

CAMELOT'S LOVE

“If you aren’t going to eat that, I will,” Arthur reached across my arm and speared my meat with his knife.

“That’s mine,” I muttered without real spirit.

“You aren’t eating anything and haven’t all day,” he stated. “You sickening for something?”

“Nothing you need know about,” I said poking at some bread.

I felt him pause, “What is it?” His voice held that gentle tone I’d heard all too rarely lately.

I looked at my hands on the rough table before me and wondered if I could confess the confusion of feelings inside my chest. What would he think? What would he say?

“Nothing,” I muttered.

His hand lay down his knife and lowered beneath the table. The other pages and squires around us were deep in their own conversations. The time off we had each day too short for wasting. No one noticed his palm on my thigh and his fingers digging into the firm muscle.

“Talk to me, you’ve been tense since my return,” Arthur whispered.

I looked into his eyes, dark blue and utterly captivating. As always, my promises of keeping my own council dissolved in the face of his compassion. “You are to be king in a few weeks, months at most,” I said quietly.

“But right now I’m not,” he said just as quietly. Our heads were close to together, his breath mingling with mine. “I came back to Tintagel just as I promised.”

“Everything is to change, Arthur. I am a squire, living on another’s generosity, I have nothing to offer you, I have nothing to offer anyone,” misery dripped

from each word. I hated to admit how my lowly station.

“Lancelot, when I am crowned I will knight you properly in front of the entire court and you will become the best of them, just as you are here. You will be my Champion. You know this. I will give you anything you need.” His words were earnest and honest.

“There is one thing you can give me, Arthur, that I need right now,” I spoke very carefully.

He paused, “What can I give my closest friend and ally?”

I felt my heart ache with the knowledge of the pain my words were going to cause, “You can give your consent to my marriage.”

He froze. I couldn’t feel him breathe. His hand locked on my thigh. “Marriage,” he said very slowly. His hand drew away from my leg and returned to his wine cup. He drank. “Who is the lucky girl or need I not guess.”

“She cares for me, Arthur, but I need your permission to ask for her hand,” I didn’t look at him. “It is what is expected and she will make a fine wife.”

“Is a wife what you want?” he asked, his voice strained.

“A wife is what I should have,” my words felt hollow and I watched Arthur nod rapidly.

“Yes, every man should have a wife, it is what is expected,” he smiled. A smile I knew, the wistful one. The one he used when trying to hold his burdens to his heart and not scream the world down. He didn’t want to be king. He wanted us to ride together into a future to seek our fortunes. These were the stories he concocted for a world we’d never have.

“Arthur,” his name left my lips on a whisper of agony.

“Don’t,” he ordered. I watched him gather himself together and smile, “When do you wish to ask her?”

“Tomorrow, I’m meeting her at noon on the cliffs before she leaves with her family,” I said fighting my need to weep.

“Do you know if she will say yes?” he asked.

I shrugged, “She has told me she cares for me.”

Over the last few months, while Arthur had been in Came-lot, I’d learnt to survive without him and the woman in question said she cared a great deal. At least those were the words she’d been giving me and I’d hoarded them like the gold they were.

“Guinevere is a beautiful girl,” Arthur said quietly.

We were silent for the rest of the meal.

After our evening chores, I made my final rounds of the castle and stood on the wall overlooking the pounding sea. I’d been happier here than anywhere else in my miserable life. My hands flexed against the rough wall and the half moon over my head lit the rolling, cresting waves beneath me in flashing monochrome. The comforting smell of the briny water brought back so many memories and many of them contained Arthur.

His golden hair the beacon I looked for every moment of every day. I’d sworn my alliance to him years before, when we were just beginning our training as squires. Now we faced knighthood but nothing changed, my loyalty never wavered. The memories which stirred me most, deep in the night, tentatively wriggled forth. I’d batted them down so often over the months they were feeling bruised and unloved. Golden days, where two young men shared their dreams and their confusing passions. But no man could live with these feelings and actions. The acts of childhood must be put away for the acts of manhood and that included marriage. I’d met a woman capable of making my heart sing, not in the same way Arthur did, but just as loudly.

