

The Almost Queen

When you spend most of your life planning your Ever After with a girl, it feels strange to be planning your wedding to a boy.

A boy who'd been avoiding Agatha for months.

She couldn't sleep, dread brewing in her stomach. Her mind flurried with all the things left to do before the big day, but that wasn't the real reason she was still awake. No, it was something else: a memory of the boy she was about to marry . . . a memory she couldn't bear to think about. . . .

Tedros, stained with tears and slung over a man's shoulder. Tedros unleashing



a primal scream, so pained and shattering that sometimes Agatha could hear nothing else—

She rolled over, burying her head under a pillow.

It had been six months since that day: the day of the coronation.

She hadn't slept well since.

Agatha felt Reaper tossing tetchily at the foot of the bed, her restlessness keeping him up. Agatha sighed, feeling sorry for him, and tried to focus on her breaths. Little by little, her mind began to ease. She was always better when she was doing something to help someone else, even if it was falling asleep to spare her bald, mashed-up cat. . . . If only she could do something to help her prince too, Agatha thought. Together they always managed to work things ou—

Click.

Her heart stopped.

The door.

She listened closely, hearing Reaper's soft snores and the sound of the latch creaking open.

Agatha pretended to sleep as her hand inched forward, probing for the knife on her night table.

She'd kept the knife there ever since she'd arrived at Camelot. She had to—Tedros earned enemies here long before he'd come to take his place as king. Even if these enemies were in jail now, they had spies everywhere, desperate to kill him and his future queen. . . .

And now the door to her chamber was opening.

No one was allowed in her hall at this hour. No one was allowed in her *wing*.

Moonlight spilled onto her back through the cracked-open door. Her breaths shallowed as she heard footsteps muffle against the marble floor. A shadow crept up her neck, stretching onto the bedsheets.

Agatha gripped the knife harder.

Slowly a weight sank into the mattress behind her.

Hold, she told herself.

The weight grew heavier. Closer.

Hold.

She could hear its breath.

Hold.

The shadow reached for her—

Now.

With a gasp, Agatha swiveled, swinging the knife for the intruder's neck before he seized her wrist and pinned her to the bed, the knife a millimeter from his throat.

Agatha panted with terror as she and the intruder stared into the wide whites of each other's eyes.

In the dark, it was all she could see of him, but now she felt the heat of his skin and smelled his fresh, dewy sweat, and all the fear seeped out of her body. Bit by bit, she let him pry the knife away before he exhaled and dropped into the pillow beside her. It all happened so fast, so softly, that Reaper never stirred.

She waited for him to speak or pull her to his chest or tell

her why he'd been avoiding her all this time. Instead he just curled into a ball against her, whimpering like a tired dog.

Agatha stroked his silky hair, mopping up the sweat on his temples with her fingertips, and let him snuffle into her nightgown.

She'd never seen him cry. Not like this, so scared and defeated.

But as she held him, his breaths settled, his body surrendering to her touch, and he glanced up at her with the faintest of smiles. . . .

Then his smile vanished.

Someone was watching them. A tall, turbaned woman looming in the doorway, her gleaming teeth gnashed tight.

And just like that, Tedros was gone as quick as he came.

Splinters of August sun streamed through the window onto the chandelier, refracting light into Agatha's eyes.

Blinking groggily, she could see missing crystals in the chandelier, covered in cobwebs like an old gravestone.

She hugged her pillow to her chest. It still smelled like him. Reaper slithered up from the foot of the bed, sniffing at the pillow, poised to slash it to shreds, before Agatha shot him a look. Her cat slunk back to the foot of the bed. *He's improving at least*, Agatha thought; the first night in the castle, he'd peed in Tedros' shoe.

Voices echoed in her wing. She wouldn't be alone much longer.

Agatha sat up in her baggy black nightgown, peering at

her room. It was three times the size of her old house in Gaval-don, with dusty gem-crusted mirrors, a sagging settee, and a two-hundred-year-old desk of ivory and bone. Clutching her pillow like a life raft, she soaked in the quiet coming off the cracked marble tiles dyed robin's-egg blue and the matching walls inlaid with mottled gold flowers. The queen's chamber was like everything at Camelot: royal from afar, tarnished up close. This applied to her too—she was living in the queen's quarters but she wasn't even queen yet.

