

ARTHUR'S HEART

“When is he likely to wake up?” asked a woman. Her words drifted in and out of my ears like motes of dust captured by sunlight.

“He’ll come around when he’s ready, Morgana. I can’t promise you any more than that. Arthur isn’t as fey as Lancelot, he can’t take the same kind of punishment. Tearing those bonds out of him has punched holes through his spirit,” Merlin said. I knew that voice. It had been with me since childhood and never seemed to change.

I rolled my eyes behind their lids. I had eyes. I had a tongue and fingers and toes. I also had a void in my chest. Something didn’t feel right. I didn’t feel right. I missed the one voice I needed more than any other. “Wolf,” the name slid between my dry lips.

“Lancelot’s not here, Arthur. But I am and you are safe,” Merlin said. The bed moved and someone took my hand. I forced my eyes to open but focusing proved difficult.

“Wolf,” I tried again to make these people bring him to me. The man who held my heart and soul in his hands. I tried to remember where he’d be if not here at my side. I’d been injured in battle, my heart almost crushed. He’d left to save my life, a year and a day, they’d told me. But I knew he needed me and I’d forced Merlin to bring me into the cursed world of Albion. And I’d lost him. I’d lost my love to another. I remembered. I remembered everything.

Pain shot through me and wrenched a cry from my lips as my body curled onto its side and my knees drew tight to my chest.

The bed shifted again and I felt a hand on my head. “Arthur, you need to breathe. The pain will pass. We had no choice, he was killing us both. We had to sever the ties

between you and those he held with me,” Morgana’s voice sounded so reasonable.

“No,” I whimpered. “No, I can’t lose everything. I can’t lose this, it’s all I had. He is all I had.”

“We should leave him,” Merlin said quietly. “He’ll come around when he’s ready.”

The bed heaved around me and I heard their footsteps. Morgana said as the door closed, “If this is love, I’m glad I’ve never felt it.”

She was his wife and would be forever and she didn’t love him. The pressure inside me exploded outward. I sobbed. My Wolf had left with Tancred by his side and he’d ordered me to stay in The City or return to Camelot. How could he do this to me? And then he’d been attacked and my life drained out of me while I tried to hold him to this world. He didn’t love me. He’d chosen another and I wanted to die.

How long I lay there and wept was anyone’s guess. Time didn’t mean much. A small man came in and silently moved around me, leaving me simple food and watered wine. He left wash cloths and clean clothes. I slept, still unable to leave my nest of tangled sheets and blankets in case the world collapsed. He’d left me. He’d chosen another. I just couldn’t move past the pain. No rational thought allowed me to consider his perspective. He’d left me for someone else and in this moment of torment I truly didn’t understand why.

“My Lord?” a small hand and a small voice finally interfered inside the black shell holding the world away. “My Lord, you have been here for three days and nights. You haven’t moved. People are worried and the frankly you need to stop this.”

“Go away,” I croaked.

“My Lord Pendragon, you haven’t eaten or drunk for days. You need to move. His Majesty won’t thank me if you

die under my care and neither will the Queen.” The voice sounded cross and insistent.

“He won’t care what happens to me,” I croaked.

“Are all men from Camelot so stupid?” asked the small voice. “Do you really think such a passion can ever really die? I have not known you or the King for every long but I do know a thing or two about love. Come, my Lord. Sit up, have something to drink and a little food, let me clean your hands and face. You will not die of this malady.”

“I want to,” I groaned.

“I know but you are too strong and your heart won’t stop,” insisted the voice.

I groaned as I tried to uncurl from my woodlouse ball of misery. My arms and legs were stiff and I suddenly realised I couldn’t remember the last time I’d taken a piss. I panicked with the desire to pee. “Through there, my Lord,” came the voice, which I discovered belonged to Lancelot’s manservant, Quilliam. I fell off the bed and organised my limbs to scramble into the closet. I yanked at my clothes, which stank and finally relieved myself.

Used to servants, but not used to being such a wreck, I felt myself blush when I returned to the room I’d been using since my arrival in Albion. The walls were gently curved and flowed over my head to form a ceiling of fine plasterwork and glass. The masons of Camelot could not have imagined such grace and elegance, in fact everything I’d seen of The City and her people put Camelot in the shade. My consolations came from the loyalty of my people and our more civilised existence. My grandfather stopped slavery and my court did not insist on the terrible sacrifices made by Lancelot and Tancred from their ‘sponsors’.

“My Lord, your bath is next door, but I suggest you have something to drink first,” Quilliam said, stripping my bed. I think he wanted to prevent me returning to it.

“Thank you, Quilliam,” I said.

He glanced at me and his wrinkled expression seemed surprised. “You remember my name, Sir?”

I smiled, easy for a man used to hiding behind the image people need, rather than the one he wants to represent. Of course I didn’t always manage it, but I tried and these days I tried harder. I realised I’d already begun to bury the grief Lancelot’s decision left in my heart. No more public displays of self pity.

“Of course I remember, Quilliam. You helped dress Lancelot for his coronation, he’s not any easy man to understand after someone like Aeddan, I should imagine,” I said.

“No, Sire, not the kind of king we are used to, fortunately,” Quilliam said drily. He handed me a finely made glass full of watered wine and ushered me into the adjoining bathroom. I stood and looked at the gently steaming warm water, sunk into the tiled floor. I’d shared a bath like this with Lancelot, when we’d been at Rafe’s. Tears burned once more but I swallowed hard, undressed and slipped into the warm embrace.

If I didn’t think, or remember, it didn’t hurt so much. I set my mind to considering Morgana and realised she’d been dealing with a city in an emergency when I’d felt Lancelot dying. We’d had several smaller earthquakes and more buildings collapsed but I’d lost consciousness early one morning and not woken again until just now.

“Morgana will need your help,” I muttered. “Stop being such a selfish bastard, this is what caused him to leave you in the first place.” I set to with a scrubbing brush and some finely scented soap I found. I washed my hair, washed me until I couldn’t feel my skin anymore and Quilliam appeared with a razor in hand. I lay back in the bath and allowed him to shave me.

