



The White Enchantress

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: Twenty-first-century Jersey girl, Guinevere, finds herself lost in time. A time and place known only through the legends of King Arthur. Knowing the fate she faces, Guin attempts to keep Lancelot at a distance after coming face-to-face with the legendary knight. Thoughts of Josh, Guin's best friend whom she had begun to fall for, are the only barrier she has against the strong attraction she feels for Lancelot. But Josh is a millennium away, and Guin has no way of returning to him and all those she loves.

As Guin grapples with the idea of time travel, she struggles to accept that all her loved ones are gone. The life she knew is over. The wedding she ran from. The father who gave her an earldom. The best friend who became her lover. All of that is in her past, yet some time in the future. Facing a doomed destiny, Guin is still determined to write her own story and fight for a happy ending.

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Prologue

My mom is trying to convince me that I will have the most wonderful time visiting my father and his family of demonic harpies, aka, my stepmom and half-sister. The idea of an entire summer away from my mom, surrounded by the two most vile creatures on Earth, is terrifying. I know my father loves me. Even though we barely see each other, he loves me like I am his only child.

But I'm his bastard daughter. The earl's bastard. A fact Edmund's legitimate younger daughter, Cecily, loves to remind me of every time I visit them.

"Mo chridhe," my mom says in Gaelic. "I know it has not been easy with Charlotte and Cecily being hostile hosts, but your father would never let anything happen to you. I think it will be good for you to go to England on your own this summer. You are seventeen years old. Soon you'll be going to college, traveling the world. I will even ask Ed to take you on a trip away from Eden Manor while you are there."

Turning toward my mom, I give a dramatic sigh. "That sounds like fun in theory. But mama, with you there, at least I had someone to share the bullying with. Without you there, I will get all of it and probably more."

"No, you won't. Do you think Ed would let anything happen to you?" My mom asks, a copper eyebrow raised.

"It's not like he could stop them from burning all my underwear or calling you a whore during one of dad's dinner parties. They do what they want. They don't care. Ed can't do anything to stop them before they do something."

“If you really don’t want to go, we won’t make you. I had thought you would love the opportunity to travel on your own.”

“Why would I want to do anything on my own when I can do it with you?” I say with as much charm as I can muster. “Why can’t you come?”

“Oh, you are a charmer, Guin. Do you want to think more about it, or shall we call your father now? He should still be awake.”

“I’ll call him now, but you will answer me as to why you can’t come after we talk to Ed. Wanna call him through the car’s Bluetooth?”

“I don’t think I have that set up.”

“What? Ma, you get a car with all the bells and whistles and you don’t even use them? I’ll just call him on my phone then and put it on speaker.”

As we stop at a traffic light, I take my phone out and open my favorite contacts. Though I barely see my father in person, we talk on the phone every week. He loves hearing about my boring American life and I love hearing about his insane British life as the Earl of Lancaster.

For the first five years of my life, Ed didn’t know I existed. When I met him, he instantly became my hero. I loved him before I even met him. At first, I didn’t understand why Ed couldn’t stay with us, why he had a wife and another daughter.

It’s been a challenging decade getting to where we are in our relationship without destroying his family or mine. And even though I hate Charlotte and Cecily, I adore my father. These summer trips mean the world to me, but I just can’t go without my mom. Maybe Ed can come visit us this time.

Gathering my courage, I press my finger to the picture of Ed on my phone. But it slips from my grasp. A car rams into us from behind, pushing us into the intersection.

I glance over at my mother, her face showing the same look of fright I must have on mine. Before she can react and move the car somewhere safe, another car slams into the driver's side. Glass shatters everywhere with the impact, throwing sparkles of white and red at my head and throwing me into the passenger's side window.

The red must have been from my mother's injuries. Before I lose consciousness, I see her face. Her eyes are closed, blood dripping from a gash on the left side of her head.

I wake up in a hospital, Ed holding my right hand with both of his. He is leaning against the bed, propped up on his elbows, tears silently falling down his face.

"Dad?" I croak. My throat is scratchy, dry from disuse. I wonder how long I've been out. The sun is setting, but it would have taken Edmund at least eight hours to get here. It couldn't be the same day as the crash. "Where's mama? What happened?" I try to pull myself up but the pain in my head makes me lie back down.

"Guinevere, you're awake." Ed is still crying, trying to keep his decorum. "Let me get a nurse."

He stands up and is out the door before I can stop him to get some answers. While Ed is gone, I assess the damage done by the car crash. My whole body aches. But it doesn't seem like anything is broken except maybe my head. I can barely keep my eyes open as the lights make my headache worse.

Pulling the blanket off my legs, I notice a few bruises, but again, nothing is broken. Then I recall the image of my mother; she looked broken. The hood of another vehicle smashed up against her side of the car.

My dad rushes back in, saying, “A nurse will be here shortly to check on you, Guinevere. How are you feeling?”

“Where’s mama?” I say, choking on my words, afraid to hear the answer.

“Guin, she...I’m so sorry. The doctors did all they could. When I arrived, she was already gone.”

“Gone...what do you mean gone?”

“The impact...her injuries were severe. Broken bones all down the left side of her body, her head...she didn’t survive.”

“No. No...you...you’re lying. We were talking. We had just been talking. I was about to call you. She can’t be...NO!” I yell, not caring that the sound of my own voice causes my head to explode with every syllable. My heart is broken already. Why would I need my head?

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Ed wraps his arms around me, not caring to be gentle with my bruised bones. He holds me tight against him, breaking down into violent sobs, unable to keep his composure for me. We stay this way until exhaustion takes over, or maybe it's all the drugs pumping into my body.

The next time I awake, Ed is talking to the doctor in the hallway. When they see I'm up, they quickly walk into the room. The doctor asks me some questions to ensure I am not suffering from memory loss. After examining my pupils and checking on my injuries, the doctor tells Edmund that I can go home in a day.

Home. Where is home now that my mother is gone? She was my home. Tears pour down my face as the truth sets in. I feel Ed looking at me but I don't want to talk about it yet. Keeping my head down, I continue to cry silently. I try to remember what my mom looked like. How bright her copper hair would shine in the sunlight. Her pale skin was speckled with freckles from nose to toes. Her hazel eyes would change color depending on her mood. When she got angry, they would turn a scary bright green. And whenever she looked at Ed, her eyes would glow a golden color.

She loved him so much. I know it was hard for her to spend a month at Eden Manor every summer, being so close to Ed but not close enough. I had suspected that they would sneak away together, but mama never confided in me. If they did have an affair, I wouldn't blame them. It was so obvious that they were madly in love.

In my mind, it's Charlotte and Cecily who are the imposters. They took my father away from me. Ed didn't want the life he has. He just wanted Elvira, my mother. As I got older, I began to put their story together from the bits and pieces my mom and dad would say to me over the years. And still, I don't understand why they aren't

together.

After what feels like ages, I finally get the courage to look up at Ed. He had moved over to a chair against the wall, his head down, reading something on his phone.

“Dad?” My voice is unsteady. Probably because I’m afraid of the answer to the question I want to ask. He looks up from his phone. His hair askew, eyes red and puffy, suit all rumpled up from traveling. “What...what’s going to happen to me, my home?” I mumble.

Ed pulls his chair next to me, scooping up my hands. “My dear Guinevere, let’s not worry about all this just now. I need you to focus on getting better. But know this, I will take care of you. I am your home now.”

It’s the response I needed to hear, but my reaction startles me. I’m delighted that my father wants me, that he would be there for me full-time and not just for phone calls and one measly month of the year. Knowing this, I still feel empty inside, and tears threaten to rip me apart again. Grief will be my companion for the rest of my life. I just hope it won’t consume me.

The following day, Ed takes me home to the Victorian house where my mom and I live...where we used to live together. She restored the facade and interior to their original charm when I was a wee lass. The siding is a pale blue, the window panes a bright white and the shutters accented in a dark blue. A turret points high up toward the sky on the right side of the house, making the place look more like a castle than a historical house in Princeton, New Jersey.

I hold onto my father for support as we walk up the red brick path to the wrap-around porch. A swing just big enough for two people sways quietly in the light breeze coming through the trees.

As I step through the front door, I collapse in a fit of anger and despair. I yell incomprehensible nonsense to no one in particular, maybe God, the universe, whoever it was that took my mother from me. She would never grow old in this house. She would never see me graduate, walk me down the aisle, hold her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She would never wipe the tears from my eyes, scoop me a bowl of ice cream, sing me a Gaelic song.

All I feel is the pain of losing my mother, not having a chance to say goodbye to her, not even the chance to beg the gods to save her. Being home, where her memory is everywhere but she no longer exists, the pain is too much. Ed picks me up in his arms and carries me to the living room couch. He sits down next to me, holding me as we both weep, letting our tears exhaust us to sleep.

Sometime later, I wake up with a new pain I hadn't remembered feeling. Hunger. I haven't eaten much since the accident; I forgot to eat. Not wanting to wake Ed up, I slowly push myself up off the couch. Before sneaking into the kitchen, I gently toss a blanket over my sleeping father. The bags under his eyes have turned an angry shade of blue. Unlike me, he didn't have the benefit of drug-induced sleep these past couple of days.

I tip-toe into the kitchen, pour water into the kettle for some tea - tea fixes everything, right? - and make a couple of sandwiches. Even though I am starving, I can't find the strength to eat. My mom is gone. I will never speak to her again. I will never go see another Broadway show with her. We will never cry together while watching *Moulin Rouge* for the millionth time. I will never again geek out with her over all the new *Harry Potter* content spilling out from every corner of the entertainment industry, then complain about how JK Rowling is a fucking death eater and ruined everything. We shared so much I don't know how I can ever find joy again.

"Try thinking about the happy memories you shared with her instead of how much you miss her." Ed startles me with his abrupt entry into my thoughts.

“How did you know what I was thinking?”

“Because I’ve been thinking the same things. How much I’ve missed with her while she was alive and now, all the things I’ll never get to say or do with her.”

“You really loved her, didn’t you?” I don’t say this as a question. I already know how much Ed loves my mom. But he answers anyway.

“Vira was the love of my life. My love for her never faded from the day I realized she was my everything to today and through tomorrow. I only wish that I had fought harder for her. The life I was forced to live made it difficult for us to be together. When I found the two of you, met you for the first time, I was going to divorce Charlotte. I don’t know if you remember this. I stayed here for a few months when you were five years old. Your mother kept her distance even when I tried to convince her that we could be together. Even after my soulless father died, Vira would not allow me to get divorced. I had made a vow, she said.”

“Sounds like mama,” I say. “I remember the first time I met you. You looked...uncertain. I made you tea to calm your nerves. Mama took us out to dinner and ice cream at Bent Spoon. I fell asleep on the couch, afraid that if I went to bed, you would be gone when I woke up.”

Ed’s mouth twitches, attempting to form a smile. “Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, I just can’t get myself to eat anything. I made a sandwich for you if you want and some tea, but I think it’s gotten a bit cold.” I take a sip to test the temperature. “It’s still warm. But if you want a hot cuppa, I can reheat the water.”

“Warm tea is better than no tea. Now, what’s in the sandwiches you made?”

“Ham, salami, and provolone. I call it a lazy Italian.” When Ed looks at me with a

blank face, I explain what an Italian sub is. “They are sandwiches on a long roll, filled with Italian-style meats and provolone and usually topped with shredded lettuce, tomatoes, oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper. This is a lazy Italian because it doesn’t have all the fixings and is on two slices of bread instead of a sub.”

“Ahhhhh, I see.” Ed obviously doesn’t get it.

“Anyway, I was craving one, but I didn’t feel like slicing up a tomato. We also don’t have all the ingredients.”

“I can run out and pick up one for you if you’d like.”

“Thanks, dad, but I can also just order one from Jersey Mike’s and have it delivered. No need to bother driving when your food can be hand-delivered. Which I might actually do. Would you want anything?”

“What other sandwiches do they have?” Instead of answering, I hand Ed my phone after opening the GrubHub app. He studies the menu for a little longer than I anticipated considering what is on the menu. “I’ll go with the Original Italian.”

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“Good choice.” We look at each other, our mouths forming into smiles.

Chapter 1

6 Years Later

“He slapped you?” Josh yells, wide-eyed in anger. He never really liked Wesley, my boyfriend, well now ex-boyfriend. And it turns out I didn’t either. Wesley and I started dating after our dads set us up on a blind date nine months ago. I can’t believe it has taken me this long to realize I was in a loveless relationship.

All of a sudden, I felt trapped. Trapped like my father is in his loveless marriage to a she-demon. My heart yearns for the love my mom and dad shared. Yet, at the same time, I’m terrified. Not terrified of loving, but of losing love.

I am afraid to feel broken again, to let someone in who might tear apart my whole being. My soul. My heart. It’s still something that frightens me, but I hate feeling so hollow inside.

Wesley doesn’t have the potential to break my heart, but he would have drained me of my passion. He would have been an accessory in my life if I hadn’t woken up. I don’t want arm candy. I want a great love. A partner for life. Someone to laugh with, to cry with, to feel one with. My heart is ready to love someone completely, to give them everything that is me.

This moment of realization came to me suddenly while I was sitting in Wesley’s kitchen this morning. No matter how hard I try to have fun with Wesley, laugh with

him, and find that spark of love, Wesley just doesn't care about me. He only does these things to play along. We haven't even said, "I love you." Nine months should have been more than enough time for us to fall in love.

"I can't believe he fucking slapped you." Josh's Irish brogue is thick with rage. "Please tell me Leo beat the shit out of him. That bodyguard of yours might be old, but he looks like he can tear a man's head off with his bare hands. Wait, did he tear off Wes' head?"

Josh always knows how to bring laughter back into my soul. He has been a constant in my life since I moved to England six years ago. And he was the first person I wanted to see after the awful break-up I had with Wesley. Leo tried to convince me to go home immediately and tell my dad what happened, but I needed to calm down first.

"No," I say to Josh after our laughter fades out. "But Leo went full Scots, swearing and muttering in what sounded like Gaelic. Very un-Leo-like. It reminded me of my mom, actually. She'd act the same way when she was angry or upset."

Josh pulls me into a bone-crushing hug. While wrapped in his embrace, I whisper against his chest, "I'm going back to America." I hadn't decided until the words came pouring out of my mouth. "It's been a few years since I went back there. I'm thinking of turning my mom's house into a bed and breakfast. Do you want to come with me?"

I also hadn't decided on asking Josh. My brain is not processing anything right now so my mouth is running away with any thought that pops into my head. But the thought of not seeing Josh for weeks, maybe months, makes me sick to my stomach. I can't expect him to drop everything and run away to America with me, but I can try to convince him.

Josh smiles at me, not the least bit shocked that I want to return to my childhood

home to recuperate after nine months of being in a fake relationship. “Are you sure running away is the right thing to do, love? You haven’t even spoken to your father about what happened. Do you plan on talking to him before leaving?”

“I don’t think I can. That’s why I want to go back. I need some space away from this life before making any decisions.”

“And what decisions are to be made?”

“Stepping down as his heir.”

Josh huffs, then laughs, saying I am a complete idiot for giving in so easily. “It is your life, Guin. I know Ed will respect whatever decision you make. Talk to him first. You owe him that. Don’t run away to America without a word to him. That’s what your mother did. Imagine how hurt he would be if you did the same.”

“Ouch. That was a knife to the gut.”

“Well, you don’t love me for my looks.” Josh winks. “And yes, I will visit you in America. I have a few gigs lined up in the next four weeks that I can’t flake out on. Is it okay if I come after?”

I nod. “I’ll talk to Ed. But then I’m on the first available flight out of here.”

“Come here,” Josh whispers, pulling me back into a hug.

“Do you have time for a jam session?” I ask.

“Right now?”

“Yeah. I won’t see you for a month. I need to absorb as much of you as possible.”

“Sure. You can play my Fender, just for this once,” Josh says, staring me down to let me know this is an honor bestowed upon me for today and to never ask to even look at his precious again.

We play for hours until my fingers become too tired and start slipping on the strings. When I leave Josh’s apartment, I feel myself becoming whole again, my strength revitalized. The magic of Josh’s presence.

When I step out of Josh’s apartment, Leo is waiting for me, sitting on a park bench reading a book. He glances up at me as I approach him, an expectant look on his face.

“I’m ready to go home now; speak to my father.”

“Very good, my lady.”

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Edmund left early in the morning for a meeting in London and won't be back for a couple of days. I could wait for him to return, but I want to leave for America immediately. Still, I need to let Ed know my plans and why I have chosen to leave England for the foreseeable future.

I sit down at the desk in his study and write him a letter with pen and paper. He would appreciate the gesture of a hand-written explanation much better than a voicemail or text.

Dear Dad,

I wish you were here so I could explain everything in person. Nevertheless, a handwritten letter will have to do.

I appreciate all you have done for me these past few years, but this life has become a bit too much. Without your love and support, I wouldn't be the person I am today. But I don't know if I'm cut out for this life as a British noble. I want so much to make you proud, to show you I am worthy. Maybe I will, but I have my whole life ahead of me.

Now that I'm a college graduate, I need to do some soul-searching, find out who I am and how I fit into your world. America is where I was born. It's the source of so many childhood memories, of loss and love. I am going back there. Not forever, just to breathe a little. I also had this idea of turning mom's house into a bed and breakfast.

This might seem like a spontaneous and irrational decision since I had never brought

the idea up before. It's always been a little daydream of mine and I want to make it come true. I need to do this on my own so that I know I can be independent. You won't always be there to protect me. I know this now.

I promise to tell you everything I am feeling at this moment, writing this letter to you. It's a bit too much to package away on paper though. I hope I'm ready to talk sooner rather than later. Please give me time.

Love,

Guinevere

While I pack my bags, Cecily barges into my room with her usual curious scowl. She plops down on my lounge chair and continues staring, not saying a word to me. I hate playing her games. I hate being her sister. She is a vile creature, born from the same evil brew as her mother. Though we look like sisters, we are absolutely nothing alike.

Before my mom died, when we would spend an entire summer month at Eden Manor, Ed made sure he was around as much as possible. He didn't want to miss out on getting to know me. As I got older, I realized he also wanted to take advantage of his time with my mom as much as, maybe more than, with me.

Cecily's hatred of me was obvious to Ed. He made several attempts to show Cecily an alternative, to be kind and accepting of her half-sister. But Charlotte wouldn't let her precious daughter befriend the intruder who threatened their very existence. Even as a child, Cecily was wretched. She never gave me a chance to belong, to be her sister, to be a Musgrave.

And the bullying from Charlotte and Cecily became crueler every year my mother and I would return for our month-long stay. When I came to live here permanently, without the protection of my mother's shadow, they reached a whole new level of

nasty.

“Where are you off to, my lady?” Cecily scowls. I hate when she calls me “my lady.” Well, I just hate when she talks to me at all.

“That’s none of your business.”

“Does father know you are leaving? Or better yet, does Wesley?”

“I don’t need to run my travel plans by anyone. Now please leave. I have a lot of packing to do.”

“Very well.” Cecily bounces away, giddy like a little schoolgirl.

Chapter 2

I notice Josh immediately as Leo pulls the car up to the curb at the arrivals terminal of Newark Liberty International Airport. He is holding his guitar case close to his side and dragging a small suitcase on wheels behind him, looking a little disheveled from the eight-hour flight. Bags under his eyes, his curly black hair sticking up all over the place, his face full of anxiety as he looks around, searching for a familiar face.

Moments like this, when I can look at his face without him noticing, like when he’s playing with his band or studying for an exam, I notice how incredibly handsome he is. Though I never had feelings for Josh, it’s hard to ignore those sculpted eyebrows casting a shadow over mood-changing hazel eyes. Features that make him look like he is in a constant state of brooding.

As Josh continues to struggle through the crowd of travelers, I jump up and down, shouting his name so that he can easily see me. A bright smile wipes away his resting brood face as if the sun has peeked out from behind a cloud just to shine a spotlight

on how beautiful this man is. He walks with purpose, his eyes never leaving mine.

When we hug, I feel whole again. Josh lifts me off the ground, spinning me around as he holds me tight against him. Smiles of the passersby remind me we are in public and that our reunion might look like that of two lovers who had been separated for months. Leo clears his throat, giving me another reminder that I should behave like the lady I am supposed to be.

“All right there, Leo?” Josh asks, setting me back down on the ground. Leo responds with a sharp nod, walking over to pick up Josh’s luggage. I reluctantly pull myself out of Josh’s embrace, looking up at his smiling face.

“Let’s never be away from each other ever again, Josh. I’ve missed you so much.”

“Hey, you are the one who decided to escape to America spontaneously.”

“I know. I’m just so glad you are here now. How long are you staying?”

“As long as you need me.”

“Really? What about your job interviews? You said you were close to getting that job as a counselor.”

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“Yeah, well, it didn’t work out. They picked someone else.”

“I’m sorry, Josh.”

“It’s okay, love. I am still thinking about starting a nature retreat, even if you don’t want to join me on that adventure. I know the idea started as a joke when you were taking those hippie courses at uni, but I’m starting to take it as a serious career path for myself.”

“If that’s what you want to do with your life, do it. I’ll help out where I can, give you my expertise.” I wink at him, making him laugh. With his luggage in the trunk, Josh and I jump into the backseat of Leo’s rental car.

“How long is the drive to Princeton? I am in desperate need of a real drink.”

“Just under an hour.”

“Lovely. Will we be driving through Manhattan? I’ve never been to New York City before.”

“We are already in New Jersey, Josh. You might be able to see the skyline as we exit. But I’ll take you to the city, don’t worry. There’s a Broadway revival of Oklahoma! I’ve already purchased our tickets.”

“You are amazing, Guin. I love you.” Josh pulls me into an awkward hug, our seatbelts keeping our bodies from touching each other. “And you sure this is New Jersey? It doesn’t look like the place you’ve described to me a million times.”

“That’s because this is Newark and the airport. Once we get past the urban landscape, you will see how beautiful New Jersey is. Mountains, woods, lakes, farms, history. I love it here.”

As soon as we get back from dinner, Josh falls asleep on the couch. He is suffering from a pretty bad case of jetlag. He had tried to stay up until at least ten but failed miserably. I have to nudge him in his tender sides to get him to walk up to bed.

After tucking him in, I walk to my room, where I finish planning our trip to the city. We’ll stay at a hotel right on Times Square and roam around the city visiting museums, parks, famous buildings, and eating at all my favorite restaurants.

There is a bar in Hell’s Kitchen that hosts Open Mic Nights. I add that to our itinerary and make a note to remind Josh to bring his guitar when we go. There are so many things to do and see in Manhattan I am a little overwhelmed with the choices.

Walk the Brooklyn Bridge and The Highline, both a must. We also need to go to Central Park and The Met. I leave some options for Josh to decide and close my laptop even though I could have stayed up all night planning every second of the five-day trip.

The following day, I let Josh sleep in a bit while I go down to the kitchen to whip up some pancakes and bacon. With the bacon in the oven and the pancakes keeping warm on the stove, I sprint upstairs to wake up Josh.

When I walk into his room, he is still dead asleep. He must have woken up at some point in the night as his shirt and pants are on the floor. I creep up next to his bed and softly whisper, “Good morning,” in his ear.

Instead of jolting awake, Josh grabs me by the waist and pulls me under him as he rolls over on his stomach. His eyes are barely open as his face dips down to mine, lips

seeking for a kiss. “Josh!” I yell. His eyes shoot open then.

“Fuck. Sorry, Guin. I thought you were Izzy. I’m still a little disoriented from sleep and jetlag, I suppose.” Josh rolls off me onto his back. He presses his fingers against the bridge of his nose, taking a deep breath. “Though, there have been many mornings I wake up and think she’s in my bed even though we haven’t seen each other in months.”

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out with you and Isabella. I know you loved her.”

“I don’t think I did. I was just comfortable.”

“Oh, well, I’m sorry all the same.”

Josh grabs my hand, giving my palm a tender kiss. “Thanks, love.”

“The bacon! I put bacon in the oven before coming up here. I should check on it. Come down when you are ready.” I slap a kiss on his forehead and jump off of the bed.

Josh and I have always been affectionate with each other. This is probably why our friends all thought we were secretly shagging throughout high school and college. I never thought anything of it though. We are more than best friends. We are kindred spirits. But the way Josh kissed my hand sent shivers down my spine to a place where Josh is not allowed. I feel my body ask for more and nearly turn around to walk back into his room and take what my body wants.

Fighting the feeling, I sprint downstairs and into the kitchen. The bacon survived, though a little singed. Crispy bacon is the best kind of bacon anyway. As I place the strips onto a plate covered with paper towels to soak up the grease, Josh stomps in and plops down on a chair at the kitchen table.

“You look dreadful,” I say, avoiding his eyes. For some reason, I can’t look into his eyes just yet.

“And I feel dreadful. But that bacon smells absolutely divine. I plan on devouring every bite. What are you going to have for breakfast?”

“Don’t you dare steal my bacon. Equal shares. I’ve been deprived of bacon for years while living in England.”

“I’ve been deprived my whole life!” Josh yells jokingly. “I’m seriously starved though. Give me at least a pile of bacon and a stack of those pancakes, please and thank you, love.”

I put his order together, gently placing it in front of him with a large cup of orange juice. Sitting across from him with my own plate of bacon and pancakes, I ask, “How did you sleep?”

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“Oh, I slept great. Woke up in the middle of the night realizing I was wearing the clothes I traveled in and smelled like ass. I fell right back asleep once I tossed them off. That bed is so fucking comfortable.”

“Glad you think so. I’ve replaced all the beds in the house since I arrived. Well, at least the mattresses. Did you try changing any of the settings?”

“Settings?” Josh mumbles with a mouthful of bacon.

“It’s a Sleep Number.”

“I’ll play around with it before my nap after this feast. Unless you have plans this morning that involve me?”

“No, get your rest. I have an exciting week planned. It will not be so fun if you are still jetlagged.”

“Lovely.” Josh stuffs an entire maple-soaked pancake in his mouth. “I’m so excited to be here with you, Guin,” he manages to say after aggressively chewing the massive amount of food he had stuffed in his mouth. I smile back at him, admiring how his dark curly hair is perfectly tousled on top of his head.

“I’m thrilled you are here. But I’m sorry for asking you to come on such short notice. I know I’m rarely spontaneous. Very unexpected of me. But I’ve been so happy here, at home.”

“England is your home too.”

“I know. But it’s not the same. I have so many happy memories here with my mom. I don’t know what I would have done if this house wasn’t mine to keep. When I moved to England, I was so worried my dad would sell it, thinking I’d have no need for it anymore. The thought never crossed his mind to do such a thing. He wanted me to keep my home, to have a place to go if I ever wanted to return. Ed surprises me sometimes.”

“Speaking of Ed, what did he say when you told him about Wes?”

“I haven’t told him that Wesley and I broke up.”

“What? Guin, he needs to know.”

“I know...I mean, I hinted at it in my letter to him. I’m sure he knows.”

“Have you not spoken to Ed since arriving here?”

“I asked him for space. I told him I needed to think about my life and what I wanted.”

Josh slaps his hand to his head, dragging it down his face in frustration. “Ed deserves more than a letter, Guin.”

“I know. I’ll give him a call soon. I just don’t know how to tell him that I failed him.”

“Bollocks! You did not fail him. You did not fail at anything. You were fake dating a complete gobshite. Ed will understand there was no love between you two. Love is fundamental to Ed, as I’m sure you know.”

“Sometimes you talk about my dad like you guys are old pals.”

“We’ve had some conversations you don’t know about.”

“What does that mean?” My eyes narrow at him, boring into his mind for answers.

“Fuck. Okay, you are bound to find out anyway. Your dad found out about our gigs. Leo had felt uncomfortable keeping such a secret from his lordship. He wanted to make sure Ed was fine with you performing at pubs and cafés with my band. Please don’t jump down Leo’s throat just yet. Ed wanted to hear you sing.”

Josh pulls me back down in my seat, stopping me from locating Leo to give him a piece of my mind. “Ed would hang out in the back, out of sight, and just listen to you sing with us. The first night he approached me after a set, I thought I would get a beating. But Ed just wanted to share a drink or two. He wanted to make sure you were happy. And also interrogate me about us.”

“Us?”

“He thought we were secretly dating.”

“Why didn’t he ever ask me himself?”

“Because he thought that you didn’t fully trust him and were afraid that he would make you change your lifestyle to fit the one he brought you into.”

“Bullshit!” I shout. Josh stares at me, eyebrows raised, patiently waiting for me to acknowledge my stubbornness. “Okay, so yeah, maybe he was right. I didn’t trust him. And I am still afraid that he wants me to be this picture-perfect lady with a rich husband and frivolous hobbies. But why would you keep all this from me?”

“Ed made me promise not to tell you. I’m sorry, Guin, I hated keeping this from you. But you both need to just fucking talk to each other. So fucking stubborn, the both of you.”

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I sink my head in defeat, piling the rest of my breakfast into my mouth as I think about everything Josh had just told me. I know I'm stubborn, but mostly I'm scared of this life I was brought into. "I'll call Ed tonight," I say into my empty plate.

"Are you mad at me?"

Looking up at Josh, I see the hurt in his eyes. Josh cares so much for me. Our friendship means everything to him as it does to me. "How could I ever be mad at you? Josh, you are my person. The only person in the whole world who knows me. Except for maybe my dad. I just didn't realize he was also my person."

"I'm glad we are finally on the same page." Josh stands up. "And now I'm going to pass back out on my luxurious bed upstairs. You are exhausting, Guin."

"Sleep tight!"

After hearing Josh's harsh truths, I feel like I finally have the courage to talk to my dad and tell him everything that happened with Wesley. I think of what to say as I replay the scene in my mind.

I had been sitting at the table waiting for Wesley to bring me a cup of tea when the realization hit me. We weren't in a real relationship, at least not one I wanted. Suddenly I couldn't even stand the idea of Wesley's lips on mine anymore. As I fell into a whirlwind of questions, I could hear Wesley's voice, but I didn't register what he had asked me, as this epiphany was all I could hear.

Looking up at him, a cuppa in his hands, I said, "Wesley, look, I'm sorry. I don't

think this is what I want.”

“Tea?”

“No, you. Us. I don’t want to marry you.”

“I haven’t even asked you yet, Guinevere.”

“I know. But we both know where this is going if we keep up the charade.”

“Maybe you just need time to think about things. I can wait for you.”

“Wesley, do you love me?”

“Yes.”

“Yes? Why haven’t you told me before now?”

He shrugged, that deadpan look on his face that I didn’t realize I hated.

“You don’t love me, Wesley. Let’s end this now before our parents get too excited.”

I got up to leave then, but Wesley grabbed my shoulder, sitting me back down. “You don’t want me, Guinevere? After nine months, all of a sudden, now you don’t want this anymore? I don’t think that’s very fair to me.”

“Let go of me, Wesley.” I tried to throw him off me, but his grip tightened.

“No, I don’t think so. You are going to give me what I want.”

“Get the fuck off me!” I screamed as loud as I could, hoping that Leo was close

enough to hear me. He was supposed to pick me up mid-morning.

Before I could yell again, Wesley slapped my face with his right hand, then covered my mouth with his other. “You don’t get to walk away from me as if I am nothing. I have given you nine months of my life. Wasted my precious time just to make you happy. This was never about falling in love, Guinevere. What a silly notion. You must truly think that you will take the earldom from your father when he is dead. Stupid woman. Only men can be earls, Guin. Your father wants me to become Earl. This American dream you are picturing, it will never be true for you.”

“Fuck you,” I spit in his hand.

“So unladylike. What would your father say?”

I pushed his hand away from my mouth but he kept a firm grip on my shoulder. “My father would never do that to me. Ed made me his heir. I am his eldest.”

“Guinevere, you are so naive. No wonder it was this easy to charm you.”

My opportunity came as he loosened his grip, thinking I was not a threat. I took aim, smashing my head into his nose. There was a horrible crunching sound, much louder than when I had broken Cecily’s nose. Wesley jumped back, screaming as blood began to pour down his perfectly symmetrical face. Wasting no time, I kicked him off me and ran straight for the door.

I shiver at the memory. But I can’t keep it hidden any longer. I pull my phone out of my pocket, open my favorites and call my dad’s cell. It goes straight to voicemail. Of fucking course! I always get so anxious when leaving a voicemail. And the content of what I want to say is way too much for a voicemail. Instead, I hang up immediately and send Ed a text telling him to call me back.

Chapter 3

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“Are you sure you don’t want to join us, Leo?” I ask as we unload our luggage from the car at the train station.

“Undoubtedly certain, my lady. Someone will need to keep an eye on the place while the contractors are at the house.”

All week long, I have been meeting with the contractor I hired. Since my mother and Uncle Aldon had already restored the old Victorian house to its former glory, it only needs a few tweaks to become a bed and breakfast.

“However, you must promise me that you will lay low,” Leo says, holding my attention with all seriousness in his eyes. “Americans might not know who you are, but that doesn’t mean you won’t get recognized. Call me immediately if you require my services.”

“And what services do you provide, Leo?” Josh asks sarcastically. The glare he receives from Leo wipes the smile right off his face. “I’m only joking. Jesus.”

“Don’t worry, Leo, nothing will happen to us. I’ve been to the city a million times. If anyone recognizes me, I know some place to lay low. But, of course, I will give you a call.” I give him a bone-crushing hug before turning toward the train rolling into the station bound for New York City.

After Josh and I settle ourselves into our seats, my mind thinks back to the Victorian house I grew up in. It’s filled with memories of my mom, which doesn’t upset me as it had years ago. And I know mama would have adored all the upgrades I’ve planned with our contractor, Hank. He is the same contractor who worked with my mom

twenty years ago.

Hank not only knows everything behind the walls but also has many memories of me from when I was an infant to my toddler years. I love hearing his stories about how my mother would strap me onto her body and offer to help with anything that wouldn't disturb me too much.

Supposedly I'd fall asleep to the sound of a table saw in an instant. The sounds of hammering and drilling were lullabies. And as I grew older, my mom would teach me how to use these tools, paint, and put up wallpaper. I have vague memories of all this as the renovations were completed by the time I was four or five. But hearing them from Hank, they feel like real, tangible memories from a past that had begun to fade away.

"What are you thinking about, love?" Josh asks, bringing me back to the train as we approach New York City.

"Just memories of when I was young, helping my mom renovate our house when I could barely feed myself with a fork." We laugh together.

"I love seeing you happy. Remember when we met? You were a blubbering mess."

"Hey, I had every right to be."

"You did." Josh pulls me into a hug, speaking into my hair. "You were sad for a very long time, Guin. I know the grief of losing your mother will always weigh your heart down. But what you are doing now, turning your home into a place where many families can make their own happy memories, it's a beautiful thing."

I settle into the crook of his neck as Josh's arm wraps around my waist. We both sit in silence, staring out the window until the train enters the dark tunnel leading

underneath the Hudson River. “We should start collecting our things,” I say.

Since we are only staying for a short week, I hadn’t bothered to bring more than a small bag and purse. But I want to grab Josh’s guitar before the other travelers try to remove their items off the rack above our heads.

With our bags and Josh’s guitar safely in our possession, all we can do is wait. The train takes its time rolling through the tunnel, making its final stop at the underground platform at Penn Station. We follow the masses of people at a snail’s pace until finally exiting the train.

I grab Josh’s hand as we both step onto the platform, silently guiding him upstairs and out into the stale city air. Penn Station is always crowded with people during the day. The sidewalk outside isn’t much of a difference. Since the hotel is only a few blocks up, I continue pulling Josh along until we can walk side-by-side. He doesn’t let go of my hand when I loosened my grip, but I don’t mind.

As we walk through Times Square, Josh can’t help but look up at all the digital screens advertising Broadway shows, movies, newscasts and more. Acting like the classic awe-struck tourist. When we reach an intersection, I have to pull him back because he isn’t paying attention to the traffic signs. I point up to the right corner of the square, explaining that we’ll be staying at that hotel.

“We are staying in a hotel right in Times Square? Fucking awesome.”

“Come on, let’s cross over up there, by the TKTS booth. We can buy tickets for another show later at that booth.”

“I thought you already bought us tickets for Oklahoma!”

“I did, but we are here for five days. We can see more than one show. I’ve left

openings in our itinerary for at least a Wednesday matinee and another evening show on Tuesday if we want.”

“Fucking awesome!” Josh repeats. “I really want to see *Hadestown*.”

“Yes! I’ve listened to the soundtrack. It’s amazing. The off-broadway recording at least. Did you know that the guy who originated the role of Orpheus is playing *Curly* now? So we’ll get to see him tomorrow. His voice is butter.”

“Guin, you are doing that thing where you go off on a rant and I don’t understand a word you are saying.”

I shrug, pulling him past a family getting their picture taken with a knock-off *Ninja Turtle*. This is the weirdest city in the world, but I love it.

After checking in to our hotel and changing out of our traveling clothes, we walk toward Hell’s Kitchen for an early dinner. Since the open mic night we are performing at is in the same neighborhood, Josh brings along his guitar. Josh and I brainstorm songs to include in the set as we wait for our food to arrive. We are allowed ten minutes, at least three songs.

“I have a surprise for you,” Josh says after taking a sip of his coke. “I learned a song from that weird Yiddish musical you like so much and put together some guitar chords, which was actually not too difficult. Would you want to give that a try tonight even though we haven’t practiced it together?”

“‘It Doesn’t Matter’ from *A Night in the Old Marketplace*?” I ask excitedly. When he nods, I jump up and down like a giddy little girl. “Yes!”

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“We’ll do that one first in case we bomb it miserably. Then let’s do Ain’t No Mountain High Enough and Rewrite the Stars.”

“Very romantic setlist, Josh. But I love the theme. Nothing gets in the way of love. Death, mountains, fate. I love it!”

“Hmm,” Josh grunts, his broody face taking over, but he shrugs it off. “I didn’t even mean to put a theme together. Those were just the songs off the top of my head.”

Everyone in the audience loved our unique covers. Yay! Josh and I stay at the bar hours after our set. I am still a bit flushed from the performance though. Looking into Josh’s eyes as we sang songs about love brought back that feeling from the other morning. His hazel eyes had turned a shade of golden I’ve seen before, but not from him. I remember how my mother’s hazel eyes would glow that same golden shade when she was with Ed.

I know Josh loves me; he’s said it to me many times and I’ve returned the sentiment. But something has shifted since Josh arrived in America to spend time with me as I figure out what I want out of life. I know he feels it too. The way he pulled me down into his bed the other day, nearly kissing me, his lips brushing gently against my palm, and that golden gaze piercing my soul.

We head back to our hotel just after midnight, stumbling down the busy sidewalk in a drunken haze. I pull my water bottle out of my bag, chugging half of it to sober up a bit and offer the rest to Josh but he doesn’t take any. Instead, he asks if we can pick up a six-pack for the hotel.

“You want to keep drinking? How are you not wasted after all those shots and beers we had at the bar?”

“I’m Irish?” Josh shrugs.

There is a convenience store on the way, so we stop in for some booze, snacks and more hydration. I am still a youthful twenty-three-year-old, but I know the mix of drinks I had will leave me with a hangover if I don’t hydrate before falling asleep.

As I step into our hotel room, the one king-size bed looks much smaller than I remembered. I booked this room because only the king rooms have balconies. The idea of sharing a bed with Josh hadn’t been a big deal before. In fact, we’ve slept in smaller beds together without any funny business happening between us. But that boundary we put up all those years ago seems to have faded. I feel vulnerable.

“Are you gonna stand here in the doorway all night, love?” Josh asks, pulling me out of my own mind. I shake myself as if chills run down my spine and make my way into our hotel room. Plopping my bag down on the ground, I grab a bag of chips and a water bottle, then head straight for the balcony. Josh follows, bringing a beer with him. “Everything all right?”

“Yeah, why? Do I not look all right?” I say a bit too sharply.

“You just seem out of sorts, is all.”

“I’m fine,” I say as I sit down on one of the chairs. I open the bag of chips and chomp away. The junk food and water seem to be helping with my drunkenness. At least I can see straight again. “Isn’t this city beautiful? Chaotic, but beautiful.”

Josh agrees, sitting down next to me with an open beer in hand. “So, what’s on the itinerary for tomorrow?”

“I thought we’d discover downtown and visit Battery Park and World Trade Center, have lunch at Beecher’s, then we have tickets for Oklahoma! which starts at 3:00.”

“Sounds perfect, Guin. Thank you for organizing all this. I didn’t know how much I needed a vacation. And just so you know, I’m paying for half of this trip so just tell me what I owe you.”

“Not gonna happen, pal. This is my treat, my thank you to you for crossing the Atlantic to be with me during what is probably a super early mid-life crisis.”

“Hmm. You are definitely having a breakdown. But I think you are handling it pretty well. I honestly thought you would have run away to America much sooner.”

“Really? Well, Ed turned out to be a pretty decent dad and honestly, I didn’t like the idea of life without you in it.”

“I know.” Josh’s face is unreadable, transforming back into his default brood while looking out into the view of Times Square from our balcony. The lights from the digital screen make him look ghostly. His gaze is fixed on something I can’t see, thoughts churning around in his mind.

The urge to caress his rigid brow, cradle his face in my hands and bring him to my lips is so strong I need to step away from him for a moment. I stand up a little too quickly and lose my balance. Josh is beside me in an instant holding me up as the dizzy spell passes.

“Are you okay, love?” He says in a soft, husky voice. Before I can answer, Josh pulls me closer, putting his lips to mine. I kiss him back with the same passion and need he shows me. Then his hands are all over me, searching, seeking for skin underneath my clothes.