The wedding was still two months away.

A wedding that was making her uneasier each day.

Once upon a time, Agatha had imagined she'd live happily ever after with Sophie in Gaval-don. The two of them would be proud owners of a cottage in town, where they'd have tea and toast each morning, then jaunt off to Mr. Deauville's Storybook Shop, now the A&S Bookshop, since she and Sophie would take it over once the old man died. After work, she'd help pick herbs and flowers that Sophie would use to make her beauty creams, before they'd visit Agatha's mother on Graves Hill for dinners of lamb-brain stew and lizard quiche (steamed prunes and cucumbers for Sophie, of course). How ordinary their life would be together. How *happy*. Friendship was all they needed.

Agatha squeezed the pillow harder. *How things change.*

Now her mother was dead, Sophie was Dean of Evil at a magical school, and Agatha was marrying King Arthur's son.

No one was more excited about the wedding than Sophie, who'd sent letter after letter from her faraway castle with

sketches of dresses and cakes and china that she insisted Agatha use for her big day. (*“Dear Aggie, I haven’t heard back from you about the chiffon veil swatches I sent. Or the proposed canapés. Really, darling, if you don’t want my help just tell me. . . .”*)

Agatha could see these letters piled on the desk, coated in spidery trails of dust. Every day she told herself she would answer them, but she never did. And the worst part was she didn’t know why.

Footsteps grew louder outside her room.

Agatha’s stomach churned.

It’d been this way for six months. She felt more and more anxious while Tedros grew more and more withdrawn. Last night was the closest they’d come to speaking about what happened on coronation day and neither of them had even said a word. She knew he was embarrassed . . . devastated . . . ashamed. . . . But she couldn’t help him if he didn’t talk to her. And he couldn’t talk to her if he was never *with* her.

More voices now. More footsteps.

Mouth dry, Agatha snatched the glass of water from her night table. Empty. So was the pitcher.

Reaper slid off the bed, prowling towards the faded double doors.

She needed time alone with Tedros. Time where they weren’t living separate lives. Time where they could be honest and intimate with each other like they used to be. Time where they could be *themselves* again—

The doors crashed open and four maids paraded in, each wearing the same draping robe in a different shade of

pastel—peach, pistachio, grapefruit, rose—as if they were a box of mixed macarons. They were led by a tall, tan woman in lavender with dark, smoky eyes, shiny red lipstick, and wild black hair barely cooped by a turban. She carried a leather-bound notebook in one hand and in the other, a feather-pen so long it looked like a whip.

“Breakfast with the wedding florist at seven in the Blue Tower Dining Room; then meetings with tailor candidates in twenty-minute intervals to decide who should stitch the wedding linens; then an interview with the *Camelot Courier* for their Wedding Preview Edition. At nine, you’ll visit the Camelot Zoo to pick the official wedding doves; they have several species, each a varying shade of white. . . .”

Agatha could barely listen, because Peach and Pistachio had hoisted her out of bed and were already scrubbing her with scalding towels, while Grapefruit shoved a toothbrush in her mouth and Rose smeared her face with an array of potions, like Sophie used to do, only without Sophie’s charisma or humor.

“Then a signing of *The Tale of Sophie and Agatha* at Books & Crannies to raise funds for the castle’s plumbing renovation,” the lavender woman continued in a crisp, posh accent, “followed by a lunch fundraiser at the Spansel Club, where you’ll read a storybook to children of rich patrons whose donations will repair the drawbridge . . .”

“Um, Lady Gremlaine? Is there time for me to see Tedros today?” muffled Agatha beneath a blue gown the women were tugging over her. “We haven’t had a meal alone in ages—”

“After lunch, you’ll begin waltz lessons to prepare for your wedding dance, then etiquette training so you don’t make a mess of yourself at the wedding feast, and finally, history class about the triumphs and disasters of royal weddings past so that yours might end in the annals of the first rather than the last,” Lady Gremlaine finished.