I pushed myself off the damp wall and finished my round, vanishing through a low doorway and down a

narrow stone stairway. My room, small and dark though it was, felt like home. My sword stood in the corner, my armour lay on a large chest full of everything I owned and a small box sat on the small desk I used for my studies under the narrow window. I stroked the box. Everything I'd earned and won for the last six months, now formed a golden ring so beautiful it rivalled anything a queen might wear. Or at least that is what I hoped.

I undressed slowly, my rough woollen clothes well made by the women of this castle. Geraint's father, Hoel, cared for me like his own son and I felt both gratitude and pride he should think me worth the effort. I lay on my small bed and stared at the black ceiling, my candle gradually vanishing. I didn't bother with the fire, the winter night soft and mild.

Eventually, I slept with dreams of golden hair filling my mind, but whether short masculine curls or long tresses, I didn't remember.

I woke early the following day and dressed quickly. My belly full of snakes. I ran to the stables and began my chores. Mucking out the stable, cleaning tack, exercising the horses, then training with both sword and spear. Geraint and I worked hard but Arthur didn't appear.

"Where is he?" I asked.

Geraint shrugged, "I don't know." He didn't look at me and although he seemed his usual affable self it felt strained.

"Right," came the booming voice of Hoel's captain, "for some reason you miserable bastards have half a day off. Vanish before I change my mind."

I grinned at Geraint and we dashed off to dump our training swords. Before we parted, Geraint pulled me to a stop, "Whatever happens this afternoon, remember,

I'm here for you." He held out his arm for a formal acknowledgement of our friendship. I frown in confusion but grasped his forearm in union.

"I know and stop worrying, how could she say, no? I'm adorable," I grinned.

Geraint laughed, "Many things you are, Lancelot, adorable isn't one of them. But who knows the minds of women?"

"I know her mind," I affirmed.

I went to the washroom, cleaned myself up and even shaved. I dressed in my finest clothes, the doublet a rich green and the hose a dark brown. I ran my fingers through my rough hair, brushing it back and knowing it would just tangle in the wind but hoping it irrelevant. Returning to the stable I tacked up Bow, the chestnut I now rode most often and rode out of the castle. I followed the path leading to Glebe cliff and rode up onto the bluff. The sky, fine blue, like her eyes, cradled racing clouds. The sea, a dark morass of shifting colour with white horses rearing up on its flanks, looked as restless as I felt.

I rode to the tortured thorn tree on the cliff top and dismounted, tying Bow to the low branches. He started to crop the grass. I paced and watched the sun. I paced back and forth wearing holes in the grass. I paced and tried to think of anything other than what I was doing on this cliff top. I wanted to race back to the castle and find my wife to be, speak to her in public, anything but continue waiting.

Then, long after noon, I saw the head of her small palfrey bobbing up the slope and Guinevere's golden hair streamed out behind her in the wind. Her beauty hit me like a hammer blow deep in my guts. I loved her. I knew it. Nothing else mattered but winning her hand and holding her to my pounding heart. Thoughts of my king vanished under the passion I held for this paragon.

When she reached me, I held out my hands and she silently consented to my help when dismounting. She wore the finest, softest wool I'd ever felt under my rough palms.

"Lancelot," her voice, as clear as her gaze, caressed my name.

"Guinevere," I smiled gently. Something I'd learnt to do under her tutelage over the autumn, while her family sojourned in Tintagel.

She pulled out of my grasp and turned to face the sea. A young woman's bashfulness, or so I thought. I walked to her side, took her small hand in my huge paw and touched the pouch containing her ring.

"Guinevere," I began and stumbled over the words I planned because she turned to look at me. Her pale blue eyes were so different to Arthur's. So full of the promise of a life which held no fear or hurt. So innocent.

"Lancelot," she said and raised my hand to her lips, "I have something to tell you." Her breath tickled my fingers.

"I have something to ask you," I said quickly trying to head her off. I watched tears form in her eyes and spill silently down her cheeks.

"No, let me speak first."

I held my tongue and dread filled my heart. My life, so dark up to the moment Arthur rode into it, should have continued to grow brighter with the addition of the light Guinevere represented. Somehow, I didn't think my luck would hold.

She took a deep breath, her small breast pressing against her dress. "Arthur Pendragon came to my room last night," she said very, very quietly.

I thought the wind played tricked with me. The words sent on breezes from those who twisted the lives of noble men.