There is no hesitation, no thought. We move as one, tearing each other's clothes off. I don't remember moving, but the next thing I know, my legs are against the bed. After tossing my naked body down, Josh quickly moves on top of me, parting my thighs gently to massage the wet folds between.

The sensation of his strong, warm hands on such a private part of my body is enough for me to lose myself at once. As he slides a finger inside me, massaging my inner walls, I moan softly in his ear, giving the lobe a little nip. In one swift motion, he removes his finger, replacing it with a much larger extremity. He enters me fully with one strong thrust, making me cry out in blissful agony.

Resuming his assault on my lips, we fall in step to a perfect rhythm until we begin to reach a climax. I dig my fingers into his curly hair, pulling him closer to me as his thrusts quicken with urgency. Wrapping my legs around his hips, I push him deeper inside me, needing him to leave an impression, a physical branding of his presence.

He grabs my legs, pushing them up as he continues to drill his entire length inside me. I suddenly feel his whole body shudder as he loses his strength, falling down beside me on the bed.

"Guin...fuck." Josh is out of breath from the spontaneous exercise that had just taken place in our bed. Sweat glistens on his brow. "I'm so sorry for jumping you like that. I'm drunker than I thought. But fuck, I didn't mean for it to go that far. You just looked so damn sexy in those ripped jeans I couldn't help myself."

"I could have easily stopped it if I wanted."

"I don't know if you could have. I was a bit crazed, might still be." He looks away as though ashamed. "What happens now? I don't want this to ruin what we have."

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“Josh, nothing could ever ruin our friendship. I love you. I honestly don’t know how I would have managed my new life in England without you. For a while, you were the only good thing about my life. I love you because you are a true and loyal friend, someone I can count on and bitch to and will always be there. And I’m obviously attracted to you. Something I wasn’t aware of until recently. But I don’t know if I want more than friendship with you, at least not right now. I’m still figuring my life out. Whatever this is between us, I like it...quite a lot.”

“I understand. I don’t know what I expected when I kissed you and then fucked you. All I know is that I love you.” His furrowed brow relaxes. “What does this make us now? Friends who love each other and shagged one night?”

“Why does anything have to change? Do you really think this affects our friendship?”

“I dunno, Guin, all the stories I hear about friends with benefits end terribly. The idea of us not being friends anymore because of this...I don’t even want to think of it.”

“If we just go on as normal, I’m not saying ignore what happened tonight but just stay the same best friends we were an hour ago, it will be all right. I promise. There is nothing in this world that will ever tear our friendship apart. Death, mountains, fate.”

“Well, in that case,” Josh rolls over to me on the bed. “You wanna do it again?”

“Yes,” I reply, jumping on top of him.

On our way home, Josh and I sit close to each other, hands clasped together. Our short week in New York City turned into a bit of a romantic getaway. We didn't label whatever was going on between us. Maybe it's just that we both really needed a good fuck. Maybe we are confusing the love we feel for each other for an uncontrollable attraction. I'm still not sure, but I don't question it, and neither does Josh. If we want to kiss each other, we kiss. If we want to fuck, we fuck. Besides that and the extra snuggles, our relationship remains the same as it was before this trip.

It doesn't feel awkward to see Josh naked, to be naked with him. I don't overthink how I should act around him after the first night we slept together. We are still Guin and Josh, the very best of friends. My love for Josh hasn't diminished, but I'm unsure if it has grown. I am just happy to be with him.

Josh falls asleep as soon as the train leaves Penn Station; we barely slept the night before. I am exhausted myself but can't fall asleep. With nothing else to do, I try my father again. We have been playing phone tag all week and I desperately want to finally tell him about Wesley and give him an update about what is happening inside my mind. With my unoccupied hand, I reach into my purse for my phone.

Ed answers almost immediately. "Hello, my dear Guinevere. I am so very sorry I have not answered your calls. I have been extraordinarily busy lately. Though, I should have attempted to call you more frequently as I have some bad news."

"What bad news?"

"It's Uncle Aldon. He is not doing well."

"What do you mean?" Hearing my distress, Josh wakes up, his hand still cradling mine. He gives me a little squeeze telling me he is there.

"He had a heart attack last week and is still in hospital."

“Is that normal to be admitted to the hospital for that long after a heart attack?”

“Aldon needed emergency surgery. He is recovering quickly but needs to be monitored closely. At his age, he could turn for the worse at the snap of a finger.”

“Then make sure no one snaps a finger!” I yell.

Uncle Aldon had been the only family from the Musgraves who had a consistent role in my life. He helped my mother set up her life in America, buy the house we lived in and even loaned my mom the money to restore our home.

I have so many memories of him coming to visit, spending Christmas with us and celebrating my birthday every year. He doesn't have any children of his own, so he spoiled me rotten. I was the daughter he never had. Ed didn't start visiting until after I was five years old, though I can't blame him for not coming sooner as he hadn't known I existed.

Uncle Aldon was my first ally at Eden Manor. The only one to speak up when Charlotte or Cecily stepped out of line when my father wasn't around. He wasn't afraid to call them out for their vile behavior. When Ed had to go away on business trips, Uncle Aldon would stay at Eden Manor to keep me company and ensure the bullying didn't get out of hand. I no longer need his protection, but I love my Uncle Aldon and am going crazy with worry. I have to go back to England. He needs me now.

“I'm coming back home. It might take me a couple of days though. Please tell Uncle Al that I'm on my way.”

“He will be delighted to hear that you are coming back home, Guinevere. I will let you know of any developments as best I can. The Malfroy's also require a good amount of my attention for the wedding plans. I want to make sure everything is perfect for you and Wesley.”

“Wait, say what now? Perfect for Wesley and me? Wedding? What wedding?” Josh’s eyes widen, his brows forming rigid slants. He mouths, “What the fuck is going on?”

“Now, Guinevere, is this your sarcasm I can never understand?” Ed sounds completely sincere. He isn’t joking.

“No, dad, this is my seething anger, confused at everything you just said. I broke up with Wesley over a month ago. He’s the reason why I needed to leave England.”

“If you broke up with Wesley, why did you not tell me this?”

“I did! I wrote you a letter.”

“Oh, the letter. Yes, I was thankful to at least have received that letter. However, Guinevere, I did not read anything about a breakup. You said you needed space which I have given to you. And during this time, your fiancé has been worried sick about you. Worried that you were having cold feet and wouldn’t be home in time for the ceremony.”

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“This is fucking crazy, dad. Wesley never proposed to me. He has never even said he loves me. He doesn’t care about me. Whatever plans have been made, cancel them. I’m not marrying him.”

“You can’t just throw away your relationship because you are scared, Guinevere. We have already announced the wedding, booked the church, venue, and catering. Everything has been arranged. And I have had to do damage control while you are off galavanting with Josh, doing God knows what. Wesley was in tears thinking that you would leave him for Joshua.”

“Fucking bullshit!” I scream at the top of my lungs, making the other passengers turn and stare at me. Josh grabs my phone, knowing I will soon lose complete control of my anger and say things I’ll regret.

“Guin, breathe. I’m going to talk to Ed. We’ll sort this out.” Putting the phone on speaker, he casually says, “Hey, Ed.”

“Joshua. Listen, you seem to be the only one who can talk sense into my daughter. Can you please—”

“Okay, Ed, I’m going to interrupt you. I’m sorry. Guin might be fuming in anger currently, but she is being reasonable. I can vouch that she broke up with Wes, and it wasn’t a friendly parting. Guin was in bad shape emotionally. I know she wanted to tell you but she didn’t know how. This is a conversation the two of you needed to have weeks ago. I urge you to listen when she is ready to speak with you. Both of us will be on the first available flight to England. Goodbye, Ed.”

Josh hangs up before Ed can respond, slipping my phone into my purse and pulling me into a hug. I immediately begin to sob into his shoulder. Uncle Aldon is in the hospital, my father thinks I am engaged to Wesley, my wedding is already announced and planned, and I might be falling in love with my best friend.

I was a hot mess of anxiety once we get home from our short week in NYC. Josh tried everything he could to calm me down, including sex. Lots and lots of sex. We had to be much quieter with Leo staying in the house, but the sex helped relieve most of the anger and anxious tension I felt inside.

Now that I am flying back home to uncertainty, the ball is back, heavy in my chest, making it difficult to breathe. Josh gives me axanax before take-off in hopes that I can calm down enough to sleep a few hours. Once we get to our seats on the plane, I put in my headphones and listen to my music on Spotify until I fall into oblivion. Eight hours later, I wake up as we land in London, feeling somewhat relaxed.

But when we exit the plane, I feel like I am going to vomit, so I run to the closest bathroom. I know it is just nerves and emotions screwing with my body. Once I get my breath back, I splash a bit of cold water on my face and march out to find Josh and Leo. They are sitting on a bench with our carry-on luggage scattered around them, a look of concern painted on both their faces.

I do my best to reassure them that I am okay. Josh grabs my hand, pulling me down to sit on his lap as he surrounds me with his arms. I feel so much love radiating from his soul. I curl into him, not wanting to be anywhere else. Letting his love consume me.

Leo stands up, mumbling something about getting the car and hurries away to give Josh and me some privacy. We sit this way in silence for a while. Josh's arms feel like home, but I need to start moving. I jump off his lap, throwing my hands out to help him up from the bench.

We make our way to the baggage carousel to grab our luggage and then meet Leo outside with the car. The ride up to Carlisle is less stressful. Josh hooks up his phone to the car's Bluetooth, playing all my favorite songs. We sing karaoke-style at the amusement of Leo, who rarely ever smiles. He even joins in on a few songs. Leo is probably doing this only to keep my spirits up, but I don't mind. It works.

As we get closer to Carlisle, I tell Leo I want to visit the hospital first. I am unsure if I want to return to Eden Manor though. And I know Uncle Aldon would be so pleased to see me. That's all I need to think about at the moment.

Ed had texted me before the flight, not wanting to speak on the phone, to update me that Uncle Al was doing much better and might get released in a couple of days. I am glad to hear he is doing better, but I don't want to return to Eden Manor if I'm not ready. Uncle Aldon would most likely be released to my father's care, which means I would have to see Ed and other unfriendly faces when I visit him there.

I enter the hospital on my own, wanting to have a moment alone with my great uncle. As I approach his room, I spot Ed standing in the hallway, speaking to a doctor. I sneak into my uncle's room, not wanting to deal with my father immediately. Aldon is propped up on his bed, reading the day's newspaper. When he hears my steps, he looks up, a bright smile exploding on his face.

"Hi, Uncle Al!" I run over to the side of the bed and pull him into a gentle hug. "Don't you scare me like that again."

"I apologize, Ginny. My heart decided to do its own thing. I had no say in the matter."

I am glad his sense of humor is intact. "I'm so sorry I couldn't come sooner. Ed didn't tell me until a couple days ago, and it took some time to settle everything with the contractor I hired to renovate old Victoria." That's what my mom used to call our

home, especially when Uncle Al was over. He would always give a hearty chuckle at the name.

“What are these big plans of yours?”

“I’ve had the idea of turning the house into a bed and breakfast for years. It was sitting there, getting dusty. I knew I wasn’t going to live there full-time, so I wanted to make use of it somehow. The renovations are mainly cosmetic, updating the kitchen and bathrooms and adding another full bath upstairs. It’s very exciting. And it was so wonderful being back there, even for such a short time.”

“You call six weeks a short time? I feel like you have been gone an eternity.” Uncle Aldon peers over my shoulder, a cautious look on his face. In a voice as soft as a whisper, he asks me if I am serious about Wesley. “He does not seem the right fit for you, Ginny. He is stuck up, pretentious, and, well, rude. Why Edmund does not see this side of him is beyond me.”

I glance at the door, hoping my father is no longer standing out in the hallway. I can’t hear his voice and I don’t see the shadow of a lingering body. “I broke up with Wesley before I left for America. I thought I made this clear to Ed in a letter I left him, but now I see that I should have waited to leave until speaking to him. I just don’t understand why Wesley would set up this farce. Unless he truly means to take the earldom from me.”

“Is that what Wesley said to you?” Uncle Aldon grasps my hand, squeezing tightly.

I nod in response. “After I told Wesley I didn’t want to be with him, he got so angry.”

“Edmund does not know of this breakup still?”

“I told him about it over the phone after he said he planned my wedding. Do you

happen to know the date?”

“Two weeks from today.”

“What!” I yell in shock. “What the actual fuck! Sorry, Uncle Al.” Breathing deeply, I regain my emotions. “I know I should have told Ed what happened weeks ago. But how could he possibly think that I am engaged and want to get married so quickly?”

“Edmund thought that maybe you had gotten pregnant.” My eyes bulge out of my face, a loud laugh escaping my mouth. “Ginny, I know you have been put in an awkward situation. Keep yourself together when you speak to your father. He will understand. Edmund is not like my brother. He will not force you to marry someone you do not love.”

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“I know, but he was unreasonable on the phone the other day. He wouldn’t listen to me.”

“Put yourself in his shoes, Ginny. You left for America without saying why. You and Wesley seemed like lovebirds. To Edmund, a proposal was inevitable. While you were away, Wesley came over to Eden Manor. I do not know how he knew you were in America. Especially knowing now that you were no longer on speaking terms with the man. Wesley had a whole story prepared. How he proposed, your immediate happy response, even details of wedding plans you had left him. He must have an inside source.”

“Cecily. That little bitch. She will do anything to ruin my life.”

“Do not lay blame before you have proof, Ginny. I know she can be awful, but she is your sister. Do you really think she would organize this fake wedding to ruin your life?”

“Yes, yes I do. I know Cecily would do something this insane just to see me unhappy. Either way this plays out, Cecily wins. I either marry Wesley and live unhappily ever after, or I don’t marry Wesley and Ed will disinherit me.”

“He will do no such thing. Edmund might be angry with you. Still, he loves you with all his heart. All he wants is to see you happy.”

“Guinevere?” I turn around. Ed stands in the doorway. Turning back to Uncle Aldon, I question him with my eyes. What do I do? I’m not ready to speak to him. He, in turn, gives me a sharp look telling me to buck up and get it over with.

I stand up, walking over to my dad. “Shall we go somewhere private?”

Edmund turns on his heels without answering, leading me into a small private waiting room. My insides are compressing into a large ball, ready to suffocate me. The anxiety is unbearable. I keep forgetting to breathe. How the hell am I getting out of this one? I love my father. Since the first day I laid eyes on him, I have adored him. But it wasn't until I moved into Eden Manor full-time that I felt my love returned in full. Our bond deepened through the grief we felt in losing my mother.

Though we would butt heads from time to time, Ed and I could always reach a compromise. He is in my court. We are playing on the same team. I know he wants what's best for me, but he also wants me to be happy above all else. To my core, I know this to be the truth. As I stand in the waiting room with him, struggling to contain my anger and reel in my anxiety, this doesn't feel true anymore.

“I know you are angry with me. I made a mistake. I shouldn't have left for America without speaking to you.”

“Your mother left me on our wedding day. Without a single word. Do you know how hard that was for me? She ripped my heart out that day and every day after. For five years I did not know where she was, why she left, if I would ever see her again. Then you left. Guinevere, my heart can only take so much. I thought you were happy. You seemed so happy with Wesley and with your life here.”

“I was happy, dad, just not with Wesley. I thought I had explained myself well enough in that letter—”

“That blasted letter!” Ed yells, seething anger I have never before felt directed at me. “I read that letter countless times. Nothing. You explained nothing. Only that you needed to soul search and be independent. How the bloody hell was I supposed to know what you were talking about?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t emotionally prepared to tell you what had happened.”

“Emotionally prepared? Guinevere, you were the walking personification of happiness the last time I saw you. I understand choosing to marry someone is a major decision for you. That you want to get it right the first time. Guinevere, you cannot accept a marriage proposal, plan your wedding with your fiancé, and then leave him in the dust. If you had changed your mind, you should have told him so. This drama you are creating is only making things worse.”

“Drama? My drama? Wesley made this whole thing up. I told you this already. He never proposed. He sl—”

“I have had enough, Guinevere. You will make things right between you and Wesley before your wedding day. A date you picked yourself, I might add.”

“And what date is that, dad?”

“June 8th.”

“The anniversary of my mother’s death? Why the fucking hell would I pick that date?”

“Wesley explained that you wanted to transform a day of grieving into a day celebrating love and life.”

“Bullshit, dad.”

“Guinevere, I really do not know what crazy shit is going on in your mind. Get it together.” Edmund storms out of the room.

The anger I feel fuming off his body is raw. I had hurt him by leaving for America. I

know that now. He no longer trusts me. I need to gain his trust back somehow. Before our heated encounter, I had planned to stay at Josh's until this all settled down. But I need to go back to Eden Manor, show my father that I am not crazy, that I am not taking him for granted, and most importantly, that I love and respect him.

Chapter 5

"Are you sure you want to be doing this, Guin?" Josh asks, his Irish lilt coming through strongly in his agitated state.

I haven't moved from my spot near the window and remain silent, gazing out into the parking lot as guests begin to arrive. Today is my wedding day. A day that is supposed to be filled with unlimited joy and happiness. All I feel is dread and anger.

"No. I'm not marrying Wesley. But I don't want to make things worse for Ed. I just need him to hear me. I don't want to lose him."

"Guin, your father loves you. I know you two have been butting heads recently, but he loves you. Use that. Be honest about your feelings. If anyone understands the situation you are in right now, it's him."

"I have been honest with him."

"No, you haven't." I glare back at Josh, my eyes full of daggers. Josh doesn't scare easily though. "All you said to him is, 'I don't want this, I don't want that,' tell him why. Tell him what happened. From his side of the stage, you and Wesley have had a successful relationship for nearly a year. You didn't even tell Ed that you broke up with Wesley two months ago. He thinks you have cold feet. You are both being stubborn. It's time to listen to each other."

I let myself fall against the cold window, stubbornness defeated. With one look at Josh, he knows I've given in. "I'll go find Ed. Don't get married before I come back." Before closing the door to the bridal chamber, Josh looks back at me, flashing his biggest smile.

He is right; I wasn't honest with my dad. But Ed also didn't let me explain the situation. Maybe he truly wants to believe that the match he made for me was one that blossomed into love. A love he doesn't have with his wife. I know he doesn't want that life for me. He has lived a miserable life with a miserable woman as his wife. And the love he so desperately wanted ran away from him. And then I ran from him. But all I want to do right now is run to my father to tell him how sorry I am, how much I love him. That I will never run from him again.

"Ed is coming," Josh says as he walks back into the bridal chambers. "I think something happened, though he wouldn't tell me what."

"What do you mean something happened?"

“I dunno. When I found your father, he didn’t even let me speak. He said, ‘Stay with Guin. Make sure no one else speaks to her. I’ll be there in five minutes.’ That was three minutes ago.”

“Did he seem angry?”

“Yeah, he did, but I don’t think he’s angry with you. Just stay calm. Breathe, Guin, you are not breathing.” Josh closes the distance between us in two steps, pulling me into a hug, a hand slowly caressing my spine, attempting to coax a breath out. My chest heaves with a deep breath, my heart slowing down to a healthy pace. A second later, my father bursts in, sending my heart into overdrive.

“Guinevere, I am-”

“Wait, dad, let me speak first.” Another deep breath helps me prepare myself for what I want to say, what I should have told my dad months ago. “Before I left for Princeton, I broke up with Wesley. I told him that after nine months, I still didn’t feel anything for him and knew that love wasn’t going to grow between us. He didn’t take it well. He slapped me.”

I pause, looking up at Ed. His green eyes are focused on me, listening. He waits patiently for me to finish, understanding my need to tell him everything I had been keeping from him. “I didn’t tell you this because I didn’t want to be a failure to you. Every time you talked about Wesley and me, you were so happy, so proud of me, and delighted that you were the one to introduce us. I couldn’t crush your spirit, your hope that I’d marry a rich man from a good family and that we’d love each other. I really tried, dad. The love just wasn’t there. And Wesley turned out to be a massive shitbag. I thought I would have time to figure out how to tell you while I was away in Princeton. But Wesley couldn’t let me go so easily. I really had nothing to do with planning this wedding. This dress, though gorgeous, the first time I laid eyes on it was this morning. I came back to England for Uncle Al but also because I didn’t want to

make you look a fool. If I had stayed in Princeton, it would have been like I abandoned you. I couldn't do that. But I thought you would hear me out and believe my side. It hadn't occurred to me that you would be on Wesley's side. I'm so sorry, dad." I run into my father's open arms, crying uncontrollably into his shoulder. "I'm so sorry I left and said nothing."

"I am sorry I did not believe you, my sweet, dear girl. Even though you wanted to prevent me from feeling foolish, I cannot help but feel like a pig-headed fool. The letter you left me was vague and incoherent. It brought me back to when Vira left me, and I was worried that's what you were doing to Wesley. But when I first read the letter, I thought it best to leave you alone and give you the space you requested. While you were gone, Wesley played a convincing role as your lovable fiancé. I did not understand why you ran away to Princeton and would not tell me the news of your engagement. Maybe I was subconsciously playing dumb because I had hoped that the two of you would be a perfect match. I now understand the emotions that were flooding your mind at the time. Could you ever forgive me, Guinevere?"

"Of course I forgive you, Ed." He cringes hearing me call him 'Ed' and not something paternal. "But, dad, why the change of heart? Just this morning, you were in a rage, telling me I had cold feet and that I would get over it as soon as I saw Wesley at the altar."

"Yes, I was a bit of an ass, wasn't I? Before Josh came looking for me, I overheard Wesley talking with Cecily. He reassured her that you would never take my title and all that comes with the earldom. Wesley said he did not love you and only wanted a son from you. A son he would raise himself, a son that would take the earldom before you could claim it. Wesley even made plans with Cecily to sneak into her room at night. I am sickened by my own daughter. The look of ecstasy I saw on her face at the expense of your misery is something I wish I could unsee. But now I know the truth of it all."

“And thank God for that!” Josh whispers loudly, breaking Edmund and me out of our bubble of confessions and emotions.

“Leo is parked right outside that door.” Ed points to the side door that leads out to the parking lot. “Take Josh and get out of here.”

“But what about the wedding?”

“I will handle it. Do not worry about me. I will see you at home.”

“I love you, daddy,” I yell as I leap back into his arms for one last hug. He gives me a warm kiss on my forehead before pulling out of our embrace.

“I love you, Guin. Now go before someone walks in here.”

Not wanting to waste any more time, I grab my bag and Josh’s hand and run to the door. I take a peek outside, hoping nobody will notice the bride acting strangely just before her nuptials are due to begin.

Leo is parked outside, as promised, holding the door open to the back seat of the car. Josh pulls me along, careful not to run too quickly since I’m still in heels and the train of my wedding gown hasn’t been fastened up yet. Josh ushers me into the backseat, picking up the lacy fabric of my gown as I slide in. Leo then sprints around the car gracefully, jumping into the driver’s seat. He pulls out cautiously, wanting to avoid any suspicion from the guests still arriving for my wedding that will never happen. In no time, we are making our getaway.

But I soon notice that we aren’t going in the direction of Eden Manor. We are driving west instead of east. “Leo, where are we going? Ed said he’d meet us at home. Home is in the other direction.”

“I apologize, my lady. When his lordship said ‘home’ he didn’t mean Eden Manor.”

“He didn’t? Where is ‘home’ then?”

“There’s a little cottage by the coast. It’s where your mother used to live.”

“What?” Shock rattles my brain. “How did I not know about this cottage before now?”

“I apologize, my lady.”

“Stop apologizing. Do you know why this place was kept a secret from me?” Leo keeps his mouth shut, eyes focused on the road ahead. “Do you know if my parents would sneak away to this cottage during our summer visits?” More silence, but Leo’s eyes twitch up at the rearview mirror, giving me the answer. “I bloody knew it! Mama was always way too happy during those visits. I’mgonna strangle her when I see-” I stop myself before finishing my thoughtless thought. After years of missing her, I sometimes forget that she is gone. The urge to text her, call her, make plans for a movie night is still a reflex in my mind like she had never died.

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I sit back against the seat, keeping watch for cars that might be following us. After turning around for the hundredth time to check if anyone dared to pursue us, Josh tells me to relax. “What will Wesley do, start an epic car chase like in some Hollywood action movie? That would make him look the guilty party. No, he’ll want to appear innocent, as I’m sure your father has much to say in regard to his character. You are safe but, most importantly, free.”

I want to cry and laugh at the same time, but all I let out is a warm smile and a hiccup. Josh grabs my hand, giving it a supportive squeeze. “Leo, if we were to be in a car chase, would this car win?”

“This car and my exceptional driving skills will be no match for anyone, my lady. I assure you.”

Hearing the hint of a joke in Leo’s voice, I relax, letting Josh pull me closer to him. His eyes fill me with calm, looking down at me with nothing but love. We might have been friends in high school and throughout college, but things changed after Princeton. I have a strong urge to kiss him, though I don’t think that would be appropriate with Leo sitting in the front seat. But my urge wins out. I lean up into Josh’s smile.

Before our lips touch, we are hitched forward unexpectedly. The car violently swerves left and right before skidding to a stop in front of a large tree at the edge of the Solway Coast Nature Preserve.

“Lady Guin, are you all right?” Leo asks breathlessly, sounding as if he is miles away.

Flashbacks of my mom, her face covered in blood, glass decorating her skin, consume my mind. My breath is frozen inside me for a span of ten seconds or so until I recognize the voices shouting my name.

“Lady Guin!” “Guin!” Leo and Josh shout in unison.

“Yes, I’m fine. What happened?” I ask, coming back to my body, to the here and now.

“It’s a flat tire, my lady. Nothing to be concerned about.”

“Of all the days to get a flat tire, do you think someone sabotaged us?” I hop out of the car to investigate, dragging my dress along. The tire is so badly damaged, I can’t tell if someone vandalized it.

“Let’s not become paranoid, Guin. I’m sure it’s just a coincidence.” Josh says as he climbs out of the back seat. “Please tell me you have a spare, Leo.” At this, Leo gives Josh a look that says, “Who the hell do you think I am? Of course I have a bloody spare.” But Leo is much too polite to say such a thing aloud. “Right, let’s get started then.”

As the two men go to work, I grab my backpack from the back seat and head for the trees to get some privacy. I step a good ten paces or so into the trees, far enough to lose visual of the men but close enough to hear them. Leo politely shouts orders at Josh, who quickly obeys his commands. I smile to myself, knowing that Josh is a good guy, one who shows respect even to a driver.

Though Leo is much more than my driver, respect is something Wesley never gave to him. I don’t know what the future holds for Josh and me. I don’t even know if I want anything more than friendship. But at least he loves me, and I love him. I love that he is honest. I love that he is loyal. I love the way his broody face lights up as soon as

music touches his lips and fingertips. Whatever comes next, I know Josh will always be there.

I open my bag and start rummaging through to find the change of clothes I packed. Dammit. How am I supposed to get this bloody dress off? I forgot about the millions of tiny buttons on the back that Mrs. Bingham helped me with earlier this morning. As I close up my bag, I hear a whisper from behind me but when I turn around, the sound is gone.

No one is there. But I swear I heard voices, human voices whispering just a few feet behind me. And I swear there weren't this many trees when I walked over here five minutes ago. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up on high alert. Every bone in my body shakes with fear, telling me to turn back to the car. But I can't.

In this moment, I understand why every character in a horror movie doesn't just run the fuck away. Fear makes you motionless.

Chapter 6

I close my eyes and count to ten, calming my irrational mind and the anxiety within. When I open them, my mind is quiet again, and I begin the labor of unbuttoning my wedding gown.

But after a few minutes and only a couple of buttons undone, the whispers start up again. I can't make out their words, but the voices sound strangely familiar. It's as if they are trying to speak to me, calling out. Somehow, I know I am meant to follow them. I grab my bag and carefully make my way farther into the marshy woods, listening for the whispers.

As I walk, I think of Merida from the Disney movie *Brave*, following those mysterious will-o'-the-wisps to find her destiny. Is it crazy to think that something

like that could be real? That these voices will lead me to where I am supposed to be? After all, the world is a big mysterious place, and England is full of legends and lore that must have come from a genuine source.

But after a while, I feel like giving up. I don't know how long I have been walking. And then it hits me; I haven't been keeping track of where I had been walking from. Did I walk straight? Had I made any turns? If I use the GPS on my phone, I'd be back at the car in no time. This isn't so bad. I can't be too far in.

I quickly regret this thought as mist surrounds me, coming out of nowhere. The whispers start up again, much louder than before. Panic slowly pulses its way through my body, up from the pit of my stomach. I feel sick and dizzy, unable to see straight in front of me.

Then silence. All around me, a terrifying quietness takes hold of the woods. I am even unable to hear my own panicked breaths. Spinning around, I try to find an opening in the thick mists, but there is nothing, only a blank whiteness.

Then I hear a voice, loud and clear, saying my name. Josh, he is looking for me. It sounds like he is just behind a group of trees standing to the left of me. But I can't detect any movement beyond them.

Taking a deep breath, I prepare to shout back at him, but no noise escapes my mouth. My scream turns to bubbles right in front of my eyes. For a split second, I'm dazed. How did my voice turn to bubbles?

Water. Somehow the mist turned into water. Looking all around me, I see nothing but water. No surface, no incline in the ground to lead me to shore. My mind is racing, trying to think of a way out of this crazy nightmare. I attempt to move, but my dress is stuck under a large rock. Now, how the fuck did that happen? Pulling at my dress does absolutely nothing.

Then a glint of metal appears to my right. I bend to pick it up, hoping it'll be sharp enough to cut myself free. Before I can even see what I picked up, I'm surrounded by a warm white light. The light shoots me out of the water. I stay conscious long enough to see a dense forest surrounding me as I hover above the lake I fell into.

I'm a little disoriented when I come to, and I can still hear those damn whispers. These whispers are different though; they are clearly female. I can even make out some of what they are saying. Something about a white enchantress, legendary sword, the lady and a lake...none of it makes any sense.

I open my eyes to find myself lying on the ground, drenched and muddy. I see two women dressed in dark robes, both with hair flowing down to the waist. I must have stumbled into a LARP camp.

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When they notice I'm awake, a woman with sun-kissed skin and raven black hair whispers something to the other. The blonde-haired one then turns toward the trees, disappearing down a path that must lead to their camp.

"We have been awaiting your arrival," the LARPer says, looking directly into my eyes.

"Oh, no...no. I'm not a part of this session. I don't do fantasy role-play. Not my thing. It's just that I got lost in the woods. My friends are out by the road waiting for me. Do you think you could help me?"

She responds with a simple, sad smile, saying nothing. I sit up and turn toward a lake; the lake I must have fallen into while stumbling through the mists. I notice I am still holding onto the metallic object I found in the lake, a sword. It emits a warm, white glow. When I let go of the handle, I feel a chill run down my spine and begin to shake. I quickly reach out to touch the sword again and am instantly warmed...interesting.

I say this aloud, not realizing it, and the robed woman behind me agrees. "Do you know the legend of Excalibur?"

"Ah, so this is an Arthurian live-action roleplay," I say under my breath. "Yes, and this sword is meant for King Arthur. Isn't he supposed to pull it out of a stone though?"

"The White Enchantress will decide who receives this powerful sword."

“Okay, and who is this enchantress? Can she help me get home?”

“I am not certain. But the Lady of the Lake might be able to answer some of your questions. Let me take you to her.” The raven-haired woman offers her hand to help me out of the muck I am still sitting in.

I have no other choice but to play along, so I stand up, grabbing my bag and the sword. I follow the robed LARPer through the trees. She leads me toward the same path the other woman went down. We are both silent, saying nothing as we walk the few minutes it takes to get to where this Lady of the Lake is. The end of the path opens up into a large area where multiple stone buildings stand around a courtyard.

More women wearing the same dark robes are tending the vegetables and flowers in the garden, laundering dirty clothing, and walking in single file into what looks like an ancient church. This definitely isn't a LARP, is my first thought after seeing all the well-kept stone structures. A cult? I get the feeling that something is very off. This place shouldn't exist so close to civilization.

“What is this place?” I ask my escort.

She looks back at me dumbfounded as if I should know exactly where I am. “Why, Avalon, of course.”

“Oh yes, of course,” I say sarcastically.

I'm ushered into one of the larger buildings and directed up a flight of stairs to a cozy room with a small bed, a table with two chairs and a fireplace blasting with warmth. Laying the sword down on the table, I make my way over to the fire, hoping it will help dry my gown. I throw my bag onto the closest chair and fan out the skirt of my wedding dress.

When I do this, I notice a large tear on the train of my gown where it was caught under a rock. How did I get out of the lake? A question I've asked myself over and over again since waking up on that muddy lakeside shore. Neither of the other women were wet, so they hadn't been the ones to rescue me.

"The Lady of the Lake will be here shortly. I've brought you some warm water and a robe to change into." The same raven-haired woman walks back into my room and hands me a neatly folded pile of white fabric.

"Thank you, that's very kind of you, um," I hesitate, realizing I don't know this woman's name.

"Morgana," she declares as if reading my thoughts. "Do you need help getting out of that gown?"

"Um, yes, otherwise I'd be dry as a bone before I got it off me. My name is Guinevere, by the way." I don't know why I give her my full name. I always introduce myself as Guin.

As Morgana unbuttons the back of my dress, I take a look around the room. There are no lamps, no light switches on the wall, no clocks, no phones, no outlets, no vents. What is this place?

"What a beautiful gown this is, so intricate, delicate. Is it a gown for a special occasion?"

"It's my wedding dress."

"You were getting married today?"

"I was running away from getting married today."

Morgana squeezes my shoulder, an offer of comfort perhaps, then continues unbuttoning the back of my gown. “All done. If you wish to wash up before meeting the Lady of the Lake, there is a block of soap, ewer and basin of warm water on the table. I will check up on you within an hour. There should be a priestess outside your door if you need assistance before then.”

“Thank you, Morgana.”

As soon as she walks out, I run over to my bag, opening it to see if my phone survived my plunge into the lake. I always keep my phone in the back pocket of my leather backpack, which helped to keep it partially dry. Thank god for water-resistant technology. My phone is working fine, but my hopes immediately dwindle when I see an X on the service bar. Maybe they have WiFi? Nope, nothing. I open the window to lean out with my phone in my hand, trying to see if I can get a signal. Still nothing.

If this is some creepy pagan cult, I am done for. There is no way to escape from this small room. Even if I could fit through the window, how would I escape a cult? I walk over to the bowl of hot water, letting my dress fall to the floor and begin cleaning the mud from my body. Morgana also left me a brush. I work at the knots in my wild red hair, pulling out branches and other bits of foliage.

After I clean myself up, I walk over to the robe Morgana left for me. It is pure white with long flowy sleeves that cut to a point. There are no buttons or zippers. I slip the garment over my head and use the string dangling on the side to wrap the robe securely around my waist. I feel warmer but still naked without any undergarments protecting my lady bits.

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With nothing more to do, my thoughts drift back to my current predicament. Morgana had used the word “priestess.” Everyone in this place is wearing a dark robe. Why was I given a white one? Is it because I am a guest? Do they mean to initiate me into this cult, or worse, am I a sacrifice? Don’t be silly, Guin. You are not going to be killed.

I somehow know I am safe here, but I can’t shake the feeling that something is terribly wrong. The mist was gone when I awoke beside the lake. Josh and Leo must be out there looking for me. They have to be close by. Before I can think more about where my friends are, I hear a light knock on the door.

“Come in,” I mutter.

Morgana walks in, followed by a most unusual woman. Though she is quite average in looks, something about her is striking. Her jet-black hair shimmers like a star glowing in the darkest of nights. And her brown eyes are filled with knowledge as if she is much older than she looks.

“Guinevere, this is the great priestess, Vivienne, Lady of the Lake, ruler of Avalon,” Morgana announces, standing aside to let the Lady take a deeper look at me.

I stare back into Vivienne’s eyes. “A pleasure to meet you, my lady,” I say, playing along. “I would like to ask a favor of you. As I’m sure Morgana told you, I’ve lost my way and want to be heading back home. It’s getting late. My friends must be worried sick that they haven’t found me yet.”

Before I continue rambling on about my need to leave, Vivienne places her hand on my cheek and looks deeper into my eyes. “I know you do not come from here, or

rather, from this time. However, I do not believe you can return home. I truly am sorry, Guinevere. Excalibur called to you and brought you here for a reason.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I lose composure, unsure what to make of Vivienne’s words. “All I did was fall in a lake after getting lost in the misty woods.”

“No, Guinevere. Wherever...whenever you think you are, is no longer when you are. I do not know exactly where or when you came from. What I do know is that the water surrounding the island of Avalon is protected by strong magic that hides us from the rest of the realm. This magic is strong enough to create a crack in time, with help from the powerful sword you brought out of the lake.”

“You have to be joking. This is most definitely a joke. How could you be telling the truth? I’ve traveled through time?”

“What year do you think it is now?”

“2019,” I say, keeping my calm as I say this aloud. But on the inside, I’m freaking the fuck out. The look on Vivienne’s face doesn’t make me feel any better. She is stunned by my proclamation.

“I knew you would come from the future, but so far, over 1500 years. Guinevere, in your time, have you learned the history of King Arthur and his kingdom?”

I remain speechless on the outside while screaming on the inside. This woman is either clinically insane, an excellent liar, or I am in Avalon...THE Avalon.

“Arthur is real? Then that means Lancelot and Guin...”No, this is absolutely insane. I am named after the legendary character Guinevere. This is all some trick or a dream. I fell asleep or, no, I never woke up this morning.

“I know this is frightening. I cannot imagine what you are feeling, Guinevere,” Morgana says, reeling me back to this crazy reality. “But the Lady of the Lake speaks the truth. I have seen many unexplainable things in my life. You are undoubtedly the most fantastic of them.”

“How is it that you both are so calm. You claim that I am from a time 1500 years from now. Does that not frighten you?”

“It terrifies me,” Vivienne whispers. “You terrify me. My whole life, I have been able to see what will come. I knew you would arrive. Yet, I cannot see past that. I cannot see who you were, are, or will be. You mentioned my son, Lancelot. What do you know of him?”

“What do I know?” I mumble back. “I...I need to lie down. No, I need to wake up. This is all just one crazy, insane nightmare.”

I throw myself down on the small bed in the corner, willing myself to wake up. Josh. He was so close to me. I had heard his voice clear as day right before drowning at the bottom of a lake that didn't exist. At least it doesn't exist in the future. That just can't be the truth. But when would I have fallen asleep? Nothing makes sense. I feel my body slipping into an anxiety attack. Closing my eyes tight, I breathe in deeply, letting it out slowly.

“Guinevere, this is not a nightmare. We are only trying to help.”

“Leave her be, Morgana.” Vivienne approaches me, laying a hand on my shoulder. “When you are ready to speak, we will listen. Take your time, Guinevere.”

I hear the door shut as the two strange women leave me to my thoughts. But before I can do any thinking, I fall asleep.

Chapter 7

Lancelot

As I arrive at Avalon, the priestesses have begun to prepare for their Midsummer feast. I have always loved this time of year when the quiet, little island of Avalon flows with life. What has brought me back here is not the solstice but a letter my mother wrote to me. A letter describing Excalibur and a woman she calls the White Enchantress.

I can feel the excitement pulsing through the air. The magic of the island has been ignited. It is more than the upcoming festivities. Whatever happened here was real. Morgana's account - as described in my mother's letter - of the events at the lake is unimaginable. I cannot remove the vision from my mind, yet I cannot believe it to be true. Growing up in Avalon, I have seen incredible things and witnessed true magic at the hands of my mother.

She has healed fatal wounds, bringing men and women back from their deathbeds. Conjured rain to water crops during droughts. She has even turned water into wine, a trick that the Christian god is believed to have performed. My mother is no goddess, but she is gifted with unexplainable powers.

Once my horse is settled at the stables, I make my way to the lake's shore on the southern end of the island. The place where the miracle occurred. As I approach the water, I realize how dusty I am from the journey. The lake is a welcome sight. Hoping to wash away the long journey, I remove my tunic. But the sound of a shocked gasp quickly brings me out of my stupor.

I did not notice the other occupant at the lake. As I look upon her vivid red hair and dark green eyes, I forget myself. I feel as if I am in the presence of an angel as she is dressed in an all-white robe and appears to be glowing. And it is not the sun burning

brightly in the sky, glistening off her dark copper locks that cause her to shine.

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Her stunning visage brings out a primal, animalistic feeling that rises deep from my groin. I must have her, is my only thought. My mouth moves and words fall out before I can stop myself. “Would you care to join me?”

The lady clears her throat nervously before responding. “So sorry, this place is usually vacant. I like to come here and waste away the day thinking about nothing. I should head back though. See if the priestesses need my help with anything.”

Her nervous reaction to my invitation to join me in the lake quickly shakes me back to my mind. I see her from the inside, lost and alone. Then, it dawns on me that she must be the one my mother had written about. How she had stumbled into the lake on a misty day, plunging down into its depths.

As the lady turns to head back to the compound, I convince her to stay with a crooked smile. “I will not disturb your thoughts. Unless you want me to.”

Slowly, she sits back down on her boulder as I turn back toward the lake, recalling Morgana’s account from my mother’s letter. The impossible rescue from certain death invaded my dreams all week long.

Merlin had prophesied such an event would occur during Arthur’s reign. And my mother confirmed it with a vision of her own shortly after. A woman from another world would bring forth a sword from its dark, watery grave, awakening the magic within. The sword would come to life and bond itself to the one who will carry the kingdom to prosperity and unite all its people.