Agatha gritted her teeth as her maids fussed with her hair and makeup like the nymphs in the Groom Room used to. “Dancing, etiquette, history . . . it’s the School for Good all over again. Only at school, I actually had time with my prince.”

Lady Gremlaine raised her eyes to Agatha. She snapped her book shut so sharply a gemstone fell out of the mirror. “Well, since you have no further questions, your chambermaids here will see that you get to your breakfast on time,” she said, turning for the door. “The king needs me by his side every possible moment—”

“I’d like to see Tedros today,” Agatha insisted. “Please add it to my schedule.”

Lady Gremlaine stopped cold and turned, her lips a tight red slash. The chambermaids subtly backed away from Agatha.

“I’d say you saw more than enough of him last night. Against the *rules*,” said Lady Gremlaine. “A king cannot be alone in your room before the wedding.”

“Tedros should have the right to see me whenever he wishes,” said Agatha. “I am his queen.”

“Not yet, Princess,” said Lady Gremlaine coolly.

“I will be after the wedding,” Agatha challenged, “which I spend all my time planning like some brainless biddy when I’d

rather be with Tedros, helping him run the kingdom of which he is now king. And seeing that you're Chief Steward in service to the king *and* future queen, surely that's something you can arrange."

"I see," said Lady Gremlaine, moving towards Agatha. "The castle is crumbling, your king wears a crown still in dispute, you have spies plotting to kill you, the former queen and her traitorous knight have been in hiding since the coronation, and the *Royal Rot*, a rogue publication intent on overthrowing the monarchy, calls you, amongst other things, 'a gilded celebrity from an amateur fairy tale destined to bring more shame to Tedros than his own mother once did.'"

Lady Gremlaine smiled, lording over Agatha. "And here you are, still pining for your days at school and a little kissy-time in the hall with the Class Captain."

"No. That's not it at all. I want to *help* him," Agatha retorted, enduring the onslaught of her steward's perfume. "I'm fully aware of the problems we face, but Tedros and I are supposed to be a team—"

"Then why hasn't he ever asked to see *you*?" said Lady Gremlaine.

Agatha flinched.

"In fact, except for his momentary lapse last night, which he assured me will never happen again, the king hasn't mentioned your name once," Lady Gremlaine added.

Agatha said nothing.

"You see, I'm afraid King Tedros has better things to do, trying to bring Camelot out of *shame* in time for the wedding,"

Lady Gremlaine went on. “A wedding that must be so magnificent, so memorable, so *inspiring* that it will erase all doubts that rose from that humiliating coronation. And it is a wedding that, per thousands of years of tradition, is up to the future queen to plan. That’s your job. That’s how you can *help* your king.” She leaned in, her nose almost touching Agatha’s. “But if you would like me to tell King Tedros that you find your responsibilities beneath you and that you have questioned every one of our decisions, down to the colors of your wardrobe, the importance of baths, and your choice of footwear, and now, on top of that, would like him to interrupt his urgent efforts to prove his place as king so he can make you feel part of a *team* . . . then by all means, Princess. Let’s see what he has to say.”

Agatha swallowed, her neck rashing red. Her eyes drifted down to her clumps. “No . . . that’s okay. I’m sure I’ll see him tomorrow,” she said softly, looking back up.

But Lady Gremlaine was gone and all that was left were her pastel minions, ready to whisk the princess to a breakfast she would have no time to eat.

Halfway through the day, Agatha was about to turn runaway bride.

She’d endured weeks of this with a forced smile—the same deadly dull routine of inspecting a thousand place-cards and cakes and candles and centerpieces, even though they all looked the same to her and she’d be happy marrying Tedros in a bat

cave (she'd prefer it actually; no room for guests). Interspersed with all this tedium were appearances for "Camelot Beautiful," a queen-led campaign to raise funds for the broken-down castle that had been left to blight after King Arthur had died. Agatha believed in the cause wholeheartedly and had a high tolerance for nonsense—she was friends with Sophie after all—but Lady Gremlaine seemed determined to humiliate her with each day's schedule, whether making her sing the anthem at the Woods Rugby Cup (even the Camelot team covered their ears) or ride a bull at the Spring Fair (it bucked her into a mound of poo) or kiss the highest bidder in a Smooch-the-Princess auction (a toothless hoodlum who Lady Gremlaine insisted had won fair and square).

