

Chapter One

Arthur Pendragon gazed out his bedroom window, not feeling the warm rays of sunlight that filtered through the glass to touch his skin. The courtyard below bustled with energy and motion: young girls twisted flowers into each others' hair, servants hauled food and decorations in every direction, and the soldiers helped each other make the final inspections of their glistening armor and scarlet capes. His own servant, Merlin, had just left to assist with final preparations for the celebration. Arthur's eyes roamed the activity below without latching onto anyone in particular. He knew he would never remember or care about the extravagant details of his wedding.

His wedding. A union he had not chosen to a bride he did not love. Ashamed though he was to admit it, Elena practically disgusted him.

Sighing, Arthur leaned his arm against the stones framing the window. It wasn't that Elena was ugly—even if she wasn't the most beautiful princess he had ever met, either. And she wasn't rude—but for the love of Camelot, she was more of a clutz than Merlin! And yes, she was a princess, but . . . somehow, she seemed out of place. Gwen would have carried the role with much more grace.

Gwen . . .

No. Arthur shoved the thought of her from his mind, straightening his posture out of a habit of discipline. He would not let his emotions overrule his sense of honor. Marrying Elena was his duty, and he would fulfill it. For Camelot.

“Arthur?”

He started, turning to see his father a few paces from the door. Uther wore his finest robes, crown polished and set upon his gray head. He looked like the perfect king and father, ready to marry off his son with glowing pride, yet his face bore an uneasy expression.

“Father,” Arthur managed to croak. “Come to give your son some last marital advice before he ties the knot?”

Uther sighed and began slowly walking forward, hands clasped behind his back. “In a way, yes,” he said. “I know you dread this marriage, Arthur.”

“No, of course not,” Arthur assured him stiffly. “I am happy to serve Camelot in this way. The alliance—”

“The alliance will not lie with you in bed or eat your meals with you,” Uther interrupted, now standing beside his son. He looked straight forward, however, out the window as absently as Arthur had just moments before. “I know you do not love Elena.”

Arthur winced. “I cannot disagree with that.”

Uther looked down, now studying the floorboards with great intent. “I had an arranged marriage too, you know,” he finally said, softly. “I hardly knew your mother before we exchanged vows.”

Raising an eyebrow, Arthur looked sidelong at his father. “I know, Father. You've told me about your marriage before.” What was he getting at?

“Yes.” Uther cleared his throat. “Yet despite our quick marriage, it was like love at first sight. I adored her—every bit of her—and I could hardly stop speaking with her every moment we were together. It was as if she were truly made for me. Like the heavens had arranged our marriage from the beginning.” He turned to face Arthur. “Her death devastated me like nothing ever had before or has since.”

Arthur nodded, trying not to give in to the tears he felt pricking at his eyes. He knew Uther missed his mother, and Arthur longed just as much to have had a chance to know her.

“You are the only one who has helped those wounds to heal, Arthur. I could not trade you for anything in the world.” He paused. “Still, I have often wondered how everything might be different, had she ruled by my side all these years.”

“Father?” Arthur asked cautiously. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I have decided,” Uther replied, “to make an adjustment to our agreement with the Kingdom of Gawant.” He turned to face Arthur squarely. “I remember the difference a loving wife made in my life, even for such a short time. I want you to have that same blessing, if possible. And I earnestly hope your life will be filled with that love much longer than mine was.” He stretched out a hand to rest on Arthur’s shoulder. “You do not need to marry Elena today.”

Arthur’s eyes widened, and his mouth fell open slightly. “I—really?” He let out a laugh of disbelief. “Father—Father, thank you! I cannot tell you what a relief—”

“But you will commence an engagement period at the ceremony today,” Uther continued pointedly. “I will allow you one year to court Elena and turn your heart over to her. At the end of that time, you *will* marry her, whether your heart desires it or not.”

Stunned, Arthur tried to grasp his father’s meaning. “An engagement?”

Uther nodded. “Yes.”

“For a year?”

“Yes.”

“And then we marry? Elena and I?”

“Yes,” Uther urged. “I have prepared an alteration of the contract between our two kingdoms, but most of the changes simply make clear the temporary nature of the first year’s engagement period. There will be some flexibility, as Lord Godwyn and I will likely need to make slight adjustments here and there as our alliance proceeds.”