Is this woman that person? Merlin had believed the sword to be meant for Arthur.

Perhaps she will decide who to bestow the sword Excalibur upon as she is presumed to be a prophetess. Knowing who she is does not stop my body from wanting her any less though.

I sense her eyes on me. She has not looked away since our eyes first met. Not wanting to startle her, I slowly turn back around and meet her gaze. Red instantly flushes her cheeks, a color to match the beautiful locks of hair that frame her round face.

“I didn’t mean to stare. It’s been a while since I saw a man. It’s like looking at an alien.” She laughs, the sweetest sound, and turns back to the lake.

“What is an alien?” I ask.

“Oh, just like a foreign being, not of this earth.”

“Like an angel?”

“You could say that, yes. But you are more god-like.” Her cheeks turn an even brighter red which makes my chest flutter. But I came here for a reason, to seek the truth in what Vivienne had written. I will not let my guard down.

“My mother wrote to me about you. You are the White Enchantress. The one who found Excalibur in the lake.” I do not ask this as a question but as a statement.

“Yes, though I’m not too sure about the enchantress part.”

“I find you quite enchanting.” I catch her eyes again, showing her my most charming smile, needing her to trust me. “Can I see the sword? Excalibur.”

“Um, yeah, sure.” She gracefully hops down from the rock and grabs the sword from

the ground.

“Do you carry Excalibur with you everywhere you go?” I ask, wondering how she can carry such a large sword around the island without a scabbard.

“No, it just shows up wherever I am.”

That was not the answer I was expecting. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I had left the sword in my room two hours ago when I came out here. I didn’t even have to look down to know that it magically appeared right next to me shortly after I sat down on this rock.”

“May I?” I ask, holding out my hand. She places the hilt gently in my right hand, cradling the blade cautiously with the other. The warm glow from the blade dims as I take possession. Interesting.

The lady sits back down on her rock as I admire the sword. It’s beautiful. Surprisingly lightweight. And it’s vibrating with power. This is Excalibur. It has to be.

“Wait. Did you say ‘mother’? Are you Vivienne’s son?”

I peel my eyes away from the sword, guiding them up to the lady’s pale face. I react quickly when I see her stumble off of the rock, losing her balance. In an instant, the sword is on the ground and the lady is in my arms.

Lightning shoots through me at the feeling of her body so close to mine. I am desperate to press my lips against hers, taste her flesh, and...I cannot allow myself to think of such things.

But I pull her in closer, cradling her head to my chest. I feel absolute bliss. Keeping a tight hold on her, I want to let her know that I will not be the one to let go. I do not want to be anywhere else, but I cannot let this go on forever.

The lady who brought forth the sword of power is not meant for me. I will not tarnish such a delicate creature to sate my own mortal lust. Before I can release the enchantress, she pushes herself away from me, fleeing back toward the compound.

The sudden movement stuns me, leaving me motionless for an eternity. I run after the lady, needing to apologize. I might never receive an intimate kiss from her, but I need her trust. She plays a significant part in Arthur's reign and the entire kingdom. Therefore, she is important to me.

None of the priestesses answer my hurried inquiries about where the enchantress has gone. When I approach the gardens, I no longer need to ask which direction she went. I feel her presence as if she is standing right next to me, whispering my name in my ear. I turn toward the whisper, and there she is, peering down from a window.

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“Lancelot, why are you running around half-naked?” Morgana asks, approaching me with a hasty step.

“The White Enchantress. I met her at the lake. Something frightened her. She ran without a word. I am looking for her.”

“Perhaps it was you who frightened her?” An all-knowing look stings my already delicate heart.

“That is what I wish to know. Apologize if I did anything to upset the lady.”

“Mmph,” Morgana grunts. “I know you are oblivious to the effect you have on women, Lancelot. But in this case, I believe her reaction was due to other circumstances. She has spoken of you in her...prophecies. Perhaps Guinevere is hesitant to face the things she knows will come. Do not ask me; she has not spoken of these visions to me or your mother. However, when she arrived, your name was one of the few words she mentioned. Guinevere had seemed frightened of the possibility of meeting you. Nevertheless, I will speak with her. I can see that meeting her has affected you deeply as well.”

“Thank you, Morgana.”

With a sharp nod, Morgana makes her way into the main building where all the sleeping quarters and common living areas are housed. She does not return though. I soon become aware of the priestesses’ hungry stares in my direction. My tunic is still at the lake’s shore, so I hastily make my way back to retrieve it. My mother forbade me to seduce any of the priestesses at Avalon, not that I had wanted to. I grew up

with these women. They were my sisters.

Guinevere is the first new face in Avalon for years. However, this is not the reason for my lustful and greedy thoughts. Something powerful draws me to her. Whether it is her physical allure, the fantastical image of her shooting out of Lake Avalon that has been stuck in my mind for a week, or an invisible force pushing me towards her, I do not know. But I need to be in her life.

Chapter 8

Guinevere

When Sir Lancelot catches sight of me looking out my window, I jolt back in my bed, hoping he won't try to come up to see me. For weeks I have felt so alone, talking to no one besides Vivienne and Morgana. All the other women on the island are terrified of me. No one will look at me.

With the Midsummer feast coming up, everyone on the island has begun preparations for the festivities. A couple of novices are to become priestesses of Avalon on the solstice. I had offered my help, needing to do something, but all I get are strange looks and cold shoulders. I am a stranger in Avalon. I don't belong here.

This was made clear the first evening I arrived. My empty stomach forced me out of bed in search of food. I had found the dining hall where all the priestesses dined together. Walking over to the first available seat, I sat down and grabbed a piece of crusty bread. Then I quickly filled my plate from the other platters of food in front of me, not caring what I was putting in my mouth.

Even the simple task of eating seemed to frighten the priestesses like I had the plague. I didn't care. I just sat quietly, eating my dinner and taking in my surroundings. The walls of the hall were made of stone and plaster. Two wrought iron chandeliers

holding candles flickering with light hung from wooden beams in the ceiling. A large fireplace roared to life on the far side, two tables away, but I could feel its warmth as if I was sitting right next to it.

I looked down at my plate to grab another piece of chicken and nearly fell over when I saw Excalibur lying on the table in front of me. I hadn't brought this beastly sword with me, which is why I was shocked to see it next to my plate of food. Was it following me? Could swords follow people?

I soon learned that this sword did follow people, me in particular. Anywhere I went, Excalibur would be there. It didn't hover behind me but would appear wherever I went. This made the priestesses of Avalon even more fearful of me.

Making myself scarce seemed the only thing to do. So I developed a routine of walking to the lake every morning. I knew the path, the same path I had been led down upon arriving at Avalon. But today, I wasn't the only one seeking the solitary silence from the lake.

The door to my room creaks open, making me jump off my bed. My heart stops beating, assuming that Lancelot has made his way up to my room. But it's Morgana who walks through the door. I let out my breath, relieved that it wasn't Lancelot himself bargingin. As she enters my room, Morgana informs me that Lancelot has been asking for me.

"I can't see him. Just tell him I've fallen ill."

"I do not understand. Did Lancelot do something to you?"

"No, it's just...I sort of fell in love with him in two seconds. I don't know if it's real or if my mind is playing tricks on me. That's Lancelot, Sir fucking Lancelot! Goddammit, he is fucking gorgeous. And his energy is electric," I say while

nervously pacing back and forth in front of the cold, barren fireplace.

“You are not the first girl to fall head over heels in love with Lancelot, nor will you be the last. I had similar feelings when I was a much younger woman. He is a very handsome man.”

I plop back onto my bed. “Handsome is not a powerful enough word to describe how beautiful that man is. But maybe you are right. Maybe this is just a temporary infatuation. The shock of seeing him, knowing who he is and what he could be to me.”

Morgana walks over to my bed and sits next to me. “What is truly troubling you? Please, you can speak with me about anything.”

I sigh in defeat, knowing I must tell someone what I know, or what I think I know. “It’s time I told you and Vivienne about the Legend of King Arthur.”

Vivienne walks in unannounced as if she’s read my mind. “Guinevere, is something the matter? The priestesses are all whispering that my son is looking for you. That you had run away from him, frightened.”

“My lady, I’m really sorry. I should have told you sooner. You have shown me nothing but kindness since my arrival. But I’ve been too shocked to comprehend it all. There are things that I know, or at least I think I know, about what will happen to King Arthur and his kingdom. In my time, Arthur is only a legend, not part of our history. Many have attempted to prove that Arthur and his knights of the round table existed. There are so many versions of the story, but none are accepted as history. I will tell you this,” I hesitate, unsure how to explain the impossible.

“If I am the Guinevere in all these stories, then I am the reason for the destruction of King Arthur and his kingdom. This is my fate, to marry a king but love another. And

that love will be the death of so many people. I cannot bear to fall in love with a man I can't have. I will not live that life. I refuse to let that be my fate.”

I think of my mom. How she lived eighteen years of her life in love with a man who she couldn't be with. As I got older, I wondered if that was the reason why my mom had named me Guinevere. A woman trapped, torn between love and duty.

Vivienne cups my chin in her hand, saying, “Guinevere, you are the White Enchantress. You are the one who has brought the sword of power to us. You will give it to King Arthur. He will use it to unite the kingdoms of Britain. How could you be the destroyer of all when you are the bringer of light? Do you know how you survived the journey to this place, out of the lake?”

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Utter confusion on my face leads Vivienne to go on with her speech. “Morgana saw the whole thing. A bright white sphere of light appeared in the lake. After breaching the surface, the light became so bright that Morgana and Rhiann had to shield their eyes. When they could bear to look again, they saw you floating above the water, surrounded by the white light, holding Excalibur high in the air.” She points to the sword on the table. It had reappeared there sometime after Morgana arrived in my room.

Vivienne continues her speech, desperate for me to believe who I am. “That sword chose you. It saved you, Guinevere. It must have a reason for doing so, and I do not think that reason was to destroy.”

“It didn’t choose me. I picked it up—”

“Excalibur is alive. If it did not believe you to be worthy, it would have left you to die.”

I let her words wash over me, wanting to believe every word out of Vivienne’s mouth, but I can’t. “Do you believe the past can be changed?”

“I believe in everything, Guinevere. One of those beliefs is that we forge our own path in life.”

Love was always something I wanted, but at the same time, something I’ve been afraid of for most of my life. I know what love feels like. I’ve felt it before in many different ways. What frightens me most is losing the feeling after it has consumed me. Maybe this is why none of the relationships I’ve been in have worked out,

why my closest attachment is a best friend and not a lover. Though recently, Josh had become both.

When I lost my mom, I could feel the pain of my love for her, seeking another soul to bring that part of me back to life. My love was dying, going into stasis, unable to survive my heart shattering into a million tiny particles.

If my dad hadn't dropped everything to be with me for those first few weeks, I don't think I would have been able to love again.

I remember how much my mom loved Ed. It comforted me that part of her heart was still beating in his. But it took a while to realize that she also still lived within me. Everything I was, everything I am, is because of her and the love she gave me. The love I held in my heart for my mom was still inside me. But it wasn't until I met Josh that it blossomed back to life.

The love I began to feel for Josh was the same love I had for my mother. I knew Josh was one of my soul mates, a person I was meant to meet. He helped me come back to myself, the person I was when my mom was still alive.

Though life at Eden Manor was anything but the home I yearned for, Ed had made sure I felt comfortable there. Seeing how much I flourished at public school and the friends I had made helped him to see just how depressed I had become since moving to England.

Ed became a much more involved father, spending quality time with me away from Charlotte and Cecily. We would have afternoon tea together while watching Netflix. He'd take me to see musicals in the West End, making a whole weekend trip to London.

And he even came to see me in all the musicals I performed in through high school

and university, for every performance. Ed would tell me that I reminded him so much of my mom. “You did not get your vocal talent from me. Vira would sing and I would swoon.” “Ew, dad,” I’d say.

I knew Cecily was jealous of my relationship with our father, but she never attempted to ask for more. She just wanted his attention, not his love. And love is what I had from Ed. It didn’t match the love I shared with my mom but it was the love I needed.

Happier with my life as the bastard daughter of the nineteenth Earl of Lancaster, I remained at Eden Manor after graduating high school and attended the University of Cumbria. I could have gone to any high-ranking university worldwide if I wanted to. My father would have gladly paid for the tuition. But I chose to stay at home. Josh joined me uni. He studied psychology while I worked on a degree in Outdoor Adventures and Environmental Studies. “Hippie courses,” as Josh calls them...called them.

I thought it would be good to have a better understanding of the environment so that I could use my knowledge to advocate for climate change initiatives. I didn’t want to be just an earl’s daughter, spoiled and worthless, having everything handed to me. I dreamed of joining or forming committees to ensure that the plans drawn out by the UK government were on schedule and to hold those in charge accountable. I wanted to use my rank to make a change, to make the future a better place to live in.

Now stuck in the past, I will never know what kind of future awaits the people I love in the twenty-first century. My life is in Arthurian England. A place lost in time. One which I destroyed because I fell in love with the wrong man. Or will destroy. It hasn’t happened yet.

Chapter 9

Guinevere

After confessing what I know about King Arthur, I find myself wandering around Avalon, feeling like a ghost drifting away from my body. I come across a building I haven't noticed before. It looks like an old temple, ancient even for this time. Strong, gigantic sculpted rocks hold up a dilapidated roof. It's open on all sides but only has one set of stairs facing west. The setting sun washes the facade in golden light. I can feel Excalibur humming at my side as if it knows this place, misses it even.

"Is this where you were forged?" I ask the sword, looking down to where I had fastened it with a makeshift holster. It pulses with a white light surrounding me in warmth.

"Yes." She doesn't say this word exactly, but I know that is what she said, if that makes any sense.

I look back to the temple and notice a string instrument of some kind leaning against the stone stairs. Maybe a lute? It looks a little worn but otherwise in good shape. Someone must have left it behind earlier today after practicing for the festivities tomorrow evening.

I pick it up, intending to bring it back to the dining hall. Instead, I sit down, loving how the lute feels in my hands. I haven't played music in weeks.

Luckily my bag survived the journey through the mist and lake. And since my first year at university, I've always made sure to carry a portable solar-powered charger with me. This allows me to keep my phone charged, not for making phone calls or sending texts, obviously. With my phone charged up, I can listen to the music I downloaded on Spotify back in the twenty-first century.

Still, I miss making music. As my fingers brush the strings of the lute. I can feel Excalibur's warmth at my side, a sort of energy that vibrates through to my fingers. I begin to play "Million Years Ago" by Adele as best I can remember.

As I play, I can't help but think of Josh and the first day I met him. I was a total wreck, living in one of the circles of Hell for the last few months. I had received no warm welcome from my stepmom, Lady Charlotte Musgrave, nor from Cecily when I moved into Eden Manor as a permanent resident.

After another day of being tortured by a gang of teenage girls at school by order of Queen Cecily, I asked Leo to stop at Upperby Park. I needed a break from my evil half-sister. And a moment to breathe outside the confines of Eden Manor. Cecily had made it her life's work to make mine miserable with every breath I took, at home, at school, at social events. Everywhere.

At school, her posse of followers did her every bidding. They made it impossible for me to make friends of my own. Everyone saw me as the American bastard child of an English earl, unworthy of their attention.

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Strolling along the path, I stopped still when I heard the most enchanting sound. A boy my age sat on one of the park benches, gracefully strumming his soul out on an acoustic guitar. He was looking down at his fingers, his curly black hair pulled back from his face.

I stood there mesmerized, losing myself in his melancholy melody. It took him a while to notice me staring at him with tears running down my face. Instead of ignoring the crazy teenage girl, he called me over to him. This startled me, setting me off, and I began to cry uncontrollably. It dawned on me then that I hadn't cried since my mother's funeral. I had been holding back so many tears, so much pain and anger, and it was all spilling out in front of this beautiful stranger.

"Now then, what's the matter, love?" The boy asked sweetly. His hazel eyes searched my green ones for a sign that I was okay. "Come sit with me a bit. I'll cheer you right up," he said in an Irish brogue.

I lost all control of myself, letting this stranger take me in his arms and bring me down onto the bench next to him. He held me gently and let me cry on his shoulder as if we were old friends, and he didn't release me until I calmed down enough to talk coherently. "You play beautifully, with such passion and intensity. Your music is ethereal."

"I'm sorry it made you cry-"

"No, no. It made me feel again. I haven't been myself lately. Your music, well, it reminded me of my mother and the beauty in this world and just because you lose one beautiful thing in life doesn't mean you can't find it elsewhere."

“Wow, thanks. I mean, I’m just screwing around on my Fender. No one has ever really noticed my music in such a way. I’m Josh.”

Shaking his hand, I replied with my name.

“So, where in America are you from? If I might ask.”

“New Jersey, but I’m actually British, was just born and raised there.”

I hesitated to release any further information about my British background as it had always seemed to stir up instantaneous resentment. With Josh, even though he was a stranger to me, I felt comfortable with him. I knew he wouldn’t look at me any differently after knowing who I was. Still, I resisted giving him any information that would give me away. Instead, I went on a rant about my evil stepmom and half-sister. How earlier that day, Cecily and her friends had recruited my classmates to ask me questions about my mom. How much did she make as a whore? How did she convince my father that I was really his? Did I see her mangled body as she was dying?

“Have you told anyone about this?” Josh asked, concern woven in his voice.

“No. It would only make things worse with Cecily at school and home.”

“Guin, this kind of bullying will only get worse if you keep letting it happen. You need to report it or at least tell your father.”

“I just don’t want to put a bigger rift between us all.”

“I get that. You are in a tricky situation, and it’s likely not going to get better no matter what you do, but please think about it, okay?”

Before I could say anything else, Leo interrupted us. “Lady Guinevere, we must be

off as your father will want you ready and dressed for tonight's dinner."

"A lady, are you?" Josh asked, his eyebrows crooked with curiosity.

"Yes, the Earl of Lancaster is my father. I hope that won't change the prospect of our friendship."

"Absolutely not. I hope our paths may cross again soon."

"Well, in that case, here's my number." I rip off a piece of paper from the small calendar notebook I keep in my blazer pocket and quickly scribble down my phone number. "Call me anytime you need an audience and I will come crying."

I sing the last phrase of the most relevant Adele song my life has ever known, my voice decrescendoing as the last cord I played on the lute dies down to silence. Tears filled with memories of my best friend are gushing down my cheeks, burning a path of emotional destruction into my skin. I will never see Josh again.

"That was beautiful," a voice from behind me softly exclaims.

I turn around quickly, startled by the sudden presence of another human. Lancelot. My body shivers in surprise at seeing Lancelot so suddenly, replacing the sadness that was consuming me just moments before. I'm not ready to speak with him yet, but I can't keep running away whenever he appears. Still, I don't know what to say, so I remain silent, a little flushed that he had seen me so vulnerable.

Chapter 10

Guinevere

"You have the most captivating voice. Where did you learn to play such music?"

A warm blush spreads across my cheeks at the compliment. I quickly wipe away my tears as Lancelot approaches me. “My best friend taught me how to play guitar. I’ve always been good at singing. Something my mom passed on to me, I guess.”

“You are not good at singing, my lady. You are remarkable.”

I can’t see my face, but I know the shade of red has to be noticeable. Hoping that the shadow of dusk is hiding my embarrassment, I look up at Lancelot as I stand. “That is very nice of you to say. Thank you. Um, I think I’m going to head back now. Dinner has most likely already been served and I am ravenous.”

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“Would you mind if I escort you?” Lancelot asks, the perfect chivalrous gentleman.

I hesitate, unsure if I should allow myself to be alone with Lancelot. But my head is nodding in affirmation without asking what my brain thinks. Lancelot quickly catches up with my pace. “I would like to apologize for earlier if I offended you or caused you to think that my intentions were not—”

“No,” I stop abruptly and turn toward him. He is so tall, a foot above my five feet four inches, with broad shoulders and a massive chest full of muscle. His brown hair is pulled back into a messy man-bun. Why do I find that sexy? Standing in the last rays of light from the sun make his eyes flash brightly into mine, seeking answers.

“I’m sorry, I was upset because I...,” I can’t tell him the truth, but I need to tell him something. “I miss my boyfriend, um, my betrothed. We were separated when I arrived here. I have no way of finding him. He is lost to me.” Josh wasn’t my boyfriend, but maybe he could have been and I do miss him something fierce.

“Where were you separated? I could organize a search party. I do not have any of my men with me as I arrived alone, though I could gather a troop within a short two days.”

“That is very kind of you, Sir Lancelot,” I say, holding back tears.

“I will leave immediately. Tell me where it was you—”

“No, no. You misunderstood. I thank you for your offer but Josh is lost to me. I will never see him again.” Tears threaten to burst from my eyes. I turn away from

Lancelot, looking into the growing darkness surrounding me in a place that shouldn't exist, in a world unfamiliar but incredibly beautiful.

“When you say he is lost...did your betrothed die? Was he killed? I will find his murderer and bring him to justice.”

“You really are the portrait of chivalry,” I say, stifling a laugh. “Josh is dead, but not by man's hand.” He hasn't been born yet.

Taking my hand, Lancelot surrounds it with both of his. “You have my deepest sympathies, my lady.”

At his touch, Excalibur sends a jolt of vibration through me and into Lancelot's hands. It's a soft zap, as if she's telling me that this is where my hands are meant to be. Still, I quickly pull away, hoping Lancelot didn't feel the energy from the sword or my own heart.

“Would you care to join me for supper? I mean you are escorting me there after all.”

“I would be honored, my lady.”

“Please call me Guinevere.”

“Guinevere. A beautiful name for a beautiful lady.” Lancelot's smile makes my heart flutter and my groin shake in excitement. Stop that! I yell inwardly to myself. This man is off-limits. As if hearing my thoughts, Excalibur sends another jolt through me. This one is harsher, making me bump into Lancelot. He takes that as an opening to wrap my arm through his and proceeds to walk with me down the path toward the savory aromas of whatever medieval food is being cooked for dinner.

“Are you from the northern lands?”

“Scotland? Or, um, what is it called now?” I mutter under my breath, trying to remember my British history. “Caledonia?”

Lancelot nodded. “Your hair, the people of the north are known for their red manes. I have seen Pict warriors painted blue with fiery hair. They are fierce people.”

“My mother was a Pict. I get my hair from her.” It isn’t a lie. My mother was from Scotland. Maybe her ancestors were Picts.

“And what of your father?”

I can’t tell Lancelot who I am or where I really come from. His mother is the Lady of the Lake, but Lancelot is a knight of Camelot. I wonder if they call themselves the knights of the round table. I haven’t bothered to ask about the details of the real King Arthur’s kingdom. Still, his life is in Camelot. He won’t believe me, and if he did, I’m afraid of what he would do with me.

He would surely tell Arthur who would want to know what future awaits him and his kingdom. I’ve read the stories. I’ve seen the film adaptations. But I don’t know the truth of what actually happens here.

I don’t know what compels me to answer Lancelot’s question about my father. I could have easily remained silent, and yet, “My father was...uh...he was a Roman noble,” I lie.

“A Roman and a Pict? An unlikely pair.”

“Yes, very unlikely. My father was one of the last to remain in England after the Romans left. I don’t think there are any more Romans in Britain, are there?”

“If there are, they are no longer Romans.”

I nod, then continue with my lie. “His father, my grandfather, was a Roman legatus. He was one of the few to stay behind, unwilling to admit defeat. My father, Ed...uh...Edmundus was maybe nineteen years old. One day, Edmundus left camp to forage for food as their rations had diminished a few months after the majority of the legion had left for Rome. It was now years later and his father still wasn’t willing to return home. My mother was filling up buckets of water. She nearly killed my father, thinking he was there to rape and murder her.”

I pause for a second to catch my breath. Wow, I am getting really into telling my fake origin story. I had dreamed of a more romantic love story for my parents, one where they got a happy ending. So here’s my chance at making one for them, even if it is a bit fantastical.

“Edmundus didn’t fight back though. He never understood what the Romans were fighting for and never wanted to join the legion. But he was expected to be a military man. That was his only career choice. Vira, my mother, she saw the kind soul within my father. She let him live. Every day they would meet at the stream in secret. A year later, my grandfather died from wounds that wouldn’t heal. The legionaries with them had abandoned my father, but he had already chosen to stay. Vira brought Edmundus home with her, though it took convincing to let him stay and keep his life. He was thrown in the Pict’s prison, spending two years proving himself to the chief and the rest of Vira’s people, being beaten daily, starved, and harassed. Vira would sneak away to his cell whenever she could. But Edmundus could no longer take the beatings and humiliation. He asked my mother to run away with him. They snuck away at night, not knowing where they would go, trusting their love for each other was all they needed. They found their sanctuary in the highlands, tucked away in the woods. A year later, I was born.”

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Lancelot doesn't respond, only nods his head. I hope that he believes my fantastical story. "That would explain your otherworldliness."

"Otherworldliness?" I ask, unsure what he means by this statement.

"The way you speak, your accent. Cumbric was not your first language. And the way you hold yourself. You are noble yet wild." A crooked smile forms on his face. I want to wipe it off with a kiss. But his words are distracting.

"Cumbric?" Again with a one-worded question.

"Yes, that is the language you are speaking."

"I'm speaking Cumbric?"

"Yes."

"And you are speaking Cumbric to me?"

"Yes." Lancelot's smile disappears in place of concern. His brows tightly furrowed.

"How do I know a language I've never learned?" I ask myself, but I say the words aloud, causing Lancelot to scratch his head in confusion. Great, I wanted to avoid looking crazy.

Excalibur sends a warm jolt of energy through me. I'm not sure if she spoke words or if I could just understand what she wanted to say. It happened earlier too. This

mystical sword is impossible. It saved my life from the depths of a lake that appeared out of nowhere. Follows me around like a lost puppy. And has given me the ability to speak a language I didn't even know existed.

I shake my head, unable to grasp my new reality. "Anyway, I'm starving. Let's go eat." I walk into the dining hall, not looking back to see if Lancelot follows me in.

As I make my way to an empty bench at one of the long tables, I wonder what he is thinking. Does he think I'm strange? I know I don't fit in here. Even my made-up story makes me seem outlandish and unusual. The daughter of a Roman soldier and a Pict...an impossible match. Just as Lancelot and I are.

There are so many alternative stories written about Guinevere, but I can't remember a single one with a happy ending. Still, maybe I can create my own story, forge my own path. Excalibur chose me, and she seems to like Lancelot. That has to mean something.

And Arthur is far away in Camelot. I might never meet him. What if Lancelot was Guinevere's husband, then when Arthur finds out about Excalibur, he kidnaps her and takes her for his own bride? In the legends, Guinevere gets abducted, but there are so many different variations of who the abductor was...is...will be. I don't even know what tense to use anymore. But what if it is King Arthur? That would be quite the plot twist.

But I don't want any of this, no matter how the story ends. I want my life back, the one I had in the twenty-first century. I miss Josh more than anything. And I want the chance to take our friendship to the next level. I want to fall in love with Josh, not Lancelot, Arthur, or anyone else who might try to take my love from me.

Chapter 11

Lancelot

As soon as we enter the dining hall, I sense a shift in Guinevere's mood. She had been lively just a minute ago. Even after singing such a melancholy song and divulging the story of her mother and father, she seemed full of spirit. It is difficult to believe that a Roman and Pict would even have a chance to fall in love. But Guinevere is living proof that love has the power to overcome unconditional hate.

My heart breaks for her, making me feel a mix of emotions I am unsure how to handle. Anger that Guinevere's heart belongs to another. Happiness that the man who held her heart is no longer walking this earth. Guilt that I am optimistic about her loss. I remind myself that she is not mine and will never be mine. Still, my heart aches to hold hers and my soul howls with want to be one with her.

Watching Guinevere on the steps of the temple, a lute against her chest as she gently stroked its strings, I could not help but stare at her fingertips and wonder how they would feel against my skin. I would love nothing more than for her to whisper an intimate love melody in my ear. But I also felt hope. As Guinevere played her lute, Excalibur glowed as bright as the sun.

I take a seat next to Guinevere. Looking down at the sword now lying on the dining table, I can still see the dim glow within, and I know it is Guinevere who has sparked this magic to life. Guinevere must truly be who Vivienne claims her to be.

I am cautious not to cut my hand on Excalibur's blade as I pull a plate toward myself. Guinevere notices my caution, looking up at me with a smile as I grab a small loaf of bread and rip it in two pieces. I hand one to her, which she takes, her smile remaining in place.

"Don't worry, she won't bite." Guinevere looks down at Excalibur, a subtle laugh escaping her lips. "I would have left her in my room, but it's much more shocking

when she appears out of thin air.”

“Excalibur is a she? And it truly does follow you everywhere?” She nods, stuffing the piece of warm crusty bread into her mouth. “When you had run away earlier, leaving Excalibur behind, I went after you. And when I returned to the lake, it...she was gone. I remember feeling cold without it.”

“That could have been because you weren’t wearing a shirt,” she smirks into a spoonful of mutton stew.

“I do truly apologize for upsetting you earlier and disturbing your peace.”

“No need for an apology. You did nothing wrong.”

“I am glad to hear I was not the cause of your sorrow.”

I notice a side glance from Guinevere toward the priestesses sitting at the table. It is obvious that she feels uncomfortable all of a sudden. Perhaps the mere existence of our bodies sitting close together in the dining hall has caused some kind of inner tension among everyone. I can feel it, growing stronger within me. Even though I should keep my distance from Guinevere, I find myself drawing closer to her and her to me. Not just physically but something else. I do not know how to describe it.

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“It’s nice to have someone to talk to,” Guinevere looks down into her bowl of stew as she says this. “Everyone here is afraid of me, except for your mother and Morgana.”

“What do you mean afraid of you? They are in awe of you. The White Enchantress, wielder of Excalibur. I read Morgana’s account of how you shot out of the lake, the sword shrouding you in white light. The priestesses are only shy, awestruck in your existence.”

“No, that’s just silly. I’m—”

“Mairenn,” I call across the table to a young novice whose face goes pale at being called upon. “Would you be kind enough to make a sheath and holster for Guinevere so that she may safely carry Excalibur with her?”

Fright turns to exhilaration on Mairenn’s face. “Sir Lancelot, I would be honored. That is, if you wish me to make these for you, my lady.”

Guinevere is taken aback, astonished by Mairenn’s kindness. I notice a hint of rose rising on the lady’s cheeks. Perhaps I have embarrassed Guinevere, but I had only meant to show her that she is a welcomed guest here in Avalon.

“Yes, Mairenn, that would be wonderful,” Guinevere answers enthusiastically.

“You honor me. I will begin this very minute.” Mairenn stands up quickly to leave the dining hall and start making the accessories for Guinevere.

“No, no, Mairenn,” Guinevere yells after her. Mairenn turns around to me, expecting

an order, then back toward the lady. “Please finish your meal. I don’t need it this very second.”

“Are you certain?”

“Absolutely,” Guinevere says with a warm smile.

After dinner, I walk Guinevere back to her room. Even though I can feel a rope pulling us together, I keep my distance from her as she keeps from me. There are questions in her eyes. And I have many questions of my own I wish to ask her.

“Good night,” she whispers as she opens the door to her room. She hesitates before disappearing behind the door. And I can feel her eyes on mine. I tilt my head in question, wanting to know what she is thinking.

Instead, I say, “Good night, Guinevere,” and continue walking down the hall. Thoughts of what I want to do to her body swim through my mind.

Arthur sent me to Avalon to investigate the accounts of Guinevere’s arrival, bringing Excalibur out of its deep hiding place. It takes me days to send a letter affirming the events to be accurate, knowing that Arthur would order me to escort the lady and sword back to Camelot. I know I am being selfish. I am afraid that once Guinevere arrives at Camelot and meets Arthur, I will not be able to spend time with her as I can here.

Still, after that first day meeting Guinevere, I have been careful not to make unwelcome appearances where I know she would be. Three days have passed since I bid her good night. We only see each other in passing. Sometimes we eat our meals together, but I keep my distance from her on the bench. When I am not near Guinevere, my dreams and thoughts are constantly fixed on her. I cannot get her out of my mind.

I have seen beautiful women before, loved them intimately even. I was not always the perfect, chivalrous, pious man Arthur expects his knights to be. I was very young when women began to beg for my attention. My love affairs were short-lived though many. But I was honorable in my departure, making certain I did not sire any children. Still, I broke many hearts. Over the years, I have learned to control these basic instincts, ignoring women altogether.

At first, my carnal feelings for Guinevere felt like they came from that same place inside me where my uncontrollable desire takes over my mind and body. Since meeting Guinevere, I have had many shameful visions of us together. Our limbs entwined in passionate lovemaking, my lips on her neck, her breasts, the delicate flesh between her thighs.

But I have also daydreamed of us together, clothed, talking, only talking. I even imagined what it would be like to call Guinevere my wife and have children together. Those thoughts bring sadness to my soul knowing that I will never hold such a place in Guinevere's heart. Perhaps I should cherish the moments I have with her now. But I am afraid I will only want to dive deeper into those forest-green eyes and never return.

Chapter 12

Guinevere

After that night, after confessing my false story to Lancelot, thoughts of him invade every waking moment of my days and every dream my brain orchestrates. He has consumed every inch of my mind. As hard as I try, I cannot turn these thoughts off. Lancelot is a toxin my soul requires. If I do not poison myself with thoughts of his watery green eyes and sweaty, sculpted chest, I would surely die. But too much of the toxin could kill me. Worse of all, it could kill others.

I try to keep myself together, to keep control of this attraction. But it's a lost cause. Fate will win out and I will fall desperately in love with a man I cannot have. You can have him now. No one is stopping you. I think to myself. Or maybe that was Excalibur. Arthur and I have yet to be introduced. Perhaps I never need to meet Arthur. And if we never meet, Lancelot and I would be free to do as we please.

It makes perfect sense. But it's a trap. It has to be.

Still, how could I be in love with a man I don't know? This can't be real love. And if it is, why would fate be so cruel? Fuck fate. Fuck destiny. My body and mind might betray my heart, but I will not let anything stop me from returning home.

Home. I had lost my home before. When my mother died and when I thought my father would disown me. But Josh was also my home. A home I didn't think I had until time stole me away, dropping me 1500 years into the past.

"Lancelot has received a letter from King Arthur." I turn my head toward Vivienne as she clears her throat. She summoned me to her quarters by way of Morgana a few minutes ago and I came running, hoping she would have news about how I could return home. I had been in my new spot, sitting on the steps of the ancient temple playing the lute I sort of stole.

Vivienne continues with her announcement. "He wishes to meet you and to see Excalibur. You will go to Camelot and present him with the sword."

"Wait, what? No! I can't go to Camelot."

"And why not?"

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“I want to go back home. This is where I came through. What if a portal opens up again? I don’t want to miss my opportunity.”

“Your destiny is here, Guinevere. Excalibur brought you here for a reason. You have been chosen to bring it forth into this world.”

“I don’t want to be chosen. You said I could forge my own path. This is me, forging.”

“Guinevere, you do not understand. The magic of the lake is a mystery. I do not think you will be able to return to your home.”

“But you don’t know.”

I’m on the verge of tears again, thinking of Josh, how desperate I am to see him. All I want is to hear him sing, play his precious guitar, kiss me on that sensitive dimple on my throat, watch his face lose control during our lovemaking. I want Josh. Why did it take me losing him, losing my whole life, to know what I want?

“Vivienne, if I go to Camelot, well, I don’t know exactly what will happen, but I have an idea. Arthur will want to marry me. Even if I say yes, I will inevitably fall in love with Lancelot and commit adultery, destroying the fragile unity of this realm. How can the people trust a king to lead them when that same king has trusted those who betrayed him?”

“You do not know this will be the outcome. You said it yourself. There will be many stories told about King Arthur. Who is to say that any of those stories have truth to them? Push them from your mind and create your own story.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Have you developed feelings for Lancelot?”

I freeze, stopping my leg from bouncing around in a nervous panic. “No,” I lie. “I don’t know.” Still a bit of a lie. “He does have an effect on me. But I have someone back home whom I love. He is everything to me. I need to get back to him.”

“I understand that you have lost all your loved ones upon arriving here. You need to prepare yourself for the actuality that you may never see them again.”

Vivienne doesn’t understand. There isn’t anything I can say to change her mind, but she also can’t make me go against my will. “I’m not going, Vivienne. If Arthur wants his damn sword he can come here and get it himself.” Excalibur mirrors my anger, vibrating at my side in its new sheath. “Though I don’t know if she would go willingly either.”

“Are you speaking on behalf of the sword?” Vivienne has heard me personify Excalibur before. She doesn’t think I am crazy but is in awe of how I bonded with this mystical sword. “What did she say? Did Excalibur tell you she does not belong with Arthur?”

“Not exactly. She just vibrated angrily after I said that Arthur can take the sword for himself. Though I’m not certain if she is angry because I am or because I would just hand her over so easily.”

It’s strange to feel a bond with an inanimate object, yet Excalibur isn’t just a sword. I can feel her. She has a soul or something that makes her alive. And she feels like an old friend, someone I knew in another life maybe.

I wouldn’t say the sword is haunted. But it is possessed by something that used to be

human. Or perhaps an elf or fairy? I giggle at my absurd thought then quickly straighten my face when Vivienne asks her next question.

“Why exactly are you so afraid of Arthur?”

“If I am the Guinevere, Arthur is supposed to become my husband. I don’t want to marry him.”

“You would be queen. Think of all the good you could do with that power.”

“I don’t want power. I don’t want Arthur. I want to go home.”

“Guinevere, you cannot go back home. This is where you belong now.”

“If I knew those voices would have led me here, I never would have followed them. I had been running from a wedding I never wanted. I was free. My father and I had mended our bond. I was building a bed and breakfast in New Jersey. Josh and I...we could have an amazing life together. I need to go back to that. That is the path I want.”

“You chose your path when you followed those voices. They were calling you here and you answered.” Vivienne scoops my hands in hers, forcing me to look her in the eyes.

“I will not force you to do anything you do not want to do, Guinevere. Let me just tell you this. Arthur is a good man. I have known him since he was a boy and he has grown into a brave, intelligent, kind man. Too kind for a king some might argue. He will not thrust matrimony upon you if that is not your wish. I only ask that you meet him and make your decision then. As for my son, I have known many women to fall in love with him. I have not seen him return such affection wholeheartedly. But he is loyal to Arthur and committed to his king. I am certain he would never betray Arthur

and he would never take advantage of you.”

Silent tears fall down my face. This is the path I must face, for now. If there is no way for me to return home, to get back to Josh, I must move forward. But I will write my own story. No one else will write it for me. Excalibur hums at my side in agreement. “Okay, I’ll go.”

Chapter 13

Lancelot

As I sit on the same rock Guinevere frequents, I think of Arthur. My king, my cousin, my friend. He is a great warrior, a man to fight with and for. Arthur rules his people with kindness and strength. He fought hard to bring peace to the land and is still fighting to unify the kingdoms of Britain.

When King Uther died, Arthur was only fifteen. My father was one of his first supporters, offering Arthur allegiance and men. After the Romans left Britain, kings from every corner were greedy to take what they could from the ruins. It was not until Arthur inherited his father’s throne that the kingdoms began to unite, seeking peace and prosperity. My father fought alongside Arthur against anyone who rejected his claim to power, wanting it for themselves. And when my father was killed and his kingdom taken by King Claudas, Arthur was there, rallying his men to seize back our lands.

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When I received the letter from my mother detailing Guinevere's unimaginable appearance, Arthur wanted to believe every word of it. Of a lady hovering over Lake Avalon with a sword glowing a bright white and fiery hair billowing in the mystical winds that blew forth announcing her arrival.

The vision Arthur imagines of a unified kingdom is still to come. With Excalibur at his side, no one would deny his power. He would be King of Kings, the one true ruler of a new land.

I will help him achieve this dream no matter the cost. And if he needs Guinevere at his side, the cost will be my heart, and I would gladly give that up for Arthur. I believe I could, at least.

"You've been avoiding me," a voice from behind me proclaims. I do not need to turn around to know whose voice it is, but I turn nonetheless. Guinevere glares at me, one hand on her hip, waiting for me to answer her.

"No, I have not."

"You snuck down here after you saw me leave my post."

"I would not say that I snuck here. I did not wish to disturb you, my lady."

"Please call me Guinevere. I really hate being called 'my lady.'"

I nod in affirmation. "All right, Guinevere. What may I do for you?"

“I want to know why you are avoiding me. I know why I was avoiding you.”

“And why is that?”

“No, I asked you first.”

“I am afraid I cannot tell you why. It would make a lady like you blush.”

“There is a reason I do not like to be called a lady. I am no such thing.” Her smile draws a picture of a devilish woman. What is she thinking? Those green eyes glow with mischief. If she does not cease looking at me with such passion, I am not sure I will be able to hold myself back. “Let us be honest with each other. Our attraction is obvious, isn’t it? You want me. I want you. If we are honest now, it won’t be so shocking later.”

“What exactly are you saying, Guinevere?” My voice quivers in anticipation. I know what she is going to ask for and I need to muster all my strength to say no, to deny my need for her. Before I can say anything more, Guinevere removes her robe, standing naked before me. I reach for her, unable to control my need to touch her supple breasts and dip a finger into—

“Lancelot! Lancelot, wake up. It is time for you to depart. The horses are being readied and your supplies packed. Your mother wishes to speak with you before you make your way to Camelot.” Morgana is shaking my shoulders, coaxing me out of a deep sleep.