When I left the bath, frighteningly fragile but in one piece, I found clothes of velvet in Camelot’s colours of blue

and gold, with a fine black silk shirt. Excalibur lay on the bed, her scabbard polished, along with my boots.

“The Queen is expecting you for dinner, my Lord Pendragon,” Quilliam said.

“I thought you were the king’s servant, Quilliam?” I asked. “Not that I don’t appreciate the attention, but...”

“The King is absent, you are his representative. It is my duty to care for you in his place, Sir.”

I placed my hand on his shoulder. His brown eyes really did register surprise at such an intrusion. “Thank you, Quilliam. It is an honour to be considered worth your trouble.”

A small smile spread over the Brownie’s face before he managed to hide it by turning away. “This way, my Lord.”

I tied the last of the laces on my doublet and followed the smaller man. We walked past the suite of rooms I knew Lancelot used the night before he left on Taranis’ quest and onto Morgana’s suite. An ornate carving of the moon hanging over a tree and lake sat on the highly polished wood of her main door. Quilliam knocked, entered on her command and announced, “The Lord Arthur Pendragon, your Majesty.”

He bowed, I walked in and Morgana rose. The dark to Guinevere’s light. She was truly beautiful and very self contained. She crossed the room toward me, held out her hand and I bowed low over it, kissing the back.

“I’m glad to see you up, Arthur. I’ve missed you these last few days,” she said studying my eyes.

I looked back at her. I knew what she saw, bruises of grief in my eyes, fresh lines in my face and a sense of glass vibrating just before the moment it smashes. “I am sorry to have been such a...” My courage fled. Such a what? Such a weak fool? So desperately in love, I couldn’t think beyond my loss?

Morgana’s grasp changed and she led me to a table laid

with fine, light foods. “Sit, Arthur. You need a friend. I cannot hope to understand your love, but I can understand pain,” she spoke with a gentleness which surprised me. Guinevere, although she tried to help whenever I lost Lancelot over recent years, never really understood. Her own love for him made it hard for her to help me. She also didn’t like being second fiddle to us both; something I’d grown to appreciate after Tancred appeared.

“I should not have allowed myself to be incapacitated for so long, forgive me,” I managed with all the grace I could muster.

Morgana studied me before answering, “Fey are a strange race, Arthur. We can manipulate the very energy of one being into the soul of another. We can share experiences beyond your abilities to imagine when we truly love, but to have that destroyed so brutally, usually kills us. You will be fragile for some time, possibly forever but you will find a measure of peace if Lancelot stays away. He is so very strong and you’ve loved him a very long time.”

Her compassion and understanding almost stole my hard won self control. She smiled, patted my hand and changed the subject. “We have something of a problem which is growing worse on a daily basis and I need a general I can trust,” she said, picking up a piece of fruit.

“Right,” I said. “What’s the problem? I can lead men into battle.”

She grinned, a delightful lopsided affair. “I was hoping you could.”

We talked on into the evening. The City, its vast and diverse population in a state of confusion and upheaval after the earthquake, had started to turn in on itself. The criminal underbelly swelling to epidemic proportions. She explained the systems in place and I instantly saw her problem. The men wouldn’t listen to her because Lancelot didn’t stand beside her as a proven warrior and she was thought of as

Aeddan's lapdog. There were also far too many different types of soldier and nobody wanted the unpleasant job of helping the understaffed city watch.

I needed to replace Lancelot and be a proxy king for Albion. Guinevere would be so pleased.

"I know it's a lot to ask, Arthur. Especially after everything we've been through," Morgana drew circles on the table between us with her fingertip and I thought back to the frozen wastes of Avalon. "But I plan on Albion being a friend to Camelot, not an enemy."

I sighed. "To be honest, Morgana, if you were to stab me in the back now and end my life it would be a blessed relief, so yes, I'll help you. If only to have something to do which keeps me here and close to my Wolf."

"For enemies we are being frighteningly honest," she said.

"Aeddan and Stephen de Clare were my enemies, not you," I said.

We raised our glasses and formally acknowledged our simple alliance.

"Fuck," I choked on the stink coming from the small room at the top of a rundown house.

"Sorry, Sir. Should have warned you," said the man at my side.

"It's alright, Sergeant." I tried to breathe through my mouth but it meant I tasted the corpse rather than smelt it. I blinked back the tears the smell caused and tried to see through the buzz of flies.

A body lay in the centre of the room, wrists and ankles nailed to the floor, the limbs spread eagle. A young woman, her skin now turning green at the edges of the gaping wounds in her chest and belly. Her breasts had been removed and her gentiles mutilated.

I used the edge of my cloak over my mouth and nose before stepping forward. Avoiding her face, thankfully free of wounds but covered in the sores of a dying whore, I forced myself to look into her belly. Liver, spleen, womb all gone. So to the heart, making her chest a mess of broken bones.

Her guts heaved and a rat stuck his head out of the rotting mess. That was enough for my stomach. I retched and ran from the room, not stopping until I reached the street. Fortunately the weather, heading toward winter, made the air cool and sweet compared to the room upstairs. I controlled my breakfast and thought clean thoughts of cool mountain springs. Until an image of Lancelot popped into my head, standing waist deep in water, and I thought I'd been having a good day.

Six weeks into my forced separation from him and I still woke each morning with his name on my lips and an ache in my heart. Each night I lay in my bed, alone, staring at the ceiling trying to understand how it all went so wrong. I soon realised most of the mess belonged to me.

During the day, I worked for Morgana. Which meant being at this terrible murder and trying to understand how it happened.

When she'd given me the task of reining back the different military organisations in The City, I'd relished the challenge. There were nine Legions, all of whom maintained their own specific roles within the confines of the walls and their rivalries controlled their behaviour. I also had The City Watch to deal with and, because of the size of the place, district militias. They all hated each other and thought the others a waste of money. The Legions in particular were proving difficult for Morgana to handle. They considered themselves above the people who lived in The City. They did not serve the people as the Knights of Camelot did.

She wanted me to start to forge these Legions into a unified army. I realised I couldn't, but what I could do was find men who'd work with the Queen. But for now, the army didn't bother me; the bodies mounting up became a priority.

