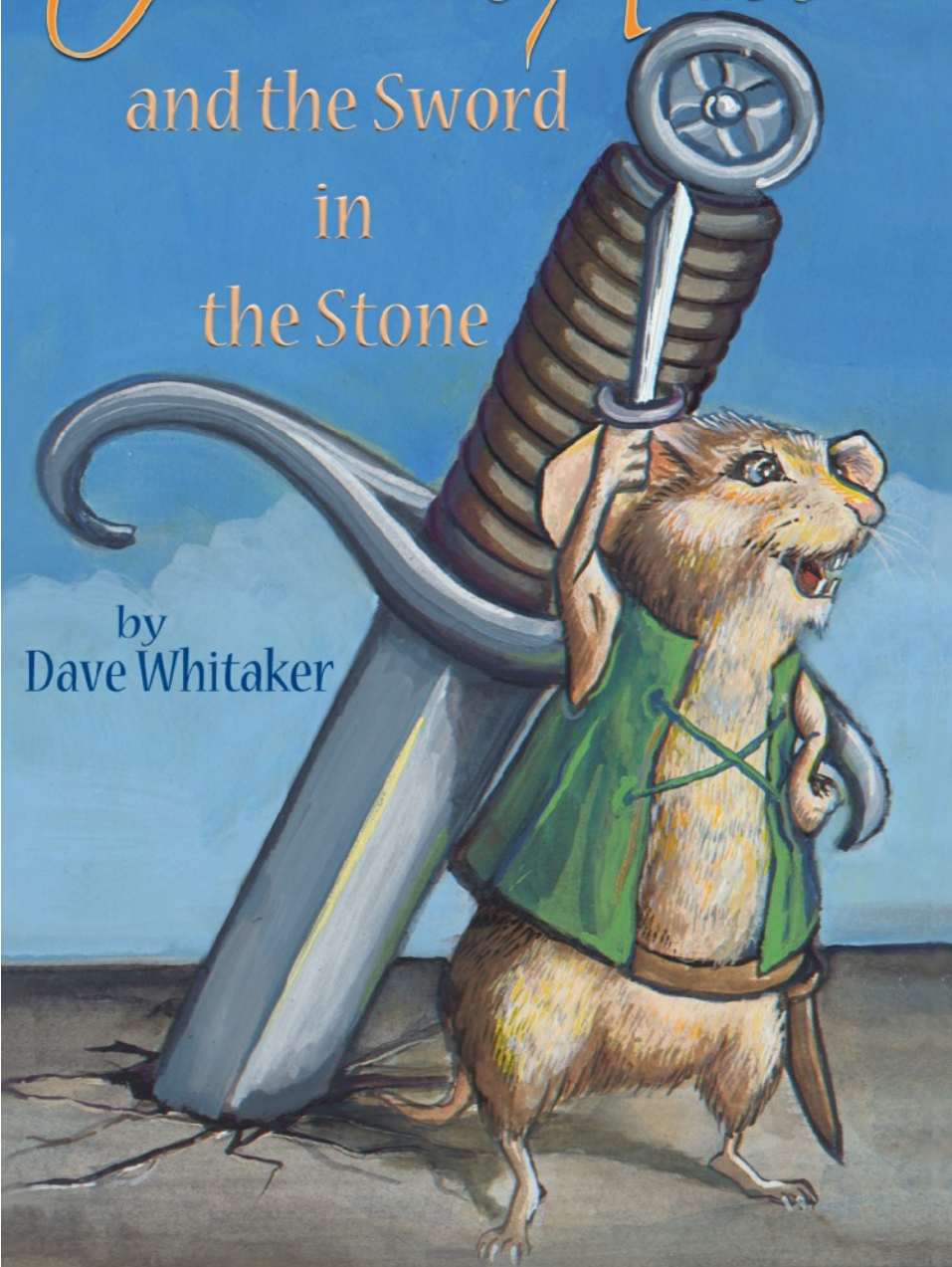


Otter and Arthur
and the Sword
in
the Stone

by
Dave Whitaker



OTTER & ARTHUR
and the Sword in the Stone

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Dedication

I am grateful to my children for making this book possible. Not only were they my guinea pigs as I wrote my initial draft, but they gave suggestions which became integral to the story.

I also offer my appreciation to the Monday Night Writers. Soon after I joined the group, the idea for this book developed. The members of that group gave me valuable critique which shaped this book.

Thanks also to Joyce Jackson for lending her wonderful editing talents and Gen Goering for the fantastic cover art.

My final thanks goes to the hundreds of authors who have tackled Arthurian legend. Their work has inspired and informed me. Hopefully my humble effort introduces King Arthur to a brand new audience.

Table of Contents

<i>Chapter 1: Otter Learns to Joust.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Chapter 2: The Adventures of Unka Vin.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Chapter 3: Arthur Meets Otter.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Chapter 4: Otter Learns Magic.....</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Chapter 5: Otter Takes Flight.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Chapter 6: Otter Goes to the Village.....</i>	<i>63</i>
<i>Chapter 7: Arthur and Otter Each Meet Someone Important.....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Chapter 8: The Mouse Village.....</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>Chapter 9: Otter Goes Home.....</i>	<i>97</i>
<i>Chapter 10: Home Again.....</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Chapter 11: Back to Dragon's Tail.....</i>	<i>121</i>
<i>Chapter 12: Kay Is Knighted.....</i>	<i>127</i>
<i>Chapter 13: Arthur Is Attacked.....</i>	<i>137</i>
<i>Chapter 14: Otter Saves Arthur.....</i>	<i>149</i>
<i>Chapter 15: The Lady in the Lake.....</i>	<i>159</i>
<i>Chapter 16: A New King.....</i>	<i>169</i>

Chapter 1: Otter Learns to Joust

My name is Otter. No, I'm not *an* otter. I'm a mouse. "Otter" is my nickname. My real name is Arthur, but no one calls me that. When some of my younger cousins tried saying "Arthur" it came out as "Otter" instead.

It's just as well. It avoids confusion with Arthur, the boy who my parents named me after. "We knew he was special," my parents told me. "A knight first brought him here when he was just a baby. Merlin has tutored him ever since."

I live with my mom, pop, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins. We have a hole in the wall of a cottage in the woods. I don't plan to stay cooped up in a tiny mouse hole the rest of my life. I want to get out and see the world.

"Seeking adventure only leads to trouble," my parents cautioned. "After all, you know what happened to Uncle Vincent."

Actually, no one knows what happened to Un-ka Vin, as I called him. He disappeared when I was very small, but I have wonderful memo-

ries of him. I long for experiences like those in the tales he told, although they may or may not have been true.

Merlin owns the cottage where we live. It is a small house, similar to the homes of the peasants who live and work in Dragon's Head, the village outside the castle of Camelot. The cottage has one room and very little furniture – a bed, a table, a couple benches, a chair, a trunk, and a book shelf.

Merlin is not a peasant, but a wizard. He lives a simple life like the peasants, though. He wears the same black robe and sandals every day and I have never seen him trim his long, white, scraggly beard. I am pretty sure I could live in it and never be discovered.

Merlin is also a creature of habit. Every night after a supper which usually consists of bread, cheese, fruit, and wine, he reads in front of the fireplace. Occasionally he practices spells, which are a little more exciting, but mostly it is dull when just Merlin is around.

During the days, however, Merlin tutors the sons of Sir Ector, one of the knights from Cam-

elot. They don't look like brothers. Arthur is tall and handsome with straight, brown hair and deep blue eyes. He is also stronger and more sensitive than Kay.

Kay is a scrawnier kid, even though he is two years older. He has dark wavy hair and brown eyes like his father. Kay mocks Arthur frequently, but the teasing rarely dampens Arthur's enthusiasm. He is better than Kay at just about everything. Arthur sticks with something until he figures it out – which is usually pretty quickly. He is eager to learn, but humble about his successes. Kay often boasts with less to show for it.

I often watch the tutoring sessions from behind a rock which propped open the door. One time which stands out is the day I learned to write my name – well, part of it anyway – and was introduced to jousting. “Boys,” Merlin began when Arthur and Kay arrived that morning, “we'll begin today with table manners.”

Kay groaned, “Who cares about table manners?”

From my hiding spot, I frowned. *Yeah! Why teach them that? There are others living here who depend on dropped food, you know!* We mice had wonderful feasts after Arthur and Kay's visits. As soon as the cottage was empty, we scampered under the table and collected the scraps. Kay was especially messy. We typically found bread crumbs and – on a really good day – crumbled pieces of goat's milk cheese. Pure heaven.

"Pull your chair up to the table," Merlin scolded Kay. Arthur already had his seat in place. Kay rolled his eyes, but did as he was told. "Now put your napkins in your laps. That will catch any food you drop." I shook my head in disbelief. "You must also take small bites and chew with your mouths closed." This was unbearable. I might never eat again.

Once the torture ended, Merlin told them, "Now for penmanship." The boys crossed the room and each pulled a practice writing book from Merlin's shelf. With the boys' legs out of the way, there was clearly nothing beneath the table but the dirt floor. There wasn't a morsel of food to be seen. Tragic, simply tragic.

I was quickly distracted, though, by Merlin's next lesson. "We shall practice the letter 'O'. Can you boys think of things that start with 'O'?"

"Owl," Arthur said.

"Opossum," said Kay.

"Otter," said Arthur.

My ears perked up. "Otter"? So, my name starts with an 'O', does it? This was important stuff. I didn't know any mice who could read or write. Maybe I would be the first!

"Excellent," said Merlin. He held up a small slate tablet and drew on it with a piece of chalk. "This is an 'O'," he said. "Now each of you make an 'O' in your books."

I used my paw to scratch out a circle in the dirt. I stepped back and inspected my work. An 'O'! A wonderful 'O' for 'Otter'! This was the best day of my life.

The excitement had just begun. After the boys practiced 'O's for awhile – and mine were

pretty good, if I do say so myself – Merlin told them to put their books away. “Now,” Merlin said, “let’s go outside.”

Behind the cottage was a small stable where Merlin kept his horse, Nennius. When Arthur and Kay came for tutoring, their horses were kept there as well. My parents had strict rules about steering clear of the stable. “Horses lead to no good,” they said. “Uncle Vincent was nearly trampled to death!”

I heeded my parents’ advice and stayed a good distance from the horses. However, I had to get close enough to see. As the boys led their horses to the nearby clearing, Merlin announced, “Today we begin jousting lessons.” I didn’t know what jousting was, but the boys got excited so I was curious.

“We will start by learning to ride with lances,” said Merlin. He walked over to two long poles leaning against a tree. I assumed these were lances. Merlin grabbed one in each hand as the boys mounted their horses. Then he handed a lance to each boy. He showed each of them how to curl his arm around the pole and hold it in the right spot to balance it correctly. Ar-

thur got it immediately, but Merlin had to show Kay a couple of times. Once they had it, the boys raced their horses up and down the field, getting used to the weight of the lances.

After some practice runs, Merlin announced, "At the end of the field are two rings dangling from the tree branches. You shall each charge toward your ring and try to spear your lance through it."

Kay huffed, "Those rings? Down there? I can hardly see them!"

"Ah, Kay." Merlin shook his head. "If you believe you cannot do it, you will likely prove yourself right. The key is..."

Arthur had already taken off down the field, charging at full gallop. He effortlessly speared his lance through the ring.

Merlin was very good at hiding emotions. However, even he could not withhold his amazement. A slight "Oh!" escaped from his lips as his eyebrows rose.

Kay scowled. Determined not to be outdone, he yelled, "Giddy up!" to his horse and focused hard on the ring. However, when he got to the end of the field, his lance completely missed. "The horse moved!" he complained.

Kay and Arthur tried a dozen more times each. Arthur's lance went straight through the ring over and over while Kay missed repeatedly – and had a new excuse each time. "Arthur got lucky! He has a better horse! My ring is smaller! The sun was in my eyes!"

After Ector returned for the boys and took them home, I was eager to try my hand at jousting. I rummaged through the twigs on the forest floor until I found a sturdy, straight stick that was just the right length and felt good in my paw. I carefully twisted some vines into a round shape and hung it off the leaf of a plant. Now I needed a horse, but the absence of mouse-sized horses posed a problem.

I jumped when I heard a voice behind me. "What do you think you are doing?"

It was Squiggles, a squirrel who lived in a nearby tree. "Oh," I said, surprised. "I didn't know anyone else was here."

Squiggles wrinkled his nose and stared at me. "Like I said, what are you doing? That doesn't look like something a mouse would do."

"I watched Merlin teach Arthur and Kay to joust."

"You shouldn't pay attention to that crazy old wizard. Once I was minding my own business and Merlin cast a spell which yanked me out of the tree. I was hovering in mid-air! He finally put me back, but I thought he would drop me for sure."

"Wow! That sounds awesome!" Squiggles scrunched up his face in disgust. I corrected myself. "Not the falling part, but the hovering part. I'd love to fly!" Then reality hit and I sighed. "Of course, Mama and Pop would never approve. They say mice are supposed to stay out of sight from humans. It's best if they don't know we're even around."

"Your parents are right," sniffed Squiggles.
"Best to avoid humans altogether. Especially
ones that lift you out of trees."

I didn't respond at first. I was deep in thought.
Then I said, "Hey, maybe you could help me?"

"Whadaya mean? I'm not going near that wizard
and those kids, if that's what you want."

"No, nothing like that. You can help me joust!"

"Joust? Why would a squirrel do a silly human
thing like that?"

I considered what would convince Squiggles. I
glanced around at the leaves, weeds, grass,
twigs, acorns... that's it! Acorns!

I beamed. "How about you let me ride on your
back like a horse if I collect a pile of nuts for
you?"

Squiggles pondered this. "How many nuts are
we talking about?"

"How about one ride for every nut I collect?"

“What? Giving a mouse a ride is much harder work than picking up one nut! How about five?”

“All right,” I agreed reluctantly. “Five it is.” I set to work collecting while Squiggles relaxed against a tree, watching me work. When I was exhausted I did a quick count and announced, “There’s fifty nuts. That’s ten rides.”

Squiggles carefully inspected the pile. He set a few aside. “These have worms. You can’t count them.”

“Fine,” I said in frustration and I hustled off for replacements. This time he approved.

I had to ride bareback on Squiggles, which was tougher than I expected. I grabbed a scruff of fur on the back of his neck and held on tight. I had to do a few practice rides to get used to it. Then, with lance in hand, I made my first run at my makeshift ring at the end of the field.

The first effort was way off. The next time I nicked the ring and by the third time I got the lance through the ring. A couple runs later, Squiggles announced, “Okay, that’s ten rides.”

"What?" I protested. "I had to do some practice runs first!"

"The deal was ten rides and I gave you ten rides."

"Okay, you're right. I'll go collect more nuts."

"No. That's all for me today," Squiggles said, throwing up his paws. "I'm worn out."

"Okay," I agreed. It probably was hard work for Squiggles. After all, a squirrel isn't much bigger than a mouse, so I was heavier to him than a boy was to a horse. "Tomorrow, then. I'll be ready for more jousting!"

I learned an important lesson – acorns are essential to jousting. Squirrels will do almost anything if you collect a pile of nuts for them.

Chapter 2:

The Adventures of Unka Vin

I burst into the mouse hole, yelling and waving my arms. "Mama! Pop! You'll never guess what I did!"

"Shhhhh!" my mother replied. "Merlin will hear you!"

"But I can't help it! I jousted!"

"What on earth is that?" Pop said.

"You charge at a ring while riding on a horse with a big stick."

Mama's eyes grew as big as holes in Swiss cheese. "Why would anyone want to do such a thing?"

"It's fun!" I pretended to spear a lance into the wall as I let out a triumphant "Yaaaaa!"

Mama glared at me while putting a finger to her lips to remind me again to keep my voice down. My father looked concerned. "This is

some foolishness you learned watching those boys and that wizard, isn't it?"

I realized this wasn't a good thing to share. My enthusiasm quickly drained. I would get a lecture now.

"Yes, Pop. It is."

"Son, we don't know what happened to Uncle Vincent – maybe he was stepped on by a horse; maybe a cat gobbled him up. For all we know, he was speared by one of those jousting things." The list of Unka Vin's possible fates changed slightly depending on the particular evil from which my parents were trying to shelter me.

They might not reference Unka Vin so often if they knew it had the opposite effect. Every time they mentioned Mama's brother, I day-dreamed about being just like him.