“Hmph,” I grunt, wanting to fall back asleep to the erotic dream I was about to have. An entire week alone with Guinevere. These dreams will likely only get worse. I am determined to conquer them though, to conquer my desire for her.

I roll out of bed, quickly pull on my clothing, and gather my belongings before

making my way to my mother's quarters. When I enter, Vivienne is kneeling on the ground, praying to her goddess for our safe journey to Camelot. I wait patiently for her to finish.

"I must tell you something, Lancelot, about Guinevere." My heart begins to race, beating against my chest so hard it will burst open. "She was not happy that Arthur has requested her presence at Camelot. Though she is willing to hand over the sword, she fears what life will be like once she arrives at court. I know Arthur to be a kind man. Nonetheless, I need you to promise that you will not let him force matrimony on Guinevere. She does not wish to be his queen if that is Arthur's plan. Though she may change her mind after meeting Arthur. I only ask that you protect Guinevere. I know she plays an essential role in the years to come. She must choose Arthur of her own free will. Do you understand?"

"Yes, mother. I will protect her, even from Arthur. You have my word."

"As I thought. And, Lancelot, be careful of your love for her. Make sure it is love you feel before you act on it." I am shocked by my mother's blatant statement, though not surprised. She has a way of knowing exactly how I feel on the inside, no matter how hard I try to keep it there. My reaction is all she needs to confirm what she already knows. "Guinevere should be waiting out in the courtyard. Safe journey."

"Farewell, mother." I bow before exiting, making my way downstairs and through the hall. I find Guinevere near the stables, brushing my horse's mane. She looks tired and sadder than last I laid eyes upon her. I want nothing more than to wrap my arms around her waist and take her pain away. She must have sensed me staring as she twirls around suddenly, staring directly into my eyes, a question in hers.

"Good morning, Lancelot. You look the worse for wear."

"Pardon?" Guinevere is hard to understand at times; she says the strangest things.

“Oh, maybe that didn’t translate well. Um, you look tired. I hope it’s not a long journey to Camelot. You don’t look like you will make it a day.”

“I will be fine, my lady. I have had less sleep and a longer journey ahead of me. This will only be a week, maybe less if we can keep a steady pace.”

“An entire week?”

Guinevere looks as though she might be sick. “My lady, what is the matter? Have you never traveled such a distance before? You said you came from the north.”

“Um, yes, sure. But where will we be staying for the night? Are there lodgings along the way?”

“There might be one or two places we could go, but they are out of the way. It would be better for us to make camp each night so we arrive in Camelot when Arthur expects us.”

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“Is it not uh...unseemly for me to be alone with you?”

“Arthur has entrusted me with the task of escorting you to Camelot. Your reputation will be intact if that is your concern.” Guinevere looks nervous, even afraid. “You can trust me, Guinevere. I will not harm you and will not let any harm come to you. If need be, I will lay down my life to protect yours.”

“I know I can trust you. Most importantly, Excalibur trusts you. She even likes you,” Guinevere says with a smirk that sends a shiver through my chest. “Let’s not waste any more time then. Which horse is yours?”

“The one you have been grooming. His name is Gringolet, gifted to me by Sir Gawain. He is a fine, sturdy steed.”

Guinevere laughs and gives Gringolet one last pat before hopping gracefully up on the horse my mother lent from her stables. I am shocked at how effortlessly she mounts her horse, straddling the saddle in a way that makes all my insides quiver with desire.

Quickly turning from her, I mount my steer and begin leading both horses down the path to the barge that will take us off the island of Avalon.

Chapter 14

Guinevere

The first few nights on the road with Lancelot are not so bad. Every evening before sunset, he guides us off the road we traveled and silently prepares a fire. After eating

dinner, we talk mindlessly about this and that. The both of us avoid each other's gaze. When it comes time to sleep, Lancelot makes a comfortable pallet for me out of the blankets rolled up in our bags.

He gave me all the blankets on the first night. I insisted that he needed to stay warm too. So he grabbed the thinnest blanket, tossed it over himself and fell asleep before I could protest any further.

His attitude toward me has shifted since the day we met. The flirtatiousness turned sour and even his sweet chivalrous demeanor became serious and dour. I shouldn't mind. Still, I can't help but wonder what he is thinking and what has affected his mood. I keep silent anyway, following his lead. It's better this way. I can't fall in love with a man I don't talk to, right? And if we never speak to each other, the feelings that stir in my heart would surely go away.

With two more days left of the journey, Lancelot and I have barely said anything but pleasantries. The silence is working. I can feel the infatuation fading. My mind is clear for the first time in weeks. Thoughts of Lancelot no longer haunt me. But those thoughts are quickly replaced by recent memories of Josh, my father, all the drama I left behind when I fell through time.

Somewhere in the twenty-first century, all the people I care for must be worried sick about me. At least I hope they are worried, that they are searching for me, never giving up. Maybe they would even find a crack in time and bring me back home.

I feel a pang of guilt that I had found another man attractive, that I swooned at the first sight of Lancelot. And while I swooned and dreamt of Lancelot, I thought I was in love with someone else.

Josh and I hadn't talked much about our feelings for each other, afraid to break the fragile line between friends and lovers. We had already become lovers, and though I

thought I didn't want a romantic relationship with Josh, I still want the opportunity to explore what could have been, what should be.

In the weeks leading up to my wedding day, Josh was my everything. While we were navigating the murky waters of friends with benefits, I was attempting to convince my father that I wasn't in love Wesley.

After returning from America, I moved back into Eden Manor where it was once again ruled by the fiends of Carlisle. Cecily was my constant shadow again, tormenting me, waiting for me to break. During meals and any other time our family gathered together, she always commented about how well-suited Wesley and I were. How much Wesley missed me and couldn't wait until our wedding night. He only hoped that I would remember how much I loved him before then.

I kept my mouth shut, only throwing daggers with my eyes. If I had let my mouth loose, I would say things I'd regret. And I would show my father that I was the unstable, confused, and entitled little girl Cecily described me as.

The breathing techniques I learned from Josh were immensely helpful in keeping my patience. But breathing only did so much to keep my anger at bay.

Three evenings before the wedding, I sat in the corner of our main living area, reading a book. Ed was at his desk looking through some paperwork while Charlotte and Cecily watched a reality TV show on the couch.

Cecily turned to me, saying in her sweetest voice, "Ginny, Wes called me today. He asked to speak with you but you were out with Josh. Wes misses you terribly. You should really give him a call."

I hated when Cecily called me Ginny. Only Uncle Aldon was allowed to call me Ginny. I didn't tolerate it from anyone else. "No thanks."

“Why are you being so mean to Wes. Don’t you love him? He said you both were so happy together before you left for America. What happened over there that made you so cruel?”

“Nothing happened, I never loved Wesley and he doesn’t love me. For the millionth time, we never got engaged. In fact, we were not even together when I left for America.”

Ed huffed at his desk but offered no interjection. “That’s just preposterous. I was there when he proposed, Ginny. You were glowing. I have never seen you happier.”

“What the actual fuck, Cecily? Why are you lying? You don’t give two shits about me. Why the hell would you have even been part of a marriage proposal regarding me?”

“Now, Guinevere, there is no need for such language,” Charlotte warned, keeping her eyes glued to the television.

Breathe, just breathe, Guin. I closed my eyes, counting to ten, pushing the boiling anger down to a simmer and continued reading my book about a steamy office romance. I just wanted to get to the part where the couple gets back together. They better fucking get back together. But Cecily wasn’t quite finished with me.

“You are marrying Wes in three days. Are you going to ignore him when you are his wife too?”

“I’m not going to marry him, Cecily. If you care so much for him, why don’t you marry Wes?”

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“I would marry him in an instant if he wasn’t head-over-heels in love with you.”

I rolled my eyes hard at that last comment. “Gonna say this one more time. Wes doesn’t love me. He never loved me and he never will love me. Whatever scheme you two are working on together, it’s not going to work. I’m not marrying anyone in three days.”

“What if it was Josh? Would you marry him in three days?”

I blushed, unable to keep my feelings from showing on my face and quickly buried my head in my book.

“So that’s what happened in America. You and Josh finally slept together.”

Breathe, just breathe!

“Guinevere, is this true?” Charlotte gasped as if I was more entertaining than the trash she was watching on the TV.

Breathe, just breathe, 1, 2, 3, 4, dammit, Guin, breathe!

“Guinevere?” Ed was now fully involved in the conversation. I couldn’t ignore him. When I looked up into his face, my expression was all the answer he needed. “Goddamit, Guinevere! How could you be so careless? You are engaged. Engaged to a fine gentleman who will be a wonderful husband. Why would you damage a—”

“Wonderful husband? Wesley is a vile, cruel man who only wants me for what I will

inherit. He told me so himself when I.Broke.Up.With.Him.” I emphasized each word dramatically. “Would a wonderful husband slap his wife? Because that’s what he did to me when I told him that I didn’t think we were working out. He doesn’t love me, he doesn’t care for me, he was only using me, and using you too!”

I should have stopped there when I saw my father’s face melt with concern. But I kept going. “Cecily and Wes are obviously playing some kind of fucked up game to ensure my imprisonment. I don’t know what Cecily gets out of this arrangement. MaybeWes has promised her the role of his mistress in exchange for my wedding vows.”

My anger had exceeded boiling point as I finished my rant and reached a level where I couldn’t control the words that came out of my mouth.

“Go to your room, Guinevere, before more fantastical nonsense escapes your enraged mind. And pray that Wesley still wants to marry you after all this.”

“I’m twenty-three, Ed. You can’t make me go to my room. You can’t make me do anything. But I will leave this room because I can’t stand the sight of any of you.”

I stormed out, stomping up the steps and threw myself in my bedroom where I stayed for the next three days. I spent my time texting Josh, calling Josh, thinking of Josh, and fucking Josh when he was able to sneak into the manor.

The night before my wedding, Josh didn’t bother sneaking in. He waltzed through the front door and headed directly to my bedroom, locking the door behind him. I must have looked like an exhausted wreck. Josh didn’t care. He pulled my tear-stained face to his lips, kissing me urgently.

“Will Ed make you marry Wes?” Josh asked after making love to me, holding my naked body against his as we lay in bed.

“I’m not sure. My dad’s wrath has not diluted even an ounce. All he’s heard these last few weeks are words against me from my biggest enemies.”

“Let’s go to America. Tonight. I will go with you. We can run the bed and breakfast together.”

“What? No, you have a life here, Josh. What about your family? And your band?”

“My family can visit. They’d love to come to America. And my band is replaceable.”

“I couldn’t run away from my father. Even though he’s being a fucking asshole. I love him. My mom loved him.”

“I understand. And I think it is the right decision. What do you need me to do?”

“Stay with me tonight, don’t leave my side tomorrow. And don’t let me get married.” I laughed at my last command. There was no way in hell I was going to marry Wes. I would make it as far as the aisle, then I’d run.

“You got it, love.” Josh winked, offering me a smile that brightened up his moody face and made my heart burst with happiness.

If I had run away with Josh, I’m not sure if I would have been able to patch things up with my dad. Our relationship would have been ruined. I could care less about the inheritance. I didn’t want to lose my dad.

The decision to stay was one I don’t regret. But if I had gone to America with Josh, we would be together now. I would have a chance to mend my relationship with my dad, a sliver of a chance. I can’t decide which is better: life with Josh, estranged from my family or having my father’s love back but lost in time and unable to get back home.

I sigh loudly, thinking about the mess I left behind, that would happen 1500 years from now. My sigh makes Lancelot turn around on his saddle, giving me a quick glance. I must have a distressed look on my face because his softens at the sight of me. He slows down the pace of his horse, falling back to ride alongside me.

“What is the matter, my lady?” Lancelot asks, his brow raised in concern.

“Nothing,” I huff aloud. But my insides scream, I’m tired, I have to pee, I’m aching all over, I miss Ed and Leo and Uncle Al. I just want to go home. I miss Josh so fucking much, and I’m so fucking horny!

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“We will soon be in Camelot. The beds are comfortable. I promise you will be able to get a full night’s sleep and regain your strength. If you need to relieve yourself, we can make a brief stop. There is a river just over there where we can water our horses as well.”

“Wait, did you read my mind or did I say all that out loud?”

Lancelot smiles, letting out a short chuckle. “What does ‘horny’ mean?”

I roll my eyes, completely mortified. I am not about to explain what horny means to Lancelot, but my red face only fuels his curiosity.

“I can guess what the meaning might be, especially since you mentioned missing your man.” Lancelot at least has the decency to look away. I hop off my horse when we reach our destination. Lancelot then grabs the reins, steering both our horses over to where a stream peeks out from a grove of trees. Without further comment, I turn toward the trees as Lancelot pulls the horses over for a refreshment.

I am exhausted from spending four days on horseback and three nights sleeping on a cold, hard floor, worried that a wolf or thieving murderers would sneak up on us in our sleep. Now that Lancelot knows my very intimate needs, I don’t know how I can spend another night alone with him. I need to be more careful and keep my thoughts to myself.

After three days of roughing it, I have gotten pretty good at squat peeing in a dress. Peeing outside was not something I was uncomfortable with before. I camped quite often during my college years. But I also had certain supplies to make it a little easier

to go to the bathroom in nature.

As I shake myself off, I hear a rustling behind me. I am facing toward the direction where Lancelot and the horses are resting by the stream. One, to make sure Lancelot doesn't walk in on me and two, to remember which direction to walk back to.

The rustling sound becomes louder, and it doesn't sound human. I'm more afraid that it's a wild animal. I can at least attempt to defend myself against a man. A wolf, or worse, I am helpless. I slowly turn around, peeking around the tree I had squatted under. The cause of the sound is not a human, wolf, or any other violent, wild animal. It is a horse-like creature. Its fur glistens even though the canopy of the trees hides the sunlight above.

White, or no, silver is the color of its hide. And on its head, a straight pointed horn. I must be dreaming or perhaps I have gone crazy. A unicorn. I am looking at a unicorn. Maybe I really have gone insane. Am I still in the England of my future? Did I hit my head when I fell in the mists? I start to doubt my reality. How had I quickly accepted that I am 1500 years in the past, but I can't believe I am looking at a unicorn?

I feel someone grab me from behind. A hand quickly clasps against my mouth as I try to scream while the other hand pulls me tighter against a hard body to keep me from struggling. Turning my head slightly, I look into soft eyes the color of the sea, pleading with me to stay calm. I halt my squirming.

Lancelot had taken me in his arms so suddenly that I forget to suppress my feelings for him. I feel safe with his arms around my waist. There is a familiarity about him. I feel as if I'd known this man my whole life. As I look up into his bright green eyes, a flood of emotions escapes the black pit I had banished them to. I am in so much fucking trouble.

Chapter 15

Lancelot

As I lean against a tree, watching the horses drink the glistening water from the stream, I feel something pull me toward where Guinevere had gone. Something is amiss. It does not feel as if the lady is in trouble per se, only that there is a presence of panic. I run into the grove of trees, following the pull from an unknown entity.

Guinevere stands next to a tree. In front of her is a unicorn. Though it seems calm, I am afraid she will attempt to approach the creature.

Unicorns are docile creatures by nature, though in recent years, they have become aggressive. Their population is under threat. It is as if they know how few of them are left in the world and know it is because of humans. This unicorn does not seem too perturbed by the presence of two humans. Still, I approach Guinevere from behind, careful not to make any sudden movements.

Not wanting her to scream from fright, I quickly place a hand over her mouth and wrap an arm around her waist. As I predicted, she is frightened by my sudden presence and attempts to fight me.

One look into my face calms her down, and she falls against my body, fitting perfectly under the crook of my neck. I release my hand from her mouth, though I keep my arms in place around her waist, not ready to let her go. We have not been this close since the day we met when she fell into my arms. As I did then, I feel a warmth overtake my body, growing from my chest down to my pelvis. It continues to spread, consuming me. It is comforting. I feel at home.

Guinevere looks up at me again after admiring the creature in front of us. "Is that a real unicorn? I'm not seeing things, am I?"

“Yes. It is real. Have you never seen one before? They are a rare sight to behold but not uncommon. At least there used to be many more sightings of them until King Claudas proclaimed that their hide was made of pure silver and gold and if you drank from their horns you would be impervious to poison. I do not know any of that to be true, but the folk began hunting unicorns without remorse. Now there are so few left, I never thought I would see one again.”

“Humans are horrid creatures,” Guin scoffs.

This statement makes me laugh. “Yes. We are.”

“Well, I didn’t mean to say that you are horrid. You are one of the exceptions.”

“Am I?”

Guinevere blushes. Turning away from me to glance at the unicorn once more. “We should leave it be. I don’t want it to think that we mean any harm. Poor thing. All alone.” Her words are heavy, filled with emotions left unsaid.

“It would have already made a move on us if it was frightened. It is said that those with a pure soul have a calming effect on these creatures. Virgins, and such. Unicorns are drawn to them.”

Turning around to face me, my hand now positioned on Guinevere’s lower back, she speaks in a gritty whisper, “Are you the pure one? Because I sure am not.”

Her eyes lock on mine as her chest presses against my ribcage. And the rest of her body gently grazes against my hips, my thighs. The warmth I had felt earlier is now burning my insides, engulfing me in flames. I want to surrender to the fire, let it consume me. Looking into Guinevere’s eyes, I can see the same desire coursing through my veins, but I also see something else. Fear, anger, loneliness.

She is fighting an inner battle too. Though I do not know what she is fighting, I can only guess. I feel the invisible rope that is pulling us together. If I am afraid of this pull, Guinevere must be terrified. She has been through so much, lost so many people in her life. The loss of her man seems to be a fresh pain, the grief suffocating. And here I am, holding her tight against my body, hoping she will throw herself in the fire with me.

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Remembering what my mother had said to me before leaving Avalon, I quickly step back, releasing my hand from her back. The distance between us is too much. I am instantly cold, wanting her back in my arms. I offer her my hand, which she takes without hesitation, and we make our way back to the stream. When the horses are in sight, I let go of Guinevere's hand; the warmth of her leaves my body but a flicker remains in my heart.

The next few days go by quickly. Instead of riding in silence like we had been, Guinevere sings her strange songs and I tell stories about my youth, fighting alongside Arthur. I had planned to speak only of Arthur, to give a better picture of the man she will soon meet and possibly marry. My intention is to paint a vision of Arthur's bravery, generosity, piety, and humility. However, all that comes from my mouth are stories of my own life.

"I was a ripe fifteen when Vivienne brought me to Arthur's castle, Camelot. And I had much to prove. Vivienne, if you did not know, is not my true mother. I was abandoned while my parents were fleeing their kingdom. Vivienne found me near the lake, outside Avalon. I did not know who I really was until I became a knight."

"How old were you when Vivienne found you?"

"Five, I believe. Old enough to have memories of my real parents, though I did not know they were real memories until later in life. Vivienne raised me as her own. She named me Galahad. It was not until later, while serving King Arthur, that I learned my true name. I answered a challenge by the Copper Knight. When I approached his castle, I was forced to fight through a guard of twenty knights. I defeated them all single-handedly. The Copper Knight had fled before I reached the keep. But the

villagers welcomed me. They told me of a local legend. A stone, one so heavy that no one had been able to lift it. The townsfolk explained that whoever lifted the stone would find his name written underneath. I made an attempt to lift the stone. When I did, the name Lancelot was revealed.”

“Wow, I didn’t know your…that’s an incredible origin story.”

“You say the strangest things.”

Guinevere shrugs. “What happened after? When you learned your true name?”

“When I returned to Camelot, I explained what happened to Arthur. He knew my father, told me he was one of the first kings to give his support. Arthur became king when he was only fifteen. The same age I was when I first arrived at Camelot seeking to become a knight. Many people wanted to take Arthur’s kingdom and power. Arthur held his ground though, with the help of allies like my father. King Ban, that is who my father was. Arthur explained to me how my parents were forced to flee their kingdom. King Claudas seized their lands. They barely made it out alive. My father died from wounds inflicted as they escaped. Arthur took my family’s lands back from King Claudas, but I was never found. I was lost until that moment. My mother, my real mother, had died years before I arrived at Camelot. But my brother and sister were still alive.”

“You’ve lived quite a life. How long ago did all this happen?”

“Did what happen?”

“I’m just curious how old you are because so much has happened to you and you look so young. All those quests, becoming a knight, learning who you are, about the parents you only knew as a small child.”

“I thank you for the compliment. I do feel like an old man at times, though I am only two and twenty.”

“A year younger than me? Huh.”

“You are three and twenty? But you look like a maiden of sixteen.”

“I’m not sure if I should take that as a compliment or an insult.”

“It is only that, well, women of your age are usually settled and swarmed with children. You told me of your engagement. Were you married before...Josh?” I hesitate to say his name, the man who Guinevere so obviously adores. The thought of her married to another affects me, makes me angry even. I am unsure where this violence comes from as I barely know Guinevere. In fact, I am leading her to a man who will likely offer his hand in marriage. Guinevere would be a fool not to accept.

“Uhh, no. Where I’m from, women tend to marry later in life.”

“Oh. Were you and Josh together for very long?” My throat tightens as I ask this question. I do not know why I asked; it is as if my subconscious has taken over, curious about this mysterious copper-haired lady. I want to know more about her, but I do not care to hear stories of how she loves another man.

“Josh...it’s a little complicated.” Guinevere’s shoulders droop thinking of her man. Suddenly, she looks tired, consumed by her sorrow.

“I apologize. I have no right to ask such a question.”

“No, it’s all right. I just miss him so much. I miss all my family. Josh was my very best friend for the longest time. He helped me through a grieving period that could have easily consumed my whole being. But it wasn’t until recently that I realized we

were perhaps something more. And I think he felt the same.”

“You said he was your betrothed.”

“Oh, yeah, I did. Well, we weren’t engaged. I just didn’t know what to call him since we weren’t anything yet. The day I arrived in Avalon, it was my wedding day. I was supposed to marry another man, a man I despised. Josh helped me escape. And then...” Guinevere looks up at the sky, her eyes cemented shut as if attempting to push back tears.

I steer Gringolet toward her horse. Taking one of her hands off the reins, I give her a squeeze. “I truly am sorry for your loss, Guinevere.” She turns her head toward me, a single tear falling from her eye, and nods. I keep her hand in mine a second longer, then announce we will be arriving in Camelot mid-day on the morrow.

This news does not cheer her as I had hoped. I know the destination is not where Guinevere wants to be. Still, I had hoped she would be happy at the idea of soft beds and warm food.

“Arthur will most likely have a feast planned in your honor. I am salivating thinking of all the foods that will be placed before us. I have grown used to life on the saddle, journeying from one castle to another. Still, I will never get used to dried venison when I know there is a version with gravy accompanied by warm, fluffy bread.”

“Oh, stop it! You are making me hungry now.” Guinevere laughs, wiping her tears away. The sound of her laughter is intoxicating. I offer her a smile in return as our gazes meet, seeing that her sorrow is still billowing inside her.

I ask her to sing one of her strange songs. “Something jovial this time.”

She smirks, a flash of excitement sparkling in her eyes. Singing brings joy to her soul.

The tone of the song does not matter; even singing her melancholy songs makes Guinevere glow with happiness. She loves music, loves sharing music with others. It is unmistakable that this love of music comes from her love of another. I wonder if it is Josh.

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Though, at the moment, the thought of Josh does not affect me as much as before. Hearing Guinevere sing, sharing her love of music, being surrounded by her melody. Even though I do not understand every word she sings, I know what she is singing about. I can feel it emanating from her body, her soul.

My mother had spoken to me of Guinevere's concerns about Camelot. Mainly of Arthur. With talent like hers, she would be well-loved at court, not only for bringing the sword of power to their king but for her beautiful music.

Part of me does not want the people at court to know of Guinevere's enchanting singing voice and skill with the lute. And Arthur will no doubt fall for her in an instant if he does not do so upon seeing her face. How selfish I am to think such a thing. Still, my chest aches at the thought of Arthur or any other man winning Guinevere's affection.

As her voice becomes breathless on the last note of the song she sings, my stomach flutters and my skin vibrates. Beautiful. She is beautiful.

I want to tell her how lovely her voice is. How captivating her hair is when the light of the setting sun shines off her coppery strands. How the dimple on her cheek sends shockwaves through my chest when she smiles. How her eyes enchant me every time she looks upon my face.

But words are unnecessary at the moment. The silence is comforting for once. We ride side-by-side, smiling into the horizon.

Arthur greets Guinevere with courtliness, offering his hand to help her down from her

mount. She looks at me as if asking for my permission to allow Arthur to hold her hand. I give her an encouraging smile with a nod and she takes the hand offered to her. As I had predicted, Arthur is mesmerized by Guinevere. It will not take him long to offer more than just his hand in greeting.

“My lady, Guinevere. How lovely it is to finally meet you.” Arthur places a gentle kiss on Guinevere’s hand. Again, her eyes dart to mine. She looks unsure of herself. A look that turns to discomfort as Arthur tucks her arm through his. “Please, come inside. You must be exhausted from your journey. If you would like to rest, Elaine here will show you to your quarters.”

“Yes, I would very much like to rest my head for a little bit.” Arthur nods to Elaine, who takes Guinevere’s hand and begins walking her inside. Guinevere hesitates again, looking back toward me as I stand stoic, holding the reigns of our horses. “What about La—my belongings?”

“They will be brought up to your room. Though, perhaps you want to carry Excalibur up with you? Lancelot has written to me of the magical connection the two of you have. It will follow you to your room even if no one brings it to you, is that right?”

Guinevere shyly nods. Releasing her hand from Elaine’s, she walks back to where I stand and detaches the sword from its holster on the saddle. She looks up at me before turning back around. “You should get some rest, too. You look more exhausted than I feel,” she says, offering me a brilliant smile. “Will I see you again?”

“Of course, my lady. I will be at the feast later.”

“Cool. I mean, awesome. I mean, I’ll see you then.”

She is the strangest woman I have ever met, yet still, I am drawn to her. As she disappears further into the castle grounds, my eyes remain focused on the spot where

she had stood.

Even the ghost of her presence is intoxicating. I must remove her from my mind now that we are in Camelot. Arthur entrusted me to bring Guinevere to his castle. I do not want him to believe that I have taken advantage of his trust.

Nothing happened during the six and a half days we traveled together. Though we had been alone the entire time, there should not be cause for suspicion. Unless I let Arthur see how my chest pounds faster when Guinevere is near. Did Arthur notice how my teeth ground in envy as he took Guinevere's hand in his? How my soul longs to be near her again, empty and alone without her warmth.

"I trust the journey was uneventful?" Arthur asks, stepping alongside me as I lead the horses to the stables. "You do look quite tired, Lancelot. Did you sleep?"

"I was too worried we would be set upon by thieves or worse. If my letters to you were intercepted, someone would have known of Guinevere and Excalibur, attempted to take them both."

"But you were not?"

"No. We had not seen another soul until arriving here, at Camelot."

"Very good. I had been worried as well. I was tempted to send a few more knights to aid you in your endeavor, but I was afraid that would only bring more unwanted attention."

"Now that she is here, what do you intend to do with the lady?"

"What do you mean by this?"

“Have you thought through every possible scenario?”

“That is what I have you for, Lancelot.” Arthur pats me on the back. “What scenarios have come to mind?”

“Guinevere’s safety. At the gathering, who will be there? Who have you invited? There are many who would murder or worse in order to possess the sword of power.”

“I invited everyone. I want all the kings to bear witness to me accepting Excalibur from The White Enchantress, the lady who brought forth the sword from its watery grave. I want them to know that Merlin’s premonition is true and not just the babbling of an old, crazy man.”

“And what if Guinevere cannot give you the sword?”

“Why would she not?”

“Not ‘would not,’ cannot. The sword has attached itself to her. I have felt the connection myself. What if the sword is unwilling to part from Guinevere? What will you do?”

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“Well, then, I would have to marry her.”

“Surely you would not force marriage upon her?” I do not mean to form this last statement as a question. I am unsure of Arthur’s intentions though.

“Whoa there. I was only jesting. Please know I would never do such a thing, Lancelot. What makes you think that?”

“Nothing, nothing...only my mother conveyed to me that Guinevere had hesitations about coming here. She was afraid of a marriage proposal.”

“From you or me? By the looks of it, you have already fallen for her, and she for you.”

I laugh loudly at that. “No, my king, I would not do such a thing. And she seems unaffected by me. It is only that...I admire her is all,” I lie. Knowing deep down that I could be in love with her. I silently vow never to show it unless she asks me to.

“Hmm. As you say,” Arthur replies, believing my lie, for now.

Chapter 16

Guinevere

Elaine is kind enough to not only walk me to my room but also offer a hot bath to wash away the dirt and grime from my journey to Camelot. While she prepares my bath, my curiosity is peaked. Elaine is another name I know well from the Arthurian

legends my mother would read to me. I don't remember all the stories, all the little details. Still, I remember an Elaine who loved Lancelot and whose love was not reciprocated. I wonder if this Elaine is she.

She nearly pours the boiling water onto herself when I ask her if she is in love with Lancelot. Her answer is dry, deadpan even. "If there is a woman who has not fallen in love with the gallant White Knight after coming across his handsome visage, I would surely like to meet her. For such a feat is impossible. As I am certain you already know this."

My blushing face gives me away. I don't know what compelled me to speak. I had every intention of staying quiet. Yet my voice speaks on its own, saying, "Sir Lancelot will give his heart to onewoman, though they will never live a happy life together. A son will be born to him from another, a boy pure of heart to become a man whose bravery stands against those of the gods." Elaine looks up at me, eyes wide with fear. "Sorry, I don't know where that came from. Must have read one too many fantasy novels in my youth."

"Your bath is ready, my lady. Please do let me know if there is anything else I can do for you." With that, Elaine runs off, leaving me and my crazy brain in silence. But inside, my brain is screaming at me. People already assume I am some kind of enchantress, a witch.

I am sure to be burned at the stake for speaking such ominous prophecies about the future. Though how truthful are these prophecies? I am only repeating what I've read from various stories about the characters in the Arthurian legends. But they are no longer characters to me. These are real, corporeal human beings.

And the plot has already begun to deviate from what I had known. Guinevere, the White Enchantress? She isn't the one who finds Excalibur. And I am positive that Guinevere doesn't meet Lancelot until after she is already married to Arthur.

Guinevere's potential backstories and family histories are not mine. There must be another Guinevere in the kingdom. She is the one destined to fall into a deadly love triangle. Not me.

I couldn't get any sleep after my bath, but lying down is relaxing enough to rejuvenate my body after days on horseback. My mind is racing with thoughts about my current situation. I will soon be presenting Excalibur to Arthur. All the kings and nobles of therealm will be there. I can't help but think of the last time I was presented to a crowd of powerful and important people.

After graduating high school, my father wanted to host a grand soiree for me. It was meant to be my official welcome to the Musgrave family and introduction to society. I was hesitant at first, hating the idea of being the center of attention, especially in the presence of all my father's friends and colleagues.

The day before the big extravagant party where I was to be named heiress of the Musgrave estate and earldom of Lancaster, I discovered my dear half-sister shredding my gown to pieces.

"What the fuck are you doing!"

Cecily responded in the most innocent of voices she could muster, "Just making some adjustments. There was way too much lace around the—ahhhh."

I launched at her full force, slamming her to the ground and knocking the scissors out of her hands. The rage I had kept inside me for the past year came pouring out; I had no control over my actions.

As she tried to push me off her, I punched her square in the nose, feeling it crack against my knuckles. Blood trickled down her face and into her mouth as she screamed profanities at me, thrashing her body and attempting to push me off. I was

unmoved, a dead weight on her chest, unable to look away from her bloody face. My own face must have looked fierce because Cecily looked like a scared little pig when she glanced up at my eyes.

A hand grabbed me from behind, and I released my hold on her long enough for Cecily to push herself out from under me. “What is the meaning of all this?” Ed asked calmly.

“Guin just jumped me and punched me in the bloody nose. Papa, I think she broke it!”

“And what happened to Guin’s gown? Did you do this?”

“What? No, I mean, I was just playing a little prank on her. It’s what sisters do. Then she went all rabid and attacked me. She’s a psycho bitch.”

“Do not talk of your sister that way. Guin might have overreacted, but this is not what I would call a prank. You intended to ruin her dress, didn’t you?”

After a brief pause, Cecily screamed as loud as she could, “YES. Yes, father, I did. Ever since your precious American daughter came to live with us, it’s like I don’t exist anymore. Guin gets to go to my school and embarrass me with her stupid common ways, then gets to go to a brand new school embarrassing me more with her stupid lowlife friends. Guin gets a new gown, Guin gets a party, Guin, Guin, Guin, GUIN! I’m bloody sick of it!”

“Guin got a new gown because she doesn’t have one. How many gowns do you own, my dear daughter? I didn’t think it necessary to get you a new one when you have a closet full. And as you say, this party is for Guin, not you.”

I sat motionless during this exchange but looked up at my dad after his last comment.

Cecily's reaction was to squeal so loud the entire manor seemed to shake. A moment later, the clicking of heels down the hall told me that the wicked witch had heard all the commotion and was coming to investigate.

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“What is...Cecily, your nose! Oh my, what has happened to your nose!”

“Cecily will be fine, my dear. Go and call for the doctor.”

“It was her who did it, wasn’t it? She’s a menace, Edmund. I told you she would only cause—”

“ENOUGH!” Ed, attempting to keep his patience, continued in a calming voice. “Cecily deserves what she got for sabotaging Guin’s gown. For too long she has gotten away with everything. I will no longer allow it. If you two cannot accept that I have another daughter, you can leave. She has gone her entire life without me in it. I will not abandon her again because you two cannot overcome your selfish need for constant attention. Now Cecily will pay to replace the dress she ruined out of her own pocket. I am going to order the replacement now. Do not argue with me and do not follow me out of this room. Understood?”

Two stiff nods were all the reply he needed. Turning on his heels, he headed out of my room, leaving me with the two women I hated most. After giving me identical looks of pure disgust, they hastily departed. Thank the gods. Now all I had left to look at was the shredded remains of a once beautiful gown.

I never thought I’d be wearing my wedding gown again, but here I am, getting ready to walk down a different kind of aisle. Morgana had mended and modified my gown according to the fashion standards of the fifth century. She was even able to scrub all the mud out, making it shine an even brighter white than before my trip through time.

As I walk through the throne room, Excalibur vibrates at my side. Whether she senses

my own nervousness or is nervous herself, I can't tell. Speaking to her with my mind, I tell her everything will be fine. She is where she is meant to be. Arthur seems like a kind man. His people love him. There is no reason to be afraid. Excalibur sends a warm burst of energy around my body, enshrouding me in a noncorporeal hug, telling me the same thing. Everything will be fine. This is where I am supposed to be.

Still, it feels a bit weird to be paraded in front of what seems like the entire realm. The hall is packed with strangers, all of them staring at me with mixed looks of admiration, fright, and curiosity. But I am the stranger here. A woman who came from an unknown place in the north, stumbling into a lake, rescued by a magical sword. A sword believed to be Excalibur. A sword meant for the one ruler who will unite all the kingdoms and bring peace to the land.

I know I can't keep Excalibur for myself. What would I even do with the sword besides wear it against my hip and talk to it like a crazy woman? Still, I will miss the constant warmth and the reassurance of her presence.

Arthur stands erect in front of his throne, making himself appear taller. On either side of the crown-adorned king are his knights. Lancelot takes up his post on Arthur's right, of course.

It has been nearly a week since the welcome feast and I've barely seen Lancelot since. For the past few days, nobles, kings, and ladies poured into the castle and its grounds all to see me, this moment when Arthur will receive the sword called Excalibur.

I look up at Lancelot, his bright green eyes shining like a beacon for me to follow. He is beautiful. Perfect. Wonderful. So fucking sexy. It's not fair. Elaine was right; he is easy to fall in love with.

I was determined not to fall, though my attempt had been pathetic. After our

encounter with the unicorn, the barrier I built came tumbling down and my heart reached out to Lancelot, seeking his affection.

As we rode on horseback, I bombarded him with questions and he answered every single one of them. Some of what he had told me of his life, Arthur, Camelot, and the war were pretty much accurate to the legends I know. But there were quite a few details that shocked me. One of them is that Lancelot and Arthur are cousins—distant cousins, but still. Their connection isn't one made purely of honor. They are bound by blood.

Knowing this doesn't make it any easier to stop myself from falling. And I hadn't forgotten about Josh. Every day I hoped he would magically appear and take me back home. But I know that is never going to happen. I will never see him again. And if I am honest with myself, yes, I will miss him for the rest of my life. My heart is broken at this thought, but I am beginning to doubt my feelings for him.

I love him. There is no doubt in my heart about that. Maybe we would have dated or maybe it would have ended terribly along with our friendship. I couldn't say what my life would have been like in the twenty-first century. Perhaps it is better to have parted as friends than as broken-hearted lovers.

What I feel for Lancelot is powerful. Much more visceral than what I felt for Josh. Lancelot has haunted my dreams and infiltrated my thoughts since I fell into his arms that day by the lake. I care for this man who is still a stranger to me, yet I feel as though I have known him all my life. Just being near him makes me feel safe in this impossible world.

His eyes give me the courage I need to keep walking toward Arthur, past the piercing stares of the strangers surrounding me. I am walking to Lancelot, not Arthur.

When I approach The King, I bend to kneel before him, but Arthur grabs my arm,

standing me back up.

“You need not kneel before me, for you have unearthed a power so great, no one in this room can comprehend. Even Merlin.” He smiles at the middle-aged man standing to the left. “WhiteEnchantress, the woman chosen to bring forth the sword of power. You have come here of your own free will, have you not?”

It is obvious that Arthur rehearsed this little speech, and it feels like a lie to say ‘yes’ but, in truth, I did come here of my own free will. Vivienne gave me a choice.

“Yes, my king.”

The silence in the hall is deafening. No one even takes a breath as they listen to Arthur’s next question.

“Do you believe I am the rightful king of Britain, the leader of kings, who will unite us all and bring peace to the realm?”

“Yes, my king.”

“Will you, lady of the sword, anoint me as the true ruler and bless me with the honor of possessing the sword Excalibur?”

My eyes swing over to Lancelot, taking in his magnificent smile for one short second. Looking back into the piercing blue eyes of Arthur, I nod, even though I am only ninety-nine point nine percent certain. I don’t know Arthur very well, but in the past few days, I have seen his generosity. He is kind and holds an unconditional love for his men, his people, his country.

“Yes, my king.”

At these words, I draw Excalibur from her hiding place in the sheath at my hip. She vibrates wildly in my hand, excitement surging through us both. I hold the sword up for all to see, the blade shining brightly in the dimly lit hall.

As I lower the blade toward the ground, turning the handle into Arthur's hand, Excalibur whines loudly, her bright white lightenshrouding me in warmth. For a second, I think maybe she is sending me back home. I look at Lancelot, afraid this will be the last time I see his beautifully sculpted face. Tears pool in my eyes. I want him to know that I love him.

Chapter 17

Lancelot

Arthur stands still, unmoved by the sudden blast of white light. His hand falls back to his side as he witnesses Guinevere disappearing in the brightness emanating from Excalibur's blade. I move toward the light, needing to know if Guinevere is still in there. If she is safe. Arthur holds out his arm, stopping me before I can take a complete step forward. He looks at me sternly, with no fear on his face. Mine must have shown nothing but fear. "Guinevere," I whisper.

"She will be all right. Excalibur would not do anything to harm her."

I step back, wanting to believe this to be true. Deep down, I know she is safe. I had felt Excalibur's soul, essence, whichever it is inside that sword. It is a gentle yet fierce being.

As I relax my shoulders, no longer preparing to charge into the light, it begins to dim. I see a figure in the whiteness, a glow of red in the middle as Guinevere's hair shimmers through the sphere of light. But as Guinevere becomes visible, Excalibur disappears. The light, the sword, the essence. All of it absorbs into Guinevere's chest.

She looks at peace, her eyes barely open as the light pulses one last time. Arthur runs to her a split second before me, catching her in his arms. He holds Guinevere close to his chest, causing a violent surge of anger and jealousy inside me. One in which I need to push down into the pit of my stomach. I grab hold of Arthur's arm, pleading. "Is she—"

“She is breathing. Lancelot, she is alive.”

Along with the unnecessary jealousy, I push down the violent tears that threaten to burst from my eyes. I have never known pain like what I am feeling now. Seeing Guinevere disappear in a mystical sphere of light, a sword dissolving into her chest, the way she collapsed to the floor. I am terrified.

Guinevere is a beautiful mystery, one that will never truly be revealed to me. She could never be mine. Still, my heart yearns for her. And I want nothing more than to rip her from Arthur’s arms, take her in mine, and run away to my castle up north. Hide her from the world and all those who would take her from me.

“Lancelot, take the lady,” Arthur commands me, as if reading my mind. “Bring her up to her chambers. Lady Elaine, accompany them. Stay with Guinevere.”

As Arthur places Guinevere in my arms, Elaine walks out from the crowd, curtsies and makes her way through the hall with Guinevere and me in tow. The knights help part the ocean of frantic people, making a pathway out of the hall. Guinevere feels warm in my hands, just as Excalibur had. Is the sword inside her now, or has it returned to its watery dwelling? I ask myself.

Once clear of the crowded hall, Elaine and I make our way back to the keep where Guinevere has been staying. Elaine opens the door, stepping inside to let me through before closing and locking the bolt. I gently place Guinevere on the bed. Sitting beside her, I scoop a warm hand in mine. The warmth I feel is comforting. She is alive.