It began three weeks ago, during the last dark moon, which I now understood not to be a coincidence. The body I now dealt with came on the third quarter of the moon after the full moon's sacrifice last week. We knew they were sacrifices because a normal murderer doesn't remove body parts only for those parts to end up in the palace. I'd first discovered the city watch had a problem when parts of corpse number one ended up in the stable of Morgana's preferred horse. The second I'd seen with my own eyes, her body staked and cut open. Those missing items had arrived on a silver platter, much to the shock of Brownie bringing our food. It had taken me a long time to calm Quilliam and promise him the Brownies weren't going to suffer for the oversight.

After that I'd placed more guards on Morgana than she liked and slept on a cot in her sitting room. I wanted to call Lancelot back to The City so we could face this danger together but knew I'd never be able to find him. Morgana's protection sat firmly in my hands, rather than her husband's. The odd thing was, we'd become interchangeable for Morgana's people and her enemies. I discovered that after Aeddán's very public death and my arrival during Lancelot's final fight in the arena for The Lady or Morgana depending on who you listened to, we'd become a single person. Where one walked people believed the other followed.

I'd tried to explain that Lancelot and I were not intimate friends any longer, that we were not bound together, but no one believed me. So, I just dealt with people considering us one unit and tried to ignore the pain in my heart it caused.

Body number three arrived the night of the full moon and the missing parts were in Morgana's bed by dawn. She'd screamed, I'd woken with Excalibur in my hand and we'd stood side by side, the lady pressed against my body, trembling with blood on her nightdress. I'd not seen or felt anything. The city watch and local militia tore the city apart looking for the body. It took two days and this time there were symbols around the corpse of the whore.

The inscriptions were written in an old language of Albion's ancient fey royalty, those with real magic in their blood. With Merlin's return to Camelot to aid Guinevere, I didn't have anyone I trusted other than Morgana to help translate. She'd come down to a loose interpretation in the end: 'The whore who betrays her master will die with the grief of ten thousand souls tearing her asunder through all of time.'

Apparently this meant someone wanted Morgana dead because of Aeddan and was trying to curse her soul on its journey to the Land of the Dead. We guessed Morgana would be the final whore on the final night. I had five days to find the murderer in a city ten times the size of Camelot.

"Arthur, you need to sleep," Morgana said. She walked into the sitting room from her bedroom wearing nothing but a simple shift. The candlelight played with the white fabric making it almost translucent in places.

I sat up straighter in the chair and looked away. "I'm fine," I said.

"You'll not be if you keep this up. Come, you know the madness isn't going to continue tonight. You've finally found the last body. Sleep, tomorrow we'll set up the wards around me --"

"We've already tried wards, Morgana," I said harshly. "They don't work. None of the magic you've tried is working. Whatever or whoever is doing this is powerful beyond belief." I rose and paced the room. Not only had I

lost Lancelot, I'd be losing his wife if I didn't do something soon. What kind of insanity would we all be facing after that?

She crossed toward me and stopped my restless pacing. "Arthur, sometimes you just have to let life take its course." Her eyes were even darker than my own, a blue I found myself lost in far too often. I noticed she'd grown just a little thinner over the last few weeks and my hands flexed on her hips.

"Shit, Morgana. I'm sorry, I didn't realise," I said and dropped my hands, stepping back from her body only to trip over a low lying table and crash to the floor in a sprawling heap.

She giggled. A delightfully girlish sound. "Oh, Arthur. Forever the gallant man," she laughed.

I rolled and stood. "You don't have to find it quite so amusing," I muttered, my dignity gone forever.

She smothered the laugh but couldn't manage to hide the smile. "Quite right, but you don't have to run from me every time I come close to you."

I swallowed hard, other parts of me reacting in a similar way. "You are my friend's wife," I said roughly. "This isn't a seemly conversation."

"Would you rather I seduce you the way Guinevere seduced Lancelot?" she asked.

My back stiffened and my right hand ached to pull Excalibur. "Careful what you say, Lady. You have no rights in that quarter," I snarled with my back half turned toward her.

For a moment the air became charged with the desire for violence as a substitute for the lust which built between us. That air exploded from Morgana in a huff. "You're right, I'm sorry. That was cruel. Please, Arthur, forgive me."

I didn't move. "What do you want from me, Morgana? I am here, acting in your husband's stead protecting you and

The City. We talk, we plan, and now we fuck? Is that it?"

A movement and a soft hand on my back. "I am sorry, Arthur. And no, I didn't mean for us to fuck. I wanted you to make love to me," she spoke very gently and I heard her fear and loneliness. I felt that loneliness every night I lay in bed. I bowed my head and closed my eyes silently praying for the strength to say no.

I gave her the good grace to turn and look at her fully in the face. She was beautiful, her skin shone slightly in the low light and I saw blue tints in her dark hair. I cupped her jaw in my hand, she felt so soft and small despite being only a hand's width shorter than me. Her face turned into my palm and those full red lips kissed my starving skin. I should not have touched her.

"I love another, Morgana. You know this and you know who," I whispered. She turned those big blue eyes up to my face and her hands lay on my chest. Only my shirt protected me, I wished I wore my heaviest suit of armour.

"Lancelot isn't here, Arthur. I am. I belong to him and you can possess me," she said.

Of all the thoughts and phrases she could have used, that one corroded my resolve more than any other. I couldn't think fast enough. Why did she want me in her bed when she'd refused Lancelot the night they'd married? Did she trust me now I'd proved myself? Was I a cipher for my friend in more ways that I could possibly understand? Or was she just being a fey witch and using me to gain something I couldn't imagine?

But Lancelot had touched her. He'd kissed her. He'd married her. Did I prefer sex with women or men? During my whole life I'd had three lovers, Guinevere, Lancelot and Tancred. Guinevere I thought I desired when we met and I'd taken her from Lancelot but I knew now more than ever I'd done it because he'd left me for her. I could have her because I was to be king. Tancred, to my shame, I'd used

when he'd returned to Camelot after Aeddan. I always wanted my Wolf and Tancred filled a need in me but I'd been at my worse. There were not words to cover that shame. And then there was Lancelot.