All Arthur could do was nod silently. For a moment, he had felt completely free from this terrible burden, but now he just felt like he’d been led from one prison cell into another with a bit more room inside.

“Elena will remain here in Camelot during this time,” Uther continued, “with opportunities to visit her homeland regularly, of course. You will accompany her on these visits when your duties allow you to do so.”

“But Father,” Arthur said, “what am I going to do if I can’t fall in love with her?”

Uther sighed. “I am giving you a chance, Arthur. I want you to have love in your marriage. But Camelot needs a strong, unbreakable alliance. There have been countless threats to the lives of our citizens in the past two years alone, especially from sorcerers. Cenrid’s armies

have not been defeated for good. Thousands of people rely on us to protect them from these evils.” He looked into Arthur’s eyes gravely. “As much as you may desire to follow your heart, you must realize the importance of your oaths to Camelot. You must remain faithful to your kingdom, and now, that oath includes Princess Elena.”

Arthur bowed his head, chewing on his father’s words. His promises to guide and protect Camelot *were* sacred. They were more important to him than anything else, weren’t they? Even . . . even more important than Gwen? A lowly maid who somehow made his heart soar whenever she smiled . . .

No. His father was right. He had to be right. Arthur was, in a way, married to Camelot. Camelot was his duty, and that duty had led him to Elena. He had to treat her honorably. Remain faithful, as he would have to Gwen had things been different.

“I understand, Father,” Arthur said softly. “My duty is first to Camelot. Now my second duty will be to Princess Elena.”

Uther smiled gently, patting his son’s shoulder before clasping his hands behind his back. “I want you to know I have great respect for you this day, Arthur. You have made this decision honorably and virtuously. You will make a fine king of Camelot, and you will have a loving wife by your side when you are crowned.”

Uther strode away gaily, obviously satisfied by their conversation. Arthur watched him go, knowing he must shortly follow and attend the wedding-turned-engagement ceremony. He sighed, turning once more to stare sightlessly out the window.

I certainly hope you’re right, Father, he thought.

Not an hour later, Prince Arthur stood before the doors to the great hall of the throne room, gazing sightlessly out a nearby window again. Footsteps fell lightly behind him, and he turned to see a solemn Merlin.

“I brought your ceremonial sword,” he offered, proffering the weapon in both hands.

Arthur took it, strapping the sword on mindlessly.

“Look, Arthur,” Merlin said hesitantly. “You don’t have to do this.”

“How can you say that?” he snapped back. “You don’t know what it means to carry the responsibility of a kingdom on your shoulders. I have a duty to Camelot.” Merlin was just a servant. He had no idea how much Arthur had tried to stay true to his love for Gwen while fulfilling his duty to Camelot. The task was simply impossible.

Merlin’s shoulders fell. “I . . . I understand a bit more than you might think.”

“Oh, really?” That was hard to believe.

“I only mean that I’ve watched you fulfill your duty day after day,” Merlin said. “No one is more dedicated to Camelot than you. But there must be a way for you to honor your duty *and* be with Gwen. You don’t have to let fate determine your life. You can *choose* your fate!”

“I *am* choosing my fate,” Arthur insisted. “I’m choosing to give Elena a chance. She deserves that.”

“But—”

“I’ve decided. And I will honor the promise I’m making to her, to my father, and to Camelot.”

The doors opened, and Arthur strode up to the throne’s dais before he could stop himself. He turned to face the crowd gathered on either side of the long red carpet draped along the length of the throne room. Flowers and banners, all vibrant colors, decorated the hall with the flair and flamboyance befitting a wedding. Arthur shifted uncomfortably, wondering how the kingdom would react to the news of a year-long engagement. Hopefully the servants wouldn’t try to throw an even *more* extravagant celebration for the actual marriage in a year’s time—the preparations for *this* had been enough work and attention for him to suffer.

He refused to look at Gwen, standing just behind Lady Morgana. He caught a glimpse of Merlin, who had made his way over to a corner next to Gaius and other servants. Merlin’s face reflected Arthur’s own dread. He pointedly looked away, instead focusing on the double doors across the room from him—the doors through which his soon-to-be fiancée, Princess Elena, would walk any moment now.