“What happened?” I ask no one in particular.

“She is a witch, is she not? She did this intentionally to ruin our king.”

“Elaine, how could you say such a thing? Did you not see the fear in her eyes as the white light began to surround her? She did not know this would happen.”

“She has enchanted you.”

I turn back to Guinevere, her sweet freckled face so still, but alive. She has enchanted me, but not in the way Elaine is accusing her of. “How do you mean?”

“You are in love with her, are you not? And she with you. It was obvious from the first day you returned with her.”

“I do not know what you speak of. Guinevere and I are friends.”

“Are we friends?”

“I...yes, Elaine, we are friends.” I turn back around to face Elaine. Her skin has turned a blushing red, anger rising to the surface.

“You never look at me the way you do her. You do not care about the hearts you crush. One day it will be her heart you crush, and she will hate you for it, just as I do.”

“And why do you hate me, Elaine? Is it because I kissed you once and told you it was a mistake?”

“How many girls have you made mistakes with, Lancelot?”

I look down at Guinevere’s face before answering, hoping she cannot hear this conversation in this state. “Do you want me to answer truthfully?”

Elaine crosses her arms, huffing as she nods.

“Too many. I will admit that I have made many mistakes in my life. But not anymore. Arthur has put his faith in me. You know very well that I have tried to live a pious life after becoming a knight. I do not blame you for kissing me that night. I was drunk, flirting. It is no excuse. Elaine, if I hurt you, I apologize a thousand times over. Truly.”

“You could charm a goat,” Elaine snips. Her shoulders relax, though her anger has not completely subdued. A knock on the door makes us both jump. I stand up, hand to my sword as I ask who it is.

“Lancelot, is that you?”

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“Mother?” I quickly unlatch the door, swinging it open to find Vivienne standing alone. “What...how are you here?”

“I had a vision a few days after you and Guinevere left Avalon. May I come in?” I step aside, admitting her, then secure the bolt in place. “I took a boat down the coast but it still took me five days to get here.”

“What was the vision?”

“It was of Guinevere. Is Merlin here?”

“Yes, most likely helping Arthur calm everyone downstairs. Mother, what was your vision?”

“Guinevere, becoming possessed by something. I am unsure if that something is good or evil. It did not feel like a malevolent being, but it was powerful. Did it happen already?”

“Yes, Excalibur absorbed itself inside her. She fainted afterward.”

“Let me see.” Vivienne pushes past me, taking a seat on the bed beside Guinevere. She raises her hands to Guinevere’s face, closes her eyes, and remains silent for some time.

I look over at Elaine, feeling sorry for her. She is terrified of my mother, terrified of anything she cannot explain. I need her to understand what she witnessed downstairs was not an enchantment or witchcraft. If she spreads her opinions around the castle,

the entire country will think that Guinevere is a witch, not to be trusted. After what happened, Arthur needs Guinevere. She is the sword now. At least that is what I believe. My mother would surely testify to this.

“Elaine, I know you do not truly believe that Guinevere did this intentionally. If you despise her simply for being my friend, I ask you to consider what she means to Arthur, our king. He needs her right now. He needs the people to believe in her. If they think she is a witch, and I can assure you she is not, then Arthur will lose everything. Do you understand?”

“You really are not in love with her?”

“Why should that matter? I am speaking of Arthur, of his kingdom. Would you let your petty feelings about how I could potentially love someone other than you get in the way of unifying the Britons?”

Sighing loudly, Elaine responds. “No, of course not.”

“My son, you are correct. Excalibur lies within the body of Guinevere. I can feel her spirit. Not quite possessing Guinevere’s soul, residing within it. I did not sense any malevolence, which means we can assume that Guinevere is safe for the time being.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Will she wake up soon?”

“That I cannot say. She seems to be unharmed and stable. Elaine, you may leave if you wish. I will stay with Guinevere.”

“Arthur ordered me to stay with her, and that is what I will do.” Elaine’s voice shakes in fear at speaking so directly with Vivienne. I cannot help but be amused.

Guinevere jolts awake as I laugh, her breathing shallow and wild. I am at her side

instantly, the smile vanishing from my face. She is warm, too warm.

“Mother, she is running a fever. Elaine, go fetch some cold water.” Elaine hesitates, frightened at the sight of Guinevere’s state. “Arthur would want you to help the lady. She needs water. Please, Elaine.” My begging works. Elaine dashes out the door, letting it close back on its own.

“Lancelot, you are here?” Guinevere whispers.

“Where do you think here is, Guinevere?” Vivienne interjects.

“Home?” She shakes her head and lies back down, closing her eyes tightly. When she opens them back up, she is fully awake. “Oh, I’m still in Camelot?”

“Yes, my lady. Though you gave everyone quite a fright. How do you feel?” I ask, attempting to hide the worry in my voice.

“Meh, my head is on fire and my chest aches. What exactly happened? Did I give the sword to Arthur?”

“No. Excalibur blasted the throne room with a bright, white light and then absorbed into your body. Can you feel it?”

Guinevere takes a moment, looking inside herself for something new. “I don’t know, but I do feel different. Am I glowing? It looks like I’m radiating a soft white light.”

“I do not see—”

“Yes, I can see the light. It is faint but there. Excalibur has chosen you to be its vessel. I do not think she means to possess you or harm you in any way. This does not mean that Arthur was not the one in Merlin’s prophecy, or mine. It could mean that

he was destined for you.” Vivienne’s eyes shift to me as she says this to Guinevere.

“Do you mean I must marry him?” She looks up at me after asking my mother this question, but I cannot hold her gaze. If she looks into my eyes, she will see the sadness and longing within. I believe in Arthur. With that belief comes sacrifice. If Guinevere must marry Arthur to secure a peaceful, unified kingdom, then I will keep my feelings to myself. I will never act upon them. And I will never know if Guinevere feels the same for me.

“That is up to you. Marriage is a strong binding contract between man and woman. Marrying Arthur means that he would own you; thereupon, he would own Excalibur. There are other options if you still do not wish to marry him.”

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“What are my options?”

“Pledge allegiance to Arthur. Affirm that his claim to reign all of Britain is legitimate. Show the people that you will rally with Arthur against all his enemies. If you cannot convince the men, convince their women. Though our voices may be docile and soft, our words are powerful and fierce. Men only pretend not to listen to us.”

I cannot help but smile at my mother’s comment. Growing up on an island of women, I have greater respect for the gentler sex than my fellow men. The women of Avalon are beautiful of face, mind, and spirit. And though I have met women of similar stock here in Camelot and across the kingdom, never have I met a match to my mother, the Lady of the Lake. Until Guinevere.

Guinevere, she is a different breed of woman as well. Beautiful. The most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes upon. Talented. Her voice and musical skill could bring the most brutish man to his knees, tears cascading down his face in agonizing torment. Witty. She may say the strangest things, but how she can light up a room with her laughter. Caring. Her unconditional affection for the world around her is awe-inspiring.

Guinevere did not have to come to Camelot to meet Arthur. She could have easily run away back to the north, taking Excalibur with her. I know she did not come here seeking to become queen. She does not want the power, only the chance to change the world and make it a better place. We have that in common.

It is the one thing that keeps me grounded and keeps me fighting by Arthur’s side until the need for fighting is gone. Guinevere is the key to a peaceful land. If we can

unify the kingdom, we can fight as one against the Saxons, the Vikings, and anyone who seeks to claim what is ours.

Elaine comes rushing in as the three of us sit silently, contemplating what will happen next. “Water, my lady.”

“Thank you, Elaine.”

After drinking an entire cup of water, Guinevere stands up. “I would like to see Arthur now.”

My heart breaks into a million shards at these words. She has decided. She will choose Arthur, no doubt. Is this what I wanted? Yes, it is. But I also want her to be mine, not his. Still, I take her arm through mine and escort her back to the throne room. We walk in silence as we get closer to the sound of a thousand people yelling and cursing in a thousand directions.

When we enter the throne room, I feel as if I am drowning. The stillness is abrupt, deafening. After the initial shock of our appearance, the masses part. I hold onto Guinevere’s arm until we reach the platform where Arthur, Merlin, and the knights all stand. After helping Guinevere up to meet Arthur, I stand back, staring up at the woman I undoubtedly love. Waiting in anticipation for her to pledge herself to Arthur and become his queen.

“May I say a few words to the people, my king?” The way she can transform into the perfect, gentle lady I know her not to be is always a shock. Arthur silently nods, stepping back to let her take his place.

“What happened earlier must have been terrifying to witness. I assure you I was just as terrified. I knew the sword I carried had incredible power. I could also feel a soul within the blade. This soul, we have bonded over the last two months. I cannot

explain how or why, but Excalibur has chosen me to be its source of life. I can feel her, this being inside me, telling me that I am where I'm meant to be. That coming here was not a mistake. For some of you, this is a huge disappointment. You have traveled all this way just to see the sword of power disappear into a stranger, a woman. You expected Arthur to receive the sword, confirming his authority over the realm. Let me assure you that Arthur is who he says he is, who Merlin has prophesied him to be. Arthur is a great leader. He will be an even greater monarch if you give him the chance he is asking for. Unite as one. Band together to fight off those who would take everything from you. The Romans might be gone, but they had conquered this land once. Britain must remain in the hands of Britons."

As the people around me grunt and agree in whispers, Guinevere turns toward Arthur. Kneeling before him, she reaches out her hand for his. I cannot look. I do not wish to see Guinevere give herself away.

"Arthur, you may not be holding the metal of a sword in your hands, but what you have is more powerful than that. Excalibur has entrusted me to speak on her behalf. I pledge my allegiance to you, King Arthur. In doing so, Excalibur is yours. I stand with you, King Arthur, for peace, for unity, for Britain. I will remain in Camelot, your loyal servant."

I look up at Guinevere kneeling before Arthur. She has not offered herself as his wife and queen. Her words are powerful. They leave me with hope. Not just for the kingdom but for my own lonely heart.

Chapter 18

Lancelot

The day after Guinevere pledged her loyalty to Arthur, the king summons me to his chambers. "Answer me plainly, Lancelot. Are you in love with Lady Guinevere?" I

have been waiting for this question to be asked ever since the events of the previous evening. Try as I might, I cannot hide my feelings for Guinevere.

“What does it matter? I will not act upon it.”

“Yes, then.”

“I will never lie to you, Arthur. Yes. I do believe I love Guinevere. I have never felt such stirrings within me. Regardless, you must believe me when I tell you that I have not touched her nor made my feelings known to her. She does not care for me in that way.”

“What makes you say this?”

“Her heart belongs to another. Even though he is gone from this earth, it is clear that she still thinks of him often. He still holds her heart.”

“That might be true, but I believe she has more of her heart to give. Lancelot, I am considering making a proposal of marriage to Guinevere. I will not do this if it is your heart she seeks. Nor can I, in good faith, take her from a man I consider a friend.”

“She is not mine. You would not be taking her from me,” I say out loud. But inside, I want to tear Arthur’s throat out for even thinking of proposing to the woman I love.

“Hmm. Still, I will not ask for Guinevere’s hand. Though that might not be the case for the majority of the unmarried men lodging here as my guests. If you care for Guinevere, if you think what you feel is love, you should be honest with her. I give you my blessing to court her if you wish.”

“I...thank you, my king. But what would the people think of me courting the lady? They all assume she will become your queen. Her allegiance to you would be

permanent. And I do not need a wife.”

“Everyone needs someone to love, Lancelot.”

I leave Arthur’s chamber feeling elated yet terrified. What am I to say to Guinevere? I cannot tell her that Arthur has given his permission for me to wed her, bed her, and call her mine. She is not like other women, like the women at court whose only objective in life is to find a husband.

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Guinevere might have been betrothed before, but she ran from her marriage, following her own path. I am desperate to be part of that path, to be part of her life. But does she want me in hers?

At times I think so. The way she looks at me, searching, needing something from me. Other times her gaze feels distant, as if she is not looking at me but through me, to another place. One whereher Josh is still alive. I envy this man. Not even knowing who he was. For he had won the heart of a woman unlike anyone I have known. A strange, beautiful woman.

I love her. What else can it be? Still, my thoughts keep drifting back to what my mother had told me before leaving Avalon with Guinevere. To be certain of my love for her before I act upon it. Vivienne left soon after Guinevere's speech, needing to return to Avalon. I did not have the chance to say goodbye nor confide in her the whirlwind of agony I feel at the thought of losing Guinevere. And how much my mind and body need her.

I would heed my mother's advice and marry Guinevere before I give into temptation. I have defeated great knights, fought giants alongside Arthur, even killed a dragon. I can undoubtedly conquer my own desires. After all, I have spent many nights alone with Guinevere, lying under the stars. I was tempted then and most certainly would be enticed again.

As I step out into the courtyard for some fresh air, I see Guinevere sitting on a bench, speaking with Merlin. Though I want nothing more than to be in her presence, I am not yet ready to face her, even knowing that I can freely court her now. I turn abruptly on my heels, colliding with Gawain.

“Whoa there, Lancelot. You nearly knocked my head clean off with yours.”

Guinevere turns toward the commotion Gawain made at our clashing of heads. She smiles at me, her face bright as the sun, warming my heart. I cannot help but smile back, giving her a wave. My attention is brought back to Gawain as he says, “Ahhh, that is the reason why you changed course so suddenly. Why were you running from the lady?”

Gawain looks at me suspiciously. “Did something occur between the two of you on the road?”

“No, of course not. And be wary of what you say in such a public place,” I whisper harshly.

“I apologize. You are very tense, Lancelot. Do not worry. There is no one around to hear what I said.”

“There is always someone listening, as you well know.”

“Hmm. Let us speak somewhere more privately then. I want to know all about Guinevere and what occurred yesterday. My travels were delayed, and I only just arrived at Camelot this morning.”

We step back inside and I follow Gawain up to his quarters. Being the first cousin of King Arthur has its benefits. He has a spacious room all to himself, tucked away in the quieter wing of the keep, close to where Arthur and Guinevere’s rooms are. Had Arthur planned to wed Guinevere before we arrived? Why else would he have arranged to have her chambers so close to the royal apartments? I shake my head at that last thought. Arthur has all but given her to me.

Gawain ushers me inside, gesturing for me to sit on the bench near the fireplace. He

sits next to me as I recount the events of the previous day, listening with awe and shock. “Hearing it from you, I still do not believe it. But tell me about Guinevere. She is beautiful, of course. What do you know of her?”

“Her father was a Roman noble and her mother, a Pict.”

“No!”

“Yes. They are both dead now. Guinevere was to be wed to a man she did not want to be with, so she ran. A friend of hers helped her escape. A man she has confessed to loving. I can tell she misses him greatly. He, too, is gone from her life. She has nobody. I do not know what happened to him, how he died, or how long ago all this had happened before she stumbled into the lake. But she is a strong, courageous, caring woman. I think that is why Excalibur chose her. And, Gawain, she has the voice of an angel. When she sings...hmm... never mind.” I am getting carried away talking of Guinevere. With Arthur, I held my tongue and kept my deepest feelings hidden though that did not stop him from seeing a glimmer of my love for her.

“Please, do go on.”

“Hmpf...you get the idea.”

“So you truly are in love with the lady then?”

“Why is everyone asking me this question?”

“Because it is obvious that you are.”

“It is difficult to remove her from my mind. Gawain, please do not speak of this to anyone else. I do not want the entire kingdom to know how I feel.”

“Lancelot, I only just arrived this morning. Everyone is already gossiping about your feelings. Guinevere is a bit harder to read, I hear. Has she given you any hints that your feelings are reciprocated?”

“Am I that transparent? I thought I was hiding it well enough.”

“I will be honest. I am shocked to see you in such a state. Lancelot, breaker of hearts. I never thought I would see you in love. And you did not answer my last question. Is Lady Guinevere in love with you?”

“Can we please change the subject of our conversation? Tell me about your quest.”

“Is that the scar there?” Guinevere asks Gawain as he finishes retelling his story about facing the Green Knight. I still have not found the courage to speak with her privately about what Arthur and I discussed. In fact, I have not spoken to her at all for the past two days.

When she took her place next to me in the dining hall, she whispered something about how I had been avoiding her. Her comment reminded me of that dream I had of her before leaving Avalon. I shook my head, removing the image of her naked body and attempted to explain myself. But Gawain interrupted me, delighted at the chance to meet my lady. At the time, I was glad for the interruption. Though my heart was filled with a happiness I had never known just by her mere presence, my mind was blank.

“Yes, it is still healing, as the encounter occurred less than a fortnight ago,” Gawain answers.

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“You must have been terrified, believing you would be killed.” Guinevere smiles from ear to ear at Gawain’s story. A pang of jealousy hits me, wanting Guinevere’s smile for myself.

“I would not admit this in front of the men, but I cannot lie to a fair maiden such as yourself. Yes. I was certain of my death. For an entire year, I dreaded my return to the Green Knight.”

“What would have happened if you didn’t go back to him?”

“Died of shame, most likely, knowing I was a coward.”

“It takes a lot of courage to look death in the face.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Gawain blushes.

We continue drinking for hours, reliving our many adventures. The other knights join our table, offering their stories of heroism to Guinevere. Her smile never falters. She is a beacon of light every man seems to be drawn to. As more men come to our table, she moves closer and closer to me until our hips are pressed against each other.

Sitting this close to Guinevere, her warmth consumes me. I am tempted to wrap my arm around her waist to pull her even closer. Instead, I drop my arm down on the table loudly. Guinevere moves her hand to grab a tankard of ale, placing it in her left hand and resting her other down beside mine. Our knuckles brush against each other, causing my insides to melt.

“Lancelot has told me many things about you,” Gawain shouts over the table to Guinevere, a bit of ale sloshing over his horn as he turns abruptly to look at me.

I stop breathing. Praying, hoping Gawain does not say something I am not ready to explain.

“And what exactly has Sir Lancelot said about me?” Guinevere turns her head to me, looking into my eyes, her own sparkle with curiosity.

“Many, many things.” Gawain’s mischievous smile is still directed at me. Both of them are staring at me. I am nervous Gawain will give me away. This is not how I imagined it would be; Guinevere learning of my love for her. And I do not want the entire kingdom to hear it from a drunk man. Even if that drunk man is Gawain.

“Is it true you have a beautiful singing voice?” Gawain asks Guinevere, finally peeling his all-knowing eyes from my terrified gaze. His question gives me an opening to direct the conversation.

“You never sang in front of the priestesses at Avalon, but would you grace us with your talents here? I do miss hearing your songs.” I whisper the last part so that only Guinevere can hear me.

“You do?” Her eyes sparkle again, this time with joy.

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Well, I have had far too much ale to sing tonight. I wouldn’t be able to string two notes together. Even so, I can’t for the life of me think of any songs.”

Gawain intervenes. “What about two nights hence? That will give you time to prepare some songs. Some of the folk will be leaving Camelot before then. The crowd will be

much less dense if that is worrying you.”

“No, I’ve sung in front of crowds this large, maybe even bigger.” She looks up at me then, asking, “Do you wish me to sing?”

“You do not need my permission, Guinevere.”

“I’m not asking for it. Only asking if you want me to sing.” Our knuckles brush against each other once more. I wish with all my heart to know if Guinevere can feel the same rush of excitement I feel at the slightest touch of our skin.

“Yes. As I told you, I miss it. I would very much wish to hear you sing again. Even if it is not only me listening.”

She smiles, shining a little brighter. Those lips of hers part slightly, inviting me in. I nearly let myself be taken by her. If it was not for Gawain shouting in excitement, breaking the spell Guinevere has cast, I would have kissed her in front of all the souls in the great hall.

“Ladies and gentlemen! In two days, the lady Guinevere, our very own White Enchantress, will be gracing us with her musical talents. I offer my humblest apologies to those who have already made arrangements to leave Camelot before then. I am certain this will be an event you do not want to miss.”

The room bursts with hoots of excitement and raucous applause. Yet, I notice a few gloomy souls who are unaffected by Gawain’s joyous announcement. These being the men who have publicly courted Guinevere since she arrived at Camelot. One of the brooding men is Melwas, king of Aestiva Regio. He has been an enemy of Arthur’s since he took Uthur’s throne.

Melwas is territorial. He believes Arthur only wants the power that would come with

unifying the kingdoms. I have not witnessed his attempts to court Guinevere but heard bits and pieces from at least a dozen people. With Guinevere sitting beside me and Melwas glaring in our direction, I could not help but ask her about what had happened.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to embarrass Melwas. It’s just that after having eight or so men fawning over me to ask for my hand in marriage, I was running out of patience. Who do these men think they are? They don’t even know me. All they want is Excalibur. That was very clear. I guess I needed to make a scene to shut it down.”

“What did you do exactly? I have heard various accounts, all ending rather poorly for Melwas.”

Guinevere blushes. “I attempted to just ignore him, hoping he would go away. Maybe I was being too polite or whatever. I dunno. All of a sudden his mouth was on mine. I pushed him away, slapped him hard on his face and called him a pervert.”

“He kissed you?” I grab Guinevere’s hand, attempting to keep my voice down.

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“Yes. But don’t worry, I didn’t kiss back. Though I feel a bit bad for Melwas. He seems rather mooney over there in the corner.”

“Do not feel sorry for Melwas. He is moody by nature.”

Guinevere’s hand is still in mine. I feel her squeeze it before pulling it underneath the table, lacing my fingers with hers. “I’ve missed you, Lancelot. Why have you been avoiding me?”

I squeeze her hand back. “There is much going on at Camelot. I’ve been running around the castle and village, ensuring peace and order. And with you in constant company, I did not wish to disturb you. But now that I know the company you kept was unwanted, would you desire for me to call upon you?”

“Very much.”

Chapter 19

Guinevere

I feel like a desperate buffoon when I wake up with a hangover. The attention I had been receiving from nearly everyone at Camelot was overwhelming. At the same time, I was incredibly lonely. I yearned for Lancelot’s company but he had been avoiding me like the plague. That was until I forced him to endure my presence during dinner. I needed to know why he was ghosting me. Instead of asking him, I got drunk off ale and made a complete fool of myself.

Lancelot didn't seem to mind me making such advances though. He would move in closer, not wanting anyone to sit between us. And when he grabbed my hand, it was magnetic. And the concern on his face, the anger he felt when I told him that Melwas had kissed me, I melted. Yes, I relished that moment. I drank all of him in which made my already drunk mind dizzy with love. And now everyone at Camelot must know that I am head-over-heels in love with Sir Lancelot.

Not ready to face any living soul that might have witnessed me throwing myself at Lancelot last night, I grab my lute; the one I sort of stole in Avalon. Then I seek out a quiet nook to practice some songs I think would be appropriate to play for a fifth-century crowd.

Only a few people are wandering the hallways and garden since breakfast has already been served in the great hall. I walk briskly and with purpose, locating a quiet spot under a tree far away from the keep and main hall.

Since I have a private room with a window, I can easily charge my cell phone without any curious eyes glimpsing at what could only be considered witchcraft. I don't always carry my phone around, but I need some inspiration from my downloaded songs on Spotify. Confirming that I am alone, I pull out my phone and earbuds from the hidden pocket in my dress.

Vivienne had a group of priestesses put together a modest wardrobe for me back in Avalon. My one request was that my dresses have pockets. And I am eternally grateful for them. The pockets and the priestesses. I couldn't carry around my twenty-first-century leather backpack with zippers adorning the outside. This, too, would most likely be considered witchcraft.

Carefully laying my hair over the wires of the earbuds, I play the "Time Traveler" playlist I had started curating when I was bored out of my mind in Avalon. Luckily, I had downloaded hundreds of songs to my phone for the flights I had taken to and

from America. Slipping my phone back into my pocket, I begin playing my lute, trying to find the right cords to the songs I listen to.

After perfectly playing “Epic III” from *Hadestown*- the original live cast recording version, not the Broadway one - I’m unsure if the people here know anything about Greek mythology, but it feels appropriate for the crowd. I have a good enough set to get me through maybe an hour; that should be more than enough.

As I am about to take the earbuds out and head back to the keep, “The Heather on the Hill” from *Brigadoon* begins to play. I sit back against the tree, holding the lute against my chest, listening, remembering. The first time I kissed Josh, it meant nothing. We were Fiona and Tommy, not Guin and Josh. Thinking back on that memory of when we kissed, I can’t remember feeling any stirrings of love or passion. I can’t say for certain when I discovered those feelings for Josh; if I still have those feelings. But I loved him then just as I love him still.

“Hey, Lady Guinevere.”

“Josh!” I ran toward him at full speed, falling into his outstretched arms. Though I knew we would be at school together, I was caught by surprise seeing him at the principal’s office.

It had been a couple of weeks since I first met Josh at the park, but we texted nearly every day. I had taken Josh’s advice and approached my dad about the bullying. It took me some time to convince him, but Ed finally enrolled me at a different school, the same one Josh attended.

“Are you in trouble or something?” I asked, standing back to get a better look at my surroundings in the principal’s office.

“Not today,” Josh teased, a mischievous smile curving his mouth. “When you told me

you'd be going to school here, I volunteered to be your buddy, help you get settled in. Plus, I could use the extra credit."

I yelped in excitement, feeling pure happiness for the first time in months. "This is gonna be awesome. So, where to first?"

"I know you will want to be going to your classes and maintaining that perfect student persona, but first, I want you to meet some of my friends. They don't have to be your friends, but they are good people. It's healthy to have good folk around you, especially after being surrounded by dementors."

"As long as I'm not late to first period."

"You won't be, plus we are all in the same homeroom."

"Oh, and don't tell anyone who I am. No more 'lady,' okay?"

Josh nodded, understanding my need for privacy. I knew things would get complicated once I made friends with other students. I'd figure that out later. Grabbing my hand, Josh pulled me out to the hallway, escorting me through the throngs of teenagers scrambling toward homeroom. As we passed a bulletin board, I noticed a poster announcing auditions for the spring musical, *Brigadoon*. I had performed in school musicals and also did community theater back in Princeton. This would be the perfect opportunity to get my life back to normal, at least as much as I possibly could.

A pang of sadness hit me unexpectedly as I think about my mom. She would have loved to see me play Fiona. Music was an essential part of life for my mom, an obsession she passed on to me. And musical theater, well, that was air for the both of us. I loved living in Princeton, close to New York City and Broadway. My mom took me to see a show once a month. After she died, I hadn't listened to any music and

hadn't even thought about musicals. Since meeting Josh, I had been drowning myself in my Spotify, listening to all my mom's favorite musical soundtracks. Brigadoon was one of them. This had to be a sign.

Sensing my rapidly changing emotions, Josh slowed down his pace, turning around to ask if I was okay. I nodded, showing him my best smile. With two minutes left to spare before the bell, Josh pulled me over to a group of three guys and two girls, explaining that homeroom was just through the door to our right.

"Hello mates, this is my friend, Guin. It's her first day, so be nice and welcoming as you all were when I was the new kid."

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Mixed melodies with the words “hello,” “hi,” and “wotcher” caught my ears as they welcomed me. I tried to pay close attention to everyone’s names. James, Mia, Gracie, Harry and Logan. Mia stepped out from the group, wrapping her arms around Josh. On tiptoes, she brushed a light kiss on Josh’s lips and smiled back at me. “I’m Josh’s girlfriend.” She said this with an air of claiming territory.

I smiled back politely, trying not to laugh at her obvious jealousy of me. She was smoking hot. Why was she jealous of me? Though Josh and I had been texting nonstop for days, it was strictly platonic. There was nothing but friendship between us. “Nice to meet you, nice to meet you all,” I said as the bell rang for homeroom.

Josh’s group of friends quickly accepted me as one of theirs, except Mia. She watched me with an all-seeing eye like I was up to no good. It didn’t help that both of us were auditioning for the part of Fiona.

To make things worse, Josh auditioned for a role in Brigadoon as well. I knew he could play the guitar like Orpheus, so of course his voice was just as majestic. When the cast list got posted, Josh and I ran to look at it together. Mia pushed through between us, then a moment later, stormed out in a huff. Josh got the part of Tommy, I got Fiona, and Mia was part of the ensemble.

“She’ll get over it,” Josh said to me.

Get over it, huh?

We had the holiday break to decompress from all the drama of drama. So I tried to keep my distance from Josh, not wanting to cause any unnecessary chinks in his

unstable relationship. But Josh kept inviting me over to his house.

The gang would be around most of the time, bringing various instruments to jam together. Since I knew how to play piano, Josh let me play his keyboard. But I had wanted to learn guitar for forever. So Josh and I started hanging out on our own for guitar lessons.

Nothing happened between us, just guitar lessons and running lines. I was actually freaking out about our eventual kiss on stage. I didn't want things to get weird between us. With Mia in a constant fit of rage that I took away her lead role plus the hidden bitterness she feels toward me for stealing her boyfriend, the group of friends I was beginning to get close with was slowly fraying at the edges.

A month into the new term, I told Josh over a text that we should stop hanging out. And I gave him and Mia space at school, avoiding their usual hangout spots. The idea of losing Josh forever if Mia made him choose between his friendship with me and his relationship with her was shattering my insides.

I made it a whole week only seeing Josh and Mia at class and rehearsals and ignored Josh's text to hang out over the weekend. The next time I saw him was at rehearsal on Monday. The kissing scene. Since we'd already blocked the scene, we would now act out the whole thing, kiss included. I was terrified. Not of the kiss, but what Mia would do after I kissed her boyfriend. She was not a very rational-thinking person. I knew she was going to blow up.

And I was right. As Josh's lips met mine, I heard a bang from the audience seats. Mia knocked over a stand and marched out in a loud, dramatic huff. Josh didn't let Mia's performance distract him though. He went on with his lines waiting for me to gather myself and respond.

After rehearsal, Josh pulled me aside. "I broke up with Mia. She was being

unreasonable and her jealousy was suffocating. She would get jealous before you, even with Gracie. Mia just doesn't like it when I talk to any other girl that isn't her. And I don't know why she targeted you so strongly. Maybe because you are incredibly beautiful and have the most unique shade of red hair she's ever seen. Mia actually told me that once. Even if her jealousy stems from the fact that she doesn't have red hair, I couldn't stand being with her anymore. So please don't think it's your fault or any other bullshit. Please say we are friends."

"I'm sorry if I made things—"

"I said no bullshit, Guin."

I smiled up at him and nodded. "Friends then."

As the song reaches the last chorus and my memories fade to black, sadness, happiness, loneliness, and guilt fill my heart all at once. How could I dismiss Josh in a couple of months and fall in love with someone else? Do I even know what being in love feels like? I loved Josh, loved him, everything about him. The passion he brought out in me was surprising. I felt like a goddess when he was inside me. He worshiped my body, he loved me, everything about me. That was real.

Lancelot is real too. I don't know everything about him though. So how could I love him? How am I consumed by him? Why do I forget to breathe in his presence? My mind is running a marathon trying to make sense of it all while my heart beats at an unhealthy pace.

Tears are now running freely from my eyes at the torment ripping me apart on the inside. A person can love more than once in their life. For my parents, this wasn't so, but I know what I feel for both Josh and Lancelot is love. The kind of love that makes you ache and yearn at the same time.

For weeks, I had doubted whether I truly love Lancelot or if what I feel is just a barbaric need to fuck. But I love him. And I know my love for him isn't manufactured because centuries' worth of literature and screenplays tell me I am supposed to.

"Guinevere, has someone done this to you?"

I look up, startled by the sudden appearance of Lancelot and scramble to remove the buds from my ears discretely. "Done what?"

"You are crying. Has someone here at the castle done you wrong? Say something to upset you? Was it Melwas?"

I hesitate to answer, not wanting to talk about why I am crying, but he insists. "No. I'm just feeling sad."

Seeing my discomfort, he reaches out for my hands, pulling me to my feet. After wiping the tears from my cheeks with his rough but tender hands, he gently tucks my arm in the crook of his elbow. He then walks me out from under the tree and into the garden. We walk silently in the warm morning air.

"I will not think any less of you if you tell me. I can see by the look on your face that you are holding too much inside. You can trust me...Guinevere." He hesitates to say my name, wanting to maintain formality. But he knows I prefer to be called by my name.

"There are so many things I want to tell you Lance, I don't know how or if I should. Or if you would even believe me."

He looks away with a brief nod, understanding my need to keep things to myself. But he is still curious about me. "What were those things you pulled from your ears?"

I freeze, terrified, unsure how to explain technology from the twenty-first century. “I don’t know how to explain that.”

“Are you a witch?”

“No!”

“It would be all right if you are. I will not tell anyone. You have my word.”

“I’m not a witch. I never got my Hogwarts letter.” I laugh at my own joke, knowing Lancelot wouldn’t understand what I said.

“Not all witches have warts—”

At his comment, I burst into raucous laughter, unable to contain myself. Still attached to Lancelot’s arm, I bend forward, attempting to steady myself. Finally catching my breath, I ask, “Do you know many witches then?”

“Well, some say my mother is a witch.”

“Is she?”

“Yes. But Vivienne is not wicked. Most people here at court believe witches are the spawn of evil. It is curious that the sentiment is not shared about Merlin. He is revered. But everyone here and in the entire southern part of the realm, for the most part, is afraid of my mother. Afraid of Avalon.”

“Why are they afraid of Avalon?”

“Were you afraid of Avalon and my mother when you realized where you stumbled into?”

“Yes.”

Lancelot gives me a shy smile. Then his face becomes serious once again. “I wish you would tell me what made you feel so sad.”

“Maybe one day I will.” I smile up into his bright green eyes. Eyes that pierce into my soul, seeking entrance but willing to wait.

Chapter 20

Guinevere

I feel alive, singing and performing in front of a crowd again. I start the evening with a short ballad by The Beatles, “Blackbird.” I then shock a few people when I sing “Girl With One Eye” but bring the crowd up in spirits with “Drunken Sailor.” They are all cheering and singing along by the end of that song, especially the men. Even Lancelot is a little red in the face with drunkenness.

As I sing of the love Hades had for Persephone, how that love turned a god, a king, into nothing more than a man, I can feel Lancelot’s gaze on me. I try to look at others in the crowd, but my eyes keep flying to his, which are permanently fixed on me.

He is so goddamn sexy. The string on his green tunic has come undone during the last few songs and I can see the hairs on his chest peaking out. How I want to touch him, just reach out and stroke the soft caramel bristles.

I am halfway through the set of songs I prepared for the night and have barely looked at anyone else. Being in Lance’s company the last couple of days has been a refreshing change from suffocating under the constant attention I received from everyone else staying in the castle or nearby in the village.

He is curious about me. Not about Excalibur or my possible prophetic powers, but me. He'd ask me questions like everyone else. But I didn't feel like I was being interrogated like with the others. I feel comfortable with him. I want him to know everything about me, yet I am afraid to tell him the whole truth. I'm still not sure if he'd believe me, think I am nuts, a witch, or worse.

And then my mind keeps reminding me that Lancelot is the one man I should stay away from. I just can't. He is magnetic. My heart yearns to hold his. My soul aches to capture his. My body screams to be touched by him.

As I finish my set of songs, I am met with a riotous round of applause. Lancelot's shining smile and bright eyes remain fixed on mine. Breaking the link, I curtsy to the crowd in the great hall. When the cheering dies down, Arthur offers a toast to the White Enchantress, thanking God for the blessing that brought me to Camelot. I curtsy again as he beckons me to sit with him at the head table.

"That was the most joy I have had in years, my lady. You have my gratitude and I know the rest of the people here would say the same."

"It was my pleasure, my king." I become bashful at the compliment, my nerves taking over as they always do when I am near Arthur. Fucking King Arthur!

"Where did you learn the art of music?"

"Oh, just casually, really. My mom and I would sing together all the time. And my best friend taught me how to play the guitar, uh lute."

"They must have been quite talented."

"Yes," I agree, unable to say anything more for fear of falling into a fit of tears.

“That last song you sang about the lad that was born to be king. What is it called?”

““The Skye Boat Song,”” I said. “It’s about a young man who was believed to be the rightful king of Scotland. All his life he lived away from his kingdom until a rebellion large enough had formed. He sailed to his kingdom for the first time only to run back away after losing his war less than a year later.”

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“Where is this Scotland? Is it a real place?”

“Oh, no. I guess technically it doesn’t exist, yet.”

“Lancelot is right. You say the strangest things sometimes.”

I blush at this statement. It is difficult to be aware of where I am at all times, that I am in the past, speaking to people who I had believed were just legends. Sometimes my mouth starts talking before my brain thinks about what I am going to say.

“Have you and Sir Lancelot spoken?” Arthur says, making my blushing cheeks burn at the mention of Lance and me in the same sentence. But I’m not sure what he is asking me exactly. Arthur has seen us together on various occasions eating meals together and strolling through the courtyard and gardens.

“We talk often.” My face must have shown confusion at his question.

“Has he expressed his wish to court you?”

“Court me? What? No. We are friends.”

“Hmmm. Friends? I doubt that. As would most of the people in this room.”

“What do you mean? My king. I assure you we haven’t done anything—”

“No, no, you misunderstand me. You see, I spoke with Lancelot a few days back about his feelings for you. I was under the impression that he would become more

than a friend.”

“Is that an option for us? To be...something more?”

“I consider Lancelot to be a close friend. His happiness is mine. Though I have been told that my throne will remain secure if I were to take your hand in marriage, I cannot deny my friend a chance at love. And, if I am being honest, I had thought that you had similar feelings for Lancelot. Am I wrong?”

“No. There is definitely something there, alright. I wish there wasn’t. It would be so much easier if I didn’t have any feelings at all.”

“Then we would not be human.”

“Cheers to that.” I look over at Lancelot, who has been giving me sideways glances since I sat next to Arthur. “You would really be okay with it? If Lancelot and I chose to be together.”

“Yes, I would. My kingdom, my dream for unification will happen with or without you as my wife. I know it would make my life easier if I made you my queen, but what sort of life would that be for either of us?”

“You truly are a kind, selfless king.”

Arthur blushes at my compliment, hiding his rosy cheeks behind a beaker full of ale. “You should go to Lancelot. Tell him of your feelings. It is agonizing watching him watch you, knowing he will never get the courage to confess how he feels for you.”

I offer a smile, relieved that Arthur isn’t going to propose to me. When he called me over to him after my performance, that was the thought at the front of my mind. I had been waiting for him to ask me to be his wife and queen for weeks. Instead, he is

pushing me into the arms of Lancelot. It's the last thing I would have expected, but the very thing I've been wishing for.

"First, I need some fresh air. I'm still a bit heated from all the singing and strumming. And I need to think about everything you just said to me." I stand up, but before I walk away, I thank Arthur for showing me kindness. He kisses my hand, sending me off with my thoughts.

Walking into the brisk evening air, I fill my lungs, leaving the loud, drunken clatter behind me. I planned on going right up to my room for the rest of the night, but I find myself wandering into the castle's chapel. I am not religious, have never really believed in the whole Jesus thing. But something about these spaces makes me feel like I have stepped into a sacred place. The silence is natural and comforting yet otherworldly.

Silence is not what I receive as I take a seat on one of the benches toward the back of the chapel. "You sing beautifully, Lady Guinevere," a gravelly voice speaks behind me. Melwas must have followed me from the great hall.

"Thank you," I say without a smile, standing up to face him. The chapel no longer feels like the safe haven it is meant to be. The silence fills with voices even though there are only the two of us. "Melwas, if you wouldn't mind, I came here for some peace. After all the noise in the great hall, my head is spinning."

"I do apologize, my lady. I only wished to compliment you and ask your forgiveness for how I acted the other day. Your beauty is spellbinding. I felt drawn to you. I still feel that way. Would you consider giving me a chance? I could make you happy as my queen. We could conquer the world together."

"I don't want to conquer anything, Melwas. Please leave."

Instead of exiting the chapel, Melwas takes three steps toward me. “My lady, you do not understand what I am offering you. I–”

“Listen, Melwas, I don’t give two shits about what you are offering me. I choose my own path. I write my own story. And you are not in it.”

Closing the space between us, Melwas grabs my wrist. My anger rises quickly at his audacity but is mixed with fear. King Melwas is a large man with big, broad shoulders, a wide, solid chest and hands that could tear me in two. There is no way I would win if he chooses violence.

“Is that path Arthur? You would let that pansy of a man rule your body, your soul, your heart and all the kingdoms of–”

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“What right do you have over my person? You don’t know me. You don’t know my wants, my needs. Arthur might not either, but he has not forced himself on me, nor has he cornered me in a sacred place of worship. If you do not turn around and leave now, I will scream. Arthur’s guards would be here in a second.”

Melwas freezes as the blade of a knife slips against his throat. I look past him to find Lancelot’s face—fierce but calm. “Or perhaps you step away from the lady and head back to the great hall for some more ale while you still can.” Lancelot continues to hold his knife to Melwas’ throat, daring him to try something.

“Sir Lancelot. Always the white knight,” Melwas sneers.

“Let go of Lady Guinevere, or I will slit your throat.”

“And how would your beloved king feel about you murdering one of his guests?”

“I am confident I will be forgiven once he knows you had cornered his guest of honor in a chapel and sought to abuse her.”

Melwas lets go of my wrist. “I did not come here to do harm. I only wanted—”

“I know what you wanted,” Lancelot spews.

In a huff, Melwas retreats to the chapel’s back door. “This is not over.”

“For you, it is.” Lancelot waits until Melwas walks through the door before turning around to ask if I am unharmed.

“I’m okay, Lance. He just gave me a bit of a scare. But nothing happened.”

