

An Inquisition of Loyalty

Heather Mandel

Bang Bang Bang.

The vigorous thuds on the door pulled Martyn out of his peaceful slumber, leaving him gasping in the earliest hours of the morning with only one thought on his mind. Fuck. They found me.

“Hmm? Wassthat?” The other occupant of the room stirred, voice slurring with sleepy curiosity.

“It’s nothing to worry about, love.” Martyn lied, hoping that the trembling of his hands wasn’t noticeable. It felt like his heart was pounding in tune with the thudding knocks as he pushed himself out of bed, the cold air making him shiver as he slipped out from the safety of the blankets. “Go back to sleep.” He pulled the sheets up, ensuring that his partner was fully covered and warm before slipping out of bed, silently mourning the lost comfort of his warm blankets.

Bang Bang Bang.

“Open this door!” A gruff voice roared, volume more at place for shouting through a festival crowd and not an oaken door in the middle of a silent night. “By order of the king! Open this door!”

Martyn swallowed back the lump in his throat as his sleep-addled mind processed what, or more specifically *who*, he’d heard. “Coming, coming!” Martyn yelled back. His return call went unacknowledged if heard, and the knocking didn’t cease. He tugged on his robe, lighting a candle to guide his way through the dark house as he traipsed down from his bedroom towards the awaiting door. *Breathe, Martyn. You can do this.* Instead of opening the door immediately, he paused with his hand on the knob, waiting for the right moment.

Bang Bang-

Abruptly, Martyn flung the door open with a flourish, stepping back as the knight missed his swing and came stumbling a step into the household, startled.

“Samuel, good sir!” Casual smirk slipping onto his face like an old tunic, Martyn forced himself to keep a cheerful cadence, somewhat marred by the sleep-rough quality of it. He stepped forward with a grand sweeping gesture, subtly angling himself between Samuel and the rest of the house as a barrier. “What a delight for you to have come all the way here to my humble abode! Would you like some tea? Crumpets?”

Samuel recovered quickly from his brief stumble, straightening up and adjusting an askew piece of his armor before turning to Martyn fully, ice blue eyes taking in the sleep-ruffled state he was in. For a long few moments, all he did was stare at Martyn like he was some sort of ghost. Granted, Martyn was sure he looked like quite a sight, blonde hair sticking up at odd angles and wrapped in an old pink bathrobe that he wouldn’t be caught dead in around anyone else.

Samuel, by contrast, looked like he’d stepped straight out of Martyn’s memories, if those memories were significantly more *tired*. Every aspect of his appearance, from the cropped brown hair to the polished silver armor, seemed to scream professional, but the slow blinks of his eyes and the tense way he held himself betrayed his exhaustion. Even in the direst of times, of sleepless nights guarding the king’s door in times of danger, Samuel had never looked quite like this.

Were the circumstances not what they were, Martyn would have half a mind to consider offering his home as a place to rest. But the sobering realization of what Samuel was here for stilled his tongue.

After a long moment of stunned staring, Samuel seemed to remember his words. “Don’t bother with trivialities. You know *exactly* why I’m here, Martyn.”

“Not to have tea, then?” Martyn sighed, extending the sigh

an extra beat to make sure Samuel got the message. “This isn’t about the king, is it? You realize I haven’t been his servant in about twenty-one moons? I have no information to offer you.”

“... Just say three weeks, man. You don’t have to sound like a pompous jerk every time you talk.” Samuel’s stoicism wavered just a bit, and Martyn couldn’t help but feel proud at still being able to break down the man’s tough façade as easily as ever.

“Oh, but my fine sir!” Martyn exaggerated his accent further, drawing a chuckle out of the other man. “If I myself do not speak like the noblest knights of the court, how ever could you have not mistaken me for some other peasant in this here village?”

“No one else talks like that, and you know it.”

Determined to get at least a proper laugh, Martyn thickened the accent even more. “I doth thinketh that *all* of thine Court spea-keth with such greateth distinction. Like pompous jerks.”

There was the laughter, right on cue, and Martyn couldn’t help but break character to laugh as well, two old friends sharing an age-old joke together. The moment didn’t last nearly as long as Martyn had hoped for however, before Samuel caught his theatrics for what they were. He composed himself quickly, smile dropping back into a hardened gaze, and Martyn mourned the last few shreds of lighthearted banter with his old friend before returning to the topic at hand. “I’m afraid I can’t linger for idle chatter and old jokes. I’m here on business, Martyn.”

“And what business is that?” Martyn feigned innocence.

“You know exactly what I’m here for,” Samuel cut straight through Martyn’s act. He looked almost remorseful as he spoke, which almost dulled Martyn’s offense at his claim. Almost. “Information on the king.”

“I’m afraid I’m as clueless as you are.” Martyn didn’t rise to the accusation, choosing his words carefully. “Twenty moons past and he hasn’t yet reappeared?”