I slinked to my room after the lecture. I wanted to be alone, but our small mouse hole didn't offer much privacy. I was attacked by little voices as soon as I entered the room all the kids shared. "What happened? What did you

do? Did you get in trouble? Are you grounded?"

I was initially annoyed, but my enthusiasm crept back as I told my young relatives about jousting. However, the escalating noise level from my excited mouse relatives earned a scolding from Pop. "Quiet down in there!"

My cousin Nicholas nestled up beside me. "You're gonna be an adventurer like Unka Vin, aren't you? Tell us a story about him!" he begged. A murmur went up amongst the mice.

"Okay, okay. But keep it down."

* * *

Unka Vin was the bravest and strongest mouse who ever lived. He tamed a falcon named Fortin even though they are one of our mortal enemies.

Fortin gave Unka Vin rides. Once they flew over Camelot just as it was under attack. Enemy knights were smashing down the heavy front door with a battering ram. The knights inside the castle were barricading the door and

pouring hot lead over the wall. Sentries shot arrows at the invading army.

Unka Vin steered Fortin in for a closer look. Suddenly the falcon winced in pain and cried out, "I've been hit!"

Fortin's wing had been nicked by an arrow. He bounced and bobbed around in the air awkwardly as if he were being battered about in a wind storm.

"We're not going to survive this if I can't find a safe place to land," Fortin called out.

Unka Vin scanned the ground desperately. "Look!" he shouted, pointing to the courtyard inside the castle. "There's a wagon of hay! Can you aim for that?"

"I think I can make it," Fortin replied. "Hang on tight!"

They crashed hard in the hay but survived the landing. Meanwhile, the enemy had broken through the door and the knights who were seconds away from clashing in battle stopped

in their tracks. They were startled to see a falcon plummet from the sky.

The knight nearest to the wagon cautiously moved closer. He lifted the visor of his helmet and peered into the wagon. Fortin was squirming uncomfortably, wishing he could fly away from the attention. The knight stepped back, fearful that the falcon might lurch at him. He turned to his fellow knights and announced loudly, "He's alive!"

A cheer went up amongst the knights, who comically had forgotten they were there to fight each other. Enemies now slapped each other on the back as if they had personally guided the falcon to safety.

While the knights congratulated each other, Unka Vin wriggled out from underneath Fortin. The falcon murmured, "You might want to stay out of sight."

Rather than heed the advice, Unka Vin popped his head up and inquired, "Why?"

Fortin groaned, but said nothing. He pointed his good wing toward the black cat creeping

toward them. The cat's unblinking eyes locked on his prey.

There was no place for Unka Vin to go. He realized his best chance at survival was to create commotion and hopefully lose the cat in the process. He leapt from the wagon to the wheel and then the ground below. He darted straight through the feet of the closest knight. Just as he hoped, the cat followed.

A mouse can easily run between human legs. A cat cannot. When the cat pursued, he knocked the knight off his feet. Unka Vin dashed in and out of knights' legs with the cat following behind and bowling people over left and right.

Knights intent on bashing each other with swords moments ago were now focused on a new common enemy – an annoying pet who was making them look foolish. A mass of armored men stormed after him, stumbling and crashing into each other.

Unka Vin could have outrun a horse at full gallop. He dashed in and out of rooms all over the castle trying to escape. However, the cat

and throng of knights followed close behind, knocking over anything and everyone in their way. Jesters, jugglers, troubadours, and minstrels were nearly trampled by the crowd.

Unka Vin darted up the stairs and into the royal chambers. The enemy had stormed the castle so quickly that no one had roused the king and queen from their afternoon nap. They sat up in bed shocked as a horde of knights trampled through their room.

“What is going on?” the king bellowed.

The lead knight stopped to explain. “It’s the princess’s cat, sire. He...he...,” the knight huffed and puffed, trying to catch his breath. “He knocked us over.”

The king threw the covers aside and leapt up to stare down the knight face to face. “You’re running around like mad because of a cat?”

As the king scolded the knight, Unka Vin ran between their legs, under the bed, and toward a hole he’d spotted in the far wall. Before the cat could follow, the queen scooped him up.

“It’s a mouse, sire,” the knight explained. “He was chasing a mouse.”

The queen screeched when she spotted Unka Vin. Determined to save his queen, the knight nearest to Her Majesty swung a battle axe down, slamming the blade into the floor in an attempt to put an end to Unka Vin. Instead the axe just nipped off the end of Unka Vin’s tail as he ducked into the hole.

A knight yelled, “Get that axe out of the way! We gotta get in that hole!”

It didn’t go deep into the walls like Unka Vin had hoped. As soon as the axe was pried loose, a knight jabbed a spear into the hole. *Drat!* thought Unka Vin. *A sword would have been too broad, but the spear is narrow enough to fit.*

Unka Vin danced and darted wildly to avoid being skewered, but the knight was persistent. Then Unka Vin devised a plan. It was risky, absurd, and seemingly impossible, but it was his only chance.

The next time the knight poked the spear in the hole, Unka Vin grabbed the pole just below

the blade. Feeling the extra weight, the knight announced, "I got him!" A chorus of "Hoorays!" and "Huzzahs!" went up behind him.

The knight eased the spear out of the hole. Everyone huddled behind him in anticipation. The group shifted to puzzled looks when the mouse emerged. The knight hadn't impaled the mouse. It was holding on to the spear!

The knight laughed. "What a stupid mouse!" The group guffawed and slapped each other on the backs. Some had tears coming out of their eyes from laughing so hard.

That's when Unka Vin surged with adrenaline like never before. He did something no mouse in the history of mousekind had ever done. He whipped the spear around, dragging the surprised knight to the ground. However, Unka Vin didn't just pull him down; he spun the knight madly around in a circle. The knight, now whirling around like a top, bowled over the king, the queen, and the rest of the knights as they surged forth to try to stop the chaos.

Soon everyone was sprawled across the floor, tangled together like a ball of yarn might look

after the cat had finished playing with it. While the mass of people tried to unwind, Unka Vin zipped through the mess and out the chamber doors to freedom!

* * *

My young relatives' eyes were probably as big as the eyes of Unka Vin's victims. I was peppered with questions. "Did he get the rest of his tail back? What happened to the falcon?"

Some of the more sensible mice asked questions about how the story was even possible. "Wouldn't Fortin have eaten Unka Vin? Why wouldn't Unka Vin have immediately run out of the castle when the cat started chasing him? How can a mouse swing a knight around? Is this story just made up?"

I was starting to address their questions when Pop came in the room, arms folded. "I told you to keep the noise down!" Story time was over.

Chapter 3: Arthur Meets Otter

I was grounded and couldn't leave the mouse hole the next day so I didn't see Merlin and Arthur and Kay, but I heard them in the cottage. Merlin started the lesson with more table manners so I didn't miss anything there. For penmanship, they practiced the letter "P" and I was pretty sure that wasn't in "Otter" so I could miss it for now.

Then they went outside. I imagined them jousting again. I was miserable. I couldn't even practice with Squiggles today.

That night I was allowed to leave the mouse hole. Merlin was out so I rummaged around the cottage. I assumed it wasn't even worth checking under the table for food, but looked anyway. To my surprise, there were ample crumbs – specifically around Arthur's seat. I wondered if he'd switched chairs with Kay, but even before they started table manner practice, Kay was never this messy.

I decided not to question it. I feasted on cheese and bread and grapes until I was stuffed. It was delightful.

The next day Arthur and Kay were back and I was free to leave the mouse hole again. I took up my spot behind the rock propping open the door. Once again, they started with table manner lessons. Ugh.

However, when Merlin and Kay weren't looking, Arthur purposefully dropped food on the floor. This meant he knew about me!

Mama and Pop would be upset that I had been discovered. I could only imagine the possibilities of befriending a human.

"Okay, boys," Merlin announced. "Time to head outside."

I scampered behind as close as I dared. I noticed Arthur glancing back often. I was pretty sure he was looking for me. Merlin didn't lead the boys to the stables today. Instead they went straight to the clearing. The lances weren't out, either.

"Aren't we jousting today?" Arthur inquired.

"No," Merlin replied. "Kay needs a break." I'm not sure if Arthur or I was more disappointed. Kay looked relieved that his little brother couldn't show him up again – at least in jousting.

"Today," Merlin said, "we begin falconry." My heart raced. *Did he say "falcons"?* Unka Vin may have tamed one – if that story was even real – but I knew any falcon I met would only see me as lunch.

Merlin continued. "Falcons are used for hunting. We will start today by..."

Arthur interrupted. "Hunting? Hunting what?" He looked worried.

Merlin approached a falcon sitting on a perch in the center of the field. I had broken a fundamental mouse rule. Never dash head long into an open area. Always survey it first for predators.

Merlin loosened the leather strips which kept the falcon's claws tethered to the perch. The falcon flapped wildly. "Settle down, Ferdinand. Eager to get going, eh?"

I glanced around frantically for cover. The falcon was nearly free.

“So what was I saying before? Oh, falcons. They hunt many things. Rabbits, squirrels, mice...”

“Mice?!” Arthur exclaimed. “Do we have to hunt mice?”

Before Merlin could answer, Ferdinand launched into the air. He rocketed toward me as I turned tail and worked my legs as fast as I could make them go.

“Ferdinand!” Merlin yelled. “Back to your perch! We aren’t ready yet!”

I didn’t dare turn around for fear of losing speed, but I knew the falcon was closing in fast. Then a claw wrapped around me. I thought of my parents’ speculations of Unka Vin’s demise. Was he trampled by a horse? Chomped by a cat? “Jousted” like Pop suggested? Maybe Unka Vin hadn’t trained falcons at all but was gobbled up by one of them.

As quickly as these thoughts entered my head, the falcon released me. Why would he let me go? Was he toying with me? I gathered my wits and had just set my feet in motion again when I was scooped up a second time. This time it wasn't a claw, though. It was a hand.

"You're okay now, little mouse." I was cradled in Arthur's hands. A few feet away, the falcon lay on the ground. One wing lay limp while Ferdinand desperately flapped the other one, trying to take flight. A rock lay nearby.

"Arthur! What have you done?" Merlin yelled as he and Kay ran up.

"Ferdinand was going to kill that mouse," Arthur replied. "I had to stop him."

Merlin picked up the rock, staring in disbelief. "You hit a falcon in flight? I've never heard of such a thing." Then Merlin's amazement turned to frustration. "Your desire to protect the mouse is admirable, but Ferdinand just did what falcons are supposed to do."

"Well, I think it's terrible," said Arthur. "Why would any living thing want to kill another living thing?"

Kay rolled his eyes. "You would never make it as a knight."

"If it means killing for no reason," Arthur sputtered, "then I don't want to be a knight. I'll be in charge of the knights. I'll tell them to fight only when they have to."

"In charge?" laughed Kay. "You? The only way you'd ever be in charge is if you were king!"

"Well, then I'll be king!"

"You can't be king!" Kay roared. "You have to be of noble birth. Your dad has to be a king or knight or something."

"Well," Arthur shot back, "Ector's a knight."

"He's not your *real* dad. Your real parents were peasants who were too poor to take care of you. My dad felt sorry for you and adopted you. He shouldn't even let you have tutoring."

The best you can ever hope to be is a squire." I didn't understand their discussion, but anyone who rescued me was a king in my eyes.

"Kay," Merlin said sternly, "your anger toward your brother saddens me. It is true only those of noble birth can be kings or knights. However, times may change. Perhaps some day our leaders will be decided not by bloodlines but by who best serves the people."

Kay shrugged. "Begging your pardon, sir, but this is the way it has always been."

Merlin held up his hands. "A debate for another day. Right now let's get this falcon – and this mouse – back to the cottage and make sure they're okay."

"Merlin," said Arthur. "I think I'd better stay out here with the mouse. I don't think it would be a good idea to bring him in the cottage at the same time as the falcon." *Excellent idea*, I thought.

"Good thinking, my boy. Kay, come with me. You are on falcon repair duty."

After Merlin and Kay were out of sight, Arthur gently set me in the grass and lay down beside me. "So, little fellow, you're the one who's been watching while Merlin tutors us?"

Arthur paused, as if waiting for a reply. For such a smart kid, he didn't get how the animal-people thing worked. Animals understand each other and people, but people don't understand animals.

"I wish you could talk," said Arthur. *Well, maybe he's okay when it comes to brains after all.* "I should at least give you a name," Arthur said.

That gave me an idea. I made a bold move – perhaps the boldest in the history of mouse-kind. I decided to cross the barrier between man and mouse. I would communicate with this boy.

"What are you doing?" Arthur asked as I started scratching out my best "O" on the ground. His eyes got big. "Are you *writing*?" he exclaimed. I nodded and pointed to myself and then back to the "O".

"You are!" Arthur exclaimed. "You're writing!
Are you telling me that circle is you?"

I nodded again, pointing to myself and the
"O" once more.

"That's not a circle!" said Arthur. "That's an
'O'! So you're 'O'?"

Close enough for now.

Chapter 4: Otter Learns Magic

The next morning I emerged from the mouse hole hoping for another opportunity to “talk” to Arthur. Merlin was there, though, so I’d have to wait until later.

“Merlin,” Arthur said, as he pored over the books on the shelf. “Kay said Ferdinand was going to die, but you used magic to save him. You even talked to him! Why haven’t I ever seen you use magic?”

Merlin peered up from his chair. “I do have a gift for communicating with animals. I also know magic. Keep in mind, though, that Ferdinand has not been magically cured. I saved him from death, but he most likely will never fly again. Magic is not to be taken lightly. Like any power, it backfires if misused.”

“How is it misusing your power to save a dying animal?”

Merlin rose to join Arthur at the book shelf. “I cannot use magic to change the future. What is meant to be is meant to be.”

"Then why didn't you let the falcon die?"

"The mouse was supposed to die, not Ferdinand. You disrupted that. I simply restored things to their rightful state."

"Does that mean the mouse is going to die?" Arthur asked, worried. *Now that, I thought, is an excellent question!*

"It was not my hand that saved the mouse. It is not my place to decide its fate."

"I don't understand."

"There is much that is beyond understanding."

"Merlin, are you going to teach me magic?"

Merlin smiled. "The world has other plans for you."

"Why do you live alone in the woods?"

"You are full of questions this morning, aren't you?" Merlin hesitated. He was keeping something from Arthur. "My boy, this is talk for an-

other day. Let's check on how Kay is doing with that firewood."

"Okay," Arthur said. "I'll be right there, Merlin."

I scurried out from behind the rock. Arthur bent down on his knees. "Well, little guy, it looks like you got pretty lucky! So what do you think, O? What does the world have in store for us?"

An excellent question. Even if Arthur and I had reached that level of communication, though, I had no answer for him. Only time would tell.

* * *

When Merlin and Kay weren't around, Arthur and I did our best to communicate. Arthur wrote down words or pointed them out in books.

Merlin was tutoring Arthur and Kay in jousting again. I practiced regularly with Squiggles, Nicholas, and some other young mouse relatives. We kept it a secret from our parents.

Ferdinand was slowly mending, but couldn't fly yet. Even so, Merlin kept the falcon tethered to his perch so he wouldn't try to jump to the ground and escape. In light of this, I summoned the courage to approach him, although cautiously.

"So how's that wing coming?" I said.

Ferdinand glared at me. "Why do you care? If I could fly right now, I'd gobble you up faster than you could say 'dinner time'."

"I thought we could help each other."

The falcon chuckled. "What can a stupid mouse do for me?"

"I'm going to help you fly again."

Ferdinand laughed so hard he toppled off his perch. The leather strips yanked hard on his legs and he awkwardly hoisted his body back up. I fought back a snicker.

Ferdinand was rattled, but tried to maintain his composure. "How can you help me fly?" he huffed once he had righted himself.

"Merlin has a shelf full of magic books. I bet there's a potion in there that will fix your wing."

Ferdinand paused. "Even if that's true, how are you going to get Merlin to fix me? He's very picky about what magic he'll do."

"Merlin's not going to fix you. I am."

Ferdinand started to laugh again, but stopped abruptly, obviously remembering what had happened before.

"Arthur's teaching me to read. I can look at Merlin's books and find a way to fix you."

A glimmer of hope appeared in Ferdinand's eyes. "Why would you do this?"

I didn't hesitate to tell him. "I want to fly."