Trumpets sounded, and the doors swung open wide. Lord Godwyn emerged, and beside him walked Elena. Arthur tried to smile, but couldn’t quite get the corners of his mouth to turn up enough as he studied the princess. Her cream, silver-embroidered dress seemed to compliment her figure more than the other dresses she had brought to Camelot, and her blonde hair didn’t seem quite so frazzled as normal. No, the sight of her did not take his breath away, but at least she was capable of cleaning up and presenting herself for important matters.

As Princess Elena drew near, Arthur couldn’t help frowning as he thought about his father’s deal. What did she think of it? Was she upset that their marriage had been delayed? Did she even feel any romantic inclination toward him? He hadn’t sensed any outright affection from her during her stay so far in Camelot, but she was a little odd and hard to read at times.

She stepped up beside him, turning to face him, and Arthur blinked in surprise as he studied her face. He was used to seeing her display a rather, well, vacant expression more often than not. Today, however, her hazel eyes were clear and sharp, studying him in return with equal intensity. Was she measuring him up, wondering what kind of husband and king he would be?

Well, this union was his duty now. He would try his best to live up to whatever expectations she had. Perhaps she felt the same pressure and uncertainty that he did. He couldn’t really make this situation worse by assuming the best of her, could he? This time when he attempted to smile at her, a half grin though it was, it felt genuine.

The white bearded priest standing behind them cleared his throat and addressed the audience. “King Uther has informed me that he would like to speak a few words before the ceremony starts.” He gave a reverent bow and retreated a few steps, allowing Uther to stand behind the couple.

The King smiled at him and Elena. "This day brings much happiness to me," he said to the hall. "More than twenty years ago, I entered into an arranged marriage with my late sweetheart, Her Majesty, Queen Ygraine. I miss her more than anything, and I would give anything but my son and this kingdom to see her again." He fell silent for a moment, gathering himself. Arthur noticed the king's eyes watering and blinked quickly to avoid spilling any tears over himself. He would have said much the same about seeing his mother again, too.

"I have never known such a gentle yet strong woman as Ygraine," Uther continued. "Every day she spent by my side, she made me a stronger yet gentler king. If there is one thing I learned from my short union with Ygraine, it is that a loving and devoted wife can work miracles in a man's life, and that woman as a queen can also work miracles in her kingdom."

Many in the audience nodded and smiled wistfully. Arthur didn't dare look at Gwen, tried not to think that she would be the kind of queen his father spoke of.

Uther gestured to his fellow monarch. "King Godwyn and I share this belief that the stronger the union between a king and his queen, the stronger a kingdom they will be able to provide. It is with that idea in mind that we have decided *not* to ask Arthur and Elena to marry today."

Elena gasped at Arthur's side, as did nearly everyone in attendance. Arthur glanced at the princess. It seemed she hadn't known about these arrangements as he had, but why, he wasn't certain.

Uther smiled. "Do not fear. The kingdoms of Gawant and Camelot will still come together in an alliance through marriage. However, we feel our children will benefit from a year of betrothal. Arthur and Elena have hardly known each other for a week at this point. We hope their engagement will allow them to develop a true love and unity that will become binding after their marriage in one year's time."

At Uther's nod, the priest stepped forward once more. "Do you, King Uther, and you, King Godwyn, give your blessing to this betrothal, which is to last one year from this very day?"

The kings both murmured their ascent.

"Do you, Prince Arthur of Camelot, accept this arrangement and swear loyalty and fidelity to Princess Elena of Gawant, your betrothed, for one year?"

Arthur looked at Elena. He wasn't sure if she was disappointed at this news, but he tried to look encouraging anyway. "Yes," he answered. "I do so accept."

"And do you, Princess Elena of Gawant, accept this arrangement and swear loyalty and fidelity to Prince Arthur of Camelot, your betrothed, for one year?"

"Thank you, respected Priest," Elena said with a gentle smile, "for finally asking for my opinion."

Arthur gaped at her.

"May I clarify the terms of this engagement?" she asked. "After all, I am directly affected by the outcome."

The priest glanced at the kings helplessly. Godwyn shrugged, deferring to Uther, who nodded reluctantly.

“Very well,” the priest said. “What questions do you have, Princess Elena?”

“It seems to me that this engagement is for the purpose of Prince Arthur and I falling in love. Is that correct?”

“Well, yes,” Uther said.

“And what if we do not fall in love in one year’s time?” Elena pressed. “Is there some means of nullifying our arranged marriage if we cannot develop a relationship worthy of marriage?”

“I’m afraid that is out of the question,” Uther began.