He informed every thought and action. I loved him. I hated what I'd become over the years, how I'd used his devotion to me and the crown of Camelot. Every time he thought I'd care for him, I'd let him down. I'd grown to realise I'd done nothing to deserve his loyalty and love, which is why he'd chosen another to fill his bed and his heart. I wanted to beg his forgiveness but it was too late, far too late. I'd never feel him in my arms again. I'd never feel him move through my soul. All I had were my memories of those few times we'd known happiness. I'd destroyed his love for me and now I paid the price.

My arms slid around Morgana's waist and I pulled her the remaining distance into my body. She gasped slightly and I chose that moment, with her lips slightly parted in surprise to kiss her. It started gently, I'd been dealing with the aftermath of Guinevere's attack for a long time and never surprised her. But Morgana was a different creature and she wanted me.

Her tongue drove into me with insistence and I responded. Suddenly I wanted to fuck, to rut, to possess this creature who owned my Wolf. I moved from her mouth to her soft neck and she sighed, her long fingers clutching me tight to her and digging into my back. "Yes, Arthur. Make me yours," she murmured.

I half lifted her off the ground and pushed her against the nearest wall. I wanted to be inside her body. Somehow I wanted to reach my true love through his woman the way I'd tried to reach him through Guinevere. God, this was so wrong.

Her nightgown tangled in my fingers and I grew impatient. I tore it at the neck and yanked the skirt up to her

waist exposing those long legs at last. Morgana lifted her creamy white thigh and tucked it over my hip. I bowed my head and roughly sampled her full breasts. She cried out in pleasure, pushing her hips against mine. Her reaction to my rough treatment brought me close to the edge. I felt hard and heavy against her.

She kissed me roughly, biting my lip. “Now, Arthur. Take possession now.”

I yanked at the laces of my hose, they were already loose and I freed myself. I lifted her slightly and she raised her other leg to wrap both around my waist. I didn’t remember making a decision to slide into her body, but it happened. One moment I pined for my lost love, the next I fucked his wife. Morgana groaned as I filled her over and over. She felt so wet and tight, her athletic body using mine while we both used the wall for balance.

The spiralling desire between us grew frantic and we became a single desperate beast of desire. I drove into her hard and she tore my shirt off my back only to bite down onto my shoulder. The pain sent me over the edge and I grunted, quivering.

“Come deep inside,” she ordered and I did her bidding. She pulsed and I felt her own hot juice mingle with mine.

The self loathing hit me between one breath and next. I’d not even managed to help Morgana to the ground.

I lifted her gently off my body and held her so those long legs could reach the floor. She caught her balance but leaned her head against my chest. I stood still, now unable to touch the very definition of temptation.

“I’m sorry, my Lady,” I said. “I will find you another guard.”

Morgana jerked against me. Her head shot straight and those blue eyes pierced me more thoroughly than I’d taken her a moment before. “Oh, no, Arthur. No, please don’t do this. You can’t run and hide and beat yourself up with shame.

I wanted you. I want you. I've not trusted a man in a long time and I'll not let you go that easily." Her fingers dug into my hips stopping me from wrenching away from her.

"Morgana," I cried out in desperation. "You are the wife of the man I've betrayed in more ways than you can ever imagine. I can't do this. I can't hurt him – again. I love him." And I fucking hated myself. A single tear of self loathing caressed my cheek until Morgana kissed it away.

"Tell me about him," she requested softly. "Tell me about the man, not the legend I forced to fight for me but the man you know. Because you know him best, you always have. I want to know him, Arthur. Through you, I can learn to make him happy. Teach me."

"I never made him happy."

"That's not true. I know that's not true. I've seen inside him and his love for you is so vast, so much a part of him I can understand why it sent him mad. You burn brightly for each other but have yet to learn to control that terrible gift you've been given. Let me help you, Arthur. Let me ease the pain you feel." She touched my belly, just in the soft spot below my ribs. "Give me Lancelot, your Wolf, and I'll give you a measure of peace."

I kissed her gently, wrapped my arms around her and I wept while she held me. When I'd recovered I found myself in her bed, naked, with her body in my arms and I started to tell her about the first time I'd ever seen my Wolf in the courtyard of Tintagel Castle.

We both slept that night and woke late the next morning. I'd never woken with anyone but Guinevere or Lancelot in my bed but felt comfortable and safe. Things really had changed if waking up in bed with Morgana felt safe. We didn't speak, but we made love.

During the night the Brownies had left me clean clothes in her room, so when we'd finished I rose, washed and dressed. Morgana remained in bed, watching me silently. She finally said, "I can try to find him you know. I can call him back."

I half smiled and sat on the bed. "No, he's moved on and I have to live with that." I took her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. "You've been very kind to me, Morgana."

"You aren't going to be able to move on though are you?" she asked.

I studied my hand, holding hers. "No, I'll learn to function but I can't move on. I am very fond of you Morgana, but I shall never love anyone else. I can't and the worst thing is I can now see clearly every mistake I've ever made."

"That's a start," she said. "If he ever comes home to you, at least you won't make the same mistakes again."

I smiled again, grimly this time and rose. "I have to find a murderer."

I retreated from Morgana's company and walked to my rooms with a head full of arguments and counter arguments. What the hell did I think I was doing? I found sex with women a diversion, merely something I did because I had to have children for my throne. Lancelot is where my heart lay and in his arms the only real peace I'd known.

"But you fucked that up," I muttered opening my door.

"Sir, Lord Pendragon, Sir." Sergeant Roe stood abruptly when I entered my suite. A swarthy small man, with no body fat and long black hair he never tied back tidily.

"Sergeant, how long have you been waiting?" I asked, confused and embarrassed by his presence.

"Not long, Sir," he said with the faithfulness of a hound.

"Is something wrong?" I promoted.

He shifted from foot to foot for a few moments. "You

asked me to meet you here this morning, to discuss strategy.”

I felt myself beginning to blush. He was right and I’d forgotten. I turned away slightly. “Of course, I’m sorry. It was a long night. The Queen is upset by all this.”