* * *

My reading was progressing. I could communicate with Arthur pretty well now. I snuck peaks at Merlin's books whenever possible.

Learning to use a book was harder than the actual reading. I had to climb up the shelf and put all my might into pushing a book off the shelf. To turn pages, I had to grasp the corner of a page in my teeth, walk across the book, and then come back for the next page. It was slow going.

I lacked the strength to return the books to the shelf when I was done so I just left them on the floor. I'm sure Merlin wondered how books kept falling off his shelf.

I heard Merlin report to Arthur on Ferdinand's progress. "His strength is returning, but the wing is crooked. The falcon may never fly again."

I didn't give up hope, though. Ferdinand was discouraged, but I continued to look through Merlin's books to find a healing potion. Ferdinand and I were building trust and even becoming friends. Maybe Unka Vin's story about

flying on the backs of falcons wasn't so far-fetched after all.

Finally the day came. I found a healing potion. I excitedly gathered the different plants, tree roots, and other ingredients. I mixed them carefully according to the directions and raced to Ferdinand.

"I did it!" I shouted. "I found a potion!"

Ferdinand was visibly excited, but spoke cautiously. "Well, let's just see about that."

I dipped a leaf in the potion and climbed up the perch. This was a definite test of our friendship. I had never been this close to him. Despite our friendship, I realized he could gobble me up whenever he wanted.

"I know," Ferdinand said.

"What? What do you know?" I said.

"You're nervous."

"Well..."

"It's okay. I understand." He looked at me very seriously. "You've done more for me than any animal I've ever known. You can trust me. The only meat I will eat from here on out is the raw stuff Merlin gives me."

I smiled. "Thanks, Ferdinand. Now, let's get that wing fixed." I rubbed the leaf over his broken wing. "We're supposed to do this every day for a week," I told him. "Let's hope it works."

"Otter," Ferdinand said with tears welling in his eyes, "Thank you."

* * *

Each day I rubbed the potion on Ferdinand's wing and he flapped it to test it. At the end of the week, we looked at each other and smiled. The moment had arrived. I crawled down to where Ferdinand's claws were tethered to the perch. I chewed on the leather strips until they broke.

I darted down to the ground and lifted my paws dramatically in the air. I yelled, "You're free! Fly, Ferdinand, fly!"

Ferdinand took a deep breath and tested each wing. Then, in a jerky motion, he lifted into the air. He was rusty, but he soon soared above the trees squawking in excitement.

The noise drew the attention of Merlin, Arthur, and Kay. They ran out of the cottage and I scampered for cover. "Look!" Kay shouted, pointing into the air. "It's Ferdinand! He's flying!"

As Arthur and Kay watched in amazement, Merlin examined the perch. He picked up the pieces of leather which I had gnawed through. He rubbed the rough edges in his fingers. Then he picked up the leaf which I had used to rub the potion on Ferdinand's wing. He held it to his nose and sniffed. Then his eyes explored the ground around the perch. I knew what he was doing – he was looking for me.

Chapter 5: Otter Takes Flight

I grinned with pride and excitement as I watched Ferdinand. Soon enough I would be soaring through the air as well.

“What is wrong with you?” said a voice from behind me.

“Squiggles!” I turned around, startled. “Did you see what just happened?”

“I did.” He shook his head in disgust. “And you’re crazy. Why would a mouse help an arch enemy? You can’t trust a falcon!”

“He’s my friend. I helped him and he’s going to let me fly on his back!”

“Fly? Joust? What is it with you? Why can’t you just be a regular mouse?”

“I’m special,” I announced proudly.

“Special?” Squiggles contorted his face, clearly annoyed.

"It isn't just flying and jousting. I'm learning to read and write. I'm learning magic. I'm doing things no mouse has ever done!"

"What's wrong with just being what you're supposed to be?"

"This *is* what I'm supposed to be."

* * *

"Boys, let us return to our studies indoors," said Merlin.

"But what about Ferdinand?" said Kay.

"We'll let him fly as long as he likes. He deserves it."

"But if he comes back, we have to tether him to his perch, don't we?" Kay asked.

Merlin gazed up in the sky at Ferdinand. "He no longer needs his perch. We aren't the only ones looking out for him anymore. Nature is taking care of him as well."

I guess “nature” was Merlin’s way of referring to me. I wasn’t sure what to think about Merlin. It was one thing for Arthur to know about me. I didn’t know if Merlin would accept that Arthur was teaching me to read. And how would Merlin feel about a mouse learning magic?

I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind. There was a much bigger matter at hand – I was going to fly!

I ran to Ferdinand when he landed. “Otter!” he gushed, “that was wonderful! It had been so long since I’d flown, but it came back quickly. It just felt right!”

I smiled. It felt good to help Ferdinand.

“So,” the falcon said. “I believe I owe you a ride.”

A mix of excitement and nervousness filled me. I had dreamed of this day since the first time Unka Vin told one of his stories about flying on the back of a falcon, but I was never sure how much to believe. Did he really do it?

Could I really do it? How would I keep from falling off?

“Uh, Ferdinand,” I said, “I’m going to need a way to hold on.”

“Hmm. Good point.” Ferdinand looked around the field. “What about those leather strips?”

“That would work! If I wrap one around your neck I can grab it like a knight holding the reins of his horse!” I dashed to the perch. Merlin had left the strips on the ground after inspecting them. I picked up one and climbed on Ferdinand’s back. The strip was just long enough.

Ferdinand turned his head. “Well, Otter? Are you ready?”

I took a deep breath. “Ready.”

Ferdinand lifted off the ground effortlessly. The sensation was exhilarating. I held tight, but felt like raising my paws triumphantly. I opted for a loud “Woo hoo!” instead.

We continued upward until we were above the tree tops. We zipped past a flock of geese heading the other direction. Their necks craned back in shock as we passed. I laughed out loud, knowing these geese were now muttering amongst each other, "Was that a mouse on that falcon's back?"

I was soon farther away from home than I'd ever been. Heck, I'd barely been past the other side of the clearing. There were trees as far as I could see. I realized just how far away Merlin was from any other people.

"Ferdinand!" I yelled to be heard above the wind. "Does anyone else live around here? I don't see any houses or cottages or anything!"

He yelled back, "We're pretty far out, but if you're up for it, I can show you the village and the castle..."

"Yes! Yes!" I said.

"Hang on!" said Ferdinand.

* * *

We came upon the village first. It was fascinating. There were more buildings than I'd ever seen. People were bustling everywhere. I imagined visiting the village some day. However, I was also a little sad. This was, after all, where Unka Vin had disappeared.

Our destination wasn't the village, though. We were headed to Camelot. I could see the majestic castle in the distance. It sat atop the hill overlooking Dragon's Head, like a shepherd watching over its sheep. It was the largest building I'd ever seen. It reached into the clouds. I couldn't believe it was someone's home. Imagine what it would be like for a mouse to live in such a place!

"How close do you want to get?" Ferdinand yelled.

I thought about Unka Vin's falcon getting shot with an arrow. "Let's just fly over!" I whooped again as Ferdinand tilted slightly to catch a gust of wind pointing us toward the castle.

The castle was even more magnificent up close. It was built with huge stones and surrounded by water. A large wooden door

opened over the moat to let people come and go.

We soared over the castle walls. Knights in shining armor stood guard in the towers. I saw archers and a catapult. People were milling about in the courtyard below.

As amazing as the castle was, I was also a little unsettled. It so perfectly matched Unka Vin's description that I felt like I had been here before.

Ferdinand interrupted my thoughts. "We ought to head back before your family starts worrying. What are they going to think when you tell them a falcon flew over the castle?"

Ooooh. I hadn't thought about that. All the way home I considered how I would tell my parents. They wouldn't like it, but I had to tell them. It wasn't just because I needed to be honest – this was just too exciting to keep in! Maybe they'd understand how important adventure was to me.

They didn't. "Oh, my boy, my boy," Mama kept sobbing once we were home and I detailed my adventures. "You'll get gobbled up. Or dropped from the sky. Or lost at the castle never to be seen again."

Pop shook his head in disgust. "It is bad enough that you're getting crazy ideas from that wizard and his pupils. Now you're hanging out with falcons? What is going on in your head, son?"

"I can take care of myself. I've learned so much from Arthur and Merlin and Ferdinand..."

Mama threw her hands up. "He calls them by name now. Where have we gone wrong?"

"You haven't done anything wrong! Why is it wrong for me to want to explore, to want adventure?"

"Because your uncle..."

"Mama! You don't know that I'm going to end up like Unka Vin! Even if I do, I'd rather die doing what I love than being unhappy never going out and experiencing life!"

Pop sighed. "We don't want to see you get hurt. Or worse."

"I know you care, Pop. If you love me, you'll accept that I have to do these things. It's who I am!"

They weren't in an open-minded kind of mood. They sent me to my room. I heard them discussing it late into the night.

In the morning, Pop woke me before any of the other mice. "Son, I want to show you something."

I followed him into the main living area of our mouse hole. Pop motioned to something leaning against the wall. "Your mother and I want you to have this." Mama sat wordlessly at the kitchen table.

"What is it?" I said as I approached the long object wrapped in a piece of cloth.

“It belonged to her brother.”

I looked at my mom in surprise. “This was Unka Vin’s?”

She nodded silently and then Pop spoke. “Before he disappeared, he told us he wanted you to have this. ‘That boy of yours,’ he said, ‘he’s got it. He’s got the bug.’ You were just a toddler, but you were always getting into things. You were always exploring. Uncle Vincent knew you were an adventurer even then. ‘You can’t hold ‘im back,’ he said. ‘You gotta let ‘im be who he’s meant to be!’”

I unwrapped the cloth from the object. It was long and shiny – and sharp. I had seen something like it when Sir Ector brought Arthur and Kay for tutoring. He wore it on his belt, hanging down.

“It’s a sword!” I blurted out, gazing at this beautiful thing.

Pop nodded. “Vincent told us we would realize one day we couldn’t hold you back. ‘He’ll need this,’ your uncle said, ‘to keep him safe.

You give him this and he'll be ready for whatever trouble comes his way.'"

"I don't know what to say," I said haltingly as I tried to contain my emotion. "Thank you. I..."

"Otter, just stay safe. Please? Don't go looking for trouble. Just... just stay safe."

My dad turned away and I was pretty sure he was trying to keep from crying. Mama stood to wrap her arms around him and I definitely saw tears coming from her eyes. I ran to them and hugged them both. "I love you, Pop. I love you, Mama."

Chapter 6: Otter Goes to the Village

I heard Arthur and Kay arrive the next morning. "I'll be right back," I heard Arthur say. He rushed into the cottage while everyone else was still outside.

He leaned down to the mouse hole and I came out to greet him. I was eager to show off my new sword, but Arthur had to get back outside to say goodbye to Ector. "I just made an excuse to come in here for a minute," Arthur said. "Merlin says we'll be gone for the day so I wanted to make sure I saw you first."

I showed him the sword and he was properly impressed, proclaiming, "That's a great sword!" There wasn't much else he could say, though, since he couldn't really ask me any questions. He gestured to his shirt pocket to see if I wanted to come along. I nodded. Arthur tucked me into his pocket and hurried back outside.

"So where are we going?" Arthur asked quickly, before anyone questioned him on why he'd gone inside.

"I'm heading out," said Ector. "Merlin will give you the details. Have a good day, boys." He started to ride off, but turned to shout back, "Merlin, thank you. I appreciate this."

Merlin waved to Ector and then replied to Arthur's question. "Your father and I have agreed that it is time for a special treat today."

The boys could barely contain their excitement. They shouted in unison, "What is it? What is it?"

"Patience. You will see. First, we must pack the horses. We are headed to Dragon's Head and will be gone most of the day. Kay, go inside the cottage and look in my trunk. There should be several tapestries. We need those for trading."

"Yes, sir." Kay bounded off, full of enthusiasm and curiosity.

"So, Arthur," Merlin said once Kay was out of earshot. "Where's the mouse?"

I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. Did he just ask Arthur about me?

"Sir?" Arthur responded weakly.

"The mouse. He's going with us, right?"

"Uh..."

"Arthur, I've known about the mouse for some time. He's quite important to your future."

Was I hearing this right? Why had Merlin not let on that he knew about me? What did I have to do with Arthur's future?

Arthur reluctantly reached into his shirt pocket. He pulled me out and I stared down at his hand, not sure what Merlin was going to do.

"Well, look at that!" Merlin said, clapping his hands in delight. "He's even got his own sword! This little guy's ready to save us all!" I didn't appreciate being mocked. "What's his name?"

"Otter."

"Otter, eh? Kind of a funny name for a mouse, isn't it?" Then Merlin got serious. "Kay will be

back in a minute so I can't fully explain why I'm doing this, but I need to cast a spell on your mouse, er, Otter."

"What?" Arthur asked, with concern in his voice. "What are you going to do to him?"
Yeah, I thought. What are you going to do to me?

"Oh no," Merlin assured us, realizing he'd alarmed both of us. "Nothing bad. I'm giving him the power of speech."

Merlin wrapped both hands gently around me and muttered in an almost trance-like state:

*Let mouse and boy both understand
The words the other speaks
For in each other they must rely
To travel the journey each of them seeks*

I felt a tingling feeling throughout my body. My tongue felt different in my mouth. I smacked my lips a couple of times.

Merlin pulled his hands away and Arthur stared at me in anticipation. "Well?" he said.

"Well what?" I shot back, startled at hearing my voice. It was still me talking, but it felt different somehow.

Arthur let out a cheer. "You can speak, Otter, you can speak!"

We were interrupted by Kay's return. "Merlin, is it just these three tapestries?" Merlin looked at Arthur and me and held a finger to his lips. We understood. It was best to keep this quiet from Kay.

"We'll talk later," Arthur whispered as he tucked me back in his pocket. I wasn't happy with Kay. *Couldn't he have taken longer? I thought. I finally can speak to Arthur and we only got a few seconds!*

"Yes, Kay," said Merlin. "Pack those on my horse." Moments later, they were saddled up and were heading out. I was excited! I was going to the village!

Arthur and I let Merlin and Kay get far enough ahead so they wouldn't hear us talking. I told Arthur I was concerned my parents

would worry about me. "I'm not sure I can turn back," he said.

At that moment, Squiggles scampered by. I yelled out to him. It took him a minute to figure out where I was. He shook his head when he saw me in Arthur's pocket. "Tell my parents I went to the village with Arthur!" Squiggles nodded reluctantly, making it clear he disapproved but would deliver the message.

Arthur and I stayed back far enough to continue talking. I told him all about healing Ferdinand and flying over the castle.

"Wow," said Arthur. "I hope I get to see the castle someday. I've only seen it up on the hill when I've gone to Dragon's Head." Arthur looked sad. "I wish I could be a knight some day, but Kay says I have to be of noble birth."

"What's 'noble birth'?" I inquired.

"It means your dad has to be a knight or king or somebody else important."

"Oh. So what does a knight do?"

"He fights in battles for the king."

"What does the king do?"

"He tells the knights what battles to fight."

I was puzzled. "Why do kings and knights like to fight so much?"

Arthur paused to consider this. "I guess kings want to be in charge of as many people as possible and they want as much land as possible. When two kings want the same land, they fight over it."

"Isn't there enough land for everybody?"

"I think so."

I scrunched up my face in confusion. "I still don't get it."

"I guess I don't either," said Arthur.

* * *

When we arrived at the village, Merlin, Kay, and Arthur tied up their horses to posts. I asked Arthur to let me out of his pocket.

"But how will you stay safe?" Arthur asked.

"I'll manage," I replied, patting my sword and thrusting out my chest.

"I guess," Arthur reluctantly agreed, "but you have to stay close. I won't be able to see *you*, but you have to be able to see *me* at all times. I don't want to go back without you!"

"Deal," I agreed.

I was mesmerized by the village. I had never seen so many people and so much activity. The food was phenomenal. Shops sold and traded clothing, jewelry, beads, pottery, baskets, tools, and musical instruments. The shops surrounded a town square, which was the local gathering place for important meetings and events.

The town square had a peculiar decoration at its center. On top of a large stone sat an anvil.

A sword had been thrust into the anvil. It seemed an odd centerpiece for the town.

When Arthur and Kay passed a blacksmith shop, they begged Merlin to stop so they could look at the swords and armor. Merlin waved a hand toward the shop to indicate it was okay. I beamed with pride at my own sword.