“I followed him as soon as I saw him leave after you. The hall was crowded with so many people. I could not get through them fast enough.”

“You are here now.” I grab Lancelot’s hand, placing mine firmly inside it. “Can you walk me back to the keep?”

“Of course, my lady.”

I sigh loudly, annoyed at his formality. “If you call me ‘my lady’ one more time, I’m going to punch you on the nose.”

“I would like to see you try...my lady.”

The smugness needs to be removed from his face. He still holds my right hand, so I swing with my left, connecting to his chin. It’s a harder hit than I intended since I used my weaker hand. Lancelot lets go of my hand, grabbing at his face, his eyes bulging out in shock.

“Oh my God. Lance, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hit you that hard or at all. I thought you would duck away.”

He is laughing. “I honestly did not think you would attempt a punch.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“No. Perhaps my chin is a little red. I do not think it will bruise though.”

“Let me see.” I push his hand away from his chin, lightly caressing the skin just below his plump lips. It is red but doesn’t look so bad. Though I finished my

examination within a couple of seconds, I find myself moving closer to Lancelot. I am pulled to him like a magnet. I can't stop myself.

Our lips touch, brushing against each other ever so lightly. I look up into a sea of green full of desire. He wants me. Badly. Instead of doing the responsible, smart, rational thing, I let my heart and body have their way.

Sensing my surrender, Lancelot wraps his arms around me, parting my lips with his. I feel his tongue escape the confines of his mouth, searching, seeking for mine, needing to possess me. My body melts into his, finally at home in this unfamiliar place. Positioning my hands on his chest, I separate our heads to ask Lancelot if he wants to come up to my bedroom.

“There is nothing more I want than to take you in my arms, carry you to bed and call you mine. I want to do this properly though.”

“You mean, court me?” I giggle. My breath is close enough to mingle with his as he lets out an ale-soaked sigh.

“I do not wish to disappoint Arthur. He was kind enough to step aside and give me a chance with you, knowing that I might...that I—”

“That you what?”

“Have feelings for you.”

“Was that so hard?”

“You have no idea.”

“I think I might have some idea.”

“I apologize for not speaking to you sooner. I was unsure where your heart lies. Now I know it is open. Will you let me try to fill it?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation.

Thoughts of Josh attempt to pry their way into my mind. I push them away, making room for Lance. He is the one who is here with me now. And though it isn't Josh's fault that I fell through time, I cannot wallow in 'what ifs.' I need to live the path set out for me here. And that path is Lancelot.

Chapter 21

Lancelot

Using all my willpower, I am able to stay strong and turn down Guinevere's offer to accompany her to bed. Though as I walk back to the great hall, my mind is still with her. I imagine what I would have been doing to her had I stayed. After drowning her in more ferocious kisses, I would take my time undressing her. Pulling the strings on her dress to loosen the fabric at her waist. With a finger on her shoulder, I would tug at her dress, revealing the soft pale skin underneath. My lips would follow my fingers down to her exposed breasts. With a flick of my tongue, she would moan in delight, looking down at me with those dark green eyes. Looking into Guinevere's eyes is like losing my way in a forest. I do not want to find my way out. I want to wander deeper

into the dark green trees.

Arthur gives me an all-knowing smile when I re-enter the great hall. I must look like the drunk-in-love fool I am. I have been so long without the warm touch of a woman. Guinevere's touch is fire. She nearly consumed me with it.

"Lancelot, my friend. Where is your drink?" Gawain asks, pulling me out of my trance.

"Most assumably, someone else has finished it for me." I left in a hurry when I noticed Melwas sneak out to follow Guinevere, leaving my drink and supper on the table where I had been sitting. At the thought of King Melwas, I look toward his brooding corner. He is not there, nor are his men.

"Where is Melwas? Did you see him return to the great hall before me?"

"I did notice his menacing figure storm into the hall. He approached his men, who seemed rather unhappy with his commands." Gawain's face became serious at hearing the panic in my voice.

"Where are they now?" I ask, trying with all my might not to yell.

"They left. Lancelot, what is it?"

"I must check on Lady Guinevere. I fear Melwas is up to no good."

"I am coming with you." Gawain takes one last swig of his ale, slamming the beaker on the rough wooden table before pushing himself up. "But you must tell me what occurred in the hour you have been gone." Turning to the men at the table, he shouts, "Bedivere, Gaheris, Perceval, with us."

As we run to the keep where I hope Guinevere is sleeping soundly, dreaming of me, I recount to Gawain what had happened in the chapel. How Melwas attempted to force himself on Guinevere again. The anger I felt radiating from his body as he stormed out of the chapel without his prize. I also explained to Gawain that I had escorted Guinevere back to her quarters, leaving out the details of our kiss and her invitation to join her in bed.

We sprint up the stairs, out of breath as we approach Guinevere's door. It is propped open. My chest pounds rapidly and not from the strenuous exercise my body endured from the long run here. I push the door open, whispering Guinevere's name, begging the gods for her to reply. But I know she is gone.

When I left her door earlier, I heard her bolt it behind me. Though the bolt is still intact, it is obvious that someone forced their way inside her bed chambers. She fought, throwing whatever she could find at Melwas to stop him.

Gawain instructs the men to find King Melwas, or any of the men from the Summer Region as I walk over to Guinevere's bed. The bag she carried with her from Avalon is open on the ground. Her belongings are scattered. I quickly put everything back in her pack, picking up strange objects unknown to me. Though I pretended not to notice, I had seen her use a shiny object that produces a strange, ethereal light. She said she was not a witch. I believed her, though only slightly.

"What is that?" Gawain points to the metal lining that closes up the bag.

"Guinevere called it a zipper." I quickly use the zipper to block Gawain's view of the mystical items inside.

"What will you do if we cannot find the lady within the castle?"

"I will go after Melwas. I will kill him."

“Arthur would not condemn such an act of violence. But if Melwas kidnapped the White Enchantress, the keeper of the sword Excalibur, he would understand. Let us not waste any time telling him what has happened. I will rally the men. We will follow you, Lancelot. But tell me honestly, do you love her.”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation. Neither of us are surprised by my confession.

“I will have our horses readied now and gather what men I can find still clearheaded enough to ride.”

“And I will go to the south gate, confirm with the guards that Melwas and his men have taken that route home. If you are not at the stables when I get there, I will not be able to wait for you.”

“Do not worry, brother, I will catch you up.”

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Gawain swiftly exits the room. I am confident he will rally some men without Arthur taking notice. My concern lies with Guinevere. I need to get to her quickly. If Melwas touches her in any way, I cannot let him live.

Scooping up Guinevere's bag, I sprint for the door, down the stairs and out into the cold night air, running as quickly as possible toward the south gate. When I arrive, I have no need to climb the tower to speak to the lookouts. Melwas and his men slaughtered everyone, leaving a bloody trail for me to follow.

Before turning toward the stables, I touch the leather straps of the bag I took from Guinevere's chambers. I speak to it as if speaking to Guinevere, promising to get to her before any harm should befall her. I will ride day and night if I have to. Anything to have her back in my arms again.

Bedivere is at the stables when I arrive, readying the horses with the stablemen. He announces that my horse is ready to set out and that Gawain had even sent Gaheris to the kitchens to pack me some food for the journey. "Kei will be joining us. The rest of the knights are too far gone in their drinks to even sit upon a horse for a minute."

I place my hand on Bedivere's shoulder, thanking him silently with a nod. Grabbing a horse blanket, I throw it around my back to help keep me warm as I ride into the night, then strap Guinevere's bag to the saddle before hopping on my horse.

As Gringolet and I ride out of the stable toward the south gate, I see Gawain and the men he gathered making haste in the opposite direction. They will be right behind me. Knowing I will have reinforcements to fight against Melwas and his men is a comfort, but I will not wait for them. If I catch up with Melwas before Gawain

catches up with me, I will fight on my own. I will win. And I will take Guinevere home.

Chapter 22

Guinevere

I wake up strapped to a horse, looking down at the ground. The sun is shining brightly to the east, telling me it is early in the morning but I'm unsure if it is the same morning I kissed Lancelot. My hands are tied together, the rope wrapped tightly around the belly of my horse. I can feel my feet are also tied up in the same manner, making it difficult for me to escape, but not impossible.

The last thing I remember is thinking of Lancelot. He had just walked me back to my room. A few moments later, I heard a knock on my door. My heart skipped a beat thinking that Lancelot had changed his mind. I jumped out of bed, sprinting to the door. I shouldn't have been as excited as I was for a nighttime visit with Lancelot. But I was done fighting my feelings for him.

The excitement I felt wasn't just at the idea of sleeping with Lancelot. It was at the thought of seeing him again. I'll admit, I wanted to tear all his clothes off and ride him until sunrise. But I would be just as happy to lay by his side, fully clothed, holding his hand to my heart.

But it was Melwas who knocked, not Lancelot. The bright smile on my face, replaced by a fear-ridden frown. Melwas pushed open the door, throwing me backward. I grabbed whatever I could, aiming the various items at his face, screaming loudly, hoping someone would hear my cries. Melwas laughed menacingly as two of his men grabbed my arms, pulling me up to face him.

"No one will save you this time, not even your precious Lancelot. I've made sure of

that this time.”

“What do you mean? What did you do to him? Fucking bastard!”

“Shut her up,” Melwas ordered to his men. Blackness consumed me as I lost consciousness, falling against one of the men.

Not wanting my kidnappers to know I am now awake, I close my eyes and attempt to loosen the cords around my hands. As I plan an escape in my head, trying to figure out which way Camelot is, I hear the men talking angrily amongst themselves, scared at what they had done for their king. One of the braver men canters ahead of the group, riding up to Melwas.

“Your grace, this is not wise. Lady Guinevere has publicly aligned herself with King Arthur. This act of betrayal will surely make us more than enemies of the king.”

“He is not the king, not even a king. What sort of king would let a woman who pledged herself to him be whored around by Sir Lancelot. The swine. The nerve of him dismissing me in front of her. He thinks he is better than me. A knight, and not even the most notable of the lot. Pretty faces, that is all they are. No true courage.”

“What will they say of us after they learn that we have taken Lady Guinevere by force?”

“We will say we did no such thing. That she came willingly.”

“Your grace, forgive me. We killed guards at Camelot. That will look suspicious.”

“Then we say the guards attacked us for escorting Lady Guinevere to her new home.”

“Sir Lancelot will know that to be a lie. So will the rest of Camelot. Lady Guinevere

wanted to stay. And we left without a word of farewell. After witnessing your...uh...disagreement with the lady, surely Sir Lancelot will know where to come looking for her.”

“He can try. I am the one with the fiercest of knights, not Arthur.”

“You honor me, your grace.”

“Hmm.”

“Still, I do wonder if you have made a wise decision in your anger. There are many other fair maidens in the kingdom of Logres, as well as your own.”

“If you are so against what I have done, why did you help the other men tie her down to a horse?”

Silence from the brave knight. He’s beginning to lose his gumption. I want to cheer him on and keep him going, but that would give me away. Not that I have made much progress at loosening the ropes. Still, I don’t want anyone to know I am listening.

“That is what I thought. We ride until nightfall and will make camp for a few hours.”

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“Your grace, we should keep moving or else be caught by King Arthur’s men.”

“That is quite enough talking. If you make one more word, I will slit your throat.”

After another hour of riding in silence, I’m still struggling to untie my hands so that I can at least lift myself up in a sitting position and ride away. But Melwas discovers my plot to escape.

“What is it you are trying to accomplish, my lady?” He says with a sneer.

“What does it look like, my lord?” I sneer back. My hands are nearly free. I am able to slide them out but before I can push up into a sitting position, one of his men has my horse by the reins.

“Untie the lady and bring her to me. She will ride mounted at my front. I do not want to lose sight of my future wife,” Melwas orders. And his men follow like the sheep they are.

For the rest of the day, I sit uncomfortably rigid, attempting to keep myself as far away from Melwas as possible. The feel of my hips against his thighs, my butt bouncing against his groin with each gallop is enough to make me sick. He often grunts, frustrated at the boners he keeps getting from our tandem ride.

My only hope is that Melwas is an honorable man regarding the sacrament of marriage. With all this sexual frustration he is experiencing, I’m afraid he will force himself on me again, and not just for a kiss.

But Lancelot is coming for me. I know he is. If that man is afraid of the possibility that Lance or any of the other Knights of the Round Table are coming after them, I know I will be rescued. Then I remember Melwas saying he had done something to Lance. “What did you do to Sir Lancelot?”

“What do you mean, my lady?” Melwas asks innocently.

“You said you had made sure he wouldn’t follow.”

“Oh, yes. I had one of my men slip some poison in his ale. It might be enough to kill him.”

My body turns cold. This can’t be the truth. Lancelot is alive. But is he well enough to come after me if he’s been poisoned? Yes. He is. He has to be okay. And he is on his way at this very minute. I need to stay optimistic.

The question is, how soon will he catch up with us? If my kidnapping wasn’t discovered until the sun came up in the morning, Lancelot wouldn’t have had a chance of catching up with us. Somehow though, I know he is close by, and I will see him again soon.

I feel Excalibur burn a little brighter inside my skin. Now that she is part of me, I can hear her more often. She was my only friend at Camelot before Lance stopped avoiding me. And she encouraged me to make the first move, confident that Lance was only trying to be respectful. If Excalibur is team Lancelot, then my love for him can’t be a bad thing. Unless Excalibur is playing with me, making me fall into a trap. “Is that what you are doing?” I ask her in a whisper.

No, I feel the answer deep inside me. Then I ask if she can make herself appear so that I can rid myself of Melwas and return to Camelot. Not yet. It isn’t the right time.

We gallop fast, making our way to the Summer Region where Melwas is the ruler. I will likely fall off the horse and be trampled to death if I fight him now. But I know that isn't why Excalibur won't appear to aid me in my escape. She is waiting but also charging herself up. I can feel her power converging in the center of my being.

As night begins to fall, Melwas steers the men riding behind us into a nearby forest. "We will make camp here." He announces. I am hoisted off Melwas and his horse as he orders his men to tie me to a tree deeper in the woods, away from the main campsite. A feeling of dread flows through my insides. I call out with my mind, begging Lancelot to get to me quickly.

No one offers me anything to eat or drink. I am starving, tired and stiff from spending the day on horseback, leaving me with no energy to fight as one of Melwas' men ties me to a tree.

The man looks up at me as he begins to tie my ankles, a look of fright on his face. I recognize him as the man who stood up to Melwas earlier. Taking a chance, I whisper, "I will speak on your behalf, save you from execution or worse when King Arthur's men arrive."

His eyes fill with dread, but he takes my peace offering, dropping the ropes to the ground. My arms have already been tied together, firmly attached to a thick branch above my head.

Somehow, I get some rest while tied to this tree. The rope bound around my arms is long enough for me to sit on the ground, leaning back against the stump. I feel dazed as a hand touches my chin, waking me from my uncomfortable sleep.

"Are you hungry?" Melwas holds a plate full of food at my face. Feeling vulnerable on the ground, I stand up. This also allows me to reach out for some food, the rope looser in this position. But Melwas pulls the wooden plate away from me. "Open up."

“What?” I ask in disgust.

“I will feed you.”

“I’d rather starve.” The smell of meat cooking over a fire makes my stomach grumble loudly.

“Now then, I would prefer to have my bride arrive alive and in good health when I return to my kingdom.”

“Fuck off.”

“That is not how a queen should speak.”

“I’m sorry. Fuck off, you mother fucking piece of shit.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:42 am

His hand meets my cheek full force, causing me to fall to my knees. Melwas throws the plate of food on the ground. With his right hand, he grabs a fist full of my hair, pulling me back up and slamming me against the tree.

“I will have to teach you manners. First lesson is how to treat your husband and king with respect. If I offer you food, you take it with thanks. If I ask for a kiss, you give it with grace. And if I ask for your cunt—”

I spit in his face, not wanting to hear him talk anymore. I need to stall Melwas somehow. I am out of options though. Tied to a tree, face to face with his disgusting face. I could have pretended politeness, but I hate this man. I loathe him. What gives him the right to claim my body as his?

As he stands back to wipe my spit off his face, I attempt to kick him in his balls. He is fast. Grabbing my foot, he twists it behind me before I even know what has happened.

“Alfred was supposed to tie your legs to the tree. I will have to slit his throat after all.” He pushes up against me, pinning my entire body to the tree. Then he grabs the rope tied to my arms, slinging it over the tree branch and yanking it down so my arms shoot up.

Securing the rope tightly, he moves his hands down my arms, aggressively groping at my breasts, then reaches down to pull my dress up. My legs are still free. I thrash them around, attempting to stop Melwas from accomplishing his harassment of my body. My last line of defense is to close my legs tightly together, with all my strength, not to let him in.

Melwas' laugh is sinister. He knows he will have his way with me. I am helpless. No one is here to save me. But Lancelot is on his way. I know he is. Where are you?

Melwas takes a small knife from his belt. He grazes it against my thigh, teasing me with pain. Suddenly he cuts deeper. The pain is explosive, distracting me from my defensive position. I loosen my legs for a second, crying out in agony. That's all he needs to spread them apart and invade my body. My cries become erratic. I scream for Lancelot, for Arthur, for Excalibur, for my father, for Josh, for anyone who would listen.

The only response to my pleas is a searing heat spreading inside me. White light surrounds us. And then it is Melwas screaming in agony. I feel him leave my body as I'm consumed by the warmth of the light.

Chapter 23

Lancelot

Before the sun begins to set, I can make out a group on horseback less than ten miles away. I cannot tell if Guinevere is among them. I feel her though. The figures become clearer as I draw a little closer, staying along the tree line, hoping the growing darkness hides my pursuit. I count seven horses. One of them, absent a passenger. Another holds two figures. Guinevere must be one of those.

They slow their pace, making their way into the shallow forest. I match their pace, hoping they will not be able to spot me in the dim light of dusk. That is if they have not already noticed me.

When they slip further into the forest, I follow. The trees make it more difficult to keep an eye on the group but I am now close enough to hear the deep tones of masculine voices in the distance. Dismounting, I guide Gringolet through the trees,

securing his reins on a nearby branch to keep him out of sight.

My plan is to sneak up on Melwas' camp and kill as many of the men as I can without being noticed. I walk quickly but quietly toward the sound of their voices. As the smell of roasting meat begins to touch my nose I know I am close enough to be noticed if I am not careful. At the sight of fire, I think about the rushed plan I had concocted. I have taken on double the numbers that await me in these woods. Will I be so lucky this time? Guinevere is counting on me; I cannot fail her.

I quickly come up with a new plan. Scout the camp, then head back out to the open road for a sign of my fellow knights. This plan is quickly thrown to the ground when I hear a torturous scream. Guinevere.

I draw my sword, running full force toward the source of the scream when a bright white light stops me in my tracks. I fall to the ground, disoriented. Then I hear what sounds like a battle. Swords clashing, men yelling, men dying. How did Gawain arrive before me? I think to myself.

I run. Sword at the ready. Prepared for anything. Wishing with all my heart that my Guinevere is alive and unharmed.

As I approach the camp, the white light begins to dim and the air is suddenly silent. I see her, Guinevere. She is shrouded in light, a sword in her hand. Excalibur. I move toward her, looking for Melwas and his men, ready to fight them.

No one makes an attempt to attack as I get closer. The figures of men I see slumped on the ground are the bodies of the men they once were. I look up at Guinevere and call her name. When she turns around, her eyes are not hers. A look of pure hatred pierces my eyes. She sees me as an enemy, like the men lying in their own blood before me.

“Guinevere, it is I. Lancelot. Please, my love, see me.” I lay down my sword, which causes Guinevere to halt. She looks up at me, the hate gone from her eyes, replaced with tenderness. “Guinevere, are you still there? Please return to me.”

And there she appears, the bright blue eyes of the being inside her changing into the evergreens that are Guinevere’s. “Lance...”

I run to her as the sword disappears back into her body, the white light with it. She falls into my arms the moment I reach her. “Please tell me you are all right, Guinevere. Talk to me. Please. I am so sorry I left you that night. I wanted so badly to stay.”

“Shhhh. It’s not your fault.” She presses a finger against my lips to silence me, then falls against my chest, unconscious but still breathing. I hold her tightly in my arms, vowing to never let her go. At the sound of horse hooves approaching, I reach for my sword. Realizing I left it where I had been standing, I pick Guinevere up and walk over to retrieve it, readying myself for a fight. As the riders approach the light of the fire, I relax, relieved my fellow knights had followed behind with such speed.

“Sir Lancelot? What the bloody hell happened here?” Gawain jumps off his mount, marching toward where I sit with Guinevere in my arms. “Is she—”

“She is alive. I need to take her to Avalon though.”

“That is a very long way. King Arthur will not be happy.”

“Gawain, she did this. I did not fight one single soul here.”

Gawain gapes at me in disbelief. “What do you mean she did this?”

“Excalibur unleashed itself from Guinevere. The spirit within possessed her body. It

fought for Guinevere, saved her.”

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“Six men. She fought and killed six men? Including Melwas?”

“I have not had the time to investigate the scene. I only counted four bodies; there are two missing. When I got here, Guinevere was still possessed, surrounded by the same white light we had seen in the throne room when Excalibur first burrowed itself inside her.”

“We saw the white light from the road. Though we were making haste as it was, we sped up at the sight of the light. Riding our horses as fast as we could. Following the light like a beacon,” Bedivere reports, approaching me with caution as the rest of the men scout the area. “How is the lady? Did you speak with her?”

“Only for a moment. She is weak but breathing. I believe most of the blood is from the men she slaughtered.”

“Here, try to give her some ale. See if that revives her.” Bedivere hands me his skin, full of the light brown liquid. I hold it up to Guinevere’s mouth, delicately prying her lips apart. Her eyes flutter open as she takes a large gulp of the ale. Taking the skin in her hand, she drinks her fill. “Is that better, my lady?”

“Yes, much better. Thank you, Sir Bedivere. Do you happen to have anything to eat?”

“I will retrieve my pack of rations at once.”

“Sir Gawain, we found a live one!” Kei announces, pulling one of the bastards along through the trees. “He was hiding, fool. Should have run while you had the chance. What shall we do with him?”

“Leave him to me. I will slit his inners open for the crows to snack on.” My anger courses through my body, ready to kill.

“No,” Guinevere whispers, stopping me from pursuing my vengeance. “This man showed me some kindness earlier and was against King Melwas.”

“You think that matters? He still conspired to kidnap you.” I attempt to quiet my anger, not wanting Guinevere to feel any of the rage brewing inside me.

“Yes, he did. But I think King Arthur will want to hear from one of Melwas’ men about what happened tonight. If you kill him, there will be no evidence that Melwas took me by force.”

“The lady speaks wisely, Sir Lancelot,” Bedivere says as he approaches my lady, bearing a sack full of food.

I slump back down, allowing Guinevere to lay her head on my shoulder. Such an act of affection in front of my brothers-in-arms fills my heart to the brim. Still, I worry what they will think of our closeness. Rumors of a love affair between us are the last thing I want.

My thoughts turn back to Guinevere as she accepts a handful of food from Bedivere. Before she can enjoy the sustenance, Gaheris sprints back from the thicker part of the grove, followed by Gawain.

“We found Melwas. He is...dead,” Gaheris reports, out of breath.

Guinevere loses her balance as she stands up too quickly. I catch her and hold her close to my side. Looking up at me with a glimmer of tears in her green eyes, she explains that she needs to see him. “I don’t remember killing him, or any of these men for that matter. I need to know, to see with my own eyes that he is gone.”

I nod and begin to escort her toward where Gaheris appeared from. Gawain stops us with a hand on my shoulder, keeping us from continuing down the path. “It is not a sight easy to behold. Guinevere is already in a weak state. The body of...well...I am afraid she might not handle it well.”

“I will be just fine, Sir Gawain. Show me,” Guinevere says defiantly, pulling herself up to her full height. I nod to Gawain, who then steps aside to let us pass.

Guinevere and I walk close together, her hip against my thigh. I wrap an arm around her, hoping that it is a comfort to her. In response, she rests her head against my shoulder as we make our way through the trees. Gaheris walks ahead. Gawain is behind us. Kei and Bedivere stay by the fire, collecting the bodies and guarding the lone survivor.

Though it is dark, the canopy of the trees shielding the ground from the moonlight above, I can see where the body is sprawled and the tree where Guinevere had been tied to. The ropes, dangling from a branch, singed at the ends. The body, its head and arms, are scattered around the tree. I stop us from walking further and hold Guinevere tight. That is when I notice the large burn mark on his groin. Guinevere’s pale face becomes paler in the dim moonlight.

“He will never touch you again. No one will ever touch you again.”

Guinevere throws herself into my arms at my words, warm tears running down my neck. My heart is full of love for this woman. I only wish I had arrived sooner, killed Melwas before he...I cannot even let myself imagine what he had done to my love. At that moment, I wish for Melwas to return to life so I could kill him myself. My lust for vengeance rages.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” I suggest to Guinevere after she has a bite to eat by the fire. “I brought your pack with me. There is a clean gown inside.”

Offering her my hand, I pull her off the ground. With her hand tucked in mine, Guinevere follows me willingly. We walk to where I left Gringolet, offering some privacy. Not only privacy for Guinevere to change clothing but for us to speak uninterrupted.

As if she read my mind, Guinevere asks, “Won’t the men think it suspicious? You bringing me out into a quiet part of the woods...alone.” The shadow of a smile touches her lips. I cannot help myself but kiss those delicious lips. She pulls back suddenly, her skin growing cold. “Lance, I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I pulled myself away. You can kiss me.”

“What did Melwas...did he...I arrived too late.” My question turns into a statement, knowing the truth of what had happened without Guinevere having to say anything. “I do not deserve a kiss, anything from you for letting this—”

“No, Lance. You did not let this happen. Melwas was a greedy, selfish, power-hungry man. He thought I belonged to him just by willing it so. I am not going to let him ruin my life. He will be forgotten.” Guinevere touches her belly, stepping closer to me. “I don’t know if he...if he finished inside me. Lance, I need you to give me doubt.”

“What are you saying?” Gringolet neighs as if asking the very same question.

“The bruises Melwas gave me, I want you to make them bigger and deeper. I want them to become your bruises. If I end up pregnant, I want the child I bear to be yours. The memories I will have of tonight, I want them to be of you pushing me up against a tree and fucking me until the pain explodes in a euphoric burst of pleasure. Take me, Lance. I’m giving you all of me. If you will have me, with all my damaged parts.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:42 am

“Guinevere,” I whisper, my lip quivering with desire and fear. Though I make no move toward her, I am not hesitating. I need to be certain that what she is asking for is what she truly wants. “You have just been through a trauma. I do not wish to take advantage of you. Though I will not lie to you, I do want you, Guinevere. I want all of you. I will mend your damaged parts and make them mine. I only need your word that this is truly what you want as well.”

“You have my word. I give you my body. I give you my heart. I give you my soul. I give you everything that is me.”

At these words, I take Guinevere in my arms, smothering her with a thousand kisses. She tastes the same as when I first kissed her an eternity ago, though slightly charred. I do not mind. Kissing her, being so near to her is intoxicating. I only hope that Guinevere does not have a change of heart because I do not think I can stop myself at this point. She kisses me back with a passion I did not know a woman could have, sending waves of heat through my body.

I walk her backward, propping her up against a tree. Breathless, I ask her where the bruises are. She guides my hand to her cheek, shoulder, and the ribs underneath her breasts. In each spot, I press down hard with my hands and lips, erasing the bruises Melwas left on her delicate skin. Making the bruises mine as Guinevere had asked me to. Gathering up her gown, she places my hand on the inside of her thigh. I feel a clotted cut. Guinevere pushes my fingers harder against the wound, making the blood flow once more.

“Lance. Take me, take me now, please. Before I lose my courage.”

Without hesitating further, I untie my pants and slowly sink my entire length inside her. Giving her what she wants and taking what I need from her. Guinevere's eyes are open, bearing intomine. We soon are lost in each other's desire, seeking more of the affection we desperately crave.

I want to end our love-making my way though. Lifting Guinevere up, I gently lay her down on the ground, never once releasing myself from her depths. She offers no resistance, only a moan of delight as I continue plowing into her.

I touch each of her bruises one last time, kissing them gently. "Oh, Lance." At these words, I know the memory of Melwas is gone. For now.

Chapter 24

Lancelot

"What is the matter with you, Lancelot?" Gawain shouts in a whisper, pulling me aside as I walk back to camp, groggy from the few hours of sleep I have gotten in the past couple of days.

"What are you speaking of?" I ask, feeling guilty, for I know exactly what he is about to say.

"You and Guinevere have been gone for hours. I went to check on you and found the pair of you lying in a heap of blankets. Have you been taking to bed with her this whole time? I had thought it unrequited love."

"It was. Until two nights ago. Perhaps Melwas saw us kiss and that is why he took her. Out of jealousy. But kiss is all we had done."

"What were you doing alone for hours in the woods?"

“Sleeping, as you saw.”

“Lancelot, I know you love her, and perhaps King Arthur has allowed you to court her. Do you honestly think he will let you have her?”

“I know he would never take a woman who does not want him.”

“And you are certain that Guinevere does not want him? Does not want to be queen?”

“Yes. She has given herself to me. I will marry her, Gawain. I cannot live with anything less than that.”

“The lady has agreed to your proposal then,” Gawain says as a statement, concluding the interrogation.

“She will when I ask. She has been through too much. First, I want to take her to Avalon. I will ask her there.”

“That should give you more time to clear your mind and see reason. Gaheris and I will accompany you. We are close enough to the west shore and will likely be able to hire a boat to take us north. It will be much faster than going by horseback. And King Arthur will want to know what has happened here. I will leave word with Sir Bedivere. He and Sir Kei will stay behind to take care of the bodies here, then return to Camelot.”

“You do not have to come with us. Guinevere and I have taken the journey on our own before.”

Gawain ignores me, turning to prepare for the journey ahead. I need to gain control of the anger I feel seething under my skin. Gawain is like a brother to me. The closest friend I have. He knows how I feel for Guinevere and he knows that Arthur has given

his blessing for us to be together. Yes, that does not give me the right to take her body the way I did, though she had asked me to. I could not refuse her. I will never deny her anything.

By the time we arrive at Avalon, Guinevere is suffering from a severe fever. The cut on her thigh festered, becoming an angry red. I am mad with worry thinking we would not make it to my mother in time. The fever has consumed her for two whole days now.

As I expected, Vivienne knew we were coming. Not because I wrote to her; there was no time for that. She always knows when I am on my way back home and always greets me on the shores of Avalon.

This time, she offers no words of welcome, only concern for Guinevere, escorting us quickly to the small building where my mother and the other priestesses practice their healing arts. My mother does not look worried though. This must mean she is confident that she can heal Guinevere.

Vivienne's skill as a healer is renowned throughout the entire realm. Even those afraid of her come to Avalon for her aid. I know Guinevere is in good hands. Still, I feel consumed with grief, afraid I might never know her touch again.

That night when she asked me to give her doubt, moving inside her body, soul, and mind, I knew then that she is meant for me, not for Arthur. The lust I feel toward her is powerful, but the love I hold in my heart for this woman will never be anything less than pure.

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Guinevere has transformed my lonely heart and sinful soul. With her, I am loved, I am light. I cannot go back to not loving her. My life would be meaningless without her in it.

We have not spoken much about our feelings, but we do not need to. I know she loves me as I do her. However, I am uncertain of what will happen next. She could still choose King Arthur if he offers his hand. Knowing that she is a powerful weapon, holding not only Excalibur inside her but the spirit of a warrior elf - for an elf is what she looked like in the bright white orb of light - Arthur might not care about my heart any longer.

Though Arthur is a kind man, he is a king. He loves his people more than anything. And power is what he needs to protect his people. He needs more than just his knights to stand beside him, to rally with him in battle against his enemies. Guinevere is that power. Melwas saw it too. Even Gawain knows Guinevere's worth.

I walk back to the lake after seeing Guinevere safely in my mother's care, pulling the rope on the ferry to reach the other side. Gawain and Gaheris have already set up a little camp on the opposite shore. Strangers are seldom welcome at Avalon, especially men. For most of the younger priestesses on the island, I am the only man they have seen since childhood.

Gawain and I have barely spoken to each other since our conversation regarding my affection for Guinevere. It had been a tiresome three-day journey to Avalon. Any longer, and I would have killed Gawain for the looks of disgust he has been giving me every hour of the day and night.

If it were not for Guinevere growing ill, he might have done more than glare. Gawain is a pious man like Arthur. As a young knight of fifteen, it was easy to let lust win over my heart. Gawain took me under his wing. He showed me what it meant to be a knight of Arthur's kingdom. Men like us are held to higher standards, looked upon as moral icons. If I wanted to be a true knight, I needed to show restraint. I did not take him seriously at first. I was young, naive, and weak. Knowing I had disappointed him again should make me feel miserable inside. But I only feel anger toward him.

I do not understand how he cannot see why my actions were honorable. Perhaps he would not have done as I did in the same situation. He has never known love like this, at least not to my knowledge. How can one deny their own heart love? I will make him proud of me again and clear up this vexation between us, but not at the cost of Guinevere's love. Her love is made for me and no one else. If anyone tries to take it, I will cut them down. Arthur included.

As I approach Gawain, sitting with his back to the lake, I clear my throat to announce my presence. "I know you are there, Lancelot."

"Vivienne has taken Guinevere in. The wound poisoned her blood. This is something that my mother can heal though. We were lucky to get here as quickly as we did. The gods were on our side."

"It was God who helped us in our journey," Gawain retorts, keeping his face to the fire.

"Hmm, are they not the same?"

"Lancelot, I know we are of different minds. That being said, we have always gotten along quite well though. My heart is having a difficult time forgiving you for what you have done to Guinevere. I know you love her and I can only assume she feels the same for you. But there is more at stake here than love, Lancelot. I wish you would

see that.”

“Why can it not be as simple as love?”

Gawain’s face softens. But his eyes remain stern, focused on the mission ahead. “Gaheris and I will remain here until the lady has recovered. Then we will escort her back to Camelot,” Gawain states, ignoring my question.

“And if she does not wish to go?” I counter.

“You mean if she accepts your proposal?”

“Even if she does not and wishes to remain in Avalon, what will you do?”

“Why would she want to remain here when she has pledged herself to Arthur?” Gawain might know Guinevere’s story, but he does not understand her as I do.

“She never wanted to leave Avalon in the first place. My mother convinced her to go. If she had stayed, none of this would have happened to her. I know she will be a loyal ally to Arthur, no matter where she is or who she marries. Arthur knows that as well.”

“But does the kingdom know this?”

“They will if they only give her a chance.”

“We will await her answer then.”

I storm off, my anger at Gawain only boiling hotter. He acts this way because he believes I have taken away her virtue. A week ago, he did not have any issues with my feelings for Guinevere. They were only feelings at the time, yes. But now that I have acted on those feelings, Gawain has turned on me. I thought I could rely on my

friend, even knowing how meaningful virtues are to him.

For the past few years, I have proven to Gawain that I am no longer the carefree, lustful youth I had been when I first arrived at Camelot. With Gawain's guidance, I have become one of Arthur's most trusted knights. I feel confident I will still be after Gawain returns to tell Arthur about Guinevere and me. I know Arthur will bless our marriage.

As I make my way through the main compound, Morgana calls me over to her in the garden to inform me that Guinevere's fever has broken. I feel a wave of relief and nearly fall to the ground as my muscles relax.

"Are you feeling well?" Morgana asks, seeing my knees weaken.

"Yes. I am in perfect health. I had been worrying about Guinevere, that is all. Can I see her?"

"She is bathing to keep the fever down. I will fetch you when she is ready to receive visitors."

"I need to see her."

"I promise to find you as soon—"

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“Morgana, please. I am not a visitor. Not to you, to Avalon, nor to Guinevere, as you very well know.”

“I do not think it a good idea. Lancelot, she has been through so much since leaving Avalon, since before arriving here. There are things you do not know about her. She needs time to heal and to contemplate.”

“I know about her past. What is it that she needs to contemplate? Has she spoken to you about me?”

“What happened between the two of you? The last I saw of Guinevere, she was determined not to let herself get close to you. But now, it is as if you both cannot bear to be parted from each other.”

I remain silent, uncertain of what Morgana knows about us, hoping she will bring me to Guinevere. Morgana resumes gathering herbs from the garden, attempting to ignore my presence. This was a game I always won when we were children. I continue standing, casting a shadow over her, blocking the late afternoon sun. But she remains unbothered. “I know where her room is. I could walk myself there. Though I would rather not barge in.”

“Why do you need to see her?”

“I need to ensure she is healthy, that her wounds are healing.”

“Some wounds never heal, Lancelot. Though I believe all of hers are healing exceptionally fast. I know what Melwas did to her and what you two did afterward.

That was careless. What if one of the men you were with walked in on you? King Arthur will not take her after being raped and plowed by two other men, one of them his own knight.”

“You as well? Why does everyone believe that Arthur wants Guinevere? Do you also know that he has given me his blessing to court Guinevere?”

“He did?” Morgana contemplates. “Even if she is not able to give him Excalibur?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you did more than court her. Your mother is not happy with you about it.”

“Hmpf. I only care about Guinevere’s happiness at the moment.”

“That is what I was afraid of. She came to us for a reason, Lancelot. She was chosen by Excalibur for a reason. What gives you the right to take her from that purpose?”

“How do you know what that purpose is? Excalibur burst out of Guinevere, ripping Melwas and his men to shreds for attempting to take her unwillingly. Melwas’ prick was burnt to a crisp. Mine is doing just fine. I did not do anything Guinevere did not ask for. I would appreciate it if everyone would cease accusing me of taking advantage of the woman I love. Whom I would never harm.”

Morgana’s hands freeze in place as she reaches for a bunch of herbs. “You are right, Lancelot. My mind has been clouded with worry for Guinevere. There are still things you do not know about her. Things we cannot begin to comprehend. She will likely confide in you as I know she loves you too. Keep an open mind. Everything is possible. Even changing the future.”

I have no idea what Morgana means by that last statement. But I am glad to have my

friend back. Morgana drops the herbs she has been gathering into a basket. Standing up, she motions for me to follow her. I fall in step with her, feeling a jolt of excitement in the pit of my stomach.

Marriage is something I never thought of. But with Guinevere in my life, it only makes sense. Arthur would understand my haste in marrying her. Knowing what we are to each other.

As we walk up the stairs to the sleeping chambers, the thought crosses my mind that perhaps Guinevere does not want to marry me. I have no doubt in my mind that she loves me. Is love enough for her as it is for me? I will accept whichever answer she gives me. Still, I beg the gods, God, Jesus, whomever is listening for a “yes.”

Morgana stops at Guinevere’s door, turning around to face me. “Let me go in first. Ask if she wants to receive you.”

I nod impatiently, then collapse against the wall. Never in my life have I been such a wreck of a man. Guinevere has turned my insides out, consumed my mind, my thoughts, my dreams. If she says “no,” who would I be? For I know I will never be the same man I was, with or without her as my wife. I can hear her voice through the walls, though I cannot understand what she is saying. She sounds healthy, much stronger than she was only this morning.

Morgana appears at the door. “You can go in.”

As she steps aside, I walk into the room. My eyes immediately land on Guinevere’s green gaze. She is sitting up in bed, the covers over her waist. Her hair falls dark and wet against her shoulders. The skin on her face is still ghostly pale, though more color has seeped its way through since this morning.

Morgana is still standing at the door. I give her a nod, letting her know I want to be

alone with Guinevere. Instead of leaving, she looks to Guinevere, who nods her consent, sending Morgana on her way.

Before the door firmly closes, I run to her bed, sitting myself down on the edge and scoop her hands in mine. "How do you feel?"

"So much better. Still a little woozy. But the fever is gone. I can see straight, so that's an improvement." Guinevere offers me a smile. "Morgana said you were desperate to see me. I'm sorry if I frightened you. I must have looked like death."

"You cannot fathom how happy I am to see you doing well. You had given me a fright, all of us. The thought of losing you...let us not even think on it."

I reach out my hand, caressing her cheek lightly. She falls into my embrace, closing her eyes. "Guinevere, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife? I know we have not properly courted, and I am not asking you out of pity or to protect your virtue. Though I have not told you this yet, I believe you already know. I love you, Guinevere. With every breath I take, you are what gives me life. Please tell me you feel the same. If you do not, I will walk away and never bother you again."

"Lance," she sighs, taking my hands in hers. "I need to tell you something. Before I do...I love you. I love you with the same passion and need that you love me. I felt every bit of your love that night. And I gave you my heart and soul. But before I give you my hand in marriage, I must tell you the truth about myself."

My heart is in knots. Guinevere loves me. Though I am uncertain if she will agree to be my wife, I hold onto her hands tightly, encouraging her to go on. She speaks of Josh. How she lost him. How she had been lost to him, falling through...time. Though I remain silent, listening to every word, I cannot comprehend everything she says. Whispers brought her to the location of Excalibur. She had been 1500 years in the future. And she did not fall into the lake. It appeared all around her in the blink of

an eye.

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And her parents were not Roman and Pict. Her father was, will be, the 19th Earl of Lancaster, a rank of nobility in what she calls the United Kingdom. My heart stops beating at the mention of a united kingdom, believing that King Arthur's vision will come true one day. Even if it does not happen in my lifetime, I am glad to hear of it. Her knowledge of Arthur is vast yet vague. In her time, there are many variations of his story and my part within it.