“Yes, Sir. Not surprising really.” The honesty in his tone made me smile. It’s why I’d chosen to work closest with him. He had a wonderful memory, little imagination, great loyalty to his post and tended to take things at face value.

“Right, Sergeant, we need to study my lists.” I walked into the room I’d been using as an office during this investigation.

He whistled when he saw my efforts. I glanced at him. “What is it?” I asked.

“Well, Sir. I’ve never seen anything like this,” he said. He moved to the wall where I’d pinned up all the information I’d gathered about the first murder. Interviews with witnesses from her last hours. Friends and family, not that there’d been many, and sketches I’d made of the crime scene from the statements given by the men. The second and third murders were more detailed because I’d been there. I had maps of the palace and The City with points marked and possible paths through the buildings for the person leaving the body parts for Morgana to find.

“Whatever I do, Sergeant, I do it thoroughly. Now, familiarise yourself with the details and see if your memory can begin to make links I’m missing.” I watched him pour over the pages nailed to the wall and tackle the pages all over my desk.

“You know, Sir.” He finally straightened and rubbed his back after reading for most of the morning. “These girls didn’t know each other. Didn’t work in the same quarters of the city or share friends. They didn’t even have a pimp in common. The murderer left them in places he could take his time and the bodies not be discovered until they started to

stink. The body parts are left in closer proximity to Queen but we have no idea how he is breaking our security. That is the most important thing because you think she will be victim number four and I agree.”

“So you’ve not seen anything I haven’t,” I said. Exhaustion and anger snapped at me and I leaned back in my chair, pinching the bridge of my nose. I would not allow Morgana to die.

“Well, Sir,” Roe said slowly. I tipped forward and looked at him. “There is something. I’ve heard the King is off hunting down these bits of magic for the gods themselves.”

This story had grown and shifted over the weeks since the coronation and Lancelot’s departure from The City. I had no idea which version rattled around the streets at the moment.

“Go on, Sergeant,” I said.

“What if it was a bit of magic that big, Sir? What if it were like that Grail thing you took away?” Another of the rumours which added to the mythology surrounding myself and Lancelot.

I’d considered it, but the chances were so slight I’d never bothered to mention it. Surely if something like that existed, this close to the palace, someone would have felt its power. Unless it was already in the palace, a part of the palace. Something which had been here for so long no one thought anything about it.

Like the Brownies. Admittedly, when we discovered the second body’s remains in Morgana’s food, they’d thrown a fit but... I could only name three or four of them, the rest were interchangeable. What if Quilliam didn’t have control over them and how did they actually work?

“Sergeant Roe, we have an understanding that nothing leaves this room with regards to this investigation without my direct orders, right?” I asked my companion.

He blinked several times. "Yes, Sir. Of course."

"What do you know and understand of the Brownie society?" I asked quietly hoping they didn't have ears in the walls even if it felt like it sometimes.

Roe took a few moments to organise his thoughts, glanced around him and leaned over the desk toward me. "Well, Sir, they are a bit of a mystery. They've been a part of the royal household for generations, long before Aeddán. It's thought they may have come down from the lands of Sidhe with the powerful royal lines to create The City in the first place. Aeddán's forefathers pulled much of the palace and public places out of the earth herself and some say the Brownies were a part of that great conjuring, so that they are made of the earth herself. They don't integrate with the rest of the populous. They are separate from the people unless they need to buy something they can't make themselves."

"So we have no way of tracking them, knowing them or understanding them?" I asked.

"No, Sir. Not unless the Queen knows something you don't."

Which was always possible. "It has to be something to do with the Brownies and I think at least one of them has something which can help them murder these girls."

"Well, we don't have any other leads and although it seems impossible, it's the only probable solution to the situation," Roe said. "How do we go about finding out?"

"We ask the Queen," I said.

Roe visibly paled. "I have to meet the Queen?"

I grinned. "She doesn't bite, Roe, unless she had to." He didn't appear reassured. "Wait here and I'll bring her to us." I left him in my murder room and strode off to find the Queen. All thoughts of misery over my actions last night and Lancelot's departure fled with the chase I now scented on the air of the palace.

I found her in a meeting with some of the Legions generals. It wasn't going well by the sound of the raised voices. I didn't bother knocking, I just walked in. Morgana looked at me in surprise and a little relief. I bowed to her and said, "Your Majesty."

She rose and dropped a small curtsy. "Lord Pendragon, what can I do for you?"

I glanced at the papers on the large desk, the faces of those surrounding the table and guessed they'd been discussing wages of the army – again. "I have urgent business I need you to attend to, your Majesty. It's confidential." That would wind the old bastards up, I thought. The army didn't like not knowing everything happening in The City.

"Of course, I am always at your disposal, my Lord," she said surprising me with her choice of words.

"As I am yours, my Lady," I bowed lower this time making my subservience to Morgana obvious. The generals feared me because of Aeddan and the thought that their new King would always listen to Camelot's ruler rather than them. To be submissive to Morgana cost me nothing and give her a great deal of power. I took her hand and bowed very slightly toward the men at the table. "Generals," I said.

They all nodded in return, watching me warily. Once I had this murderer in my custody I'd be taking these men on and winning. I'd not be leaving Lancelot with the mess Aeddan created by fuelling their paranoid infighting.

"Thank you," she muttered as we left.

I grinned. "Don't thank me yet. I think we might have a lead but I need your help."

She looked at me curiously and opened her mouth to ask. "No, Morgana, I can't say anything. I need to check you can speak without being heard." We reached my rooms and I pulled her close to my chest. She gasped slightly and her lips brushed my neck sending a thrill through me. I forced

the sensation to one side. "I need you to be able to speak without the Brownies listening to you and coming in unannounced," I whispered in her ear.

"What are you talking about, Arthur?"

"Can you stop them from being a part of you?" I repeated.

"Why?"

"Just do it, woman," I insisted.

She stiffened slightly at my choice of words but closed her eyes and breathed out. "It's done. I'm sealed off from Albion but I can't remain so for long," she said.

"We don't need long," I said pulling her with me by the hand into my murder room. I'd not warned her about the images around the walls and when she saw my pictures she tried to leave the room.

