

THE DANCER IN THE WOODS

A king should not get lost, Arthur chided himself. He looked about the bog that had stifled him for nearly an hour. It seemed to stretch out in all directions. Careful retracing of his steps would take hours.

Unfortunately, he did not have hours. The sun had reached the top of the trees. As it disappeared below the hills, his hopes for seeing past the bog and finding the direction home would disappear as well.

It was the fifth time in as many months that he had gotten lost in the woods. The first two times he had been hunting and the excitement of the chase separated him from his party. More recently, he had merely gone into the woods by himself, looking for solitude and the sounds of birds. Inevitably, without being conscious of it, he had wandered away from familiar paths.

Not that he minded being lost. It was a welcome change from Camelot, where days were filled with petitions and quarrels, advisors and envoys, and the endless mutterings about Lancelot and Guinevere. Being responsible for order in the kingdom was a very heavy mantle. He was not responsible for anything that happened in the woods. Perhaps it was not by chance that he was getting lost.

For nearly an hour he had tried to turn west toward the setting sun, but was stymied by the impenetrable bog. So he went deeper into the woods to find a way around it, trying to keep in mind where the sun had dipped below the trees.

In the sunlight, the woods had been friendly and comforting. Without the sun, they became dark and ominous. Every sound and movement was a potential peril. The darkened woods grew suddenly quiet, a frequent sign of humans being present. Instinctively, Arthur reached for his sword and carefully scanned the surrounding trees. Forms of men began to emerge, in front, beside, and behind him.

“My name is Arthur. I come in peace.” His voice was strong, but he detected a quiver of doubt as he spoke the word “peace.” The encircling men responded in a strange tongue. One emerged and barked commands to the others, which stopped the menacing advance. Then the leader addressed Arthur in his own language, Briton.

“We know of you, Arthur. You are the king of a people who give us no peace and force us to roam the woods. Put up your sword, for it is useless against these numbers. You will stay with us this night and in the morning our council will decide your fate.”

They appeared to be Rovers, dark in complexion and short in stature, but more than capable of riddling his body with deadly arrows. Arthur sheaved his sword and walked toward the spokesman who was conferring with several others.

“We need to blindfold you, Arthur. If tomorrow’s decision is to allow you to return, then it is important that you not be able to recognize the way into our camp.”

Arthur accepted the blindfold, even though he doubted that he would ever be able to find this place again. Walking with the blindfold was difficult, however. It took the aid of two of his captors to steer him over roots and under branches. The time seemed endless, but his legs told him that he had traveled not much more than a mile.

His first sign of the camp was the smell of smoke from a fire. Voices followed the trail of smoke and Arthur sensed that he was approaching a clearing. The party stopped.

“We will remove your blindfold, Arthur, but we cannot let you wear a sword into our camp.” It was a reasonable request, although Arthur had never let another wield his sword, Excalibur.

“I trust no man with my sword,” he replied.

“Then we will give it to our priestess. No man will dare take it from her.”

That was a fair compromise. The blindfold was removed and Arthur, in turn, removed his sword. He was grateful for the restored ability to move without assistance and for the opportunity to observe these strange people. If he could learn enough about them, he was confident that he could persuade them to return him to Camelot in the morning.

A woman wearing ceremonial robes approached. She appeared to be a priestess, so Arthur yielded her his sword. She accepted it solemnly, and returned to a ceremonial tent. Unarmed, Arthur was free to roam about the camp.

Food was being cooked around a single fire. Small game was roasted on spits and a large cauldron hung from a tripod made of three long poles. Everyone contributed vegetables to the cauldron and took a piece of the roasted game. Arthur too was allowed to share, although he had contributed nothing.

“Everyone” was a collection of forty people, ranging from infants to elders. It was about as large a group as could sit around a large fire and stay warm. One young woman stayed by Arthur, making sure that he got something to eat. She spoke Briton. When Arthur asked where she had learned the language, she

explained that she had grown up in a Briton village and wandered off after her parents had died. When the Rovers found her, she was close to starvation.

Arthur asked her name.

“Etain,” she replied.

“An ancient name,” Arthur commented, “a woman who captivated anyone who beheld her.”

“So I am told,” the young woman responded, “but I failed to captivate anyone in the village where my parents died. I was small and had no relatives, so I doubt that anyone searched for very long when I wandered off.”

“Briton children often go unnoticed,” Arthur sympathized. “So many die before they come of age.”

Arthur asked if there were other bands like this one. There were many, she replied. They kept the bands small so that it would be easier to hunt and easier to avoid the attention of the Britons.

“The people who till the soil have little love for those who recognize no boundaries,” she explained.

The people who recognized no boundaries honored the tradition of the circle. They sat in a circle and shared food and endless chatter. When the food was consumed and instruments appeared, they danced in a circle.

Etain pulled Arthur to his feet and made him part of the dance. He did not know the steps, but Etain was a patient teacher. Soon he became lost in the rhythm, in the movement, and in the irrepressible joy of the communal celebration. The dance lasted longer than his legs could endure, so he broke from the circle and sat back from the fire, grateful to give his legs a rest.

Several dancers slapped him on the back, seeming to congratulate him for dancing as long as he did. Arthur had counted on his arts of persuasion to save his life the next morning, but it was his dancing that appeared to guarantee his safe return.

The circle broke apart as the older members stopped to rest, but the younger people stayed on their feet. The rhythm quickened and the steps became more sensuous. The uninhibited exuberance of the early dancing, gave way to the self-conscious movements of courtship. Young men displayed their strength and

speed. Young women displayed their grace and form. Each vied to outdo the other in energy and intensity.