All of the stories spoke of a love triangle. One that would make me an enemy of King Arthur and dismantle the peace we have fought so hard for. And she, Guinevere, would be the cause of it all. I cannot believe this story she is telling me. But at the same time, I know it to be true. Looking back on the day we met and how she reacted, I now understand what she felt.

"I fought so hard against my own self. I didn't want to fall for you, Lance. And I don't blame you. You did nothing. You are just, you. Brave, caring, kind, handsome. When you were near me, I shut you out. When you ignored me, I craved to be close to you. What I feel has nothing to do with fate, destiny, or simply knowing that I would eventually fall in love with you. But I do believe we belong together. Something brought me here to find Excalibur but it also brought me to you."

My chest is bursting with joy while my mind is trying to comprehend Guinevere's story. "Josh, your father, they are still alive?"

"It's difficult to understand. At this moment, this exact moment in time? No. They have never existed. But they exist in my life, in my memories. And it feels like they are dead. I'll never see them again."

“What if you had the chance to go back? Would you take it? I had thought you would not have room for me in your heart because of your love for Josh. I do not wish to keep you from him. I would do anything to bring you the happiness you seek,” I say with a heavy heart, internally punching myself for even suggesting such a thing.

“I don’t know. I do love Josh. Maybe he would have been a great love of my life. He will always have a place in my heart. But, Lance, my soul is yours. As much as I want to go home and see all my loved ones, eat pizza, chocolate, pad Thai and pork roll, I don’t think I could leave you. The only thing that frightens me is the legend of what happened here in King Arthur’s England. What will happen. If Arthur gave you his blessing to be with me, then how can all the versions of his story say I was his queen? Maybe I have already done something differently. Or maybe all the legends are just that. Legends, stories. Or maybe I am not the Guinevere. Like how there are one too many Marys in the bible. And none of the stories said anything about how Guinevere became Excalibur. That was unexpected.”

“And terrifying. Guinevere, you have caused my chest to convulse too many times since meeting you.” She laughs at me, then pulls me to her, offering me her warm, soft lips.

“If we marry, what happens next?” Guinevere breathes against my mouth.

“I will write to Arthur, tell him of our betrothal, and take you to my castle. If you wish to return to Camelot, we will go there together. But I would desire to show you my home, our home, before we return.”

“If we marry, then I will never be King Arthur’s wife. Our love will not be doomed. I will never commit adultery. Arthur will not lose his kingdom or his life.”

“If we marry, yes. How could all that occur if you are my wife, not Arthur’s?” I smile against her cheek, causing Guinevere’s skin to pucker at my touch.

“I must admit, you are taking this all rather well.”

“I have seen many strange things during my twenty-two years of life. You, my love, are the strangest of them all.”

“When I am healthy enough, take me home. And Lance, can you call me Guin? All my friends and family where I am from called me that. It would make me feel more at home hearing that name again, especially from your lips.”

“Guin. Still beautiful.” I place a kiss on her forehead. Her skin feels warm but not feverish and is slightly more pink than pale. “Let me take my leave of you. I need to tell Gawain your decision. He will not be happy.”

“Can it wait until tomorrow? I do not want to be alone. Will you stay with me?”

“That would not be appropriate—”

“Oh, please. We’ve already had sex, Lance. And we are in Avalon, not Camelot. No one will judge us here.”

“No, they will not. Let me fetch a cot. I will sleep beside your bed. We could not very well fit in this bed together. One of us would end up on the floor.”

“As long as you are near me. I feel safer when I know you are near.”

Gathering her hands in mine, I kiss her knuckles, smiling against them as I say, “You have made me the happiest man in the realm. In all of time.”

Chapter 25

Guinevere

Lancelot and I have been in Avalon for three days. I am feeling much better than when I arrived. In my feverous haze, I wasn't sure I'd be alive much longer. But Vivienne was able to stop the infection and heal my wound. It's difficult not to remember who it was that wounded me and why. I try not to let it seep in.

It helps to have such a loving support system around me. I'm not sure when it happened, but I have a family here, 1500 years away from the life I once lived. Vivienne was not happy about Lance and me at first. But she can see now that we are meant for each other. She said something about our auras balancing each other out and that I shine brighter when I'm near Lancelot.

Every evening, Lancelot comes to my room to stay with me for the night. I don't know how much alone time we will get once we leave for Joyous Gard tomorrow, Lance's castle. We will be away from the safety of Avalon and cast out into the spotlight of a world that judges everyone and everything. I'm terrified of what Arthur might think of me running away to Lancelot's castle, betrothed and possibly with child. Arthur seemed sincere when he basically gave me permission to be with Lancelot. But did he truly believe it would happen? And so soon?

"What is that shiny object you attempt to hide? The one you keep in your pocket or sometimes your bag," Lance asks from his makeshift bed on the floor.

"My phone?" I ask. Then realizing he wouldn't know what I am talking about, I pull it out of the pocket I keep it in. "How did you even see this? I keep it hidden all the time."

"You are not as sly as you think, Guin." He looks up at me from the lumpy mattress on the floor, a smile making his eyes shine in the dim light of the room. "What is a phone?"

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“Well, this is a cellphone or mobile phone. It’s used to communicate with others. But I can’t use it here for that. It needs to connect to satellites in the sky and cell towers on the ground. Those don’t exist yet, so the service really sucks here.” I laugh to myself. “What I am able to use it for is music. I have hundreds of songs downloaded so I don’t need data or WiFi. That all probably sounds like gibberish to you. I don’t even know if I can translate these words. But let me show you.”

I turn my phone on, the digital light shining on my face. As soon as my home screen loads, I open the Spotify app and play the last song I had listened to, “Fly Me to the Moon.” Making sure the volume is turned down, I place my phone next to Lance’s ears. He lays still as a sloth, afraid to move a muscle as what could only be mystical music playing from a magical device of unknown origin. After the song finishes, I press pause and turn my phone back off. Even though the portable solar charger works like a charm, I don’t like to waste the battery.

Lancelot still hasn’t moved, but I see his eyes glistening in the firelight. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I am fine. Only, I do not understand what you did to me.”

“I didn’t do anything to you,” I giggle.

“That music, is there a little man in there who sings to you?”

I laugh loudly at that but become serious quickly when I see Lance’s look of fright. “No, no, no. Um, Jesus, how do I explain this? I don’t really know how it works. I just know how to use it. It’s a digital recording of someone singing. In my time, you

can record or copy a person's voice. Once you have that copy, you can play it over and over. So the songs in my phone, they are all digital copies of people singing and playing instruments. Does that make sense?"

"No. It sounds terrifying though."

"I'm sure it does," I sigh. "When I really think about it, the twenty-first century was a terrifying place to live in. My phone, when connected, listened to everything I said. Nothing I said or typed into it was private. Unless you were a hermit deep in the woods, a hundred miles away from civilization, with no form of modern technology, there was no privacy. Someone or something was always listening. That was such a normal way of life. I didn't think twice about it. But now, it kind of gives me the creeps."

"What was the song about? The one you played for me on your...phone." Lancelot's eyes are still looking up to the ceiling as if he is afraid to turn his head toward me.

"It's about someone so in love they feel like they could fly to the moon and stars."

Lancelot turns to me then. "I can understand that feeling. Of loving someone with so much passion. Sometimes I feel like my heart will burst from my chest. There is not enough room inside for how much I love you, Guin."

Tears pour from my eyes silently. I hold my hand out and he grabs it without hesitating. "I love you, Lance." Sliding down from my small bed, I land gently beside him, snuggling against his body.

Lancelot holds me close to him, kissing my head before asking, "Is it possible to fly to the moon and stars?"

"Stars? I don't know. But men have...will land on the moon, stick flags on its

surface. There will even be space stations with people living in them, orbiting the planet.”

“The impossible is possible,” Lance whispers in my ear.

Lancelot’s castle, Joyous Gard, is a short two-day horse ride from Avalon on the east coast of England. It sits on top of a hill overlooking the North Sea. My eyes remain wide open as we approach the gate. I don’t know what I was expecting. Not this. A castle by the seaside.

It is nowhere near the size of Camelot. But it is fucking beautiful. In the middle of the fortress stands a modest keep. There isn’t much else besides a worn-down stable, a tiny chapel, and a few shacks. One looks like it holds the armory. Still, it is a freaking castle with a gorgeous view of the sea and its own private beach. The air shines differently, reflecting the sun off the waves of the water down below. I definitely chose the right man, I joke to myself.

Gawain doesn’t seem to think so, however. He was enraged with Lancelot after discovering what he had done to me. What we had done. As if Lancelot would ever take me by force. I hope Gawain understands that I am not forsaking Arthur as my king in choosing Lancelot as my husband.

When Lancelot went out to meet with Gawain and Gaheris after that first night back in Avalon, I accompanied him, hoping my weak demeanor would soften Gawain’s heart. I think it worked. He didn’t seem so angry after I explained how I had fallen in love with Lancelot and would never be happy with another man as my husband.

I also told him how I understood that my loyalty to Arthur was essential to Arthur’s kingdom and the entire realm. Arthur will always have my loyalty even though I will not be returning to Camelot as a permanent resident.

Though I was convincing and could feel the tension between Lance and Gawain slowly diminish, Gawain still could not allow us to travel unchaperoned. Gaheris and Mairienn accompanied us to Joyous Gard while Gawain made his way back to Camelot to break the news to Arthur.

If he takes the news well, Lancelot expects Arthur to arrive at his seaside castle twelve days after us. When I ask what he thinks will happen if Arthur doesn't take our marriage announcement well, Lance smirks, saying he'd still come, only he would bring an army.

I shiver at the thought of Lancelot fighting a battle against King Arthur over me and hope with all my heart it will not come to that. Maybe my life here would have been much easier if I had just fallen in love with Arthur instead. But my heart has chosen Lancelot. I can't change that. I don't want to change how I feel either.

For twelve days and nights, Lancelot and I play by the rules, acting as a properly betrothed couple of the sixth century. We are never alone together.

Mairienn is my constant shadow, even sharing my bed at night. I do see Lance every day as we await King Arthur's arrival. We share our meals together and walk along the beach. But I miss the intimate evenings we shared at Avalon. Talking to him for hours about my past in the future, what life was like for me there. He was enthralled, hanging on my every word as he lay in the makeshift bed on the floor. We didn't kiss, we didn't fuck, we didn't even touch, just talked.

It felt amazing to tell Lance the truth about where I was from. I had done well lying to him and keeping to my lie. But I was finally free to speak to him about everything and anything. I didn't hold back either. And even though we've had to hold back on our intimacy, I give Lance everything else of me. I am ready to become his wife. And I am so ready for him to take me to bed.

Spending nearly two weeks with Lance at his castle, walking along the beach together every day with our chaperones following closely behind, I am beginning to feel some major sexual frustration. At first, I was glad for the excuse not to touch.

Though I feel emotionally stable after what happened with Melwas, there are small moments when I feel vulnerable. Sometimes I feel a phantom hand grab my arm when no one is nearby. Asking Lancelot to fuck me after being raped was probably not the right move. But I do feel like he erased some of the trauma.

I am safe with Lance. In his arms, I can conquer anything. But I also know he won't be like one of those crazy medieval men who think marrying a woman means he owns her, body and soul. I have already given Lancelot both willingly, plus my heart. But they were mine to give, not for him to take.

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We love each other. Our love is so powerful it reached through time to bring us together. I can feel it in my bones, in my chest, and in my groin. I long for his touch. I long to feel him inside me again but I also long for his companionship. Knowing I will spend the rest of my life as his wife fills me to the brim with happiness.

And marrying Lancelot means saving Camelot. I will never become King Arthur's wife, destined to betray my vows by sleeping with another man. And not just any man, a knight of his innercircle, a most trusted friend. Lancelot and I are meant to be together. That much is obvious to me now.

On the thirteenth day of waiting, Arthur and a small band of riders are seen from the watchtower. I am glad of his arrival, though I do not yet know what sort of mood he is in. But his presence means that Lancelot and I can get married. I convinced myself that if Arthur allowed Lancelot to court me, he would surely let us marry. Knowing that he hasn't brought an army to fight Lancelot and take me back to Camelot solidifies my theory.

Lancelot and I stand next to one another outside the gate of Joyous Gard as Arthur and his men approach the castle. Lancelot brushes my hand discreetly, making sure Gaheris doesn't see. I look up at his encouraging smile and my heart expands inside my chest. Both of us are unafraid. We know our love will be enough for Arthur. Everything will work out the way we planned. We'll be married by sunset.

Lancelot bows graciously to Arthur as he dismounts his horse. I follow suit, looking down at the floor. "Welcome to Joyous Gard, your grace. We are honored to receive you." Lancelot says with his usual confidence.

“Have you two been wed yet?” Arthur speaks quietly, in a deadpan tone.

“No, your grace. We intended to wait until your arrival to bless our union if you would be so kind.”

“Then let us not wait any longer.” Arthur pulls Lance into a brotherly hug, his expressionless face quickly turning into a brightly woven smile. To the rest of the crowd standing in silence all around us, Arthur shouts, “There will be a wedding tonight!”

The three of us are all smiles as cheers drown out the crashing of the waves. I couldn’t help but notice Gawain’s look of disapproval though. Lancelot grabs my hand, pulling my attention away from Gawain as Arthur steers us inside the castle walls.

To my dismay, Elaine traveled with the small group of knights and noblemen of Arthur’s cavalcade. She falls in step with us, following us into the keep. “Lady Guinevere, I trust you remember Elaine. I thought she would be a good companion to help you prepare for your wedding day.” Arthur calls her over, instructing her to retrieve the trunk she’d packed for the trip. “I will take the groom and make arrangements for the evening festivities.”

I, in turn, call Mairenn over to join us. I am not about to lock myself in a room with Elaine all day.

As soon as we are in my chambers, Elaine asks me if I’m pregnant.

“What? No. Well, not that I’m aware of.”

“He must really want you then. Lancelot never did more than kiss me. He was desperate to be a pure white knight.”

“Oh?” I say, curious to know more about her relations with my husband-to-be. I keep my questions to myself though, not wanting to stir that pot. But I do want to boil up another. “And yes, he does want me.”

I expected a retort but only receive a bitchy eye roll. “King Arthur instructed me to go through your quarters at Camelot and pack up your clothing as you left in a hurry.”

“I didn’t leave in a hurry. I was kidnapped by Melwas.”

“And now you are just happening to be marrying Sir Lancelot?”

“It would have happened regardless of the kidnapping.” At least I had thought so. After our first kiss, how could we go back to polite friendship?

“What dress do you wish to wear for your wedding, my lady?”

I dug my own grave with Elaine. I know that. She was always kind to me though. Even now, she is doing amazingly well to keep her demeanor polite and calm though on the inside, I know she is screaming, just as I am. She is so obviously in love with Lancelot, and I am going to become his wife in a few hours.

Not wanting to create any more drama, I take a deep breath. “Thank you for bringing me my belongings. I’ve been borrowing clothing for the past two weeks while Mairenn helped me put together a modest wardrobe.”

Elaine mumbles back, “You are welcome, my lady.”

I turn from her to look at the dresses she brought along. I don’t have a large wardrobe so she was able to bring all of my dresses, including my original wedding gown. The one I wore the day I traveled through time and when I attempted to hand over

Excalibur to King Arthur. She begins to hum inside me, clearly biased as to which dress I should put on.

That dress has already been through so much though. So I picked out a pale blue dress that I had only worn once. Nothing exceptional happened that day and it is a beautiful dress, embroidered by Lynette, one of the many ladies at Camelot. It would make a fine but modest wedding gown.

Lance and I have a church wedding, as that is the only acceptable marriage ceremony in Arthur's eyes. Though Lancelot and I aren't believers of the Christian faith, we still don't mind. And we would rather not pick a fight with Arthur after everything that had happened in the last few weeks. I am glad to see everyone getting along. Even Gawain loosened up during the feast. But we don't stay long at the wedding reception.

Lance and I sneak off a couple of hours after the party starts. Most of the guests are too deep in their drinks to care, unaware that we were there anyway. It has been over three weeks since Lancelot and I first slept together. We have barely touched since. And the circumstances around our first time were strange and highly emotional. I had been so out of it that the memory was more like a dream. So tonight feels like the first time, and I am jittery as fuck.

As Lance carries me up to his chambers, I can't help but giggle. It's like I'm in a fairytale. The G-rated happy ending has finished playing and now I will get to see what happens after the credits. I am married to Sir Lancelot, the White Knight of Camelot. Holy fucking shit! And this is my reality.

I am not stuck in a fantasy or an erotic dream. The real Sir Lancelot, a man I have fallen so completely in love with, is kissing my neck. He holds me against the door of his bedroom. His lips are soft and wet, tasting, savoring me.

“Are we going to do this out in the hallway?” I joke, my breath tickling this chin.

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“Hmm, we can do whatever we want, wherever we want. You are my wife now and this is our home.”

I pull Lance closer to me – if that’s even possible – and smother him with kisses. “Take me to your bed, please, husband.”

Without hesitating, Lance opens the door I’m leaning against and sweeps me into his arms. An instant later, the door is closed behind us. As Lance carries me toward the bed, I glance at our surroundings, taking it all in. This is my home and this is my man.

There is a fireplace bursting with warmth in the sitting room of our chambers. As Lance carries me through to the next room, hidden behind a decorative stone wall, I can still feel the heat from the fire. Or perhaps that is my heat within.

With the bed in sight, Lance places me down beside him. A hand reaches behind me to loosen the cords holding me into my dress. Not wanting to be naked on my own, I begin searching for ways to remove Lance’s clothing. I pull his tunic over his head, sliding a finger down his collarbone, tracing a zigzag pattern down his chest and stomach until I land on his pants.

All the while, Lance keeps his eyes locked on mine, breathing shallow breaths as he waits for me to undress him completely. I gently tug at the strings which come undone immediately, his pants falling silently to the ground. Before I can make my next move, Lance moves with precision, pulling my gown down effortlessly and hoisting me up onto the bed. He spreads my legs wide, opening me up to him, hiding no parts of my body from his gaze.

His mouth quickly lands on its target between my legs. I gasp loudly at the intrusion. “Lance, what are you doing?” I moan, enjoying myself wildly but feeling timid at the same time.

“You are my wife now, Guin. I am doing as I please. At the moment, I want to taste every inch of your body, starting here.” He points with his tongue, flicking it up against the folds of skin before plunging it into me. His hands massage my thighs, soothing the tension within me. I am soon at his mercy, begging him to go on, to rub a finger on my clit, suck on my labia.

Lance’s breath tickles my electrified skin as he laughs into me. “What are you laughing about down there?”

“How you are anything but a proper lady with your moaning and whimpering and your naked thighs around my head. I love this Guin. I love that you are mine.”

He slides a finger inside me and at this point, I am so far gone after experiencing an orgasm or two I’m not sure if my body can stand another. But when Lancelot’s tongue and fingers leave my body, I open my mouth in protest only to let out a scream of passion as his cock enters me deeply. He lets out a moan at the joining of our bodies.

“Guin, I do not think I can be gentle.”

“Then don’t.”

With my consent, he rolls himself over onto his back, placing me on top and pulls me down to the root of him. I place my hands on his chest, bracing myself as he grabs my butt, bouncing me up and down while driving himself further into me. At some point, I take over, balancing myself on my feet. Lance props himself up, letting me take the lead. He gently flicks my nipples with his tongue as they bounce with my body, worshipping every curve of my tits.

His breathing becomes more erratic and the blood in my body pumps with adrenaline, close to climax. With his arms wrapped tightly around my waist, Lance thrusts deep inside me once more, releasing himself. In unison, we fall down to the bed, entwined in each other's limbs. I feel Lance's breath on my neck. It tickles, making me giggle. I smile at his response, a groan and a sigh.

"That was a sexy sound," I whisper against his cheek.

"Mmmhh? I have no idea what you are saying. Are you speaking a foreign language or am I too far gone to hear you?"

"Probably both."

Chapter 26

Lancelot

Guinevere takes her time getting dressed, teasing me with her naked body when she knows we are meant to dine with Arthur in a few minutes. The guests from Camelot are due to leave our castle the following morning. How I long to have my wife all to myself. We have been sneaking away at any given chance, hiding away in our apartments. A place I have spent many lonely nights in. Never again. I have a life companion now. A woman to call my own.

My wife, my love, my life. Ripped from her time to fall in my arms. I do not believe in God as the majority of the people in Britain do. Still, something powerful, beyond anyone's comprehension, brought Guinevere to me. If I believe in anything, it is that Guinevere is mine. She was made for me. Not Arthur, not for anyone else. Me. My only hope is that this being, this power, would allow me to keep her. For I do not want to let her go.

I glance up at Guin. As she tightens the strings on her dress, I reach out, stopping her hands. Arthur is not going anywhere just yet. He can wait five more minutes. That is all I need as I am already hard, pointing to the object of my desire. Sensing my need, Guinevere lets her dress fall to the floor, offering herself to me.

Five minutes later, we are both dressed and presentable, though Arthur seems to know what had been the cause of our delay. As Guinevere curtsies, Arthur takes her hand in his, giving it a gentle kiss. “You look radiant as the sun, my lady. I trust Sir Lancelot is to blame?”

A rosy color dyes her cheeks as she smiles and looks into my eyes. “Yes, he most certainly is.”

We dine in the private guest chambers in my keep. It is nothing as extravagant as Camelot’s. And unfortunately, there are no separate rooms for dining and sleeping in these apartments. I find myself looking over to the bed, thinking of all the things I had yet to do to Guinevere. Once Arthur and his traveling companions are gone, I would have all the time in the world with Guin.

My wife gently nudges my leg, bringing me back to the conversation. “Arthur was just saying he would like us to return to Camelot.”

“Tomorrow?” I ask in surprise. “I thought Guin and I would have some time at home to get to know each other better.”

“Of course, Lancelot. I only meant that I wish you to return to Camelot in a few months. The rest of the kingdom will want to celebrate your union. And having you both nearby will settle some of the minds of people who believe you have abandoned me.”

Arthur speaks plainly, but his tone is sincere. He holds no hatred in his heart for

either of us. Before I can respond, Guin attemptsto apologize, explaining that she had not meant for any of this to happen. “To be honest, I had fallen in love with Lancelot before I arrived at Camelot. The last thing I want is for the people to think my pledge to you was an empty one. If we must return to Camelot, we will do so.”

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“You honor me, my lady.” Arthur bows his head in thanks. “Lancelot, is this plan acceptable to you?”

“Whatever you need, my king. If you had need of me to ride with you tomorrow, I would go, though part of me would have wanted to stay at home a little bit longer. I thank you for allowing some time to ourselves.”

“I must say, I never thought this day would come. Sir Lancelot, a married man.”

“Why do you say that?” Guinevere asks, looking up from her half-eaten dinner plate. I freeze, afraid of what Arthur will say to her.

“When I was first introduced to Lancelot, a young man of fifteen, he was a bit untamed. You would think growing up surrounded by the beautiful women of Avalon would have made him immune to seduction. Yet temptation was his weakness.”

“I have not let temptation defeat me for quite some time, Arthur.” I call him informally by name as I do on occasions when we are alone and speaking as friends.

“Yes, for years. In summary, my lady, I was afraid that Lancelot would never settle down, jumping from one mistress to the next. And then he held no interest in women at all, until you came along.”

Guinevere’s smile is bright enough to light the darkening room as the sun begins to sink beyond the horizon. I am only glad she does not think ill of me after Arthur’s recounting of my youthful years at court.

“What about Elaine?” She asks with a sneer in her eye.

“Yes, what about Elaine, Lancelot?” Arthur repeats curiously.

“Hmm. She kissed me once. One time. I might have kissed her back. But that was all, I swear.”

“She has always been in love with you. I had thought to arrange your marriage, but in the end, you two did not seem like a good match.”

“I thank you for coming to such a conclusion.” Looking over at Guin, my heart is so full of love. If I had been tied down to another woman before meeting her, what would my life have been? Surely I would have yearned for Guin as I do now. I would have committed adultery, bringing shame to Arthur and Guinevere. Sensing my shifting emotions at the thought of these “what ifs,” Guinevere squeezes my hand, reminding me she is here now; she is mine.

“Your grace, I would like to thank you once again for making the journey up here. Your blessing of our marriage has meant the world to us.” Guin is the picture of a lady. It is still shocking to see her shift into this role. When it is just us, she speaks and holds herself differently. I know now it is because she is comfortable around me, unafraid to let down the mask she puts on for everyone else.

“My pleasure,” Arthur responds with a smile. A smile that quickly turns around. “Though I am deeply saddened by the circumstances that brought you to this moment so quickly. I feel responsible for your capture. Melwas was not to be trusted. I knew this. Yet, I let my guard down, thinking he would honor my hospitality as a guest in my castle. I truly am sorry for what he did to you. Please know this.”

Guinevere looks down at her hands, tears pooling in her eyes. It is my turn to offer her reassurance. But when I reach out to squeeze her hand, she flinches. In the two

months since her kidnapping, Guin has healed remarkably, both physically and emotionally. Still, there are little moments like this one when she maybe feels more vulnerable than usual. The moment passes quickly, and she slides her hand beneath mine.

“The fault is nobody’s but Melwas’ and his men,” she says, void of emotion. This is not a topic Guin wants to discuss, yet Arthur keeps pressing, asking her what had happened.

“Arthur, please, this is difficult for Guin–”

“It’s okay, Lance. I don’t really know what you want to hear, Arthur. Melwas took me from my room. Attempted to bring me to his castle and make me his bride and queen. When he...I was tied to a tree. Excalibur appeared, took over my body, fought for me. Next thing I remember, Lance was there.”

“How did Excalibur appear?”

“I don’t know. I can’t really remember anything until I saw Lance.” Guin looks up at me, her green eyes glistening with tears. “If you want to know if Excalibur still resides within me, yes. I can still feel her.”

“It is a miracle,” Arthur decides, ending the conversation.

Later that night, as we lie naked in each other’s arms, Guinevere asks me about the temptations I fell for in my youth. “I do not wish to discuss that with you,” I say curtly.

“Why not? I won’t get upset. I’ve had sex before, plenty of it. I’m not ashamed. You shouldn’t be either.”

“You were not a maiden then? Before Melwas—”

“No. I lost my virginity when I was seventeen. I had boyfriends, a fiancé, and then Josh. It is common in my time to have sex before marriage. Virginity isn’t sacred like it is now.”

“Hmm. How many...boy...friends?” I have no right to feel jealous when I have bedded many women, some of them maidens.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes,” I say after hesitating a moment.

“Two boyfriends in high school and three in college.”

“Did you love them?”

“No. They were just temporary.”

I feel strange. Hearing Guinevere speak casually about the relationships she had with other men, men she did not love nor did she have plans to wed them. “And your parents, they did not mind this behavior?”

“No. Well, my dad didn’t like me dating anyone for fear that they would use me for my position of power and wealth. My father named me his heir apparent. I would have become the first Lady of Lancaster. I think that would have been my title.”

“You were to be his successor?”

“Yes. Though I am not sure I wanted that. It was a life I wasn’t born into. My mom raised me in America, far from my father and his earldom.”

“America? Where is that?”

“Oh shit, I forgot who I was talking to for a second. America, uh, it’s currently an undiscovered land across the ocean to the west. It won’t be discovered until 1492, so don’t tell anyone about it. Thousands of people from Europe will flock there, searching for a new, better life, the American dream.”

“Why did you live there with your mother? So far from your father.”

“That’s a long story. I’ll tell you another time. Can we go back to my question? How

many women have you been with?”

“Guin, why do you wish to know this?”

“I’m just curious. Did you love any of them?”

“No. They were temporary,” I repeat Guin’s own words back at her.

“Did any of them suck your cock?”

Her question shocks me. The word she used was unfamiliar but I could understand what she said. Taking a moment to recover, I think of the few times I had received such pleasures. I do not want to tell Guinevere about these women though, or any of the other women I have bedded. She is the only one that matters. Still, her eyes drill into mine, seeking answers. Seeing that I will not divulge any to her, she gives up, removing her piercing green gaze.

Her hand then travels downward under the blankets. When she reaches her target, I let out a sigh which quickly becomes a moan of pleasure as she gently rubs my...cock to life. She slides her body down until her face is level with her hand. I stop her, saying, “Guin, no. That is something befitting a whore or a loose woman.”

“I’ve been called worse.” A devilish smile appears on her face before she takes me into her mouth. I want to hate everything she is doing to me as I feel it would be degrading for her. But Guin seems to be enjoying it as much as I am. I let the pleasure wash over my body, giving it to her, letting her have me in whatever way she wishes.

Guin brushes her tongue against the root of my hardened cock up to the tip before swallowing me whole, repeating this sweet torture until I release my seed into her mouth. My eyes are closed when she places her lips to mine. She kisses me softly, whispering, “Good night, husband,” before laying her head on my chest.

Chapter 27

Guinevere

With Arthur gone from our home, Lance and I settle into a domestic routine. Though he has errands to run throughout the day, Lance always arrives in the dining hall for mealtimes, taking his place next to me at the head table. It is strange how much I have accepted this new life. But I feel like I belong at Joyous Gard. This castle by the sea was meant to be my home. And knowing that it is Lance's home gives me a sense of being I hadn't felt since before my mother died.

Eden Manor was where I had lived for the past six years, but it never felt like home. My father, how I miss him, tried to make it a home for me while Cecily and Charlotte made it a hellish place to live. Even the staff there looked down on me as though I was discarded trash left to wander around their pristine estate. As I grew older, I began to notice these vile people and the looks they would give my mother and me. We didn't belong. We never would belong.

Besides my father, Uncle Al and Leo, Mrs. Bingham was my only other ally. She ran the show at Eden Manor, though Charlotte would have the entire United Kingdom believe otherwise. On days when my grief made it too hard to function, Mrs. Bingham would bring me tea and biscuits filled with chocolate. She would never look at me with sorrow and pity in her eyes. Only offer a smile and a little wit to get me through my day.

Here, at Joyous Gard, I have another Mrs. Bingham in my life. Faina. She is only twenty years older than me but is already a grandmother of three baby boys. A hearty woman with wiry, brown hair and a deep boisterous laugh. She runs the kitchens with an iron fist, ensuring that Lance and I are always served heaping amounts of food at every meal. There is just something about Faina that made me trust her immediately.

While Lance is off on one of his daily errands around the castle, I sneak down to the kitchens. I have been craving pizza for months and am hoping that Faina will be able to help me bake a bubbly, cheesy pie. She lets me rummage the pantry for ingredients. I have no idea how to make a pizza from scratch, but Faina can make bread blindfolded with her hands tied behind her back. All I need to worry about are the toppings.

The cheese we have in stock is soft and creamy, almost like ricotta. I grab a head of garlic, something that looks and smells like smoked bacon, mushrooms and squash. Before collecting these ingredients, I had described the consistency of pizza dough to Faina. She is already kneading the dough when I step back into the main kitchen area. I immediately get to work mincing, chopping and slicing, hoping to have some pies ready for dinner with Lance.

Faina mutters some nonsense about my strange request for a dish she has never heard of. Looking over at me with my random selection of toppings, she just shakes her head, pounding her fists into the soft dough.

Three hours later, we are pulling a pie out of the wood-burning brick oven. It smells incredible, and I am ravenous. “Let’s have a slice now before Lancelot returns.”

“Oh, I could not eat the food I prepared for his lordship. He has not even tasted it himself.”

Faina is mortified. But I assure her it would be all right. “If my husband gets angry for such a silly reason, I will gladly take the blame and tell him I forced the food down your throat.” Faina laughs heartily while cutting into the pizza, offering me the first bite. And I do not hesitate in taking a glorious bite.

“Oh, my lady, this is delicious!”

“Right!?” It has been months since I have consumed a pizza. Being a girl from New Jersey, that’s a millennium without pizza. I savor each bite. Perfectly baked at a high temperature, it is a beautifully bubbly, chewy dough with a crispy crust. Faina cooked the mushrooms with the bacon, creating an explosion of flavor while the creaminess of the cheese cools my mouth. And the garlic. It fills my soul with an earthy aromatic, making me crave more. The squash doesn’t add or take anything away from the other flavors. I just always like to have a healthy ingredient on my pizza to balance it out.

I look down at the bench where we had been cutting up slices of pizza. It’s gone! “Did we just eat an entire pie?”

“It appears we have, my lady. We can make more.” Faina has the look of a mischievous creature about to devour a poor innocent lamb. I can’t contain my laughter.

“So you like the pizza then?”

“Like it? I will only be eating this pizza for the rest of my life.”

“I was told my wife was in the kitchens.” Lancelot walks in, covered in what appears to be shit. It certainly smells like it too. “Now, what is that incredible smell?”

“It’s definitely not you, my love,” I say, pinching my nose in disgust.

Faina shoos him away, throwing blasphemies at his back for walking into her kitchen with such filth on his person. Turning to me, she says, “You best make sure that man of yours is cleaned up for dinner. I will take care of the rest of the pies.”

“Yes, sir!” Before walking out the door, I turn around. “Taking care of the pies means baking them, not eating them all, right?”

“Shoo, shoo!”

I scamper down the hall in search of Lance. Though it isn’t a difficult task with the stench on him. As I reach the bottom of the staircase leading up to the sleeping quarters, I see him making his way to our bedroom. “Where do you think you are going?”

“I am in need of a bath.”

“Yes, you are. But not up there! To the sea with you!”

He makes his way back down the stairs swiftly, approaching me cautiously. “Only if you will be joining me, my lovely, beautiful wife.” Bending to kiss me, I push him away, careful not to touch any poop. He grabs my arm, attempting to throw me against his shit-covered body but I slip from his grasp.

“Ew, Lance!” I feign disgust even though I don’t mind the smell that much, as long as it is Lance underneath the muck.

“I was hoping you would join me.”

“Let me grab you a change of clothes. Faina is preparing a surprise for dinner. I do not want us to be late. But I will watch you bathe, my love.” I say this with a mischievous grin and a wink. Before he can respond, I sprint up the stairs to our

bedroom.

Lance is already in the water when I arrive with a set of clean clothes for him. He scrubs his hair, water beading down his sculpted chest as the late afternoon sun shines against the droplets. He looks like a god being birthed by the sea. A gift sent to us lowly humans who walk among the mud.

And I can't believe this man is mine. Strong, sexy, considerate, kind. He is every woman's dream. I didn't stand a chance of not falling for him. Even if I fought harder against my heart, I know I would have ended up where I am now regardless if I had married Arthur. I can't resist his pull. The more I think about it, I am convinced this pull doesn't actually come from Lance. It comes from something else. Perhaps Excalibur is the one throwing me into the fire.

There must be a reason. A reason why I'm here in the first place. I've asked myself this question over and over again since arriving in Avalon months ago. It wasn't until Lancelot appeared at the lakeside, tearing my heart from my mind, that I began to believe I was the catalyst in the fall of Arthur. As Lancelot's wife, I have prevented the inevitable. But have I changed the future by doing so? I don't feel different.

Coming from the future, I thought I would have felt something. A shift in my memories or a change in the wind. I don't know. Maybe all I did was create an alternate universe. All I know for sure is that I found happiness, I am in love, and I literally have the most amazing man a woman could ask for in sixth-century England.

Thinking of my life now, as a wife and a young woman in love, I can't help but think about my mom. If this was how she felt for Ed, I don't know how she could have walked away from him. How she survived the heartbreak of life without him. How it didn't tear her to pieces.

Elvira Whitlock was one badass single mom. President of the PTA, softball coach,

girl scout troop leader. Whatever I was interested in, she made sure I had the best experience I could possibly have. She wanted the world for me and she fought tooth and nail for me to have it. If she had to, she would have built our painted lady from the foundation up all on her own.

Her independence and determination to fill our lives with meaning and purpose were awe-inspiring. But I see now that it might have been a way for her to occupy herself with something other than the broken heart she must have felt every day of her life. How different would life be if my mom stayed with Ed? Would they still have loved each other if Ed had given up his inheritance? Would I have grown up in England? Would I have met Josh? Would I still have ended up here, on this beach in the northeast of England, married to Sir Lancelot, determined to live a long, happy life 1500 years in the past?

“Guin? My love, is something bothering you?”

I shake my head, bringing myself back to the present, to a very naked and very wet Lancelot with a look of concern on his gorgeous face. A man this beautiful shouldn't have such worry lines. I jump up and run to him, throwing myself in his arms. “I love you, Lance.”

“And I, you, Guin.” His smile is radiant, bringing tears to my eyes at how brightly he shines. “What is this? Why are you crying? Please, tell me what is troubling you.”

“It's nothing. I was just thinking about my mom and how different life would be if she stayed with my father.”

“Oh?”

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“Everything happens for a reason, right? Anyway, I was also thinking about how my mom would take me to the beach every summer. She’d never take me to the popular beaches with boardwalks. Belmar. That’s where we’d go. It wasn’t a quiet, private stretch of beach like this but it was beautiful. I remember, as a little girl, looking out into the ocean, imagining what the other side looked like. If there even was another side. The ocean seemed endless. An infinite body of water. I wanted to go exploring, find a new land, one full of magic.” I laugh, pulling myself closer to Lancelot’s now damp body. “I guess that magical land found me.”

“Pizza?” Lance analyzes the pie with skepticism, then scans the dining hall from his seat at the head table, noticing everyone else eating the same meal.

“Yes, pizza. It’s one of my favorite things to eat. Just try it.”

“There’s barely any meat. I need more meat than this, Guin.”

“Think of this as an appetizer then. You can have the roasted chicken after you try a slice. A bite at least.”

“Hmpf.” Lancelot slumps back in his chair like a stubborn little boy at Medieval Times, wanting his turkey leg but getting the bean soup instead.

“You’re being ridiculous.” I cut a slice from the pie, fold it in my hands, stand up and sit myself down on his lap. A smile fights its way through the stiff stubbornness of his face. “If you’re gonna act like a child, I’ll feed you like a child. Now open up.”

I am met with no further struggle as Lance opens his mouth, accepting the bite I offer

him. His eyes never leave mine. As he mulls the pie around in his mouth, those bright green eyes open wide in amazement.

“For bread and cheese, this is delicious. What did Faina do to the bread? It is as if I am eating a cloud yet the crust is wonderfully crispy.”

“That’s the perfect pizza crust. And it’s not just bread and cheese. It’s a whole meal in one bite.”

A boisterous laugh escapes Lance’s lips, coated in oil from the pizza. “However, I will still require that roasted chicken.”

“As long as you eat your veggies, love.”

“I have never eaten so many vegetables in my whole life since bringing you home with me. Though I am not complaining. I have not had backed-up bowels either.”

“It’s all that fiber. A well-balanced diet is important.”

“Whatever you say, my love.”

As I attempt to stand up to move back to my own seat, Lance places his strong hands firmly on my waist, sitting me back down on his lap. I don’t argue as I know I wouldn’t win. And to be honest, I found it sort of erotic. Besides the side smirks I catch from the people walking to and from the dining tables, no one seems to notice or care that we are intimately sharing our dinner with one another. We are the only ones sitting at the head table, far enough away from the rest of those dining in the hall to give us a little bit of privacy. Enough to flirt and play around.

I bend over to my plate, rubbing my ass against Lance’s groin as I reach for another slice of pizza. I feel the stirrings of a boner and hear a low moan of pleasure escape

his mouth. A jolt of excitement runs through my body at the thought of arousing him in such a public place. Not that I am into public sex but it is exciting to think that I have such an effect on my husband.

When I pull myself back against him, I grind harder against his bulge. A deeper moan echoes in my ears as his lips close over the fleshy lobe of my ear. A hand brushes against my thigh, dragging up my torso. He gives my breasts a quick squeeze before bringing his hand to my chin, pulling my lips to his. I let him kiss me but don't give him entry inside, not wanting to make out in front of everyone in the dining hall.

"Lance," I whisper against his lips, pulling myself back just enough to keep him a breath away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have teased you."

"Hmpf. You make my body come alive, Guin. Without trying. You tease me every minute of the day."

"I'm sorry."

"Do not apologize for loving me, for showing me I can love. My heart is yours, my soul follows your every command, and my body vibrates with want of yours. I never thought I could be so consumed by another. You fill me with a love I did not believe was meant to be mine. You have made me the happiest man alive by loving me, by choosing me."

"Who else would I choose? You are mine, Lance." I plant a kiss on his lips, feeling the heat inside me expand. Before I melt into him, I pull my lips away, laying my head against his. I could stay this way for all eternity.

"Let us fill our bellies so we can spend the whole evening in bed before falling asleep in each other's arms," Lance whispers softly against my brow.

“I absolutely love this idea.”

We return to eating our meal in our own seats, cooling ourselves off. As I cut another slice of pizza, the castle steward approaches our table.

“This arrived for you earlier today, my lord. Apologies for not delivering it sooner.”

“Thank you, Augwys,” Lance replies in his business voice, accepting the letter from Augie’s hand. I call our steward Augie because I cannot for the life of me pronounce his name. I know he hates the nickname, but he never lets his annoyance show.

Chapter 28

Lancelot

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:42 am

I stare down at the dragon pressed into a golden wax seal, afraid of the words written inside. Guin and I have only had three months together. I had hoped we would have more before being called back to Camelot, to court life. I want nothing more than to keep Guin to myself. Forever. I do not wish to share her with another human, let alone Arthur and his court. Guin is mine.

Not to mention, there are too many people residing at Camelot I do not trust. Perhaps I should feel obligated to protect Arthur from these villains. However, Arthur can take care of himself. And he, too, is distrustful. Even of his own nephew, Mordred.