"Oh, by the gods, Arthur. This is horrible," she said. Sergeant Roe knelt before her with his head down. I'd forgotten how seriously the lower level guards tended to react to the presence of royalty.

"Um, yes, sorry, should have warned you. But listen, we have an idea. For heaven's sake, Roe, stand up," I ordered.

"It's alright, Sergeant, you may stand and address me. I won't bite." Her choice of words caused me to chuckle and the Sergeant to flush deep red. "We don't have long, Arthur, explain." She began to study the pictures, the papers and the maps while I explained our theory.

"You think it's the Brownies?" she asked incredulously.

"I think it's a Brownie, if they can function as a single identity," I said. "I think it's a single Brownie with one of these bloody stupid things Lancelot's trying to find."

She sat and considered my thoughts. She looked at the Sergeant. "You agree with him?" she asked.

"Yes, your Majesty. It's the only logical conclusion with the evidence we've accumulated," he said quietly and politely.

“I can feel Albion pressing against the barriers; I’ll have to let it in. The Brownies are a part of The City and the royal family, whoever that happens to be. They are attuned to the leaders of whichever part of Albion they happen to be in at that moment. It would be very hard for one to turn rogue without the others knowing about it and stopping it. They are here to serve Albion and its leaders in the hope that we do a good job for the land. As for the item we might be hunting, there is one thing – a knife. An ancient thing said to have dug into the heart of a Titan during the final days of that battle.”

I growled. I’d seen the heart of a Titan. Rhea’s small red gem which saved our lives almost at the cost of her own. “You might have mentioned it before,” I said.

“I didn’t think it would be here,” Morgana said indignantly. “If we want to do this, we will need Quilliam’s help.”

“You don’t consider –”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Arthur,” Morgana snapped. She closed her eyes and breathed out. A slight shift in her expression spoke of some kind of pain and I wondered if being King of Albion hurt Lancelot.

Within moments Quilliam stood in the doorway. I’d banded the Brownies from being in the room for some time because of their desire to tidy my documents and I needed the mess to help me see links. His brown eyes widened. “Your Majesty?” he asked, looking around him rather than at Morgana for once.

“Quilliam, I need your help and so does the Lord Pendragon,” she said. “It is a matter of some delicacy but I believe we can trust you.”

His eyes snapped to Morgana at those words. “We are here to serve, your Majesty. Trust is something you should take for granted.”

“That’s the problem, Quilliam. We think we were taking

your people for granted for too long,” she said gently. I watched her kneel before Lancelot’s manservant and the general of his diminutive army. She then explained our thoughts while keeping her voice low and calm. Quilliam swayed and grasped the door for balance. Morgana caught him. “Arthur, find him a drink and Roe, find him a chair.”

We saw to our tasks and sat Quilliam down. “I don’t know what to say,” he spoke with honest distress in his voice. “To think one of us capable of such an act is beyond belief.”

“The weapon might have corrupted the soul of the person who holds it in their possession,” Morgana said. “It might not be their fault. The real criminal is the person who gave it to them. Is there a way you can help us figure this out?”

“Of course, your Majesty.” His small hands shook. “I would suggest the Lord Pendragon comes with me to our home.”

“Can you think of a suspect, Quilliam?” I asked.

He looked up at me, his small legs dangling a hand’s width off the floor where he sat in my chair. “Yes, Sir, I think I can,” he said very sadly. His eyes filled with tears and his whole body shook. Suddenly he started to cry very loudly. Morgana and I exchanged shocked glances. Quilliam always gave the impression of the height of professional decorum. To have him display such emotion so openly caught us all by surprise. I didn’t even know Brownies were able to express such misery.

Morgana patted his shoulder and made the right noises while he recovered himself. “I cannot reach the item you need to retrieve,” he said when he’d recovered. “But I can take you to it. We have a temple dedicated to the gods, it will be there. Or at least it should be there.”

“Who cares for this temple?” I asked, thinking I might need backup.

His lower lip trembled once more. "My brother, Sir." He looked up at me with pleading misery, then down to Morgana. "I am so sorry, my Lady."

"It's alright, Quilliam. It's not your fault." She patted his hand.

"But if I had considered the implications earlier I might have prevented your distress," he said.

"That isn't your job, Quilliam. What you do is extraordinary and you cannot take more onto those shoulders of yours," she said kindly.

He nodded, but clearly didn't believe her. "There is something else you should know. My brother became very close to the last king," he said quietly as though afraid of invoking Aeddan's ghost. "They..." Quilliam's wrinkled skin blushed.

Morgana rocked back on her heels, shocked. "Aeddan and a Brownie were lovers?" she asked. "He did that as well? Was there no depths to which that man wouldn't descend for a fuck?" Her voice twisted with disgust and hate.

"Steady, Morgana, Brownies are people too," I said, a little shocked she'd find them that repellent.

"You don't understand," she said. "There are just some things you don't do. Brownies are sacrosanct. They work for the royal houses because we do not, under any circumstances, treat them as slaves or abuse them in any way. They are held above all other races in Albion. Aeddan corrupted that and I had no idea. I thought I knew every deviant, twisted bone in that bastard's body." Her disgust with Aeddan and her own obvious self loathing concerned me. I'd seen this in Guinevere after de Clare.

I reached for Morgana's hand. "Quilliam and the others are safe now. They have you to protect them. It's alright," I said firmly.

"It'll never be right. That man was..." she couldn't

finish. Instead she pulled away from me and left the room. I heard her through the open doorway, “Go, find this creature and bring him to me. I want Aeddán’s corruption stopped. I want the Brownies purified. They should not have to suffer because of that sick bastard. Carve this out of my kingdom, Arthur Pendragon, just as you did Aeddán.”

“As you wish, your Majesty,” I said walking toward her but stopping out of arm’s reach. I bowed and she left my rooms.

Quilliam asked me to dress in mail and carry more than just Excalibur. I opted for my knee length mail shirt over my gambeson, breast and back plate with greaves and my vambrace and gauntlets. I didn’t bother with the gorget or sallet. I buckled Excalibur into place and wished for the ten thousandth time Lancelot stood at my side. A quiet knock at the door and Sergeant Roe stood there in the Watch’s armour, a cut down version of my own and nowhere near as well made.