“Why?” Elena demanded. No, that wasn’t the right word. She was genuinely curious, Arthur realized. She wanted to understand the real scope of what she was getting herself into.

“Well, because we must go through with the marriage to solidify the alliance between our two kingdoms,” Uther explained, smiling and glancing around the room as if wondering if anyone else thought it amusing that Elena would ask such a question. As if Arthur himself hadn’t asked about this very thing just an hour before.

Elena nodded, considering. “If you and my father are so eager to form an alliance—which I do agree would benefit both our kingdoms—why do you need Arthur and I to marry regardless of our feelings for each other? Shouldn’t your commitment to work together as monarchs be enough? I understand,” she said before Uther could begin to explain, “that our kingdoms will be stronger for the ruling families to be joined in marriage. But if you value the positive impact that a loving marriage can have over a kingdom, consider the impact a less than happy marriage could have.”

Arthur nodded slowly. Elena was surprisingly . . . articulate. She seemed to be expressing exactly what he’d worried about, yet from her, the arguments seemed to make more sense. He glanced at Merlin, who seemed to be smiling hopefully. Then he saw Gwen, whose face was wet with silent tears. He clenched his jaw and turned back to listen to Elena. Gwen must be going through a whirlwind of emotions, hope coming and going without warning, but he needed to stay in control of his own feelings. He saw a chance here to help Elena convince his father to alter their agreement.

“If Arthur and I come to resent our inevitable marriage,” Elena continued, “we might bicker endlessly or start to pit our different kingdoms’ needs against each other. An unhappy king and queen will hurt their kingdom just as much as a happy king and queen will help it.”

Uther stared at her, evidently attempting to come up with a response.

Arthur cleared his throat. “That is a *very* sound point, Princess Elena. I cannot help but agree. I too want our kingdoms to grow a strong alliance, but it can only be detrimental for Camelot and Gawant both if we cannot marry each other happily.”

Uther gave him a sharp look, but Arthur held his ground. “There must be a way to properly determine after a year whether Elena and I would truly be suited for each other.” He turned to face Elena. He spoke to everyone in the room, but he wanted to make this promise specifically to her. “I vow to court Elena with full devotion, to seek to unite our hearts as well as

our kingdoms, within the next year. However, I will not burden her or her kingdom with an unhappy marriage and thus a weakened alliance.”

Elena smiled at him then, truly smiled. Her eyes lit up warmly and her cheeks flushed just slightly. “I vow the same devotion. And I insist that the alliance between our two kingdoms be based on the friendship of our two kingdoms, only to be strengthened but never hindered by a potential marriage.”

King Godwyn came forward and placed his hands on their shoulders. “My daughter and Prince Arthur have spoken wisely,” he said. “Both of you will make wonderful rulers when your time comes.” He turned to Uther. “I accept the conditions our children have proposed. And I desire our kingdoms to remain friends as we are, Uther. What do you say?”

Uther glanced between them. Arthur hoped his expression was as confident and encouraging as Elena’s and Godwyn’s seemed to be. Finally, his father nodded.

“In one year’s time, if we determine that Prince Arthur and Princess Elena’s marriage will only hinder our alliance, then they will be released from their engagement and thus their marriage obligations. But until then,” he clarified, a little louder, “they will court each other with every intention of marrying next year.” He nodded curtly and stepped back for the priest to continue conducting the ceremony.

Arthur couldn’t help grinning at Elena, who returned a pleased smile. How had she charmed his father into revising the terms of the alliance? Perhaps she didn’t realize how stubborn Uther could be, but whatever the case, he was just grateful she’d had the courage to speak her mind.

As the priest went on with the ceremony, he glanced over at Gwen and Merlin. Their faces held a mix of emotions. Merlin seemed concerned, but Gwen nodded at him while trying to keep her expression stoic. She understood his commitment and wouldn’t do anything to keep him from fulfilling it. But there was hope there—quiet, unbearable hope.

He tore his gaze away from Gwen’s heartbreak and told himself he was doing the right thing. Instead, he studied Elena, who was unabashedly studying him in turn. What did she think of him? Was she just as doubtful as him that they would ever love each other? Perhaps—why else would she insist that they change the terms of their engagement?

He would find out what she thought of him soon enough. Arthur could only hope the year would pass quickly and bring him true love indeed, even if it couldn’t be with Gwen.