The blacksmith showed Arthur and Kay how he put the iron in the hot fire and then pounded it into shape by placing the object on an anvil and hitting it with a hammer. He was eager to answer the boys' questions.

After watching the blacksmith a few minutes, Arthur asked, "Did you put that sword in the anvil in the village square?"

"No," replied the blacksmith. "No one knows how it got there. That large stone has been there as long as I can remember. A dozen years ago, that sword and anvil just showed up."

"Why hasn't someone pulled it out?" Arthur asked.

"It's not from lack of trying. I've seen the strongest knights in the kingdom tug on that thing for hours. No one's even got it to budge."

The answer satisfied Arthur and he returned to checking out the swords in the shop. A woman, who I assumed was the blacksmith's wife, approached the boys.

"Be careful with those swords. I don't want any heads lopped off in our shop." Kay and Arthur nodded in agreement.

"You boys planning to be knights some day?" inquired the woman.

"Oh, yes, ma'am," said Kay with excitement.

"Not me," said Arthur in a disappointed voice.

"What's the matter, boy? You don't want to be a knight?"

"No, ma'am. I'd love it, but I'm not of noble birth."

The woman looked at Arthur suspiciously.
“You sure dress like a noble.”

“Oh,” said Arthur, “I was born to peasants but adopted by Sir Ector.”

“Hmmp. If you ask me, it’s the people like us who ought to be deciding if we fight or not. What do the nobles have to lose?” she grunted, jerking a thumb toward Kay. “They already have plenty.”

Kay rolled his eyes, but Arthur nodded in agreement. “I think you’re right,” he said. “Everyone should have a say.”

The woman seemed pleased to have found someone who agreed with her. “I don’t have much use for that king of ours. He just wants to fight. He doesn’t care what it does to us average folk.”

The blacksmith shouted at her from the back of the shop, “Woman, you best hold your tongue! If the king or his people heard you, they’d have your head chopped off!”

The woman shrugged, but didn't voice any more opinions. "So are you boys buying swords or not?"

Before Kay or Arthur could answer, Merlin interrupted. "Which do you like?" Kay pointed immediately to a sword which was intricately jeweled and probably a bit big for him. Arthur carefully considered before gesturing to a much more modest sword with no adornments.

"Are those definitely the ones?" Merlin inquired. The boys looked puzzled. I could tell they were thinking the same thing as me – was Merlin going to buy them swords?

Merlin sensed the same question. "Yes," he said, "this is the surprise."

Arthur and Kay danced in delight and sang, "We're getting swords! We're getting swords!" Merlin haggled with the woman over price, finally agreeing to give her two tapestries and a few gold pieces from the pouch which hung at his side.

"You boys be careful with those swords," said the woman. Then she changed the topic. "You all going to the jousting tournament?"

Arthur and Kay looked at Merlin wide-eyed. Their excitement was nothing compared to mine. They had *tournaments*? Merlin responded, "Why, yes, I suppose we should."

The woman interjected again, "I hear the king and queen will be there today."

Merlin looked worried. I could tell he was second guessing if they should go. I didn't know why. I thought it sounded like even more of a reason to go. We would see jousting *and* the king and queen! How exciting!

We made a quick stop at the leathersmith's for sheaths and belts for the swords. Arthur's excitement dimmed as he looked at his sword and then Merlin.

"Merlin, why did you get these for us? I thought only knights were allowed to have swords."

"You are correct. Kay can begin knight training now. " Merlin paused, patting Arthur on the shoulder. "I am afraid you will not be able to carry your sword in public since you cannot *officially* train to be a knight." Merlin winked and added, "But we can still practice swordsmanship at my cottage."

"Thanks, Merlin," said Arthur.

"Yeah, thanks," Kay sputtered, sounding less grateful than Arthur.

Chapter 7: Arthur and Otter Each Meet Someone Important

Merlin pointed ahead and announced, “We need to be moving on if we want good spots at the jousting tournament.”

Dealing with crowds is hard enough for people, but a mouse faces an entirely different threat – the risk of being stepped on. I had to find a vantage point that let me see the action without getting squished.

Crowds lined the arena on both sides. There was no protection from stomping feet there. However, at the midpoint of the arena there was a raised platform which was obviously a space designed for special guests. With curtains wrapped around its base, it made an excellent observation spot for an adventurous mouse.

I ducked under and waved to Arthur. He smiled. No one was above me, but I had seen several seats on the platform. I wasn’t sure why no one was sitting there. I got my answer soon.

A man with a long horn came out in front of the platform. He blew it and announced, "Hear ye, hear ye, all hail King Uther, Queen Igraine, and Princess Morgan!"

They were dressed in fancy robes and strolled before the cheering crowd toward the platform. Arthur was in awe. The girl looked to be five or six years older than Arthur. She had coal black hair and looked angry. She gave me the shivers.

When they walked by Arthur, Kay, and Merlin, the king did a double-take. He appeared to recognize Merlin. The king briefly glanced at Kay and then looked at Arthur for a long time – the way people look at each other when they recognize someone but can't remember why.

I was sure the king was going to stop and talk to Merlin, but Uther only smiled slightly at him. Merlin nodded in return before the king resumed his pace.

Then the king, queen, and princess went up on the platform and I could no longer see them. However, I heard the king shout in a booming

voice, "Let the tournament begin!" The crowd burst into applause.

A knight emerged on each side of the field. I'd heard Arthur and Kay talk about knights plenty and I knew Sir Ector was a knight. When Ferdinand and I flew over the castle, I saw knights from a distance, but this was the first time I'd seen them up close in full armor.

Both knights were protected from head to toe. Each had a decorated shield and a helmet. Their horses were even decked out, each in special colors – one mostly in blue and the other in red. This would be more than just spear-
ing rings with lances.

Each knight readied his horse and dropped the visor on his helmet. The man who had trumpeted the announcement about the joust dropped a flag and the horses took off, charging down the field at each other. The knights barreled into each other with their lances, sending massive blows into each other's shields. Both knights were shaken, but stayed on their horses.

They took up positions opposite each other and charged again. This time the knight in blue smacked his lance into the other's shield and the red knight tumbled backward off his horse.

A squire ran out to the knight and handed him a sword. The blue knight turned his horse and charged at the red knight again, this time using his lance to knock his opponent off his feet.

When the blue knight charged again, the red knight miraculously grabbed the lance and used it to yank the blue knight off his horse. Another squire ran out and handed the blue knight a sword.

Now the two knights bashed at each other's armor with the swords. Without the armor, a few blows to either knight would have killed him. Even with the armor, though, I imagined both knights would wake up very sore the next morning.

They smacked their swords into each other over and over, occasionally knocking the other off balance. This continued for ten minutes or so before the action took a turn. Blue swung

his sword around hard and smacked it solidly into Red's chest. Red reeled backward.

With Red sprawled on his back, Blue seized the advantage. He kicked the red knight's sword out of reach and sat on his opponent's chest. He yelled, "Dost thou yield?" as he flipped open the visor of Red's helmet. With the other hand, Blue raised his sword in the air, ready to thrust it down on Red.

"I yield! I yield!" Red quickly responded. The crowd cheered and Blue rose off the other knight's chest to bow. Then he turned to help Red to his feet.

This seemed more than enough entertainment for me, but then the announcer trumpeted again to declare that the next match would begin shortly.

I was so engrossed I had once again failed to assess my surroundings. As I watched two new knights gear up for battle, I didn't see the enemy creeping up on me.

It wasn't until I heard the hiss that I noticed the cat. He had been stealthily working toward

me and was in pounce mode before I heard him. I quickly stepped back and drew my sword. His claws narrowly missed me and I jabbed my sword into his paw.

He screeched and pulled back. However, it didn't deter him. If anything, it annoyed him and he was more determined to make me his lunch. He lurched at me several more times and each time I pushed him back with well-placed blows, but he wasn't giving up.

I was having doubts about escaping this mess when the cat suddenly reared back, wincing in pain. Then it happened again – and again. I couldn't tell what was going on, but the cat lost interest in me. He hissed and scampered away.

Standing before me were four mice. Each wore a sword on his side and helmets made out of acorn tops. All of them had mouse-sized bows and quivers on their backs filled with arrows. That's when I realized what had turned the cat away – these mice were archers!

One mouse, who I assumed to be the leader, started toward me. He wore a leather vest and

looked to be about the same age as my parents. He reached out a paw to help me to my feet. "Watch yourself around here," said the mouse. "You haven't been to the village before, have you?"

"No sir," I said.

As I stood, I saw his tail swing around from behind him. The tip was missing. I thought of the story of Unka Vin and the knight who had lopped off the end of his tail with a battle axe. *It can't be!* I thought. *That story wasn't true, was it? And besides, he's dead! Isn't he?*

"No need for formalities," the mouse said, "the name's Vincent. But everyone," he said, waving a hand toward the other mice, "calls me Vin."

Chapter 8: The Mouse Village

“Unka Vin!” I shouted. “Is it really you?” I hugged him before he could answer.

He looked me over curiously. When his eyes fell on my sword – the one he’d asked my parents to give me – a smile crossed his face and he hugged me back. “Otter! My dear nephew!” He pulled away and looked me over. “You were a wee thing when I saw you last. You aren’t little anymore.” I puffed out my chest with pride.

“Vin,” one of the other mice said, jerking his head in the direction the rest of the mice were heading. Unka Vin nodded and said to me, “We can’t stay here. We scared off Midnight – the cat – for the moment, but he’ll be back.”

Unka Vin and I followed the other mice. They headed to the far corner of the platform where they dropped down into a hole. We jumped in right behind them.

The mice in front of us scurried along quickly, but Unka Vin and I lingered back, moving along slowly so we could chat. “Our gopher

friends dug this tunnel for us," he explained. "This lets us get in and out of Dragon's Head safely. Of course, we also never travel alone," he scolded. "You just met Midnight, the princess' cat. He's the biggest danger, but we have to watch out for people, too. By the way, how did you even get here? Are you with your parents?" he asked eagerly, although I could sense him trying to be casual.

"No, I came with Arthur...Oh no! I have to go back! I promised Arthur I'd stay where I could see him so we wouldn't get separated. If I don't find him, I have no way to get home!"

I tried to push past my uncle, but he grabbed my arm. "Otter, stop! You can't go back. It isn't safe." I understood, but was upset.

"Just who is this Arthur?" Unka Vin asked.

I filled my uncle in on how I'd become friends with Arthur. "I can even talk to him, thanks to Merlin."

My uncle's ears perked up and he smiled. "That old wizard's still around, huh? Good to hear."

I talked about jousting and riding a falcon and seeing the castle. Unka Vin beamed with pride. "Turning into an adventurer like your ol' uncle, aren't you?" He paused before adding, "It's great to have you here, Otter."

We arrived at the end of the tunnel. I couldn't believe my eyes. Before me was a mouse-sized version of Dragon's Head! There were shops and a village square and mice milling about dressed like people.

"Welcome to Dragon's Tail," Unka Vin proudly said as he waved an arm at all that was before us. "My home."

Unka Vin showed me around, introducing me to practically every mouse we encountered. We stopped in plenty of stores. My favorite was the armor shop. I even tried some on.

"How's it fit?" Unka Vin asked.

"Heavy!" I replied. "But I love it!"

"It's yours then." Unka Vin declared.

"What? Really? Thanks, Unka Vin."

"Certainly. I gotta keep my brave and curious nephew safe." He smiled and strolled over to the shop keeper. "Gildas," he said to the mouse, "bill me for this." He pointed a finger toward me. I walked over and Unka Vin introduced me.

"What brought you here, Otter?" Gildas asked.

"I wanted to see Dragon's Head. I didn't even know Dragon's Tail was here – until Unka Vin saved me from that cat."

Gildas looked alarmed. "Vin? The cat is back?"

"Yes, but no one was hurt."

"You better ring the bell. We need a town meeting."

"Of course," my uncle nodded. He led me to the town square and tugged a couple times on a rope hanging from a bell atop a pole. "Anyone in town can call a meeting," he explained to me. "We also ring the bell as a warning of

trouble – like if we are getting attacked and everyone needs to move indoors.”

The mouse villagers quickly congregated in the town square. Like Dragon’s Head, the square was a large open space in the center of the village shops. The area was designed for gatherings and performances. However, the stage at the heart of Dragon’s Tail was not rectangular like the one in Dragon’s Head. This one was round. As the mice assembled, they took up seats around the stage as if it were one large table.

Once the mice gathered, Unka Vin rang the bell again to quiet the crowd. He rejoined the circle and announced, “I have called everyone here to warn you. Midnight has returned.” A gasp went up from the crowd.

One voice shouted, “I thought we took care of that stupid cat.” Another voice yelled, “We need to get rid of him once and for all.”

A murmur circulated through the crowd as the mice discussed possible solutions until Unka Vin raised his hands to quiet the group again. “Listen, we decided as a group the last time

not to kill the cat. We just want to keep him away from our entrance to Dragon's Head."

After much discussion, the meeting ended with the suggestion that all mice visiting Dragon's Head must be armed and travel in no less than groups of four.

Once the crowd dispersed, Unka Vin and I talked as we walked around more. "What did ya think of that, Otter? You've never seen humans make decisions like that, have you?"

"Until my visit to Dragon's Head, I never saw more than a few people together at one time."

Unka Vin continued talking, but pointed toward a shop which sold archery equipment so we walked in. "Well, if you saw how the king made decisions..." He rolled his eyes in disgust while looking over the bows. "The king is the only one with a voice! I visited the castle once and King Uther had assembled his knights to plan for a battle. Uther sat at the head of the table in a large, cushioned throne. He bellowed on and on while the knights sat silently in uncomfortable chairs on both sides of the long table. None of them said anything!"

Unka Vin picked out a bow and walked over to a target area beside the shop. He nocked an arrow and let it fly. I watched his impressive skills, but continued our conversation.

“Wouldn’t it be easier if the decision was left to one person?”

He smiled as he shot another arrow and then shook his head. “Otter, humans believe one person should tell everyone else what to do. We believe everyone deserves a voice. We sit at a round table because it makes everyone equal.”

He handed the bow to me as we talked. He stood behind me to demonstrate how to hold it. I continued talking. “But you didn’t really decide anything – I mean, you didn’t really fix the problem.”

“It does take longer,” Unka Vin agreed, “but everyone is happier in the end. When you were in Dragon’s Head, did you hear anyone talk about the king?”

I nocked an arrow and let it go, but it fell short of the target. “Yes. The blacksmith’s wife

wasn't happy at all. The blacksmith even warned her to stop complaining. He said if any of the king's knights heard her, they'd have her head."

"There you go," my uncle replied, handing me another arrow. "That's the difference. In Dragon's Tail, anyone can speak up without fear of consequences."

Unka Vin finally turned the conversation to the archery equipment. "What do you think? That feel like a good size?"

"Oh, it's great. This is harder than it looks, though!"

"Well, find which ever bow fits best and I'll get that and some arrows and a quiver for you."

"Thanks, Unka Vin! The armor was plenty, though. You don't have to get this for me, too."

"Of course I do," he replied. "I want my favorite nephew to be safe! You can't very well go on adventures without the proper equipment!"

I didn't say anything, but I realized my days of adventuring might be numbered. Mama and Pop weren't going to be very pleased I'd disappeared to the village. When Arthur returned without me, they would likely assume the worst.

As we headed back to Unka Vin's cottage, I asked, "How am I going to get home?"

He acted surprised. "You still want to go back? To leave this?" He waved a hand at the village as we approached his front door.

"Mama and Pop will worry about me."

"Your parents are good at that," he said as he opened the door. "Otter, you and I are two peas in a pod! We crave adventure!" he shouted, raising his paws dramatically in the air. "We can't be tied down to some stuffy mouse hole in the wall of an old wizard's cottage."

We sat down on a bench by a wooden table which looked like a miniature version of the one in Merlin's cottage. In fact, I marveled at

how much my uncle's cottage looked like Merlin's. It made his comment funny.

"Unka Vin, they're my family. They're *your* family. Don't you ever miss them?"

He was quiet several moments before responding. "Absolutely. But they never understood me. They never accepted me. They acted like something was wrong with me."

"I know what you mean," I said. "But I'm not giving up on them. They're changing." I patted the sword at my side. "Mama and Pop gave me your sword. They realized..." I jumped up on the table and thrust my sword in the air. "I was born for adventure!"