“You shouldn’t go alone, Sir,” he said.

I smiled. “No, you are probably right, Sergeant.” I picked up my buckler. I forced thoughts of my Wolf out of my mind and focused on the task.

People like me and even full fey were not invited into the Brownie community. Quilliam said we’d have to go straight to the temple and simply arrest his brother, then leave quickly. When I asked why he couldn’t bring his brother to us, rather than we invade his people’s lands, he almost started to cry again until I agreed to go with him.

He appeared, dressed in his finest sombre clothes of black velvet with plain wooden buttons and led Roe and myself into the bowels of Morgana’s palace. We were not leaving the palace at all; it seemed the Brownies lived under

the sprawling edifice. Through corridors of the usual intricate design into rougher hewn tunnels and halls, then finally down into an area I don't think anyone knew existed. Quilliam removed a torch from the wall and sparked a light using a flint. I somehow thought he'd just conjure light, but no, Brownie magic didn't go that far.

"You will need to crouch for some distance, my Lord," Quilliam said apologetically. "But after the initial walk you will be fine." He took us around a corner and a small plain wooden door stood open. "It is only shut when we are not needed," Quilliam explained.

"I'm guessing that's not very often," I said.

"Of course not," Quilliam replied without a hint of a smile.

"They aren't known for their sense of humour are they?" Roe whispered to me as Quilliam walked through the doorway.

I grunted in response and bent almost double to fit through the door. Unfortunately, that wasn't enough and I had to twist sideways as well, my shoulders too wide for the small space. I walked with all my weight on one leg and had to shuffle. Not terribly dignified. Roe managed better, just having to double over, his shoulders narrower than my own. I frequently lost my balance and crashed against the rough stone walls, my back plate took a real pounding. I'd need a smith to repair the damage.

Just when I thought my legs would hate me forever Quilliam walked into a larger space, the light from the torch opening out. I moved into the hall and straightened with relief. It took a long time for the tingling to stop and the ache to leave my muscles. I needed to train more often or Lancelot would return to a blob of a man. Then I remembered he'd never be returning to me. The ping in my heart made me catch my breath and I forced myself to focus on my surroundings.

Roe and I stood open mouthed in wonder. I had no idea how something so huge could live under The City. We were in a vast cave, larger than anything I'd ever seen, even the Tor where Nimue held us. In the walls of this enormous cavern were small arches and each arch appeared to lead to a different home full of Brownies. There must have been hundreds, if not thousands of arches and walkways between each level. Smokeless torches lit the place and every door appeared to be painted a different colour. There were also paintings on every smooth surface so the whole cavern became a riot of colour. The silent masses of the Brownie community, who moved around the palace in dull uniformity except for the few like Quilliam, made colour and noise their speciality in their own home.

We heard dozens of voices and when some of the occupants of the cavern caught sight of us, more voices joined the throng until the sound became almost deafening.

Quilliam walked into the middle of this vast hall and we followed closely behind, feeling vulnerable and nervous of so many clearly unhappy voices. Our small companion raised his hand for silence and it gradually settled over the community. He bowed his head and closed his eyes. Every other Brownie in the place did the same thing and for the first time I felt the surge of their silent communication. Roe shifted beside me and I heard him swallow hard.

“Steady, Sergeant, they won't hurt us,” I said.

A unified gasp filled the hall with whatever Quilliam thought to the community and I watched in awe as every small brown head turned toward the largest of the tunnels exiting on this level.

Quilliam raised his head and opened his eyes. “This way, Sir. We have the community's sanction to continue with our mission.”

That large community of unseen but always present workers vanished before our eyes, retreating into their

homes and allowing the silence of absence to descend over the hall.

“Quilliam, I had no idea,” I whispered.

He glanced up at me as we walked to the large and heavily decorated entrance. “Nor should you, my Lord Pendragon. I would also appreciate it if you and your companion did not speak of this outside.”

“You have our word, Quilliam,” I promised and received a nod from Roe.

The decoration around the tunnel consisted of a complex story. I saw a path winding up a hillside with symbols of faith painted at each bend and different figures journeying toward a pinnacle of light at the top of the pointed arch. There were all kinds of animals, rendered in exquisite detail. I wanted to stop and examine this symbolism of Brownie life but Quilliam tutted when I stopped.

I hurried after him and we continued for some time even further down into the depths of the Albion.

“Sir,” Roe said a little unsteadily. I followed his finger which pointed to the ceiling. Instead of rock we appeared to be looking at tree roots. “Quilliam, where are we?” I asked.

He glanced upward. “The underside of the mighty arena and the trees which form its structure are the top of our own religious building. We are of the earth and the roots of these mighty trees are our holy place. The arena which is now used for fighting and display, used to be a place of scared thought and contemplation. We hope one day, there will be a royal line able to return it to its former glory.”

“You should tell, Lancelot. He would help,” I said.

Quilliam stared at me in horror. “It is not our place to dictate or suggest policy to the royal line, merely to serve.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but Roe touched my arm and shook his head. He was right, there would be no point. We walked on in silence and I felt the atmosphere of the underground home change. My right hand strayed to

Excalibur and I felt her hum in obvious distress. I touched Quilliam's shoulder and pulled the unarmed man back slightly. Roe drew his short sword and we shared a silent nod of understanding. We were walking into a trap. We moved apart slightly to give each other room and I pulled Quilliam's right hand onto my back so I knew where he was as we moved silently forward.

The mighty roots of the trees cascaded around us, forcing us onto a path and ensuring many dark and hidden areas either side which could hold enemies but were doubtless meant for contemplation. Some of these roots were decorated with the same language I'd seen on the threat to Morgana. I focused only on our immediate surroundings and slowly drew Excalibur. She shone slightly with her own light, not unusual in Albion I'd discovered, but I knew I couldn't use her to fight in such tight confines. She would however, guide us to the threat.

When her song jumped from murmurings about enemies conquered in the past, to sudden joy at the thought of new battles, I stopped moving. Roe matched me. We were near the threat.