Guinevere had warned Agatha to expect resistance from her new warden. Lady Gremlaine had been Chief Steward when Guinevere was Arthur's wife, until she and Guinevere had a falling-out and Guinevere had her dismissed. But after Guinevere's disappearance and Arthur's death, his Council of Advisors took over Camelot since Tedros wasn't yet sixteen—and these advisors brought Lady Gremlaine *back*. Now with Guinevere returned to the castle, surely Gremlaine would be prickling to exert control over Guinevere's son and his new queen. Even worse, the old fusspot couldn't be fired until Tedros' coronation was sealed.

Knowing this, Agatha had tried to befriend her steward, but Lady Gremlaine hated her at first sight. Agatha had no idea why, but clearly the woman didn't want her marrying

Camelot's king. It was as if Lady Gremlaine thought if she just tried hard enough, Agatha would give up her groom before the wedding.

I'd sooner die, Agatha vowed.

So for the last six months, she'd woken up each morning ready for the fight.

But today was the day that broke her.

First there was the florist, who shoved Agatha's face in so many effluvious bouquets over the course of an hour that she'd left red-eyed and nose dripping. Next there were the six tailors who showed her dozens of linens that looked exactly the same. Then came the reporter from the *Camelot Courier*, a miserably cheerful young girl named Bettina, who arrived sucking a red lollipop.

"Lady Gremlaine already scripted all your answers, so let's have an off-the-record chat for *fun*," she diddled, before launching into an array of startlingly personal questions about Agatha's relationship with Tedros: "What does he wear when he sleeps?" "Does he have a nickname for you?" "Do you ever catch him looking at other girls?"

"No," Agatha said to the last, about to add, "especially not fart bubbles like you," but she held her tongue through nearly an hour of this before she'd had enough.

"So do you and Tedros want children?" Bettina wisped.

"Why? Are you looking for parents?" Agatha snapped.

The meeting was over after that.

She nearly lost her temper again at the Spansel Club fundraiser when she had to read *The Lion and the Snake*, a famous

Camelot storybook, to rich, bratty children, who kept interrupting her because they already knew the story. Now in her carriage after picking wedding doves at the zoo, Agatha slumped over in her sweaty gown, thinking of the waltz and etiquette lessons ahead, and sucked back tears.

“The king hasn’t mentioned your name once,” Lady Grem-laine echoed.

She’d tried to pretend that the meddling bat had lied. But Agatha knew she hadn’t.

Even when Agatha had run into Tedros in the castle these past few months, he’d tell her how pretty she looked or prattle something inane about the weather or ask her if she was comfortable in her quarters before shuttling away like a spooked squirrel. Last night in her room was the first time she’d seen him without a flushed, plastic smile on his face that told her not to ask how he was doing because he was doing just fine.

But he wasn’t fine, of course. And she didn’t know how to help him.

Agatha dabbed at her eyes. She had come to Camelot for Tedros. To be *his* queen. To stand by him in his finest and darkest hours. But instead they were both alone, fending for themselves.

It was clear he needed her. That’s why he’d crawled into her arms last night. So why couldn’t he just admit it? She knew deep down it wasn’t her fault. But she still couldn’t help feeling rejected and hurt.

Reaper curled up in her lap, reminding her he was there.

She rubbed his bald head. “If only we could go back to our graveyard before we ever thought about boys.”

Reaper spat in agreement.

Agatha gazed out the window of her blue-and-gold carriage as it rolled into Maker’s Market, the main thoroughfare of Camelot City. Given the conditions of its roads, her driver normally avoided it and took the longer route back to the castle, but they were already running late for her wedding waltz lesson and she didn’t want to make a poor impression on her new teacher. Dirt kicked up around the carriage from unpaved streets, clouding her view of the bright-colored tents, each carrying a flag with Camelot’s crest: two eagles, flanking the sword Excalibur on a blue shield.