Samuel shook his head, the lines of exhaustion in his face increasing with each passing second. “No, not yet, and no leads either. You’re still the last one who’s seen King Ronan.”

“Is that so?” Martyn raised an eyebrow. “I don’t suppose *that’s* the reason you’re pounding down my door, is it? I hope you realize that having the king’s guard at your door first thing in the morning in a town such as this doesn’t lend well to subtlety.” As Martyn’s gaze wandered to the outside, a light that had been on in the neighbor’s house snuffed out abruptly. *Oops.*

Samuel at least had the decency to look embarrassed, drawing the door closed behind him. “Apologies, Martyn. I may have acted rashly by coming here on such short notice, but you must understand my concern.” Samuel pleaded. “The both of you disappeared on the same night, and I thought... I thought you both were...” He trailed off, unable to bring herself to finish. “But then I hear word of you here, and I knew I had to speak to you. Any lead is a lead, old friend. You have to understand that. What happened?” He seemed genuinely distraught, and part of Martyn yearned to break down, confess to the truth right then and there. But that wasn’t the part of him that won out.

“I was fired, simple as that. My liege dismissed me from his service, told me to pack my bags and leave behind the life I built, and I followed his orders as he requested,” Martyn replied. “Since my duties were no longer needed at the castle, I had no reason to remain nearby. If you had been disgraced by the king, would you have stayed in a place where everyone knows exactly what you once were? I’m sorry that I left without a goodbye, but I felt with the circumstances it was best to leave with haste to not anger the king.”

“The whole palace knows that you left. Gossip travels fast in the kingdom... But I couldn’t stop thinking about it,” Samuel admitted. “It’s incredibly strange timing. Less than a day after King Ronan demotes you without any warning or reason, he goes missing, and you show up here three days later, in the most nowhere part of the kingdom? You have to know that sounds suspicious.” Samuel stepped forwards, ice-blue eyes boring into Martyn’s soul. Not for the first time, Martyn cursed how Samuel was one of the only peo-

ple who could read him. “Why did you both disappear at the same time?”

“Disappearing is a strong way to word it. I was traveling.” Martyn defended, meeting his gaze with equal fervor. “Since my duties were no longer needed at the castle, I had no reason to remain nearby. I wasn’t aware the king had vanished at all until I arrived here.”

“Well, it’s awfully convenient that in your ‘travels,’ you never once came across news of the king’s disappearance. Word travels fast, I’d say.”

“You doubt my loyalty to the crown?” Martyn’s scowl deepened, appalled at Samuel’s audacity. “I have no qualms about my liege. I’ve been in service to the throne for over 20 years and have found nothing but kindness there.” Samuel *knew* this. They had served those decades together, only for Samuel to turn on him at the drop of a hat. Martyn crossed his arms, hoping his face didn’t portray how much the knight’s words stung.

“It’s not your loyalty to the crown that’s in question. It’s your loyalty to the man who wears it.”

Martyn seethed, voice dropping to a growl. “If you came all this way just to wake up all my neighbors, harass me, and accuse me of disloyalty, nay, *treason*, then you must be even more of a fool than you act. My liege has always been a fair and just ruler, far kinder to the foul lots of the kingdom than they ever deserved, and there has never been and will never be a time I wouldn’t lay down my life at his feet. Did you forget who saved me when he had no other reason to? Who took a poor soul off the streets and offered him a place in the palace, gave him food and shelter and work? If you think something as simple as being *fired* would turn me against the king I have so loyally served all this time, then you are not the friend I thought you were.”

Silence hung heavy in the echoes of Martyn’s outburst, words dangling on the thick ropes of tension in the air. Martyn closed his eyes, breathing deeply. When he’d calmed down enough to reopen

them, Samuel was watching him with such a familiar concern that it made his heart ache for times long past. When he spoke again, it was entirely absent of the suspicion that had been laced in his voice throughout this encounter. “I’m sorry, Martyn. I didn’t mean to come into this so accusatory. I know you would do nothing to hurt him.”

The sight of Samuel in distress was almost enough to quench the flame of offense that had burned within Martyn. “I do love the king, you know. Even if you think I don’t.”

“I know you do. I’m just worried... Three weeks have passed with no ransom note, nobody, and no trace of him anywhere. Nothing I’ve done has been enough to find him. It’s like he just disappeared...” Samuel seemed lost in thought for a moment, exhaustion apparent. With a deep breath, he regained his composure, back to looking every bit the regal knight of the king’s court. “Apologies for disturbing you. Have a good night, Martyn.”

As the door clicked shut behind Samuel, Martyn pulled his robe tighter around himself as he traipsed back towards his bedroom. The flickers of candlelight illuminated the room, casting shadows on the figure waiting for him on the bed.