Some began to pair off and wander into the woods. Many remained, Etain among them, and the music changed into a slow and sensuous dance. Arms and hips swayed to the rhythm as the dancers circled the fire. Men chose women, and women chose men: some to dance and some to sit by the fire.

Etain chose Arthur. She pulled him to his feet again and stepped back. Lifting her arms above her head, her lower body followed the pulsing of the drums. The skirt that wrapped her hips swung wide with each strong movement, then back against her thighs and calves. The cloth more revealed than concealed the lovely form beneath. The blouse atop the skirt clung to the perspiration about her breasts, revealing their shape and firmness. She smiled at Arthur's obvious attention, the smile adding beauty to her face and grace to the undulations of her limbs.

Arthur was moved to respond. He leaped and spun, dancing about his lithesome hostess, displaying his strength and observing her grace, until the two formed a circle unto themselves. Etain advanced within that circle, and Arthur, uncomfortable with the closeness, retreated.

Etain followed. Gradually she moved him back into the woods. There, she wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a long and passionate kiss. Arthur held her against his chest, his hands gliding along the curves of her supple back. She took those hands and placed them beneath her blouse where they embraced her slender waist.

Deft fingers rose up her sides, stroking the ribcage that expanded and contracted with Etain's ever deepening breaths. They found her breasts, kneaded and stroked them, then freed them from the cover of the blouse.

Etain raised her arms as Arthur lifted the blouse over her head. Keeping them raised, she broke once more into a dance. Her body twirled and swayed before Arthur. Then she lowered her hands and pulled him in to join her.

Arthur was awash in visions of bare arms, breasts and back. Etain was behind him, lifting off his jerkin; in front of him, loosening his belt. Then she twirled away and untied her skirt, stopping when it slid onto the ground. Her breasts rose and fell with her rapid breaths, and her skin glistened with perspiration. Arthur embraced the warm and wondrous woman, then lowered her onto the ground where he began to explore her strong and shapely limbs.

When their passion cooled, Etain rose and led Arthur to a tent where she kept her blanket. They slept that night beneath the blanket, two naked bodies pressed against each other for comfort and warmth.

Arthur woke before Etain, and the touch of her slender body brought back the memories of the evening's pleasures. It also brought on thoughts of his wife, sleeping miles away. She would feel betrayed by this event. As he watched the young woman's easy breathing, Arthur realized that he had moved beyond a brief betrayal. Etain had sparked a passion and an energy that filled his limbs and made the world seem lighter. He did not want to lose that feeling. He wanted her to be a part of his life.

"A dancer, Arthur, and you want to bring her here to live in Camelot. I suppose you gave your word to do this as the price for your ransom."

It was two days after his return. Arthur had avoided Guinevere at first. He felt guilty for betraying her, although he had long suspected that she had betrayed him many times with Lancelot. The awkwardness, unfortunately, only increased as he delayed the inevitable confrontation. Now he was feeling more awkward than ever.

“No, they had no desire for her to come. I want her here because I love her. She responds to me the same way that you do to Lancelot.”

There, it was said. Neither spoke or moved for several moments, letting the words linger in the silence. Arthur had expected a burst of anger. Instead he saw a face drained of emotion. He spoke again before the woman’s emotion returned with unbridled fury.

“All they sought for ransom was a law prohibiting attacks on Rovers.”

Arthur was far more comfortable speaking of politics than passion. Guinevere responded in kind, avoiding any talk of love or devotion.

“She is free to come if I can live with Lancelot. Then the four of us would be burned at the stake together.”

Arthur had the same thoughts. He also found it hard to envision Etain dancing outside the circle of the Rovers. “I don’t know what to do,” was all that he could manage to say. “Perhaps the four of us should talk.”

“That might help.” Guinevere said, without conviction. “We cannot do it here. Maybe we can get lost together on one of your ramblings.”

Arthur could sense her anger rising. “That should not be difficult,” he retorted. His self-deprecation broke the tension in the room, creating a pause large enough to allow him to escape.

“I will see to the arrangements,” was all that he said. He left Guinevere in her chamber, happy to avoid the fury that was sure to follow.

They settled on a picnic in a secluded part of the woods. Etain had picked the spot. Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere rode out into the forest, following a boy who was serving as the messenger between Etain and Arthur. Etain met them at a clearing. She dismissed the guide and led them to a path that ended at a small lake. They could safely swim or make love as they chose, without fear of others passing by.

At first, no one chose anything but to eat. Arthur introduced Etain to his wife and friend, and gave them a brief history of her life with the Rovers. Lancelot asked polite questions, but Guinevere maintained a stony silence.

Finally, Etain came to the point of their meeting: “Do you expect me to live in Camelot, Arthur?”

“That had been my thought,” Arthur responded.

“And I suppose that I would have to learn Briton dances and mingle with the ladies of the court?”

“That would be customary,” Arthur said sadly, seeing the purpose of her questions and realizing that she would only be happy as a Rover.

Lancelot and Guinevere saw it as well. They both rose together and strolled away, ostensibly to give Arthur and Etain time by themselves.

“You could no more live in Camelot than I could be a Rover,” Arthur said softly when the other two had left. Etain shook her head silently in agreement.

“Which means,” Arthur continued, “that we can share no more together than our passion for the dance. But that dance takes place in a circle which I can only visit and you can never leave.”

They both realized that this would be their last time together, and the pain of that realization denied them any joy in the

remaining moments. Etain gave Arthur a parting kiss and mounted her horse. The king stood and watched sadly as the dancer rode out of his life.

“It is time to go,” Arthur announced. “Lance, Ginny, it is time to be getting back.” The two lovers were not far away. They quietly returned and packed up the food. He gave them a glance that said he had no heart for a second painful discussion: their own infidelities to the king. The three rode back to Camelot in silence and talked no more of the dancer in the woods.