Unka Vin clapped his hands and laughed. "That's my nephew!" Then he turned serious. "You've got some of me in you, but you've got your parents' blood in you as well. Family was always the most important thing to them." He paused, reflecting over his words. "Family and adventure. I don't know if they're meant to go together or not."

Chapter 9: Otter Goes Home

I dreamed that night about Arthur. He was the center of attention in a large crowd. He was kneeling before Queen Igraine. She tapped him on each shoulder with a sword and declared him knighted. A cheer went up amongst the crowd.

Then I woke up. The morning light crept in the window of Unka Vin's cottage. I remembered that Arthur was still a boy and that I lived at Merlin's house. But it felt so real – like it had actually happened. What did this mean?

Unka Vin interrupted my thoughts. "How'd ya sleep?"

"Good. This is better than sharing a bed with all my cousins and siblings."

He grinned. "This place is growing on you, eh? So what adventures shall we undertake today?"

"Unka Vin, I know you want me to stay here. And it's great to see you again and Dragon's Tail is wonderful and..."

"But it isn't where you belong," he sighed. "I understand. When I came here, I just knew it was where I was meant to be."

"Exactly. I can't explain it, but I know I won't stay at Merlin's cottage forever either." I reiterated the words I'd heard Merlin say to Arthur. "'The world has other plans for me.'" Then I added, "But for now I need to figure out a way to get home."

"Fair enough. But first, some breakfast. Let me take you to the Red Dragon Inn. They make the best cheese omelet you've ever tasted."

The inn was actually an outdoor area in view of the town square. Tables and chairs were scattered about in front of an open window where people ordered and picked up food. I recognized the archers who'd rescued me from the cat. "Vin, over here!" one yelled, pulling out a chair and waving for us to join them.

As we sat down, the mouse introduced himself. "The name's Geoffrey Monmouse." He was a plump mouse with scruffy brown fur and whiskers shaped into a goatee. He and the

other archers wore the same outfits as the day before. They all had scuffed boots, baggy pants with shiny belt buckles, black vests, and caps with bird feathers in them.

Geoffrey pointed to the other mice. "This is Tom Malory and Terence H. White, T.H. for short." They nodded as Geoffrey continued. "Sorry we didn't have time for introductions yesterday. So you're Vin's nephew? What do you think of Dragon's Tail?"

"It's wonderful. I never knew mice lived like this. Stores? Armor? Weapons? How did you learn to make all these things?"

Geoffrey looked curiously at my uncle. "Vin, you haven't told him? Are you being modest or keeping secrets from the boy?"

Unka Vin smiled. "Go ahead. Tell him."

Geoffrey scooted his chair back from the table a bit. With his booming voice and big gestures, he was a captivating storyteller. "Dragon's Tail wouldn't exist," he began, lifting a paw dramatically into the air and then pointing it toward Unka Vin, "if it weren't for your uncle."

Unka Vin interrupted. "I had *lots* of help."

"Ha! We helped build it, but you were the brains behind it all."

"Well, not exactly," corrected Unka Vin.

"Oh, right. Merlin."

"What?" I gasped, looking at my uncle. "How did Merlin help?"

Geoffrey continued. "Your uncle visited Dragon's Head many times. That's where we first met. Remember those grapes, Vin? Who'd have thought we'd ever become friends after we practically came to blows over who had them first?" Geoffrey let out a hearty laugh.

"Vin befriended many of us at Dragon's Head. We were scraping by, as mice do, finding just enough food to survive. On top of that, we always had to watch out for animals wanting to eat us."

"But what does Merlin have to do with that?" I asked.

"He's the one who first brought Vin to Dragon's Head." Geoffrey winked at my uncle and laughed again.

"You mean..." I spoke slowly, turning to Unka Vin. "You were friends with Merlin? Could you talk to him?"

My uncle nodded. "One day he caught me scampering across the floor. I think he was lonely because he came up with some magic which let me talk to him. I started going everywhere with him after that."

Geoffrey stepped in again. "Then you had the big fight with Anna."

Unka Vin's eyes saddened as he looked at me. "Your mother was worried about my need for adventure. She could tell I was rubbing off on you. On one of my trips with Merlin to Dragon's Head, I decided to stay. I felt more comfortable with Geoffrey and the other mice and decided to help them build a village of their own."

Our conversation was cut short by the clanging of the bell in the town square. This was different from the ring which announced the town meeting. This time someone was banging the bell nonstop.

"Uh oh," my uncle said. "That means trouble. We need to get inside. There's an enemy approaching."

"Take cover?" I asked. "You have swords and bows and arrows! Aren't you going to fight against it like you did the cat?"

Unka Vin shook his head as he scanned the sky. "We can't fight off this enemy with our weapons. This is some kind of bird. A hawk or owl or..."

"A falcon?" I blurted out.

"Could be," he replied, his eyes glued to the sky.

"No, it is definitely a falcon!" I shouted, pointing to a bird cresting over the tops of the trees.

Unka Vin was impressed. "If you ever want a job as a lookout..." He refocused on the emergency and said, "We better find shelter."

He grabbed my arm, but I continued to gaze up at the falcon. Then I sputtered excitedly, "That's not just any falcon! That's Ferdinand!"

I pulled away from Unka Vin and ran to the village square while the other mice ran for cover. Unka Vin shouted after me, "What are you doing, Otter? Get out of there!"

Unka Vin and the other mice peered out from the shops where they hid with bows drawn. "Nobody shoot!" I yelled. "That falcon is a friend of mine! I promise he won't hurt anyone!" The mice didn't budge from their hiding spots, but they let the string go slack on their bows.

I ran back and forth, hoping the movement would attract Ferdinand's attention. It worked – he swerved mid-air and started downwards. I ran to greet him when he landed. "Ferdinand, I can't believe you found me!"

“Good to see you, Otter,” he said with a sound of relief in his voice. “I’ve been looking since yesterday afternoon. I was afraid I would have to give up. Arthur will be very relieved.”

“Arthur sent you?”

“Well, Merlin did,” Ferdinand explained. “Last night I overheard Arthur begging Merlin to come back here and look for you. Merlin told Arthur about Dragon’s Tail and said he thought you might have come here. Then he sent me to find you.”

I laughed. “Who would have thought I’d ever be grateful a falcon could spot me from high up in the air?”

Unka Vin cautiously approached. Other mice emerged, but kept their distances.

“The name’s Vin,” my uncle finally squeaked out timidly. He extended a paw for a handshake, but then awkwardly withdrew it when he realized a bird couldn’t shake hands. “So you’re a friend of my nephew, huh?”

"I am," replied Ferdinand. "And you and the other mice have nothing to fear." He looked at me and smiled. "Otter changed my ways."

I couldn't help teasing Unka Vin. "You shouldn't be afraid of falcons. You were friends with them long before I ever was."

He looked at me blankly. "What do you mean?"

"Your story! You know, about flying on a falcon's back and visiting the castle."

"I've never flown on a falcon. I don't even remember telling you a story like that. Even a made-up one."

I was confused. Had I imagined the whole thing? Was Unka Vin lying?

I didn't pursue it. Instead I said, "Why don't you come back with me? At least for a visit?"

He hesitated before shaking his head no. "I don't belong there. This is my home."

I saw a sadness in his eyes. I knew he was disappointed I was leaving Dragon's Tail. However, it was more than that. My uncle, who I'd seen as so brave, was scared to go home.

* * *

We went back to Unka Vin's cottage to collect my things. As I packed, he dug something out of a box. "Otter," he said. "I have something for you. Your mom gave me this when you were born."

I opened the locket he handed to me and saw a picture of a baby mouse with, I assumed, his older sister. I looked at Unka Vin. "Is this you and Mama?"

"It is," he confirmed. "When you were born, Anna was so excited to start a new family, but she said that I would always be the first baby boy in her life."

Unka Vin turned away. He was fighting back tears. When he turned back, he said, "Give that to your mom. Let her know I'm okay. Maybe I'll see them another time." *Yes, you will, I thought. I'll see to it.*

I hugged him tight. "I love you, Unka Vin."

"I love you too, Otter."

I tucked the locket into my bag and we walked outside where Ferdinand was waiting. I waved to Unka Vin as I climbed on the falcon's back. "Let's go home, Ferdinand."

Chapter 10: Home Again

As Merlin's cottage came into view, I saw figures in the clearing. "It's Ferdinand!" Arthur yelled, pointing up to the sky. As we descended, I could tell they'd been practicing archery. I smiled and patted my bow slung over my shoulder.

Arthur dropped his bow and ran to greet us. "Otter! You're okay! I was worried I'd never see you again!"

I climbed off Ferdinand's back and into Arthur's outstretched hands. I grasped his thumb tight. It was the closest a mouse could come to hugging a human.

Kay was nowhere to be seen. Arthur explained, "When Sir Ector picked us up yesterday, he took Kay home, but left me here. They are moving to Camelot so Kay can begin knight training. I'll live here with Merlin." Arthur looked dejected. "I guess I'll learn to be a squire."

I knew Arthur would be happy living with Merlin, but he was jealous of Kay. I consider-

ing sharing my dream of him becoming a knight, but I couldn't imagine it making him feel better so I kept silent.

"Well, I'm glad you're staying here," I said.
"We can spend a lot more time together."

"That's true." His face brightened. "That's a good thing." Then he changed the subject. "So tell us about your adventures!"

I told Arthur and Merlin about the cat and the tunnel and Dragon's Tail. I showed off my armor and archery equipment. Arthur laughed, pointing to his own bow and arrow on the ground.

Arthur was especially intrigued by my story of the round table. "Sounds like the right way to do things," he said.

"The most exciting thing, though, was seeing Unka Vin." I peered at Merlin. "It seems he was friends with a certain wizard once upon a time."

Arthur jumped in. "Merlin thought you might find your uncle – and Dragon's Tail. That's why he sent Ferdinand there to look for you."

"That reminds me," said Merlin. "Another spell is in order. Let's see to it that you don't find yourself in another predicament like this." He fumbled in his pockets, finally pulling out a silver ball. It was just the right size for me to hold in one paw. He handed it to me and then laid one hand atop Ferdinand's head. He rested a finger from his other hand gently on my head. He muttered the following words:

*Bird and mouse shall see as one
When the mouse is lost and must come
home
Just gaze into this silver ball
And the bird shall find you near or far*

It was hard to explain the feeling I had, but I felt connected to Ferdinand. He looked at me with wide eyes and I could tell he was experiencing the same thing.

"Otter, I have given you a magic orb," said Merlin. "The next time you find yourself in trouble, look into this orb and Ferdinand will

‘see’ what you see. Then he can find you wherever you are.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

Merlin continued. “I’m also going to mix up a potion for scaring off enemies – like that pesky cat.”

“That would be great, but maybe you could show *me* how to make it?”

“Have something in mind, do you?”

“Well, if you show me how to make it, then I can teach the mice at Dragon’s Tail.”

“Excellent idea,” Merlin responded. “We’ll work on that later tonight. For now, though, go see your family.”

* * *

I ran into Merlin’s cottage yelling, “Mama! Pop! I’m home!”

My cousin Nicholas was the first to emerge from the mouse hole. “Otter! Everyone, Otter’s

back!" Before I'd even made it to the mouse hole, Mama and Pop darted out to greet me. Mama kept hugging me and saying, "My baby, my baby. You're okay." She pulled back occasionally to wipe away tears.

Once Mama settled a bit, Pop said, "We're glad you're home safe, son." He was satisfied to give me one big hug. "Your mama and I were worried sick."

Mama interrupted. "Remember what we said, dear?"

"Right. Right. Of course, Anna." Pop turned to me with a serious look in his eye and rested a paw on my shoulder. "We know you're growing up. We know you want to seek adventure like your uncle. We want you to be careful, but..." Pop choked up a bit before collecting himself and continuing. "We also want you to be yourself."

I didn't know what to say to Pop. I just hugged him again.

I turned to Mama. "I have something for you." I pulled the locket from my bag. Before I even

opened it to show her the picture, she burst into tears. "Yes, Mama. He's still alive."

"Oh, my goodness. How is he? Is he healthy? Is he happy? Does he miss us? Where does he live?"

I laughed. "Mama, slow down! I'll tell you everything."

We went in the mouse hole where my other relatives waited eagerly. After a round of hugs, I found myself at the front of the room telling everyone my story. The adults sat at the kitchen table while my younger relatives plopped down on the floor. I told them all about Dragon's Head and Dragon's Tail. I explained how Unka Vin saved me from the cat. Nicholas said, "This is the best story you've ever told!"

After I'd finished, Mama looked sad. "So why didn't Uncle Vincent come back with you? At least to visit?"

"I think he was scared, Mama. He didn't know if he would be accepted."

I saw the hurt in Mama's eyes. "My dear little brother. I can't believe I drove him away, that I made him feel like he didn't belong!"

Pop wrapped an arm around her shoulder to comfort her. "It wasn't just you, dear. I know I didn't try hard enough." The other adults nodded and agreed, nearly responding in unison, "We're all responsible."

Pop changed the subject and pointed at my bag. "You brought a lot of stuff home, son. What else do you have in there?"

I put on my armor and posed with my sword. Then I showed off my archery equipment. I also passed around some fancy cheeses Unka Vin sent home with me.

Mama was intrigued by the bow and arrow. "How do these work?"

"Well, Mama, maybe I should give you an archery lesson." I joked.

"No time like the present," she replied.

“Mama, really?” I responded, both surprised and delighted.

She and Pop and several cousins followed me to the clearing, all eager to learn archery. I pulled back my bow, nocked an arrow, and aimed for a tree. I let go of the string and sent the arrow soaring straight ahead, right at my target.

“Ooh, I want to try that.” Mama said.

I chuckled. “Mama, I think you’ve got an adventurer in you after all!”

“Maybe so,” she laughed. I showed her how to hold the bow and nock the arrow. She let the arrow fly and hit the tree on her first try.

“Mama, you’re a natural!” I said.

She grinned. “I must get it from my son.”

* * *

I chatted with Mama and Pop late into the night. After they stifled a few yawns, they declared it was bedtime.

"Well," I said, "I need to talk to Merlin again and then I'm coming to bed too."

I emerged from the mouse hole and saw Merlin sitting in his chair reading by the fireplace. It was his nightly routine.

Arthur was asleep in a bed Merlin set up the corner of the room. Merlin glanced at me as I scampered toward him. "Ah, good evening, Otter," he said, tugging his beard. "I trust you had a nice reunion with your family?"

"I did. I'm impressed with my parents. They're really coming around."

Merlin laughed. "It sounds like they're growing up. You've raised them right, Otter."

I smiled back and he continued. "Well, let's get to work on that potion."

Merlin gathered several jars and bottles from the shelf and set them on the table. He pulled out a tree root and several crushed plants. He showed me how to grind them into a powder.

“The combined scent of these will make any cat turn tail and run.”

I crept up on the mix cautiously and took a small sniff. “I don’t smell anything.”

“Exactly,” said Merlin. “It is a repellant designed to scare cats away, not mice.”

I paused, unsure if I should bring up what was on my mind, but finally decided I should.

“Merlin, I had a dream about Arthur while I was at Unka Vin’s.”

“Indeed?” Merlin’s eyebrows went up and he peered over at Arthur to be sure he was asleep.

I explained the dream and Merlin said, “It didn’t feel like a dream, did it? It felt like it really happened.”

“Yes! But how can that be?”

“Otter, what you experienced was a vision – a glimpse of the future.”

My eyes grew big. “Does that mean Arthur is going to be a knight?”

"Well," Merlin stammered. He looked worried, like he'd said too much. "Visions are only glimpses of a possible future."

"I have to tell Arthur!"

"No!" Merlin announced sternly. He glanced at Arthur who stirred, but did not wake up. Then, in a quieter voice, Merlin continued, "You are to say nothing to him."

"But shouldn't we do whatever we can to make sure the vision comes true?"

"Otter, I also have visions. They are like magic in that they come with consequences. For example, if I'd fixed Ferdinand's wing, somebody or something else would have been injured – or maybe even killed – in his place. If we share our visions, no matter our intentions, it can negatively alter the future."

"When I fixed Ferdinand's wing, nothing bad happened."

"So it would seem," said Merlin. "Perhaps animals do not adhere to the same rules as hu-

mans. I do know, however, that I must be very cautious with my gifts. Use yours wisely and they will serve you well."