Arthur only trusts a handful of people. I am lucky to count myself as one of them. And I am grateful to Arthur for blessing my marriage to Guin. For without his blessing, I am not sure I could have married her.

Maybe we would have run away together, seeking a corner of the world far from Arthur and his knights. Maybe I would have been happy enough to forget my treachery. Though at the mere thought, I feel my guts swirling around inside me. How could I ever betray Arthur? How could I live without Guin?

“Who is it from?” Guinevere asks after swallowing another bite of her pizza.

“Arthur.”

“Already? I thought we would have more time.”

“I had thought so as well. But we do not know yet what it says.”

“What if you don’t open it? Then we don’t need to act on it right away.”

“I cannot ignore a letter from my king.”

“I’m not saying ignore, only delay. At least until the morning.”

“I do not wish to return to Camelot either, Guin. We must. It is our duty.”

“Yes. I know this. I just...well I thought maybe I would get pregnant and then we could use that as an excuse to stay at home. Honestly, I thought I would already be pregnant by now.”

“These things take time. Do not worry. Soon enough, your stomach will be swelling with a baby inside, your breasts plump and tender.”

“Of course you would focus on how large my breasts are likely to get from knocking me up. Men.” Guinevere rolls her eyes at me, a smile plastered across her face. She is pretending to be annoyed with me, something she does frequently in jest. What a wonder this woman is. She says the most shocking things sometimes, never shying away from being blunt. One of the things I love about her.

“I will open the letter in the morning. Now eat up. I want to take you to bed and fill you with my seed at least a dozen times before I read the words within this letter.”

Goosebumps pour down Guin’s arms at my words, my eyes never leaving hers. Desire. That is what I see in those dark green emeralds. “Promise?” She asks.

“Yes. We will read the letter together.”

“No. Promise you will fuck me twelve times before morning?”

I laugh, but she is serious. Twelve is maybe an impossible number for a man in such a short amount of time. “At the very least, I will pleasure you a dozen times.”

Guin finishes her meal quickly, waiting for me to finish my roasted chicken. I deliberately slowed down chewing, letting her passion and desire for me stew. And though I am feeling full from the pizza, roasted chicken and various vegetables served for our dinner, I pretend to keep picking at my plate.

Not easily fooled, Guin sits back down on my lap. Her lips find mine as her soft curves push against my body. Kissing Guin is spiritual, mystical, magical. One of those or maybe all of them at once. She fills my soul with hers. Her desires become mine.

I kiss her back with equal fervor, needing her touch to deepen, not caring if anyone in the dining hall is watching. Let them watch. As I bring my hand up to her breast, gently squeezing, Guin pulls back from my embrace.

“You know what? I think I’m still hungry. I wonder what will be for dessert.”

Instead of returning to her own chair, Guin sits her plump little ass on my lap, burrowing against my groin again. Now it is her turn to tease me. I should have known she would have a play in this game I started.

“Faina, do we have any desserts?” Guin calls out to the tables where Faina had been sitting with the rest of the kitchen staff.

“Yes, my lady, let me fetch some for you.”

“No, Faina, I can go. You sit and enjoy your supper.”

“It is no bother, my lady.”

“I am already up and on my way to the kitchen,” Guinevere shouts as she rushes out of the dining hall.

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Faina looks up at me with a question on her face. I shrug. One thought on my mind. I am wild with lust after Guin's kiss. It does not help to have her body rubbing up against mine. I need her. I need her body. I need her lips. I need her sweet, tight cunt.

Ten minutes go by since Guin left for the kitchens. I cannot wait any longer. Pushing my dinner plate aside, I stand up quickly and tread swiftly toward the kitchens in search of my wife. My cock is pulsing with want as I navigate through the halls and down the stairs to the kitchens.

As I step inside the main kitchen area, Guin sits on one of the counters, casually munching on a scone. "I wondered when you'd show up down here," she says innocently.

A devilish smile appears on her face. I want to wipe it off with my mouth and cock. These thoughts should fill me with shame. But it does no such thing. Guin is mine. She loves me. And she loves my cock.

In two strides, I have her in my grasp. "If I was any other man, I would punish you for abandoning me at dinner, leaving me stiff."

"If you were any other man, I wouldn't have married you. Plus, you started it."

I laugh, my breath tickling her lips. I want to take her then. But it is my turn to tease. Softly, I touch my lips to hers. As she attempts to deepen the kiss, I pull her back enough so that our lips are barely touching. Slowly, I tug her gown up over her thigh, brushing my fingers against her lips below.

Guin arches her back, pushing herself onto my hand. I pull away, placing my hands on her hips, my mouth on her supple breasts. A hand pulls me in deeper, fingers entwining in my hair. Grabbing her hand, I stop Guin from gripping me tighter, ending my assault on the cleavage peering out from her dress.

“Lance, I can’t take much more of this. How are you going to pleasure me a dozen times tonight if you go this slow? It’s torture.”

I press my lips to hers while sliding a finger inside her wet lips below. A moan escapes into my mouth as I slide a second finger in effortlessly. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes. Please.”

I cater to her needs, massaging her inner walls until she cries out for more, her core pulsing with pleasure. One. With my fingers still inside her, I move my mouth from her lips to her ear, whispering, “Tell me how badly you want my cock.”

“I need you deep inside me. If you don’t fill me to the brim, I’m certain I will die from want of you.”

“How do you want me?” I know my boundaries with Guin. I can tease her easily, but I never push myself inside her without consent. Her wounds may have healed on the outside, but there are still moments when her mind doesn’t seem mended. As much as I want to plow Guin and make her scream, I need her to tell me that is what she wants too. And goddammit, I am hoping she wants the same as I do.

“Turn me around, fuck me hard and make it fast. Do not take your time.”

“Yes, my love.”

Wasting no time, I lay Guin face down on the counter, throwing her skirt up and push my entire length into her wet and willing cunt. She feels incredible. Too good. And when she begins grinding against me, I nearly finish with that one thrust. She wants a quick lay, but I am not going to be defeated so easily.

Grabbing her buttocks, I pull away from her slowly, plunging myself deep in a quick motion forward. After a few more thrusts, I can hear Guin's breath quickening, telling me she is ready. I let go of my control, plowing myself into her hard and fast until we climax in unison.

Luckily, no one wanders into the kitchen. And if they had, we did not notice. As soon as we catch our breaths, I lift Guin off the counter, hoisting her over my shoulder and carry her to our bed chambers. I have work to do.

I wake up in the light of a mid-morning sun, feeling tender in certain spots. Before falling asleep in a sweaty heap, I had only pleased Guin ten times. I promised a dozen and would give her just that before opening the letter as we break our fast.

Guin is still asleep, curled up on the left side of our bed, no doubt sore herself. I slide myself under the blankets, searching for her soft center. Not wanting to wake her yet, I carefully lift a leg over my head, positioning myself between her thighs. A gentle flick of the tongue brings a soft, sleepy moan to my ears.

I wake her up slowly, sliding my tongue along the folds of her lips. When I feel her stir awake, I dip my tongue inside her. "Oh! Fuck. Lance," she moans from the other side of the blankets. Guin turns over onto her back, giving me full access to her cunt, entwining her fingers in my hair. The gentle massage from her fingers sends a thrill of desire down my spine.

While sucking enthusiastically, I give her a finger, coaxing Guin to climax. After three fingers, she is at my mercy, shaking from the pleasure I have given her with my

tongue. And my cock is ready to give her more. I throw the blankets off our bodies, crawling my way up to her mouth and give her a taste of herself.

Slowly, inch by agonizing inch, I enter her. Guin. My love. My life. My beautiful wife. I need to take this slow. Not because my body aches from a night of lovemaking, I only want to savor every bit of her. To feel every inch of myself inside her. To consume every delicious bite of her soul. To feel her heart beat with mine. Erratic and slow.

“Thirteen,” I hear Guin gasp as we lay next to each other in bed, our bodies glistening in sweat.

“What?”

“Thirteen orgasms. You gave me thirteen orgasms since last night.”

Pride is not the emotion I feel, or maybe it is. “I promised you at least a dozen. I will never break a promise to you.”

“Promise?”

I answer with a gentle kiss before rolling out of bed. “Are you hungry? I am famished.”

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“Well, you did have quite the exercise.”

“Hmmm, yes, yes I did,” I smirk.

“Lie down. I will go find someone to fetch us something to eat.”

“No, Guin. I do not wish anyone to see the state of you.”

“What do you mean? What do I look like?”

“Like a woman whose husband plowed her all night.”

A blush blossoms on Guin’s pale cheeks, making her glow even more radiantly.

“Okay. Fine. You go then.”

When I return to our room, Guin has her night shift on. She sits on the end of our bed, holding the letter from Arthur. I dread what is inside. I want these three months to turn into three years, three decades. I have never been as happy as I am with Guin. And though I know my happiness would not diminish at Camelot because I would be there with her, as her husband, I still cannot shake the feeling of dread. That something terrible is about to happen.

“Would you care to open the letter? Or shall I?”

“You should be the one to open it. But read it aloud.”

Guin hands me the letter before sitting down at our small dining table. I take a bite of

smoked sausage, then break the seal. The letter is much longer than I expected. I hoped it would only include a simple command, perhaps a “Your presence is requested within the month.”

“What does it say, Lance?”

I clear my throat, preparing to read the words scrawled by Arthur’s hand.

My loyal servant Sir Lancelot of the Lake,

I write to you with dire urgency. First, I must inquire as to your well-being and that of your lady wife, Guinevere. I do hope your marriage has been fruitful in love and that you both are drowning in bliss.

With that being said, I hate to ask this of you. There have been reports of a dragon attacking villages in the north. When I say “the north” I mean the kingdom of the Picts.

Though this land has been out of reach even for the Romans, this could be my chance to gain an alliance with the tribes to the north. If we can unite the tribes with my kingdom and the rest of Britain, noone could ever conquer this land again. Britain would be our united kingdom, forever.

Would you do me the service of investigating these claims of dragon sightings? I am sending a small calvary of men to Joyous Gard. They should arrive a day after you receive this letter. Take them with you to the north. You will be an envoy on my behalf.

After you have slain the dragon, our country will have the opportunity to double in size.

I apologize for taking you away from your home and your new wife. I had hoped to leave the both of you in peace a few months longer. However, I need you. My White Knight. Your courage and strength are what I need now.

May you have a safe journey and a quick return home.

Your king and friend,

Arthur

“A fucking dragon? Is he fucking joking? What is this?” Guin is laughing hysterically, but I can tell she is also terrified. Her lips tremble.

“Do you think that Arthur is pretending that there is a dragon in the north?”

“Do dragons exist here? I mean, I remember when we saw a unicorn. That was crazy. Unicorns don’t exist. Do dragons exist?”

“Yes. I fought one before and won.”

“Jesus, Mother Mary, Joseph. You are actually going to go look for this dragon and kill it? Lance, no. This is a terrible idea.”

“It is not an idea, Guinevere. Arthur has given me a command. I must go. His knights will be here today or tomorrow. We will then need to leave a day after their arrival to make good time.”

“Are you saying you will be gone by the end of this week with no ETA on when you’ll be returning home to me? Lance, I don’t like this. Not one bit. This feels wrong. Does this not feel wrong to you? Are you not afraid?”

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“I am terrified. Dragons are dangerous creatures. Unpredictable. And the fire bit does not make it easy to get close enough for a kill. But I must do this, Guin.”

“Then I will come with you.”

“No.”

“Why? Because it’s too dangerous?”

“Yes.”

“Then why is it okay for you to go? Lance, please.”

“I will come back home. When? I cannot say with certainty.”

“Promise?”

Guin looks at me with a desperate look of despair. Hearing that dragons exist must have been shocking. Knowing I must face such a terrible beast, she is beside herself with worry. I can feel her fear, her anxiety. I wish there is something I can say to soothe her. In truth, I am not confident I could kill another dragon without bearing injury upon myself. Instead of telling her this, I find my courage and give her a confident response.

“I promise, my love.” I kiss Guin, holding back my own fear and giving her nothing but certainty. “What does ‘ETA’ mean?” I ask, my lips brushing against Guin’s. She only laughs, pulling me back to her lips.

Chapter 29

Guinevere

I wake up feelingnauseous, vomiting into the bedpan as soon as I stand up from my lonely bed. Lance has been gone for nearly a month. My whole being yearns to have him back by my side. And as I am now pregnant, I need him by my side.

For the past week, I suspected I was pregnant since my period was late. And I am the kind of person whose cycle never wavers, even when I traveled 1500 years to the past. My uterus adapted immediately when my heart and mind were a mess.

After vomiting my insides out for an hour, I lay back down in bed, not ready to face the day yet. I have gotten so used to Lance being around that I didn't quite know what to do with myself at his castle. Our castle.

I must have fallen back asleep as I am abruptly awoken by a banging on the door. Wassa, the chambermaid, is yelling through the door, asking if everything is all right. That Faina hadn't seen me come to breakfast.

Not wanting to worry anyone, I pull myself out of bed even though I am tempted to pull the covers over my head and pretend nothing else exists on the other side. My nausea is still present but I don't feel like I am going to vomit again. As I open the door, I ask Wassa what time it is.

"Past noontime, my lady. Lunch will be served soon. Are you feeling well? Would you like me to fetch you something to eat?"

"Thank you, Wassa. Some bread and cheese would be welcome. I am feeling a bit nauseous. I'm pretty sure I'm pregnant."

The shock on Wassa's face is expected at my unplanned announcement. But the look of concern behind her eyes is worrisome.

"I'm quite all right. It's just nausea coming on so quickly and strongly that has me knackered. I think I would like to stay in my room for the rest of the day."

"But, my lady, the king is here."

"The king? Arthur?"

Wassa nods.

"What the hell is he doing here? And why wasn't that the first thing you told me? Jesus. Let me splash some water on my face and get dressed. Where is he?"

"He is in the dining hall. Lunch was about to be served when he arrived."

"All right, well, I will dine with him shortly."

"Yes, my lady."

What the fuck is Arthur doing here while Lance is away? I want to trust him. In fact, I do trust him because Lance trusts him. But I can't begin to guess why Arthur would have come all this way to visit me. Perhaps he thought I'd be lonely here without Lance. And that would be an accurate statement.

My nausea seems to dissipate in my angst to get myself ready for an audience with King Arthur. But a new sensation takes its place. Anxiety churns my insides. My mind is racing. As much as I tell myself there is nothing to worry about, I can't help but feel impending doom. Something is wrong.

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As I step from the room I share with Lancelot, Augie is waiting for me. He explains that Arthur had wished to dine with me alone in the guest chambers. The dread I had felt now strangles my heart. But I move forward, allowing Augie to escort me to the king.

“My lady, Guinevere. You are looking as beautiful as ever.” Arthur gently takes my hand in his, brushing his lips over my knuckles in a soft kiss. I curtsy back.

“I doubt that as I feel like shit,” I reply as I take the seat Arthur had offered in the seating area of his guest suite. “To what do I owe this unexpected visit?”

Arthur takes a long, deep breath. That is when I notice the bags under his eyes and the redness within. He hasn’t been sleeping lately and it looks as if he’d been crying. My heart stops. I don’t want to hear what he has to say but my ears listen anyway.

“It pains me to bring you this news, my lady.” Arthur pauses, looking away from me to gather his courage. “Lancelot is dead.”

I place a hand over my belly before responding. “What do you mean ‘Lancelot is dead’?”

“The dragon was larger, more fierce than the reports had described. Lancelot was no match for it. Even with the knights who accompanied him. It killed him and then flew off.”

“How did he die? Can I see his body?” I know as I ask that even if there is a body, I would not want to see it. But I need to see with my own eyes to believe that my

Lancelot is dead.

“Guine—”

“No! How did he die? Because Lancelot is the White Knight of Camelot. He does not die this way. This is not how it happens.”

“I know it is hard to believe, Guinevere. I, too, refused to accept it. But I have several accounts from trusted knights who saw it happen. He is gone. I am so sorry.”

A scream rips through my body, shaking me to my core. I feel myself unraveling. My heart shatters to bits all over again. I am losing myself as I had when my mother was ripped from my life. This time, I’m unsure if I can piece myself back together.

After my mom died, I had Ed and Josh and even Leo to help stitch me back up. Here? I have no one. I had Lance. The one thing that brought me joy in this place and time. Why did the universe take him from me? What had I done to deserve such cruelty? If we hadn’t married, would he still be alive?

Arthur attempts to console me, but I push him away, falling to the floor. “Get the fuck out!”

“Guinevere, please, I know—”

“I said get out! Leave!”

“No. I will not leave you in such distress in your condition. You must calm down.”

“Condition?”

“You are with child.”

“News sure does travel fast in a castle.”

“I promise you will want for nothing. We can be wed within a fortnight. I will take care of you and the babe growing in your womb as my own.”

“What!” I scream, throwing my head in Arthur’s direction to look him in the eyes. “Did you do this on purpose? Was this your plan all along? To send Lance to his death so you could take me as your wife as you had wanted all along?”

“No, Guinevere. How....how could you even think that of me?”

“How? I am your ticket to world domination. Lance was in your way—”

“No. Lance was my friend, like a little brother. I would never do anything to cause him harm.”

“Then why the fuck did you send him to fight a bloody, fucking dragon?” The rage brewing inside is turning my insides to lava. It rushes out of me in a violent stream of terror. A scream explodes from my core again, releasing steam. I can’t be around this man any longer. Even in this state of rage-fueled grief, I know I need to walk away before saying or doing anything I would later regret. “If you won’t leave, then I will.”

I sprint from the room, avoiding anyone who stands in the path leading back to my bedroom. To the lonely bed that would remain lonely for the rest of my life. For I know I will never marry again. I would not let Arthur win.

A voice inside tells me I am wrong. Excalibur, trying to coax reason into my brain. I ignore her. Reason has no place in a world where love has no power.

My anger recedes somewhat as I reach my bedroom door, but the pain consumes me from head to toe. My whole body aches with grief. It yearns for Lance. For his touch.

For his breath against my skin. For his laughter. Just to see his face one more time.

I run to my leather bag, remembering I had taken photos and a video of Lance. As I fall back into bed, I turn my phone on, kick my shoes off and slip under the covers. In my haste, I draw the wrong pattern on the lock screen but enter it correctly on the second attempt.

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And there he is. The man who is quite possibly the love of my life. The man I would love until my dying breath. The man I will never get my happy ending with. A happy ending is just not in the books for me it seems.

Opening my photo app, I scroll to the video I had taken of Lance the night before he left. He is so confident. There is no doubt in his heart. He knows he will return.

As I watch the video of him swearing at the screen of my phone, in disbelief that it was anything but magic, I am overcome with a wave of agony so strong. Bending over the bed, I vomit again. How there is anything left inside of me is anyone's guess. I haven't yet eaten today, but I'm not hungry at all. And I don't want to see a single human face if it isn't Lance's.

After the sun goes down, I hear a knock on the door. I don't answer. I don't even budge. The door is bolted, so I know I will be left alone, as I had wished to be. Faina's voice comes through loud and clear, urging me to open the door so that she can serve me supper.

She knows I'm pregnant. Without saying the words aloud, I can tell by the urgency in her voice. I ignore her. Putting headphones in my ears, I fall asleep listening to Lance's voice, telling me he loves me. That he would be back no later than two months. And when he returns, I would have happy news for him.

Lance was right about one thing. But the happy news no longer brings me joy. The embryo inside me would grow up without its father. At the moment, I am not sure if it will grow up at all. I have no desire to keep living.

Everyone I have ever loved has been ripped away from me. My mom, my dad, Josh and now Lance. There is no more love inside of me. How could I live knowing I could never love again? That I would be unable to show my child the love it deserves. And worse of all, knowing my child will be taken from me just as all my other loved ones have. It's inevitable. It's my destiny. To live a lonely, loveless life.

The following morning, I wake up to a growling stomach. On top of the pain of a ravaged heart, the hunger I feel makes it difficult to move. Even if I want to answer the door, I can't. My body won't let me.

I hear the constant shuffling of feet going back and forth outside my bedroom door. Voices muffled, voices yelling, filled with anxiety at my well-being. I answer none of them. I will lie here until I wither away into nothing. Excalibur tries to shine her light, perhaps in an attempt to take over my body again. My misery wins out.

But there is one other who persists, who won't let me give up. Arthur gives one warning before smashing his way into my room. Still, my body doesn't react. With my phone clutched in my right hand, I lay on my side, my legs curled up into my chest. Unmoved by the sudden appearance of Arthur at my deathbed.

I didn't even bother to hide my phone from view. Arthur sits down gently, grasping my other hand in his. "My lady, you must eat something. You need your strength. Your baby needs strength."

Silence is all I give Arthur. I won't let him hear the fear in my voice or the sadness in my eyes.

"Guinevere, please. I know the pain you are feeling inside. I understand how difficult it is to accept that Lancelot is gone. When my wife passed away suddenly, I was lost. We were barely married a year when I had thought we would have a lifetime together."

I attempt to hide my shock at learning that Arthur had been married. But my eyes can't help but look into his, glistening with unshed tears. I look away quickly not wanting to lose myself in a fit of grief. But he has seen me. He knows I am listening.

“The child you carry is Lancelot's. He or she will be his legacy. You need your strength for your baby, for Lancelot. I know how easy it is to give up. You are stronger than that. It is why Lancelot loved you as he did. Because you are a fighter. A woman of such strength in mind and heart cannot give up. Your child is the last part of Lancelot that is alive. We will always keep him alive in our memories. But with your child, we will keep him alive, always.”

Tears gush from my eyes, sending waves of agony through my body. I am so tired and weak that I let Arthur pull me to him. He embraces me so tightly that I can barely feel his own shockwaves of grief. We hold each other for some time before Faina interrupts us.

“I apologize, your highness. But, if the lady is well enough, she should eat.”

“Yes, of course. Please bring her plate in. I will see that she eats it all.”

“Thank you, my king.”

When Faina returns, she doesn't just bring one plate of food, but several. One of the plates has a pizza, the same one we had made together when I introduced her to the dish. I smile at her. An act I thought impossible just a few minutes ago. Maybe I will be all right. I still have people in my life who care about me. And I have Lance's baby. Arthur is right. This child needs to live. I say a silent promise to be the best mother, to love this child with whatever is left of my heart, nothing less. My love, my life, my light.

Guinevere

With a full belly and a restful night, reason wins the fight. Though I lost my husband, my lover, my friend, I am carrying a piece of him inside me. It was selfish of me to want to give up when I am the only one who can keep Lancelot alive with our child.

The castle is quiet and somber now. Everyone knows of their lord's demise. A lord they loved and respected. I haven't even thought about what will happen to them with Lancelot gone. Am I now their lord and lady? Or because I am a mere woman, would this castle be taken away from me?

Now that I am seeing clearly, panic and anxiety are beginning to seep through, threatening to drown me back in misery. I will defeat it. All of these weaknesses. For my wee one. I think of my mother, raising me all on her own for years. She had financial help from Uncle Aldon. But it was her strength and gumption that made me the woman I am today. I want to make her proud. And though I would give anything for another day with Lancelot, I will do the same to give my child everything my mother gave to me.

As I enter the dining hall, the muted whispers turn into a deafening silence. I nod to my people as I pass them by, acknowledging their grief as I share mine. Arthur sits at the head table, staring down at a bowl of porridge. He sits to the left of Lancelot's seat, a sign of respect. For even though he is a king, this is Lancelot's castle. He truly cared for Lance; I can see it in the way he grieves. I hadn't paid close attention the day before as I was too caught up in my own grief and anger. Before taking my usual seat, I place a hand on Arthur's shoulder, giving it a little squeeze.

We remain in comfortable silence until the both of us finish our meal. Then he pushes a plate of sliced apples in front of me, telling me to eat a bit more. I am still feeling hungry, so I don't put up a fight.

In silence, we walk out into the courtyard and down to the beach. No words are spoken until we reach the edge of the shore, the water teasing our feet. “What was that...object? The one that had a shining image of Lancelot painted upon it.”

I can’t help but smile. At least Arthur didn’t accuse me of witchcraft. “There are a lot of things you don’t know about me. Lancelot knew everything. And he wasn’t afraid when I told him. You? I don’t know how you would take the truth. But I’ll tell you this; I’m not from here. That object is called a cellphone. Where I’m from, it’s used as a form of communication. But here, I can’t use it in that way. I use it now to capture images and look at the pictures of the people I love and will never see again. I don’t think I’m ready to tell you more than that. I’m not sure you are ready, actually.”

“I will be ready to hear of it all whenever you wish to tell me, Guinevere.” Arthur turns his head to the water, watching the sun rise higher in the sky. After a moment of silence, he asks, “Did Lancelot know your secrets when he came to Camelot?”

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The question shocks me. Arthur doesn't sound accusatory. But he seems upset as if the idea that Lance had kept a huge secret from him was worse than his death.

"No. I told Lance when he returned me to Avalon. He had asked for my hand in marriage and I couldn't say yes to him until he knew everything about me. Once I knew he would accept me as I am and still loved me, I said yes to his proposal."

"I apologize for proposing marriage yesterday. It was inappropriate at the time. And perhaps it still is not the right moment, but I want you to know that the offer still stands. I will marry you and give your child everything. You both will want for naught. And if you bear a son, I will name him my heir. I am not saying all this because of who you are but because of who you were to Lancelot."

"Arthur, I..."

"You need not answer me now. I only ask that you think on it."

"I will give it a proper think. But I cannot make such a decision until I return to Avalon. I need to speak with Vivienne."

"Of course. Lancelot's mother needs to know what has happened."

Though that is not my main purpose for returning to Avalon, I don't correct Arthur. It is better to let him think that I only want to see Vivienne to let her know of Lance's death. I wonder if she already knows.

"Yes. But Arthur, I may choose to stay in Avalon. It is not where I am from

originally, but it's the place I feel most safe, besides Joyous Gard. And that brings me to this question. What will happen to Lancelot's castle?"

"What do you mean by that? This is your castle now."

"Oh, I had thought that you would give it to another knight perhaps."

"This is not my castle to give and take, Guinevere. Lancelot saved this place from an enchantment. And when he broke the spell and saved the people from the village nearby, he discovered his true name. Lancelot was carved in a stone. You, being his wife, are now the rightful lady of the castle. It is up to you what happens to it and its people."

"I didn't know this was the same castle. He had told me that story, but ages ago, before we really knew each other. Thank you for telling me this, Arthur."

He nods. "Would you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you to Avalon? I would like to be there for you and Vivienne. The burden of Lancelot's death falls heavy on my heart. I should have sent more knights, an army even."

"You didn't know. You couldn't have known." But it was a bloody, fucking dragon, I say to myself.

"Still, Guinevere." Arthur turns to me, tears pouring freely down his face. The sight of his tears causes me to lose my balance. He grabs my hands, keeping me upright.

"I need you to know that I never meant for this to happen. And I will be frank with you as I was with Lancelot on the day of your wedding. Though I was happy for you both then, I was angry to hear that Lancelot had taken you to his castle. At the time, I had expected him to bring you back to Camelot. After Gawain explained what had happened, your...injuries, and your own desire to be with Lancelot as his wife, my

anger dissipated. I did give Lancelot permission to court you. Only I did not think it would mean you would be gone from Camelot so soon. I wanted to make your courtship public, to give the people time to understand and accept your union. It was difficult to explain your disappearance. Camelot was thrown into chaos when you were taken. Someone had been poisoned that night. He did not live. Accusations were thrown in every direction. It was not until Sir Bedivere and Sir Kei arrived with the man you left alive that I was able to provide answers to the angry mob of guests who stayed at my castle. But then you were still missing and then news of your betrothal to Lancelot arrived with Gawain. I greeted you and Lancelot with happiness in my heart, but it had been a very difficult journey for me. I was very much afraid of losing all that I had fought for.”

“I’m sorry—”

“No, I am not seeking an apology from you. Not then, not now, not ever. I will admit to you that it has been much more difficult after you married Lancelot. I lost a few allies, but I still have enough to back my claims and bring my dream of a united kingdom to fruition.”

“If there is anything I can do to help...you know I am on your side, right?” As I ask this question, I realize the only way I can help is to marry Arthur. He is a good man, a wonderful man, a gem of a man like my Lancelot. I know I’d be content as his wife. Would I love him? Perhaps. But the thought of loving him completely makes me weak in the knees, and not in a good way.

Arthur catches me just as I am about to hit the ground. He carefully sits me down on the sandy shore. “Do you need to eat something more?”

“No, I’m just...tired.”

“Let’s walk back up. I will see you to your rooms and have some bread and cheese

brought up for you.”

“I’m not hungry—”

“I do not care if you feel hungry or not. You will eat,” the king commands.

Chapter 31

Guinevere

Vivienne doesn’t take the news of her son’s death well. It terrorizes me to see her in such agony. Though she knew Arthur and I were traveling to Avalon, she was unaware of the reason. I only know Vivienne from the short time I had stayed at Avalon. Though mysterious and passionate, she was never vile.

Kind, wise, patient, and trusting. That is the Vivienne I had come to know. But when Arthur explains what happened to Lancelot, Vivienne all but curses him for lying to her. “I believed you to be a fine man of moral high ground. How could you lie to me about my son’s death, lie to his wife?”

“Vivienne, what are you talking about?” I am shaking with terror, grief, and anger of my own.

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“I would have felt him leave this plane. The gods would have given me a sign. My Lancelot cannot be dead. This is false news from a false man of honor,” Vivienne spits out at Arthur.

“Arthur?” My voice shakes.

He is in shock, at a loss for words though his face doesn’t appear to show guilt. The words coming from Vivienne frighten him just as much as they do to me.

“Arthur!? Is there any truth to what Vivienne says?” I shout, bringing him out of his stupor.

“Of course not. Though, there were no...there was no b—”

“See! Caught in this own lie!” Vivienne is out of control with her grief. Something I could definitely relate with.

I have to be the one with reason to spare though. “Please, calm down, Vivienne. Arthur is not a liar. You know this. You know he is a good man. He loved Lancelot.”

“But he also wanted to marry you! You have even said that you were meant to be wed to Arthur. He wanted you for himself!”

“Now, Vivienne, you need to take a step back and think about what you are saying.” Morgana finally steps in to help cool things down before someone gets hurt, emotionally or physically.

“What does that mean?” Arthur asks, looking at me.

“Another time, Arthur.” I look at him sharply before turning back to Vivienne. Taking her hands in mine, I ask her to search for Lancelot. If she can still feel him, if he is still alive, maybe we can find him through her. I am not sure if I believe in either scenario, but we have to try.

Morgana takes her hands from mine, repeating my ask. “I will give you my strength to search for him. Guinevere, can you escort Arthur outside? We will come to fetch you after we are done. This could take some time.”

I nod. Standing up, I wait for Arthur to follow my movement. We walk out into the main courtyard where the priestesses tend to the garden. It is at this moment I decide to tell him everything. “Come with me.”

As we walk toward the lake, a wave of fear and anxiety sweeps through me. When I climb on top of my rock, the place I sat when I first met Lancelot, I begin to explain where I had come from.

“This is where I came through.”

“Came through?” Arthur approaches the lake with caution.

“Yes. This lake. It doesn’t exist in the time I am from.”

“I see. You are from the future then.”

“How did you—”

“Merlin knows things too, Guinevere. As I am sure Vivienne knew where you had come from, so did Merlin.”

“Oh, then why didn’t you say anything to me about it? Or Merlin?”

“He was not certain you were the same person he had visions about. They were conflicting visions.”

“How so?”

“One about a woman who would bring forth the sword of power and choose the leader to rule all of Britain, choose me. Another who would wield the power of prophecy and bring down all that I have worked hard to build. Merlin believed this prophetess would come from another time. A time where our history is known.”

“Both are true of me. However, I do not mean to tear your kingdom to pieces. I came here by accident. I had gotten lost in a marsh-turned-forest-turned lake. Excalibur saved my life.”

“Hmm.”

“And yes, I do know what happens to you, Arthur. It’s not a history though. The stories are more of a legend. All of them do not end happily. For Arthur, for Lancelot, nor for Guinevere.”

“What? You, yourself, are in the histories?”

“Legends. But yes. When I realized who I could be, I freaked out. Though I wasn’t so sure if I was actually the Guinevere until I met Lancelot. We were destined to love each other, but we were never meant to be together it seems. I tried to change it. We both did. I think I only made things worse.”

“What do you mean?”

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“I was supposed to marry you, Arthur. But as your wife and queen, I would fall in love with Lancelot. Our betrayal would eventually lead to your...demise.”

“Hmpf...so you believe that fate is stepping in to make it right because you married Lancelot first? This does not make sense. My destiny is clear. Merlin has seen it, even Vivienne. I will become king of all of Britain. Unite the kingdoms and keep us safe from invaders.”

“And perhaps you will do that. In all the stories, you are portrayed as a heroic king. You are legendary. But what if Vivienne is right? What if Lancelot is alive?”

“I wish with all my heart that it is true. But if he is...gone?”

“If you are asking for my hand again, I just don’t know. Even if Vivienne can’t feel him or whatever, what if he really is alive. This could be fate pushing us together just to bring Lancelot back from the dead and bam! We are all fucked!” What I am saying is crazy, but in my current reality, it makes sense.

We sit in silence again. A silence I have become comfortable with. Not that I dislike talking to Arthur, but it is nice to be able to sit in silence this way with another human.

I think of Lancelot. How much I miss him. If Vivienne cannot find him on this plane, alive, I don’t know what my life would be like here. If he is truly dead, I want to go back home to the twenty-first century. To my father and to Josh. I know I have a life waiting for me there.

Sure, I could have a life here with Arthur. He is a good man. And I know he would be a gentle, loving husband. I wouldn't have this problem if Lancelot and Arthur were the stereotypical medieval men they should have been. I wouldn't have fallen for Lance and I wouldn't be contemplating marriage to King Arthur.

Am I actually contemplating marriage to King fucking Arthur? It is hard to stomach, but if I am stuck here, I don't think I could survive as a single mom in the sixth century. Even with a castle all mine and servants to help me with everyday living, I don't want my child to grow up fatherless.

If I marry Arthur, he will make sure my child would want for nothing. But every day, I would be tormented with the question, "what if?" From movies and television, I've learned that if you don't see the body, they will always return.

God, I want Lancelot to be alive. I want him so badly. I know I was naive to think he was truly mine forever. That the universe would let me have such a wonderful, gentle, sweet, loving man with the tightest ass and the brightest green eyes. I love him. With every fiber of my being, I love him.

My love for him is raw, consuming, visceral. When we first met, it was like I was a wax candle and he the wick. The fire burned us both, devouring us in hours until we were left with nothing but our naked, true selves, hiding nothing from each other.

I thought I had been in love with Josh, or at least falling for him. Josh is my best friend and the one person who knows me inside and out. When we fell into bed together, our friendship became more. But the love I had felt for Josh, that I still feel for him, is not the same.

My love for Lance is epic romance-level shit. Something I thought could only be completely fictional, intended to bring adventure to readers who need a little smut in their lives. I never thought I would fall so deeply in love like this. It is a terrifying

feeling. And with him gone from my life, that part of me will never live again. I will love the fuck out of my child with all the pieces I have left. But that part of me, that epic love, it died with Lancelot.

“He is gone.” Vivienne is beside herself with grief. Morgana holds her close, silent tears falling down her face. “I am so sorry to have given you some hope that he could still be alive. Morgana and I spent hours in silence, trying to find his essence. He is gone. Arthur’s reports are correct. Forgive me for the harsh words I said to you earlier, your highness.”

“No need for that, Vivienne. There is nothing to forgive. Please accept my deepest sympathies for your loss.”

“We all have suffered the same loss. Though, Guinevere, my daughter, why did you not tell me when you arrived? How far along are you?”

I am startled that she knows I am pregnant as I can only be a few weeks along. I tell her as much in a whisper, unable to make a sound in my renewed grief. “How did you know?”

“The essence I felt of Lancelot, it came from you, from within your womb.”

“Oh.”

“It brings me joy to know my Galahad will live on through your child. Please know, you have a home here if you so wish it.”

The tears I am trying so hard to keep inside violently shake my body. Vivienne is at my side in an instant, holding me tightly to her chest. Her embrace reminds me of my mother. How she would hold me as a young girl when I was frightened or upset. The slight swaying motion is magical. I begin to feel my grief loosening its hold on my

heart.

“There, there. Breathe, Guin, take long, deep breaths.”

“Thank you, Vivienne. The pain is difficult to handle at times.”

“Pain can also make us act foolish as well. I do apologize for how I acted earlier. I was...not myself.”

“I had a similar reaction when Arthur told me. Any other king would have had me beheaded for such treachery.” I thought these words as a joke in my mind, but as they leave my mouth, I say them with sincerity. “My lady, I do have a question for you.”

“You want to go home, I know. But I am afraid there is no way back. Every priestess able to read has been through all our records and books. I do not know how to return you to your time. You must make your life here.”

“I just don’t know how to make a life here without Lance.”

“I can offer you a life here as a priestess. Your child would be raised here, just as Lancelot was.”

Vivienne looks over at Arthur who has been quiet during our entire exchange. Waiting patiently to be brought into the conversation again. And he is ready for his cue.

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“Guinevere, I know you are in pain, that you want to go home, that you want Lancelot back. I cannot give you these things. But perhaps I can give you a stable life. We do not have to live as husband and wife if you do not wish to. However, I am offering you the love and care of a husband.”

“I don’t know, Arthur. You wouldn’t expect me to...be your wife in every which way?”

“Perhaps we can come up with a solution together. With you by my side, I will unite the kingdoms together with ease. Our rule would not be questioned. The country would be safer with us all fighting together and not against each other.”

“What would you expect of me?”

“Companionship.”

“Meaning?”

“Friendship.”

“I wouldn’t have to...perform any wifely duties?”

“No. A marriage of friendship and loyalty is all that I ask for.”

“You don’t want any children of your own?”

“I cannot have children.”

“You can’t?”

“My first wife and I were unsuccessful. And, there have been other women in my youth I am ashamed to admit.”

“What about Mordred?”

“Mordred? What about him?”

“Nothing...there are just some accounts that say...um who is his mother?”

“My sister, Morgause.”

“And who is his father?”

“King Lot, my sister’s husband.”

“Okay, okay, okay. Then forget I said anything. But you should be wary of Mordred.”

“He and Lancelot had heated competitions at times. But Mordred is my nephew. I might not trust him with my life, but I trust that he would not do anything to harm me.”

“I don’t. He was or will be...would have been the one to turn people against me if we had gotten married before I fell for Lance. Anyway, I guess it doesn’t matter now.”

All three look at me with curiosity, but I am not going to go down that rabbit hole with them right now. I shake my head and tell them I am tired and need to lie down.

“Have you eaten anything today, Guinevere?” Morgana asks.

“Oh. No, I haven’t eaten much.”

“I will grab you a plate of food and bring it to your room. You need your rest. You do look pale, my lady.” Morgana examines my face a second longer, then turns to fetch me some food. I follow her out into the hallway but am stopped by a hand on my elbow.

“You need not answer me right away,” Arthur whispers. “I do need to travel back to Camelot in two days. Is that enough time for you to decide?”

“I will let you know my answer in two days.”

Epilogue

Lancelot

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:42 am

There is smoke everywhere and the remains of a furious fire on some of the thatched roofs. I know we are close. The dragon must have hit this village only a few hours ago. It could still be nearby, resting from the carnage it wielded. I make my way to the few survivors who are busy mending each other's wounds.

"Which direction did the dragon fly?" I ask no one in particular.

The villagers looked at me with fear in their eyes. Seldom did a knight clad in armor appear in their village, less seldom than a dragon, it would seem. One courageous young girl pointed behind me. "It went that way."

"Thank you," I say to the little girl, attempting to cheer her with a brave smile.

Before I can turn around, the little girl grabs my hand. "Are you going to fight it?" She asks with a quiver in her voice.

"I am going to kill it."

Her eyes widened at my statement. "Be careful, sir. It ate my mama and papa. But it could still be hungry."

I squeeze her hand before releasing it and walk with purpose in the direction the little girl had pointed. My men follow my lead as I mount Gringolot, making haste to catch up with the monstrous beast.

We gallop at full speed for an hour before sighting the dragon. It is flying low to the ground, making its way toward the North Sea. If it leaves the confines of the land, we

will not be able to follow. Maybe it will leave our island for good, but there is a chance it might return. A chance I cannot take.

I signal Agravain and Kei to flank the dragon and let loose an arrow. Kei's arrow lands on the target. The dragon's wings shoot up in shock at the sudden attack. When the wings flap back down, a gust of wind throws some of the men off their horses.

Shouting commands, I organize my men into position, hiding behind the rocks that decorate the incline to the cliffside. We had gone over many scenarios; this is one we briefly discussed, one of the trickier battles with the sea to our fronts. We must not let the dragon escape.

More arrows fly toward the now grounded dragon, only a few piercing its tough skin. While the rain of arrows occupies the dragon, I sneak around to its backside, my sword still sheathed. I approach the dragon's tail. Since the dragon had just sieged an attack on an entire village, its fiery breath only shoots out in spurts, barely closing the distance between it and my men. It even seems out of breath in a way.

I take the opportunity and jump quickly onto its back, using the spikes on its spine to climb up to the neck. Then I draw my sword, ready to kill. As I lift my sword, an eerie silence fills my ears. I look down to see the dragon's eyes on me.