“Arthur,” I said more wooden than the crooked tree beside us.

“We spent the night talking and this morning, he returned to my room. He asked me to marry him and I said yes,” her words now tumbled out quickly. Like drops of blood that chased each other, pouring from an open wound.

“Arthur,” I repeated. I saw nothing around me, the day vanished into a haze.

“I am to be queen,” she informed me. “I would ask for your blessing. I know how much he means to you, how close you are.”

Close, yes. Arthur Pendragon and I were close. His lips on mine. Our young strong bodies entwined on spring green grass. Yes, we were close. He knew me better than anyone I’d ever met.

“You are going to be his wife?” I asked without looking at her.

“I didn’t know, Lancelot. I didn’t know how he felt, how I felt. We’d hardly spoken before but he is,” she stopped, apparently out of descriptive words for my friend. “My feelings for you have not changed, they never will, but he is just...”

“He is just, a king. Not a worthless knight,” I cried out and wrenched my hand from hers. I turned to my horse and threw myself into his saddle. He jerked around and we were galloping madly back toward Camelot.

“You miserable, bastard,” I screamed and raced across the training yard. I hit Arthur and we went down instantly. My hand around his throat, trying to choke the life out him, while I raised my fist to beat him to death. A larger mass collided with me from the side. I heard Geraint swear as he took me down. I fought to wrest my freedom from his superior height and weight.

“Everyone out,” he bellowed. I cursed him until he

released me. Arthur now stood. The outdoor arena empty. Everyone vanished, doubtless for Hoel before I killed the soon to be crowned King of England.

I scrambled upright and Arthur watched me, wary and sucking a bloodied lip. "You lousy son of a whoring bitch," I spat.

"That's my mother you are talking about," Arthur snarled back.

"What the hell is going on?" Geraint asked confused as to why his best friends were trying to kill each other.

I pointed a savage finger at Arthur, "He did it. He took Guinevere. She is to marry him."

Geraint paled and turned his hazel eyes to Arthur, "You did what?"

"She is perfect," he justified.

"I know," I screamed. "She is mine."

"I'm sorry," he said his anger gone as quickly as it came. "But she is not. She is mine. There will be other beautiful women for you, my friend. But she will make the perfect queen for Camelot. Her heritage, her beauty, her wit and intelligence. I need a queen."

"I need a wife," I dropped my knees in the damp sand. "I need a wife to be free of you and you took her."

Arthur approached. My tears blurred my vision. My heart lay in the filthy soil beneath his feet. He knelt in the dirt with me, caught in my anguish. His rough hand reached out and touched my jaw. I was not the only one weeping. "I cannot allow you to be free," he whispered.

"Leave him, Arthur, you've done enough damage," Geraint reached down and pulled our young King to his feet. Arthur stumbled upright and my oldest friend replaced him. Geraint gently helped me stand and began muttering about other women coming into my life. These banalities just flowed over me, unheeded. I realised quickly that my surging grief came not from Guinevere choosing another, but from Arthur betraying

me so easily.

Days vanished in a maze of chaos and hard graft. Arthur didn't come near and I avoided Guinevere. By the mid winter festivals I found myself in Camelot for the first time. Arthur's father lay dead and apparently I would be knighted during the coronation and wedding. Geraint stuck to me like horse glue and made certain I understood the ways of the city. Its vast tangle of streets were a gift to a young man and the first night we arrived I discovered the whores of Camelot were a great deal more efficient than the whores of Tintagel and there were an awful lot of them. I decided I liked cities, despite their foul odours and vast tintinnabulation. One very gifted lady received a fine ring as payment for some very inventive games.

I also discovered Geraint and I were to lead the retinue taking Arthur down the aisle toward his new throne. During the days and nights before the final ceremony, I watched him carefully. He grew pale, despite his smiles. His eyes held a great strain and dark circles appeared. He started to lose weight and sometimes drank even more than me, which didn't seem possible. He suffered and I suffered for him. I knew what lay in his heart, what really lay deep inside. He wanted freedom from this madness.

Guinevere however thrived. She grew into her new role, which raced toward her with alarming speed. Arthur was right, she was the perfect woman to be queen. I'd never have made her happy.