Chapter 11: Back to Dragon's Tail

"Arthur, pack a bag. We are going to Camelot in the morning."

"Why, Merlin?" Arthur asked, both excited and curious.

"Kay is to be knighted."

A couple months had passed since Kay left for knight training. I knew Arthur was excited to go to Camelot to see a knighting ceremony, but disappointed he couldn't be knighted himself. "Oh," was all he said.

Merlin gazed at Arthur but said nothing. I desperately wanted to tell Arthur about my vision, but I knew I should keep quiet. If Merlin was right, it was only a possible future. I didn't want to get Arthur excited if it wasn't going to happen.

That afternoon Mama and Pop were practicing archery with me when I brought up Camelot. "I want to go," I said. They had accepted my friendship with Arthur and Merlin so I didn't anticipate any objection. However, they found

a way to surprise me.

Mama set down her bow and looked at Pop who had been napping against a nearby tree. Pop nodded at her. "We've been wondering..." she began, "Maybe Dragon's Tail is on the way to Camelot and I could visit Vincent?"

"Mama! That'd be great! We could drop you off on the way to Camelot and pick you up on the way back."

"That would be wonderful," Mama said, before choking up a little. "It will be nice to see my little brother again."

* * *

The next morning, Merlin and Arthur packed up their horses. Arthur tucked me into his shirt pocket where I'd traveled before. However, Mama snuggled in to his pocket beside me this time. We didn't have to stay out of sight so we kept our heads out of Arthur's pocket to see. I told Mama all about Dragon's Tail and how Unka Vin had started the town. She beamed with pride, knowing her little brother had become quite successful.

Instead of traveling to Dragon's Head and then Dragon's Tail, Merlin led us through the woods. He said it was a more direct route. It may have been, but the overgrown path made for slower going.

When we arrived, I was startled how well hidden Dragon's Tail was. While built in a clearing, it was so well disguised by surrounding trees and brush that we had reached the outer wall of the mouse village before I realized where we were. I also had an inkling that Merlin may have had a hand in working some magic which helped protect the village from predators.

Merlin dismounted from his horse and stood before the wall surrounding Dragon's Tail. He looked a little silly since he could easily step over the wall.

Soon a mouse appeared at the top of the wall. "Well!" he announced. "If it isn't Merlin himself! It's been years since we've seen you around these parts!" Then he eyed the horses. "You know you can't bring those in the vil-

lage, right?" Then he pointed at Arthur and said, "In fact, we can't let you or the boy in here either."

Merlin laughed. "No, no. We certainly don't want to destroy your village with our big, clumsy feet. We are merely transporting visitors." Mama and I waved from Arthur's pocket.

The mouse peered up at Merlin. "I take it you're looking for Vin?"

"Indeed," replied Merlin. "Perhaps you could let him know there are guests to see him?"

"Will do," replied the mouse. He ducked behind the wall and scurried off.

Moments later, a drawbridge lowered not far from us. Unka Vin emerged and a smile crossed his face. "Merlin! You old wizard! I don't know how many years it has been! It's wonderful to see you!"

Merlin knelt down and placed his hand on the ground. Unka Vin hugged Merlin's finger the same way I had hugged Arthur's when we

were reunited. Then my uncle looked at Arthur, who had dismounted and also knelt down. "You must be Arthur. I heard plenty about you from my nephew."

Arthur extended a finger and Unka Vin grasped it with both paws for their own form of a mouse-human handshake. "Pleased to meet you," said Arthur. "I've heard a lot about you, too."

"What brings you gentlemen to our corner of the woods?"

Merlin turned to Arthur and smiled. Mama and I peeked our heads up out of Arthur's pocket. We crawled out into Arthur's waiting hand and he set us on the ground.

Shock crossed Unka Vin's face. "Anna? Is that really you?"

"Oh, Vincent!" Mama shouted as she ran to him. They embraced each other in the longest hug I'd ever seen. Then they both started crying. They were happy tears, though. I smiled proudly. I had brought them back together.

Chapter 12: Kay Is Knighted

Over lunch I showed Unka Vin how to make the cat repellant. I gave him some I had already mixed up and kept another bottle in my pack.

After lunch I said goodbye to Mama and Unka Vin. Then Arthur, Merlin, and I set out for Camelot. The path was now even more over-run. Sometimes there was no sign of a trail. I would have no idea where we were if we didn't have the castle in the distance showing us the way.

I was lucky I could ride in Arthur's pocket. More than once, he let out a yelp when a tree branch scratched him in the face. However, once we reached the hill upon which the castle was perched, the riding was much easier. We rode up a well-worn path carved into the lush, green hillside.

I had never seen rocks as large as those in the castle wall. I wondered how the original castle builders found them, much less moved them here.

We stopped at the entrance. The drawbridge was closed. Sentries kept watch from the towers on each end of the castle. More guards roamed back and forth atop the castle wall.

There was also a moat around the castle. We could easily swim across, but Arthur said, "I hear they keep crocodiles in there." I decided against taking a dip.

"Hello, up there," Merlin yelled to a sentry. "We are here for the knighting ceremony."

The sentry gazed down at Merlin, looking bored. "Who's 'we'?"

"I am Merlin and this is..." Before Merlin could finish his sentence, the drawbridge started its creaky descent.

The horses' feet clopped loudly on the thick, wooden drawbridge. When we entered the courtyard, it felt very familiar. I saw knights and jesters and maidens just as I pictured them in Unka Vin's story. I saw flags exactly the colors I'd imagined. I saw the hay wagon which in Unka Vin's story had been where he and the falcon crash landed.

A shiver went through my body. I finally realized that the details I'd thought were a story Unka Vin told me were actually a vision. I must have had it at such an early age that I didn't understand it and mixed it together with stories my uncle had told me. In any event, I hoped today wasn't going to include knights chasing me through the castle!

In the courtyard, we were greeted by two stable hands. They bowed to Merlin, but ignored Arthur. "If it pleases you, sir, we can take your horses. We will see to it that they have fresh hay and water while you are here."

"Excellent," replied Merlin. He and Arthur dismounted and handed over the reins.

Another servant led us to a small room. "You are welcome to freshen up here." He pointed to an archway and said, "When you are ready, you may enter the Great Hall." Merlin thanked the servant who then scurried away.

Arthur gently reached in his pocket and pulled me out. "I'll let you roam about – but you better not get lost again!"

“Agreed.” I said.

Once Merlin and Arthur washed up, they entered the Great Hall. I scampered up to a balcony area where I could see all the action. Sir Ector approached them, smiling broadly. “I’m so glad you could be here for this special day.” He hugged Arthur and said, “I’ve missed you, son. I trust things have gone well with Merlin.”

“Yes, sir,” Arthur replied. “I’ve been learning a lot.”

Ector was strangely formal with Arthur. I’d noticed before how he treated Kay like his son, but was always more distant with Arthur. I realized how much Arthur and I had grown up the same way – we both felt like we didn’t belong in our own families. That was changing for me. Hopefully it would for Arthur as well.

The Great Hall was filling up with well-dressed people. Ector led Arthur around the room, introducing him to people.

The crowd silenced when an announcer called for attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, King Uther, Queen Igraine, and Princess Morgan!" Everyone knelt. The royal trio strolled through the crowd toward their thrones at the opposite end of the Great Hall. I remembered how Morgan had given me the shivers the last time I saw her.

Once the royal family was seated, the crowd rose but remained quiet. "Thank you all for coming," Uther began. "This is a special day as we welcome a new group of knights to our kingdom!"

"Huzzahs" burst out of the crowd. Uther raised a hand to call for silence and continued. "If everyone will be seated, we will begin."

There were a dozen kids about Kay's age being knighted. When it was Kay's turn, the announcer cried out his name. Kay walked solemnly to the king and recited an oath he'd obviously memorized. "To you I pledge my life and my sword. I will do all within my power to protect you and your kingdom from harm. I will fight for your honor and sacrifice my life if necessary."

Kay knelt before Uther, who took a sword and tapped it lightly on each of Kay's shoulders. "Arise, Sir Kay! You are now a knight of Camelot!"

Once all twelve candidates were knighted, they lined up and Uther announced, "Lords and ladies, our latest knights!"

The crowd applauded and cheered. The knights mingled with their families. Ector gave Kay a sturdy hug and congratulated him. Arthur meekly approached and said, "Congratulations."

"Thanks, little brother," said Kay. "Now you can train to be my squire." Arthur forced a weak smile but said nothing.

After the ceremony, the guests sat at several long tables for a huge feast. The king, queen, and princess had their own table at the front of the Great Hall. I longed to scamper back down to the floor and dig around for scraps under the tables, but with so many people, it was too risky so I stayed in the balcony. However, I

smiled when I saw Arthur stuffing scraps in his pocket.

Once the feast was over, a small group of musicians assembled at one end of the Great Hall and played instruments. The crowd started dancing. Arthur had a wonderful time with the knights and young ladies. He paid especially close attention to a girl about his age. She had a lovely smile and hair as golden as sunlight.

In the midst of the celebrations, Uther approached Merlin who'd been sitting off to the side and watching Arthur. Merlin stood and Uther wrapped an arm around Merlin's shoulders. At the jousting tournament, they definitely seemed to know each other. Now it was clear they not only knew each other, but appeared to be old friends.

I couldn't hear them from the balcony, but I could tell their discussion had turned serious. The smile disappeared from Uther's face and he pointed toward a hallway at the other end of the Great Hall.

I was curious. Merlin was so secretive and I wanted to know what was going on. I scampered down out of the balcony and carefully moved through the Great Hall from object to object, trying to stay as close to the walls as possible, until I reached the doorway. It led down a hall with even more doors. I darted from one door to the next until I heard Merlin's voice.

"Uther, I know this is difficult to hear. Perhaps my vision is wrong. However, we must be prepared."

What? I thought. Merlin said not to share our visions!

"You are right, Merlin. As always. I have missed your counsel. I have run a brutal kingdom and made many enemies. I've always known it was only a matter of time."

I heard nothing for a few moments. Finally Uther spoke again. "Merlin, can you stay after the feast?"

"Certainly," Merlin replied.

Uther continued, "I always knew it was right to entrust the future of this kingdom in your hands. You have served me well, old friend."

I heard their footsteps moving toward the door and ducked into the shadows. Uther and Merlin returned to the Great Hall.

Then I heard another door open. It was the room next to where Merlin and Uther had been. Morgan exited with an eerie grin on her face. She obviously didn't smile a lot; she looked more natural when she was angry. This face was devious and mischievous. It made me nervous. She cackled and muttered to herself, "That foolish wizard better check his visions again because I'll see to it that Camelot falls into the *wrong* hands – mine."

Chapter 13: Arthur Is Attacked

Morgan wasn't talking to herself after all. Cradled in her left arm was Midnight, the cat who attacked me at Dragon's Head. His creepy yellow eyes glared at me. He clawed at Morgan's arm and she screeched and dropped him. Midnight bolted toward me.

I had my archery equipment, but there was no time to nock an arrow. I dashed down the hallway toward the Great Hall. Normally I would want to attract as little attention as possible, but now it made more sense to stir up trouble. In the confusion that would ensue, I might escape the cat.

As soon as I entered the Great Hall one of the ladies cried, "Eek! A mouse!" A knight yelled, "Get him!" The crowd erupted into chaos.

I ran toward the main entrance of the Great Hall. Some of the knights and their guests stormed after me, stumbling and crashing into each other. I was terrified that if Midnight didn't catch me, I was going to get squished under someone's foot. Still, this was my best chance and I was going to stick to my plan.

I raced down a long corridor which ended in a spiral staircase. I leapt my way up the stairs into what turned out to be the royal chambers. It was identical to the images in my head from Unka Vin's story.

I remembered the mouse hole from the story and, sure enough, it was exactly where I pictured it. I raced past the king and queen's bed and toward the hole. Midnight pounced just as I ducked inside. This vision which I'd so long thought was a story from my uncle had now saved my life!

Well, not yet. Like in the vision, the hole did not lead deep into the wall. Instead of it leaving room for a knight to jab a spear in the hole, this hole was wide enough to allow Midnight to stuff his paw inside. I wasn't safe yet.

I scooted as far from the entrance as possible and caught my breath. I couldn't grab Midnight's paw and swing him around the room, knocking knights over. How was I going to get out of there?

Then I got an idea. I opened my bag and fished out the cat-repelling potion. I poured it over my sword. I might not be able to swing Midnight around the room, but I could send him into a frenzy that would create havoc. When Midnight stuck his paw in the hole again, I jabbed him.

It had the desired effect – and then some. Midnight retreated in pain. He ran crazily around the room, bouncing into furniture and knights. People were knocking each other down trying to get out of the path of the lunatic cat.

I peered out, hoping to make my escape, but a pair of feet greeted me. I looked up to see Arthur smiling at me. “You just can’t stay out of trouble, can you?” He scooped me up and tucked me into his pocket. “Let’s get you out of here before anyone notices.”

As Arthur calmly strolled out of the royal chambers, I heard people asking, “Did the cat get the mouse? Why did he run out of here so crazy?”

We returned to the Great Hall which had nearly emptied out. Merlin pulled Arthur aside

and said, "I need to stay here a few days. You are old enough to go back to the cottage on your own."

Arthur protested, "Why can't I just stay here with you?"

"I have important matters to discuss with the king. It would not be appropriate for you to stay. Besides, you are safer at home."

"Safer? What is going on?"

"I can't explain it now. It is best that you head home. Say your goodbyes and get on the road before it gets dark."

* * *

"Wasn't the castle amazing?" Arthur said, looking back up the hill we'd just ridden down. "I can't believe anyone lives like that!" I didn't share that the castle looked exactly as I'd seen it in my vision.

"How about that girl I danced with? She was beautiful, wasn't she?"

"Best looking girl there," I replied. "Who was she?"

"Her name is Guinevere. Her dad is a king. Of course, I'll never end up with someone like that, but it was nice for a day at least."

Arthur turned around to look behind us. I teased him. "Missing her and wanting to go back to Camelot?"

He ignored my playful jabbing as he peered back at the path behind us. "I thought I heard something."

"It's these woods," I said. "They're spooky."

Arthur nodded in agreement as he gazed up at the sun, which was starting to drop behind the trees. "It's only going to get spookier. There's no way we'll make it home before dark. This path is only going to get harder to follow as the sun goes down." As if on cue, a branch swatted Arthur in the face. "Maybe we can ride to Dragon's Tail and stay there tonight."

I brightened at the thought. "Good plan," I said.

We rode in silence for awhile. I didn't say anything, but I noticed Arthur often looking behind us. I also heard the noises, but thought, *We're scaring ourselves. Just normal sounds in the woods.*

When we arrived at a clearing Arthur pulled the horse to a stop. "Otter, do you have any idea where Dragon's Tail is from here?"

"None whatsoever."

"Me neither." Arthur looked at the sun again. It was now well behind the trees and we didn't have much light left. "I think we should make camp here for the night. Hopefully with more light in the morning we can find our way home."

I wasn't excited at the idea of spending the night in these woods, but Arthur's plan made sense. I agreed and he dismounted. He carefully eased me out of his pocket and set me on a log. He tied the horse to a nearby tree and got him some water and food. "We were talking about Merlin keeping secrets earlier. Any idea why Merlin had to stay at Camelot?"

I responded very matter-of-factly. "Uther's going to die. I heard Merlin tell him so."

Arthur gathered logs for a fire. He stopped and stared at me. "If the king is going to die, why doesn't Merlin stop it?"

"Merlin told me his magic has consequences. If he changes someone's fate, it means someone else suffers instead."

"But what could be more important than protecting the king?" Arthur asked as he lit his now-built fire.

"I don't know. Maybe he's protecting the *next* king or queen?"

Arthur pulled some food out of his pack as he spoke. "There *isn't* a next king or queen." He handed me a chunk of cheese.

"What do you mean?" I asked, nibbling on my dinner.

"The rule is after a king or queen dies, the next closest heir assumes the throne."

I stopped eating at the realization of what that meant. "That would be...Princess Morgan."

Arthur shook his head. "I asked Merlin about her after our trip to Dragon's Head. She's Igraine's daughter, but her real dad was killed in battle with Uther."

"Uther doesn't have any kids of his own?"

"I asked Merlin that also. His answered confused me. He said, 'As far as everyone knows, Uther does not.'"

"Interesting answer."