But as the dust cleared, Agatha noticed a stark divide between the rich villagers in expensive coats and jewels as they shopped along the main street and the thousands of grimy, skeletal peasants living in crumbling shanties in the alley-ways adjoining the market. Royal guards patrolled these slums, forcefully blocking any peasants who drew too close to wealthy patrons entering or leaving the tents. Agatha slid down her window to get a better view, but her driver rapped his horsewhip on the glass—

“Lay low, milady,” he said.

Agatha pushed the window back up. When she first rode into her new kingdom six months ago, she’d seen the same slum cities smack in the middle of Camelot. As Tedros explained then, his father had led Camelot to a golden age, where every citizen improved his or her fortune. But upon

Arthur's death, his advisors had allied with the rich, passing shady laws to reclaim land and wealth from the middle-class, plunging them into poverty. Tedros had vowed to undo these laws and resettle those without homes, but in the past half-year, the divide between rich and poor had only gotten worse. Why hadn't he succeeded? Had he not seen how far his father's legacy had fallen? How could he let his own kingdom languish like this? If *she* was king—

Agatha exhaled. But she wasn't, was she. She wasn't even queen yet. And from the way Tedros acted last night, he was clearly frustrated too. He was managing Camelot by himself and had no one to help him: not her, not his father, not his mother, not Lancelot, not even Merlin, the last three of who'd been gone for the past six months—

SPLAT! A black, mashed hunk of food hit the window. Agatha spun to see a filthy peasant yell, "SO-CALLED KING AND HIS ALMOST QUEEN!"

Suddenly, others in the slum cities spotted her carriage and globbed onto the chant—"SO-CALLED KING AND HIS ALMOST QUEEN!"—while pelting her vehicle with food, shoes, and handfuls of dirt. Her driver beat the horses harder, racing them out of the market.

Blood boiling, Agatha wanted to leap out of the carriage and tell those goons that none of this was her or Tedros' fault—not the slum cities, not the coronation, not a once-legendary kingdom gone to shambles—

How would that help anything? Agatha scolded herself. If she were starving in the streets, wouldn't she blame herself and

Tedros too? They were the ones in power now, even if they hadn't caused the kingdom's fall. The poor and suffering had no time for the past, only for progress. But this wasn't school anymore, where progress could be charted with rankings and a scoreboard. This was real life and despite the dismal results thus far, they were two teenagers trying to be good leaders.

Or Tedros was, surely.

She was on her way to dancing lessons.

Agatha sulked as the carriage rumbled up the hill towards the bone-white gates of Camelot, which the royal guards pulled open for their arrival. It didn't matter that the gates were streaked with rust or the towers ahead faded by weather and soot. Camelot Castle was still a magnificent sight, built into jagged gray cliffs over the Savage Sea. Under the August sun, the white spires took on a liquid sheen, capped with rounded blue turrets that speared through low-flying clouds.

The carriage stopped short of a gap in the cliffs, leading to the castle's entrance.

"Drawbridge is still broken from the coronation, milady," the driver sighed, pulling into a carriage house at the edge of the cliff. "We'll have to use the ropes to cross."

Agatha barreled out of the carriage herself before the driver could open her door. *Enough whining*, she thought, as she wobbled along the unsteady rope bridge that even honored guests had to use until the embarrassing drawbridge problem could be fixed. Tedros wasn't haggling over when they would have time alone. Tedros wasn't hounding her about being a team. Tedros was working for his *people*, like she should be.

Maybe Lady Gremlaine was right, Agatha confessed. Maybe she should stop obsessing over what she couldn't do as queen and start focusing on the one thing she could. Indeed, a wedding filled with love and beauty and intention might be just the way to restore the kingdom's faith in them after the coronation. A wedding could show everyone that Camelot's best days were to come . . . that her and Tedros' Ever After had brought them here for a reason . . . that they could find a happy ending not just as King and Queen, but for the people too, even those who'd lost hope. . . .

Head held high, Agatha marched back into the castle, eager for her wedding lessons now and determined to do her very best.

That is, until she found out who was teaching them.