“I had hoped you had gone back to sleep.” Martyn’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“You both were far too loud for anyone in the kingdom to sleep through.” The figure wrapped the blanket tighter around himself, voice slurred with tiredness. “I am truly sorry that my presence is causing you such a headache.”

“That should be none of your worries, my liege.” Martyn hung his robe back onto the hook. “I knew what I was getting into when I brought you out here.”

“Do call me Ronan, won’t you? It’s bad enough being called ‘the king’ by everyone. Or at least go back to calling me *love*.” The sleepy smile on Ronan’s face was almost worth the teasing, and it brought a smile to Martyn’s face in return.

“So you have been listening,” Martyn sighed. “I should’ve known you would eavesdrop.”

“How could I have not? It sounded like a wild beast had gotten in. I figured I’d might have to fend it off once it had eaten you.” Ronan’s joke got a weak laugh out of Martyn.

“The difference between Samuel and a wild beast can be very slim at times. Loud and impatient, but devoutly loyal. Still, he will tire of this hunt in due time,” Martyn quipped back. Stepping over the crown that had been carelessly discarded on the floor last night, he slipped into the bed next to Ronan, who proceeded to wrap the blankets around them both, chasing away the chill. Martyn slotted against him perfectly, one arm wrapping around Ronan to pull him closer. Ronan’s skin felt unearthly soft against his own, as pale hands that had never seen work or turmoil lifted up to cup Martyn’s stubbled cheek as Martyn wondered how he had ever gotten this lucky.

Ronan leaned over him to blow out the candle, the room now lit solely by the moonlight streaming through the windows. In the dim light he looked like some ethereal god, brown hair tumbling past his shoulders in waves, absent of the elaborate braids and threads of gold that once adorned him. The top of his head looked bare without the presence of his crown, and yet he held himself high like a great weight had been removed from him. He looked nothing like the king he was, and Martyn found him all the more beautiful because of it, a view only he was allowed to have. “I feel like I should be offended that you think my best soldier will get bored looking for me.”

“I feel like I should be offended that you think your best soldier is Samuel,” Martyn retorted, unable to fight the jealousy creeping into his stomach. “I’ve fought just as much for you, if not more so.”

“You have,” Ronan agreed immediately, humor melting into fondness. “You have done far more for me than I could ever repay, and even in the absence of my power or wealth, you chose to follow

me. Even despite the accusations thrown against you and questions of loyalty, you have persevered. For that, I am eternally grateful.”

“As if you haven’t done equally much for me.” Martyn countered. “You found me in your chambers with a knife at your throat, and yet you still chose to not only spare me, but bring me in as a servant and companion, knowing that I could turn my back and kill you at any turn.”

“I knew you wouldn’t.” Ronan reached out to tuck strands of Martyn’s hair behind his ear, voice soaked with fondness. “I could tell by how you were trembling that you could not bring yourself to kill me. It was a risk, yes, but you can hardly deny how well it paid off. If either one of us is lucky, then the honor is all mine.”

“I suppose we’ll have to agree to disagree.” Martyn punctuated his statement by leaning in for a kiss, which Ronan happily reciprocated.

“I do wish that this journey would have been easier on you. I should’ve known they would suspect you for my disappearance.”

“Truth be told, it was *my* mistake for thinking we could make it across the border without being discovered. I hadn’t thought people would recognize my face this far out... Or that Samuel could travel so quickly.” Ronan’s only response was a hum of acknowledgement, and with a grin, Martyn added. “And besides... With due respect, power and wealth are not what I fell in love with.” Martyn grinned. “Wealth is a fickle mistress, and power’s not my type.”

The joke wasn’t funny in the slightest, and yet Ronan’s smile turned into proper laughter, and Martyn swore to himself that he’d take on every single member of the Court weaponless just to hear Ronan laugh like that for the rest of their lives. If only his subjects could see their king now, nestled in the arms of a peasant-born servant, expression free of the dark cloud of stress that had become a constant for him in the last few years. Martyn would have loved to see the looks on their faces.

Ronan’s laughter ran its course soon enough, but before the

bedroom could fall into total silence, he asked, quietly, “Do you really think we’ll make it? Across the border?”

“I do, love.” The former servant looped an arm around the shoulder of his former king, tugging him further into a tight embrace. “I’m sure of it.”

Martyn had never expected things to turn out this way. If someone had told his younger self that one day he’d be betraying the country he’d been devoutly loyal to over the years to not only fall in love with the king he’d served, but run away with him, he would have probably laughed in their face. Fate, as he’d found, can lead people down unexpected pathways. But if following this path meant a lifetime of waking up beside his love, of walking side-by-side with him instead of two steps behind, of Ronan pressing soft lips against his cheek without fear of watching eyes, then Martyn would gladly run down that path and never look back.