"I thought so too. Merlin is always so mysterious. He definitely is hiding secrets from me." I cringed, knowing I was keeping my vision a secret from Arthur.

"Does that mean Igraine would be in charge?"

"Usually it would," Arthur responded, now up again and retrieving a blanket from the horse. "However, a lot of people in Camelot did not approve of Uther's marriage to Igraine."

People said the only reason she married Uther was to become queen." Arthur spread the blanket on the ground before the fire to make a bed for the night. "To prove her loyalty, she declared she would not claim the throne if Uther died before her."

I gulped, "So Morgan would become queen then, wouldn't she?"

Arthur looked worried. "If Uther had no children of his own, I guess so."

"Please, *please* let there be an unknown child of Uther's out there somewhere."

* * *

I woke later to see the moon now high in the sky. I looked over at Arthur. The moon offered just enough light for me to make out a silhouette of a person standing over him!

The long tunic made it clear it was a woman. She reached inside a pocket and pulled something out. My heart leapt when I caught a glint of the object in the moonlight. It was a dagger!

I grabbed my bow and nocked an arrow. My small arrows wouldn't do her any real harm, but they might distract her. She pulled a small bottle from her cloak. She uncorked it and poured its contents over the dagger. I drew back the string of my bow and let an arrow fly just as she raised the dagger over the sleeping Arthur.

She let out a small cry when the arrow nicked her leg. The noise was enough to startle Arthur awake. I drew another arrow and let it fly. Again she winced, slapping at her leg as if she'd been bitten by a bug. It bought Arthur time to get to his feet.

The woman hissed, sounding remarkably like Midnight. The cat was nowhere around, but it made me realize who the person was – Morgan!

She stepped toward Arthur and he took a couple of steps back. "What are you doing?" he shouted at her. He glanced toward his sword which was unfortunately out of reach. I continued to send arrows her way, but I knew I couldn't stop her.

Morgan waved her dagger in a couple circles as she inched toward Arthur. "I've doused this in poison. One taste and you will be dead within a day or two." She lunged toward Arthur who ducked behind a tree. "You will not destroy my plans, you meddling boy."

Arthur crouched and grabbed a stick. He jumped out from behind the tree and charged Morgan, swinging the stick madly. She backed up and stumbled over the rocks surrounding our campfire. As she tried to catch herself, one hand landed in the glowing embers of the nearly extinguished fire. She screamed and rolled away. With her good hand, she snatched a rock and flung it at Arthur. He leaned awkwardly to avoid getting hit and fell backwards and dropped his stick. Morgan leapt forward and plunged the dagger into Arthur's shoulder.

Arthur cried out in pain. Morgan cackled an evil laugh as Arthur writhed on the ground. Then she shuffled off into the woods and I could tell she was taking Arthur's horse. Even if Arthur was okay, we would be stranded.

I raced to Arthur. His shirt was soaked in blood. "We've got to get help!"

Arthur laid his head back on the ground and closed his eyes tightly to try to block out the pain. "You heard Morgan," he groaned. "If I don't bleed to death, the poison is going to kill me."

It couldn't end like this. Arthur wasn't meant to die. I raced to my pack and pulled out the orb Merlin had given me to summon Ferdinand. It was our only hope.

Chapter 14: Otter Saves Arthur

I focused hard on the orb as tears streamed down my cheeks. *Please work; please work*, I thought to myself.

For the rest of the night, Arthur floated in and out of consciousness. I desperately fought the urge to break down sobbing. I knew I had to be brave for Arthur. "It will be all right," I repeated any time he was awake. I was trying to convince myself as much as him.

When the sun peeked over the horizon, I couldn't hold back my tears anymore. Usually a sunrise is a cheery sight, but it made me realize Arthur might be dead by the next time I saw the dawn.

However, as the sun crept over the treetops, I saw a very welcome sight – Ferdinand! The orb had worked! I wiped away tears as a glimmer of hope returned.

As he descended into the clearing, I noticed something else. Pop was riding on Ferdinand's back! As soon as they landed, Pop rushed to-

ward me. He hugged me and blurted out, "Otter! Are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm fine, Pop. It's Arthur. He's going to die if we don't get help!" My father's face was a mix of emotions. His initial look of worry was replaced by relief once he knew I was okay. However, a concerned look returned when he saw Arthur's limp body and pale face.

As I relayed what happened, Ferdinand hung his head. "It's my fault if he dies. We came right away, but I just couldn't find you until daylight."

"No apologies necessary," I said, offering a reassuring smile to my friend. "Arthur's going to make it," I declared, much more convinced than before, "and you'll be the reason why. You've got to get me back to Merlin's cottage. I'll mix up a potion like the one I made to fix your wing. I just hope it can do the same trick for Arthur."

Ferdinand nodded. My father looked at me with pride in his eyes. "What can I do to help, son?"

I tugged the quiver of arrows off my back and handed it to Pop with my bow. "Keep Arthur safe. If any animals see him lying there wounded..."

Pop nodded. "I understand. Good luck."

"Thanks, Pop. We'll be back as soon as we can." I jumped on Ferdinand's back and we lifted off into the sky. I waved to my dad and looked down at Arthur, hoping it wouldn't be the last time I'd see him alive.

* * *

Back at the cottage, I quickly gathered and mixed the ingredients for the potion. I ripped the page from Merlin's book in case I needed to make more, and rushed back outside. Ferdinand and I were off again.

By the time we returned to Arthur, the sun was straight up in the sky. Pop was worried. "Otter, he doesn't look good. He's been moaning and babbling – when he wasn't passed out."

“Well, let’s hope this potion works. Pop, maybe we’re close enough to Dragon’s Tail for them to help us. Why don’t you and Ferdinand look around and see?”

He climbed on Ferdinand’s back and as they lifted off into the air, he yelled out, “We’ll do our best.”

I approached Arthur, choking back tears. He was pale, sweaty, and wasn’t moving. His wound had stopped bleeding, but his red-stained shirt made it clear he’d lost a lot of blood. I rubbed the potion on his wound, hoping and praying it would make the difference. I had mixed as much as I could carry and used it all immediately.

Then I sat. And sat and sat. Arthur didn’t move. I wept and begged out loud, “Please don’t let him die.”

“He isn’t going to die if we have anything to say about it.”

I turned around to the familiar voice. “Unka Vin! Ferdinand and Pop found you!”

Standing behind Unka Vin were Mama, Pop, and seemingly every resident of Dragon's Tail. Ferdinand flapped down into the clearing at the same moment. I was choked up by the show of support, but had to spring into action.

"Thanks for coming, everyone. Here's what I need." I read off the list of ingredients for the potion. "Gather as much of this stuff as possible."

Then I turned to Ferdinand. "Old buddy, I need your help again."

He nodded and said, "Absolutely."

"You have to find Merlin and get him here."

Unka Vin chimed in. "He won't be able to do that alone. I mean, what's he going to do, swoop into the castle and ask the sentries to fetch Merlin? He'll need help – you know, some small creature who can sneak through a castle undetected. Maybe an old friend of Merlin's..."

I smiled. "Thanks, Unka Vin."

“We’ll have Merlin back here as quick as we can.”

Ferdinand and Unka Vin took off into the air and the residents of Dragon’s Tail scattered in search of ingredients. Only Mama and Pop stayed behind. Mama said nothing. She just hugged me. Pop said, “We’re very proud of you.”

“I’m proud of you, too, Otter.”

I turned to see Arthur smiling at me. He was still lying down and very pale, but he was awake!

“Arthur!” I cried. “You’re alive!”

“Well,” he said. “I don’t feel great, but you’re right. I’m not dead.” He tried to sit up, but was too weak. “What did you do to my shoulder? It’s tingling.”

“That’s the potion; it must be working! I’ll make another batch as soon as we have more ingredients.”

I paused for a long time. *Should I tell him about my vision? Merlin told me not to, but it might inspire Arthur to get better.* “Arthur,” I finally said, “I have something important to tell you.”

Arthur looked at me curiously, but said nothing. I continued.

“I... I have visions.”

Arthur was already out of it, so this admission seemed to just confuse him more. Meanwhile, my parents were looking on and their eyes grew as big as holes in Swiss cheese. Arthur murmured, “What do you mean?”

“I have dreams about things that are going to happen – or at least things that might happen.” I paused before continuing, knowing Merlin would not be pleased with me. “I... I had a vision about you, Arthur.”

“I hope it wasn’t about me getting stabbed in the forest by a princess and dying.”

I ignored Arthur’s joke. “No. I had a vision...a vision of you as a knight.”

Arthur laughed, but only for a moment. "Ouch. Don't do that to me again." He lifted his hand to his sore shoulder. "It hurts too much when I laugh."

"I'm not kidding, Arthur."

"Well, that doesn't make sense. I'm not of noble birth."

"I don't understand it either. But my visions, they feel so real – like they've already happened, not just that they're going to happen. For years, I remembered a story I thought Un-ka Vin had told me when I was little. Once parts of it started coming true, I realized it wasn't a story, but a vision. I talked to Merlin and he said..."

"Wait a minute," Arthur interrupted. "Does Merlin think I'm going to be a knight?"

I realized this would get me into trouble, but Merlin shared his vision with Uther. Why couldn't I share mine with Arthur? "Merlin has thought so for a long time."

Instead of being excited, Arthur was angry.
“I’m so tired of Merlin’s secrets! All this time
I’ve complained I’d never amount to anything!
Why wouldn’t Merlin say something?”

“Maybe he’s protecting you.”

“Protecting me?! From what?”

“Maybe people like Morgan.”

Arthur pondered this a moment. “Why would
she care if I become a knight?”

“I’m not sure, but I saw her after I heard Mer-
lin tell Uther he was going to die. She was also
eavesdropping. She then muttered to her cat
about foiling their plan. Maybe if you become
a knight, somehow you can stop her?”

Arthur fought to stay awake. His head nodded
down for a moment, before he jerked it back
up. “It just doesn’t make any sense. Even if I
was a knight, I wouldn’t have any say about
who rules Camelot next.”

"I don't understand, Arthur. I just thought I should tell you everything I know. You know, in case..."

"In case I die," he said looking at me with worry in his eyes. He ironically looked more alive in that moment than he had in the entire conversation. "Do you think I'm not going to make it, Otter?"

I swallowed hard, trying not to cry. "You can't die, Arthur. You're my best friend."

"You're my best friend, too, Otter. If I make it through this...", he paused, choking back tears himself, "it will because of you." Arthur stuck up his thumb on his good hand and I hugged it tight.

Chapter 15: The Lady in the Lake

For the rest of the afternoon, the Dragon's Tail residents steadily brought potion ingredients. I kept making new batches and slathering it on Arthur's wound. He gained enough strength to sit up, but he couldn't stand. Even if he could, we had no horse and he certainly couldn't walk any long distances. He was still in grave danger. Where was Merlin?

The sun was inching its way toward sunset when I heard the sound of hooves pounding on the path. At the same moment, I saw Ferdinand appear on the horizon. Nennius galloped into the clearing and Merlin leapt from the horse before it had even stopped. The wizard dropped to Arthur's side to inspect the wound. He looked at me and smiled. "You've done well, Otter. He'd be dead by now if it weren't for you."

Then Merlin looked very serious. "We've got to get more help, though. That potion is fighting the poison, but it will only work so long."

"Merlin, what do we do?" I cried.

"This is beyond my abilities. I only know one person who can fix this – the Lady of the Lake. If we ride all night, we might make it in time. It's our only hope."

"Well, I'm going, too," I demanded.

"Of course, Otter. You've done too much not to see this through." Merlin scooped me up and tucked me into a pocket of his robe. Then with quite a bit of struggle, he helped Arthur onto the horse and climbed on behind him. Ferdinand and the mice wished us luck and we galloped off.

* * *

I was exhausted and quickly fell asleep. I had another dream about Arthur. We were at a jousting tournament at Dragon's Head. He wasn't competing, but he wasn't just watching either. He was worried that he'd lost a sword. It was unclear why he needed a sword since he wasn't competing, but we headed to the blacksmith shop in hopes of finding a new one. When we discovered all the stores were closed, Arthur panicked. "What are we going to do? I'm going to get in so much trouble!"

My eyes fell on the sword sticking out of the stone in the middle of the village square. I jabbed a paw in its direction and said, "What about that one?"

Then Merlin's horse stumbled and woke me up so I didn't find out how the dream ended. I peered out of Merlin's pocket. The sky was just starting to lose its grey as the sun was peeping over the horizon.

I rubbed my eyes sleepily and looked at Merlin. He noticed me peeping out of his pocket and asked, "Did you have a good nap?"

"I could definitely use more sleep, but I feel better." I looked at Arthur's slumped body wedged between Merlin and the horse's head. "How's he doing?" I asked.

"Luckily we're here," Merlin replied. "We're in Avalon."

"Avalon?"

"This is where the Lady of the Lake lives."

We were surrounded by the greenest hills I'd ever seen. The trees looked so alive I thought they might start dancing around. I saw a squirrel scamper by and thought of Squiggles. This squirrel didn't have that constant look of frustration on his face like Squiggles, though. He looked...so happy.

Everything about this place looked happy and alive and peaceful. However, nothing was more beautiful than the lake. The water sparkled so majestically I thought we could wade in and pick crystals up off the surface.

Merlin glanced down at Arthur's nearly lifeless body. "Otter," he said to me seriously, "before we summon the Lady of the Lake, I need to talk to you."

Uh oh, I thought. He knows I told Arthur about the vision.

"He was dying," I sputtered. "I had to tell him."

"What?" Merlin inquired, looking puzzled.

I realized Merlin hadn't been on to me, but now I'd given my secret away. "I told Arthur about the vision, even though you asked me not to." I wanted to also tell Merlin I knew he'd shared a vision with Uther, but decided against it. I didn't need to get in trouble for eavesdropping as well.

Merlin looked disgusted with me, but regained his composure quickly. "That can't be helped now. Is that the only vision you've had?"

"Well, I just had one," I admitted. I recounted the dream to Merlin.

"Otter," the wizard scolded, "even if your intentions are good, you are not to reveal this vision, or any others, to Arthur. Your visions forewarn you about events that may happen in your life and Arthur's. If he believes what you tell him, he might make different choices and change his destiny."

"Okay," I said sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Remember what I told you about consequences for using magic?" I nodded and Mer-

lin continued. "Arthur has suffered what should be a mortal wound. If the Lady of the Lake uses her power to fix Arthur, there will be a price to pay."

"What do you mean?"

"There will come a day when Arthur will rely on you for guidance instead of me."

His words scared me. "What are you talking about, Merlin? Is something going to happen to you?"

"I won't be here forever," he replied without offering any more explanation. I couldn't pry any more information from him. Was Merlin going to die?

Merlin turned his attention to Arthur, stirring him awake. Arthur was so groggy and weak that Merlin had to help him off the horse. He then lifted Arthur up in his arms and walked straight into the water. I started to squeak my fears about mice not being crazy about water, but Merlin stopped walking once he was waist deep.

A woman dressed in flowing white robes arose from the middle of the lake. Her skin was nearly as white as her robes. She looked appropriately angelic for her beautiful surroundings. She evoked a feeling of peace and harmony in me. Despite all that had happened, I was suddenly more relaxed than I'd ever been.

She floated above the water and glided toward us. "Hello, Merlin," she said. Then she glanced at Arthur and saw his wound. "Are you prepared to make whatever sacrifices are necessary for me to heal this boy?"

"Yes," he said. "I will do anything to save Arthur's life."

"Arthur?" the Lady said, surprised. "This is him?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "So you understand why it is crucial he be saved."

"Of course," she responded. Without a word, she laid her hands on Arthur's wound. The blood on Arthur's shirt slowly disappeared. Then the wound healed right before my eyes.

Even the tear in his shirt repaired itself. As Arthur's color returned, his eyes fluttered open. Merlin eased Arthur down until he was standing in the water.

A peaceful smile crossed Arthur's face and I could tell he was feeling as euphoric as I was. He looked around at his surroundings and then at the Lady of the Lake. "Am I... am I dead? Am I in heaven?"

She smiled at him. "It isn't your time yet. You still have a very important life ahead of you."

Arthur patted his now-healed shoulder. "Did you do this?"

She nodded.

"Thank you, m'lady," Arthur stammered in amazement. He then turned to Merlin and said nothing, but hugged the wizard tightly.