The morning of their wedding I found myself hustled into Arthur's private chambers. He stood by a tall window filled with rare glass. I fidgeted in my new clothes, delivered that morning. Rich, deep browns and greens.

"I need your help, my friend," Arthur said quietly

without turning.

His voice sounded thick and harsh. I spoke carefully, we'd not been alone for a long time. "I will always help you, Sire," I said formally.

"Please, don't call me that, not you of all people," he said painfully. His head bowed and his hands flexed. The tension in his shoulders looked like torture.

I caved and crossed the room to my friend in three strides. "Arthur, what's wrong?" I asked laying a hand on his back.

He turned to me without seeing me and threw himself into my surprised arms. His body trembled as he held me, burying his head in my shoulder. I slowly wrapped my arms around his back and I kissed his blond curls. He smelt of spiced perfumes and fine soap.

We stood like that for a long time, not moving but welded together and my heart finally dragged itself out of the dirt in Tintagel. It came back to me in Camelot and I held it briefly once more. I knew I'd lose it again to Arthur and Guinevere. I knew that as well as I knew my own cursed name. But in that moment I held it long enough to forgive my friend any and all hurts.

Arthur finally pulled away. His eyes were clear and his breathing even. He raised a fragile smile. He fiddled with my velvet doublet and didn't look at me as he spoke, "I couldn't do this without you."

"I know," I said sadly. "I've been watching you for days."

"I should not have taken her from you," he admitted.

"Yes, Arthur, you should have," I couldn't believe the words coming out of my mouth. "She would be wasted as my wife. She is made to be queen."

"I've missed you," he said quietly.

I ached to reach out and force him to kiss me. I buried the desire under layers of convention and propriety. "I've missed you too," I managed to keep my

voice even.

“Let’s not argue again. I need you in my life too badly. I need you to be by my side.”

I smiled, “Your shadow?”

“My sword,” he clarified. “Which means I’ve chosen an insignia for you and gifted you lands.”

“I don’t need lands, Arthur. I just need to serve you as your faithful servant,” I said honestly.

“I have to give you titles,” he said.

“I’ll earn them,” I told him. “Just make me a knight and I will earn everything for you. Keep it all safe for me. I am your sword arm, Arthur. I cannot own anything for myself because I am a part of you.”

I stopped talking. I hadn’t meant to say so much. Be so honest about how I felt. He finally looked at me, “You will be my Champion.”

“I will be when I’ve won the title,” I said and tried not to blush.

He nodded. By ceding all the lands he might give to me, back to the throne, I gave him the perfect ally. Everything he needed to control but couldn’t own directly he could give to me but I’d just return it to him making me obviously the most loyal of his men.

“Then I will look forward to the tournament tomorrow,” he said.

I realised we still held each other closely. I couldn’t move, didn’t want to. The energy between us changed with terrifying speed. Arthur’s breath hitched and his blue eyes dilated. I felt my cock grow thick and knew I needed to escape before this became unmanageable.

“Lancelot,” he breathed my name and swayed toward me. Our lips brushed against each other and our breath mingled.

A knock on the door and Geraint’s voice from outside asked permission to enter.

I jumped like a badly loosed arrow. Arthur cursed

and Geraint walked in. His voice died as he looked at us both. He knew but he did not speak the words and I silently thanked him for it.

Instead, he said, "Arthur, it is time for you to marry."

For the first time, I noticed Arthur's clothing. He wore Camelot's colours of deep blue and gold, the rich velvets and silks hugging his firm body and highlighting his natural beauty. I turned away, unable to meet Geraint's eye.

Forever the smooth diplomat, Arthur said graciously, "Then led the way."

Geraint returned to the door, Arthur followed him and I brought up the rear. My friend fell in beside me and gently laid a hand on my arm. I glanced up into his hazel eyes, "Be careful. You need to protect yourself, not just him."

I nodded but didn't reply. We were now swept into the glorious spectacle of Camelot's wedding and coronation. I saw none of it, registered nothing. The feel of Arthur's lips brushing mine branded into my mind. Then I saw Guinevere.

The most perfect, beautiful, goddess I'd ever seen. Her eyes caught mine for a long moment and my heart broke. The heart so recently returned to me, snapped in two. One half for Arthur, one half for Guinevere. Would I ever know peace again?