"Walk into the light and have the courage to face us, priest," I called out.

"You bring these creatures into our sanctum to challenge me?" came a dark snarling voice.

Quilliam shifted behind me. "Brother, surrender yourself and the dagger. It is time to call an end to this shame on our people. The Lord Pendragon is here to stop us from more dishonour."

"You are the one causing dishonour," came the voice and a figure followed it. A smaller more twisted Brownie in a brown robe with a deep cowl. Something hung from his neck and it glinted darkly in the pale light filtering through from somewhere. "You have betrayed our greatest King."

Quilliam trembled all over and I thought he'd faint. "It is

not our place to decide what is right and wrong among the royal lines of Albion. We merely serve so they can give Albion what she needs. The people of Albion are happy with Morgana and Lancelot. You can feel it, Brother, if you would just listen to the world rather than that thing forged of hate hanging around your neck.”

“The Lord King gave me this as a reward for my service and suffering to aid his great works,” the priest said.

I realised there would be no compromise, no peace, no arrest. He held in his tone the same notes of madness I’d heard in Stephen de Clare’s voice before he’d died. Aeddan twisted those around him unless they were able to resist. Morgana and Nimue had changed since he’d died because he could no longer affect their sense of self. The course of their souls returned to where they’d supposed to have been without him redirecting them.

I would not however be making the same mistake I’d made with Lancelot. I needed Quilliam’s permission to do this right. I did not want to hurt the Brownie any more than necessary. “Give me your sanction to end this, Quilliam,” I said.

“Is there nothing else you can do?” he asked me pleadingly before returning his gaze to his sibling. “Brother, please, do not shame us like this. Please, do not force these men to seek blood in this place.”

The priest threw back his cowl and I saw the damage of dark magic on his body. More skull than skin. More white than deep brown. His eyes almost black and teeth blacker. He leered, “I was special to our King. I was loved.” He caressed his own groin.

Apparently, this was enough for Quilliam. “End it,” he said, pushing my back slightly. “We will clean the holy site.”

I stepped forward, Roe matched me. The priest stood in the centre of a larger space between the roots. Almost a room. I expected to see golem, or some other nasty creature

come steaming from the surrounding darkness, but nothing came toward us. Excalibur began to babble in desperation to take the life of the enemy she sensed and I started to lose control of conscious thought. This happened far more often than I liked and although Merlin tried to teach me to control her, I wasn't fey enough to maintain the focus necessary.

The priest watched me and laughed in his madness. "I will join my King and Saviour. We will be killed by the same traitorous blade," he screamed and ran forward in the same moment. He threw himself onto Excalibur's blade. I also dropped her in shock. She tore through his chest and back as if it were parchment. Blood rushed from his mouth and nose. It poured from the wound in his chest as he wriggled on my blade and as the light faded in his eyes he smiled. I thought he mouthed, "My King." His eyes looking over my shoulder.

I actually had to check. Aeddan did not stand in the shadows. We were alone. And then we weren't.

Brownies, of all ages silently appeared and surrounded us. I kicked the priest's body off Excalibur and turned my back to Roe. We watched nervously.

All the Brownies stared at us with their brown eyes and even the children had wrinkled faces. As one they all bent their knee to us and bowed their heads.

Quilliam said, "We are grateful for your help and compassion in this matter. We are in the debt of the King of Camelot and Roe of The City Watch. We would ask you to leave us to mourn our shame and our dead. Please, take the foul knife with you and leave us."

I didn't know what to say – so bowed to the assembly and sheathed Excalibur. I bent to take the knife, slipping it into a bag Roe held out for me. I just said, "Thank you for your help in this matter and for all the work you have done to protect and serve the royal line of Albion. I know both the King and Queen appreciate you all."

A sigh of joy rippled over the crowd at my voiced gratitude. A small Brownie, I took her to be a child, walked toward me around the blood and I knelt to try to look her in the face. She stood about the size of my son at two years of age.

She touched my face and small tingle spread over me. “He still loves you, Lord Pendragon. Be ready when he needs you. It will be the worst of trials for him and he will need your strength. We all will. Albion will suffer before she sees the light. The Black Wolf and the White Hart will once more fight together. The rest is up to you.”

Tears streamed down my face as I looked into her eyes.

“She is our new spiritual leader,” Quilliam said behind me.

“Thank you for this small measure of hope, my Lady,” I said to the child. “I will be ready for Albion and for your King.”

She smiled and patted my cheek once more before stepping back into the crowd. I rose and with Roe at my side retreated from the religious site.

Despite my desire to know the Brownies more and study their home we left quickly. We knew we’d been given a certain amount of freedom but we were running out our welcome. When we shuffled through the corridor we broke into a run and jogged back to the normal parts of the palace.

Morgana released me from the hug she’d been using to welcome me back. “I can’t find a Brownie anywhere,” she said.

“No, you might struggle for a while. We’ll have to fend for ourselves. They have some tidying up to do and I have the feeling they all need to be a part of it,” I said handing over the bag with the knife in it.

She didn't even look. She merely dumped it on a table and muttered something about dealing with it later. I didn't ask. The thing gave me the creeps. I could feel it whispering like Excalibur but nowhere near as nicely.

"I think you deserve a reward," she said kissing me.

I stepped back out of her arms. "Morgana, I should return to Camelot. I need to be ready should Lancelot need me." The Brownie's words were echoing in my head and heart.

"But I need you here," she said.

"How about I move between the two? Can we make that happen more easily?" I asked. I cared for her, but sharing her bed felt very wrong in many ways. I knew myself too well though and at some point I would be craven enough to seek her out but I could at least try to remain loyal to my friend. I wouldn't need her at all but she represented the closest thing I had to Lancelot. I was pathetic.

She studied me. "Always your Wolf, huh?"

I smiled. "Always." And I knew that if I ever had a chance to give back just a little of the dedication Lancelot had shown me over the years, I'd grab at the opportunity and be the best I could be for him.

I vowed to myself, I'd never let him down or stand in the way of his happiness again. Even if it meant watching his love for Tancred take him from me forever. I would always be there for my Wolf, regardless of the cost.