"Ow!" I squeaked from Merlin's robe pocket. "Not so tight!"

Arthur laughed as he pulled away from Merlin. I crawled into Arthur's now out-stretched hand.

"Thanks, Otter. You saved my life," he said, sticking up his thumb for a "hug."

"It seemed only fair," I responded. "You rescued me when Ferdinand attacked."

"That was nothing," Arthur stated. "I threw a rock. You had to get others to help. You had to get to Merlin's cottage to mix up a potion. You stayed with me through the night. And you shared that wonderful dream to give me hope that I would be a knight someday." He paused before continuing. "Otter," he said, "no matter how real it felt, it was *only* a dream."

I smiled feebly at Merlin. He looked relieved that Arthur didn't believe my vision. It meant Arthur wouldn't do anything that would change what was hopefully meant to be. After an awkward silence, I replied to Arthur, "You're welcome, friend."

Chapter 16: A New King

"The king is dead."

Sir Ector's face was grim as he made the pronouncement. He dismounted from his horse and walked toward Merlin. The wizard rose from the wooden bench outside his cottage. He set down the knife he'd been using to whittle a stick.

Arthur leaned against a nearby tree, studying a book on chivalry. I sat on his shoulder reading along, but ducked out of sight when Ector arrived.

Ector had apparently come straight from battle. His armor was muddy, banged up, and stained with blood. He and his horse looked exhausted.

"In battle, I presume?" Merlin asked, resting his hands on Ector's shoulders.

Ector nodded. "I was fighting alongside him," he said, hanging his head in mourning. Then he raised his head proudly and proclaimed, "He died with honor."

He turned to Arthur, who had walked up to Ector and Merlin. "My son," he said, choking up a bit. "This will dramatically change our lives." Then he hugged Arthur.

Merlin gestured to his cottage door. "Come inside and we'll talk." I pondered following them in and eavesdropping again, but a stern look from Merlin warned Arthur and I that this was not a conversation for our ears.

Once they were inside, Arthur gasped. "I can't believe the king is dead! And why did Ector seem so worried about me? I'm sad that the king is dead, but I live in a cottage in the middle of the woods. I barely knew what was going on in the kingdom."

When the two men emerged from the cottage, I got out of sight again as Ector approached Arthur. "Son, I'm very proud of you and I love you very much. I will see you again very soon. Listen to Merlin and do what he asks."

"Of course, Father," Arthur replied. I knew he wanted to ask what was going on, but Ector was mounting his horse and clearly not in-

tending to share any details. He smiled at Arthur and galloped off.

Merlin turned to us. "I am going to Camelot tomorrow for the king's funeral." He pointed a stern finger at us. "You two stay here."

"But we want to go!" Arthur protested, already forgetting Ector's warning.

"Absolutely not!" Merlin shot back. "Morgan tried to kill you! It is best to let her think you're dead." Then Merlin tried to offer some reassurance. "Don't worry. You'll be safe."

* * *

Merlin was gone the next morning before Arthur and I awoke. He didn't return until night fall. Arthur was already asleep, but I popped my head out of the mouse hole in hopes of hearing about the day. I was disappointed when Merlin simply said, "Good night" and crawled into bed.

* * *

The next morning, Arthur peppered Merlin with questions. The wizard remained largely silent about Uther's funeral, but shared news which definitely got Arthur's attention.

"In seven days, there will be a jousting tournament at Dragon's Head. At that time, the new ruler of Camelot will be declared." Merlin smiled at Arthur with a twinkle in his eye.

"Do I get to go?" Arthur asked, his eyes wide in anticipation.

"Oh, yes," Merlin replied. "Kay will be competing for the first time – and he's asked that you be his squire."

A shiver went down my spine. This felt like my vision! If Arthur was a squire, that would explain why I dreamed that he was in a jousting tournament, but wasn't competing.

A look from Merlin told me he was well aware what was going through my mind. When Arthur wasn't looking, the wizard put a finger to his lips as a reminder to keep my visions to myself.

Arthur had turned away to pout. "It just isn't fair," he whined. "Why does Kay get to be a knight? I can beat him in everything! I don't want to be a stupid squire!"

"I don't ever want to hear you mock someone's station in life," Merlin bellowed in an angry voice that caught us both off guard. "No matter what chore you have been given, do it with honor and dignity. I have known kings who were weak and peasants who were strong. Your character is what defines you, not the job you have been tasked to do."

Arthur hung his head in shame. "You're right, Merlin. I cannot control that Kay was born of noble birth and I was not. I can only control how I live my life." He lifted his head up and proclaimed confidently, "Merlin, I will make you proud."

Merlin smiled. "You already have."

* * *

At Dragon's Head, dozens of tents were set up outside the village where knights would pre-

pare. Merlin and Arthur met Ector and Kay at one of the tents. Kay was in a grumpy mood.

"About time you got here," he snapped at Arthur. "I thought Father was going to have to help me get my armor on." Arthur took a deep breath, but said nothing.

"Well, snap to it, little brother. You're my servant today." Arthur glared at Kay but held his tongue. Kay continued, "During the tournament, you have to be ready with my sword if I get knocked off my horse. Not that it will happen," he said smugly. "Think you can handle that?"

"Kay, there's no need to treat your brother like that," Ector scolded. Then he turned to Arthur. "Sorry, son. He's just nervous." Arthur wordlessly nodded and helped Kay with his chest plate.

Once Kay was fully suited in his armor, Arthur helped him mount his horse. Then, as Kay's dutiful squire, Arthur took the horse's reins in one hand and Kay's lance in the other.

"I'll carry Kay's sword," Merlin offered. "Your hands are full."

The knights majestically paraded into the village on their horses led by their squires. The jubilant crowd greeted the knights like heroes coming back from a victorious battle. It was a much larger crowd than the last tournament I'd seen. Everyone wanted to see the new ruler of Camelot crowned.

I was pretty worried it was going to be Morgan. However, I was eager to see another jousting tournament – and this time I would see Arthur right in the middle of the action!

Arthur led the horse through the town square, bringing us past the sword in the stone. Its hilt glistened in the sun. I remembered what the blacksmith told Arthur – even the strongest knights could not get the sword to move. I also had a strange tingly feeling as I remembered the vision I had of Arthur and the sword in the stone.

Merlin surprised us with a sudden announcement. "I have business to tend to. I'll meet you

at the tournament shortly.” With that, he disappeared into the crowd.

People stepped aside as Arthur guided Kay’s horse through the crowd. The villagers were mesmerized by the knights in their gleaming armor and bright colors.

I heard people chatting in the crowd. One woman said to another, “Did ya hear? Whoever wins the tournament becomes King Uther’s successor!”

“Nah,” the second woman replied. “’Tis just a rumor. Igraine’ll take the throne.”

A man next to them said, “She won’t be queen. She signed a declaration promising she would not succeed him if he died first.”

Then the first woman asked, “What about Princess Morgan?”

The second woman answered, “That Morgan is evil. I hear Igraine has considered disowning her.”

The knights and squires moved into a waiting area. I peered over to the platform where I'd found Unka Vin the last time we were here. I smiled as I saw him peeking out from behind a curtain with my parents. We'd dropped them off at Dragon's Tail where they met up with Unka Vin. Then they journeyed through the tunnel to watch the tournament with him from under the platform.

Moments later, a crier announced, "Lords and ladies, Queen Igraine and Princess Morgan!" They strolled into the arena and headed toward the platform. Igraine smiled weakly as she walked by the throng of people. She moved slowly, but did not talk to anyone. I realized how hard it must be for her to appear before all these people after just losing her husband.

Morgan walked behind her. She wore the same sinister expression on her face as always. If anything, she looked more evil than usual. She appeared confident that she would be queen before the afternoon was over.

Kay was scheduled to fight in the second match. Arthur helped him get ready as the

first match got under way. Suddenly, a look of horror crossed his face. "Oh no! Your sword! Merlin has it!"

Kay rolled his eyes. "I knew you'd ruin this! Can't you do anything right?"

"I'll find Merlin before your match."

Arthur darted off, frantically searching for Merlin. He muttered to me, but anyone listening would have thought he was talking to himself. "What am I going to do? What am I going to do? I'll never find Merlin in this crowd."

The crowd thinned out once Arthur approached the village square. His eyes fell on the blacksmith's shop. "I could get Kay a new sword there!"

I got goose bumps. I knew before he even got to the shop that it wouldn't be open – just like in my vision. Sure enough, like all the other shops, it was closed. Everyone had gone to the tournament. "What are we going to do? I'm going to get in so much trouble!"

It was exactly what Arthur said in my vision. I looked at the sword in the stone in the center of the town square, knowing the vision was guiding me. "What about that one?" I asked, pointing.

Arthur glanced down at me and then the sword. "Even the strongest knights have failed to pull the sword from the stone!"

"You have to try," I replied. "Otherwise you have no sword for Kay."

"You're right," Arthur reluctantly agreed. "I can at least try." He set me down beside the stone and climbed atop it. He braced his legs on either side of the anvil. He clasped both hands around the hilt of the sword. "Here goes nothing," he said. Then he took a deep breath and tugged.

There was a cracking sound as the sword loosened. Arthur tugged again and the sword smoothly slid out. I noticed an inscription on the blade of the sword, but couldn't make out what it said. Arthur didn't notice the writing; he was too excited. "I can't believe it! It came out! I have to get this to Kay immediately!"

He was also so eager to get back, he forgot about me! He darted toward the tournament field and I scampered around behind the crowd to avoid getting trampled. I couldn't run on the field, so I ducked under the platform.

"Otter! What are you doing here?" my uncle cried.

Between huffs, I sputtered, "No...time... to...explain... Look!" I pointed toward the field. Kay's match had not only started, but he had already been unseated from his horse. He searched frantically for Arthur, who was supposed to be right there with the sword as soon as Kay was knocked off his horse.

Arthur darted on to the field. It had taken him more effort to fight his way through the crowd and I'd actually made it back first. Arthur presented the sword to Kay. Kay glared at him. "Took you long enough." Then he puzzled over the sword and shouted, "This isn't even mine!"

"I'm sorry, Kay. I couldn't find Merlin. I had to get another sword."

"I never should have depended on my little brother! You will never amount to anything!"

Kay's challenger rode up to see what the commotion was about. "Are you ready, my lord?"

I glanced around at the crowd. As much as they loved a good joust, they seemed even more captivated by this turn of events. I saw Merlin standing next to Ector. The old wizard was always so dependable, but he didn't look at all concerned that he'd put Arthur in such an awkward position. In fact, he was grinning. I realized he'd done this on purpose to make sure my vision came true!

"Where did you get that sword?" Kay demanded.

"In the town square," Arthur muttered.

The other knight stammered in surprise. "You...you pulled that sword from the stone?"

Arthur shrugged. "It wasn't a big deal. It came out easily."

The knight inspected the sword. "It has the same hilt." Then the knight looked at the blade. "What's this? It has an inscription. *Whoever pulls this sword from the stone is King of all Britain.*"

A collective gasp escaped from the people close enough to hear. Then the murmur circulated through the crowd about what was happening. Kay grabbed the sword. "Let me see that. There's no way Arthur pulled this out of the stone."

Merlin made his way into the arena and announced, "Perhaps we should check the stone and see if the sword is still there?"

Shouts of approval went up amongst the crowd. People moved aside to allow Arthur, Kay, and Merlin to make their way toward the village square. The mass fell in line behind them. Mama, Pop, Unka Vin, and I worked our way around the crowd. We found a tree close enough to the center of the village square

where we could perch on a branch and catch all the action.

Shock and bewilderment dominated the reactions of people as they drew close enough to see that the sword was indeed gone. Kay shook his head. "How do we know someone else didn't pull it out and give it to Arthur?"

Merlin smiled. "Let him do it again."

Kay slid the sword back into the anvil. At Merlin's prompt, Arthur stepped forth and pulled it out again. The crowd cheered.

Kay rolled his eyes. "Anyone could do that now! It was already loose."

Kay jabbed the sword back in and tried to remove it himself. It wouldn't budge. "Well," he sputtered, "I'm sure someone else can do it."

One by one, knights and villagers tried but failed. The crowd was so focused on those trying to pull the sword from the stone there was no reaction to Queen Igraine as she moved her way slowly toward the middle of the activity. A particularly burly man was putting all his

might into trying to pry the sword from the stone. She rested a hand gently on his shoulder.

The man turned, ready to bark at whoever was interfering. The look on his face quickly changed. "Your majesty," he said, moving back away from the stone.

She smiled faintly and addressed the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, I realize this is not a conventional way to determine a king. When I married Uther, we knew his brutal reign would risk the lives of any children we had. Enemies would kill any heirs to the kingdom to throw it into turmoil. However, Uther and I loved each other very much..." she paused to compose herself, "and we had a son."

A gasp went up amongst the crowd. "Uther asked his most trusted advisor," Igraine said as she turned to Merlin and smiled, "to look after the boy and keep him from harm." She gazed at Arthur with pride. "Merlin thrust this sword in the stone and cast a spell so that it could only be removed by the rightful heir."

Arthur looked at Merlin with confusion. "Me? I'm Uther and Igraine's son?"

Merlin nodded. Igraine gestured to the sword in the stone. "Arthur, my son...", she stopped again, working hard to contain her emotion, "if you will remove the sword once more, I will knight you. Then we can officially declare you king."

The bewildered Arthur once again pulled the sword from the stone. The crowd cheered again. Arthur handed the sword to Igraine and knelt before her. She tapped each of his shoulders with the sword. I got chills. It was just like my dream!

"Arise," the queen proclaimed. She smiled at Arthur before addressing the crowd, "Our new king!"

Arthur stood looking perplexed and overwhelmed as the crowd cheered for him. Merlin dropped to a knee before Arthur. Then Igraine and Ector followed suit. Slowly, the people in the crowd silenced and knelt down, one by one, until only Morgan and Kay were standing. Morgan furiously stormed off until she

was out of sight. Kay looked baffled, protesting to seemingly no one in particular. "This can't be true. He's my little brother!"

Ector scolded Kay. "Kneel! You will show the proper respect. He's your *king*."

Kay reluctantly dropped to a knee as the crowd erupted into chants. "Long live the king! All hail King Arthur!" Mama and Pop and Unka Vin and I followed suit, squeaking out "All hail King Arthur!" knowing there was no danger of people hearing us above the roar of the crowd. Unka Vin and I thrust our swords triumphantly into the air.

Despite being the center of attention, a worried look crossed Arthur's face. He grabbed at his pocket where I had been hiding before. He'd realized he forgot about me. He frantically searched the ground where he'd last seen me.

Merlin also saw Arthur's face. He wrapped an arm around his young prodigy's shoulders and whispered in his ear. The wizard pointed toward the tree where we were watching the show. We quickly ducked for fear that others would see what Merlin was pointing at. Ar-

thur's look of fear was replaced by relief. Merlin maneuvered his way out of the center and let the throngs push forward.

The wizard strolled casually over to the tree. When no one was looking, he stretched out his palm and I climbed in. He smiled and said, "Let's go congratulate our king."

About the Author

Dave Whitaker is the father of two boys who happen to love stories about mice, knights, wizards, and kings. His sons are featured in the book *Kids Do the Darndest Things...And Then Dad Posts It on Facebook*.



Dave previously wrote non-fiction in different capacities. His company, Toolbox Training (toolboxtrainingonline.com), is devoted to developing resources and training for adults who work with children.

He also formed Dave's Music Database (davesmusicdatabase.com) to share his passion for music. Under that banner, he published a book about the top 100 songs of the rock era and a collection of essays originally posted on his blog at davesmusicdatabase.blogspot.com.

You can learn more about Dave's work at WritbyWhit.com. For more about this book, check out OtterandArthur.com.

Picture a mouse on the back of a falcon soaring over a castle. Imagine that mouse practicing jousting using a squirrel as his horse or storming through the corridors of Camelot with a cat and dozens of knights chasing him. Glimpse into Merlin's cottage as the mouse rummages through the wizard's spell books to learn a magic potion. If it weren't for that mouse, Arthur would never have pulled the sword from the stone and become king.

Otter and Arthur and the Sword in the Stone follows the adventures of a mouse nicknamed Otter who befriends the young Arthur and helps him become literature's most celebrated king. Dave Whitaker's story is aimed at elementary school-age readers, combining classics like Beverly Cleary's *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* with the legend of King Arthur.

