

The Quest

In a castle, on a hill, there lived a knight. Not a ruined castle with crumbling walls that had long since been breached by an enemy holding the fortress under siege, nor yet a pretty castle with flowers hanging from the windows and vines up which you could climb; it was a strong castle with a keep and battlements, a guardhouse and portcullis, a drawbridge and a moat - and that meant safety. The castle was surrounded on three sides by the moat and the fourth side stood watch over an insurmountable cliff. From its walls, guards could see clearly for a dozen miles in every direction for the Lord of the castle- a certain Arthur the Brave- had seen to it that the forest had been cleared and replaced with fields from which the local peasantry drew an honest living.

The local people thought well of Arthur as he had always treated them fairly and helped whenever trouble had hit. He held the King's Court four times per year where he solved problems and disputes with the wisdom of Solomon. When he collected taxes, he didn't collect money, but rather a portion of the food that each person had grown. This, he held in storage and distributed when the hardest times in winter hit. He maintained a small force of soldiers to govern over his lands keeping law and order, but asked that each able bodied man learn to use a bow or fight with a sword for at least two days each month so that if the need ever arose, they could help him to defend their lands and the castle.

Now, one morning in the spring of 872, a hooded stranger approached the castle escorting a donkey. The road up to the castle was well maintained and so the mud that covered the surrounding fields didn't inhibit him at all. On the donkey's back, the stranger had packed all his worldly belongings and they were covered in a brown blanket to keep the worst of the weather from them. In his hand, the stranger carried a staff - a long straight stick which helped him to walk more easily. The man's grey beard and slow, short steps betrayed him as a man of considerable age. As he approached the outer gate to the castle, he was challenged by one of the guards.

"Stand still," called the guard. "How can we help you?"

The old man looked at him and stood silent for a minute. Once he had caught his breath back, he replied, "I have come to see Lord Arthur. I have a message for him from the King. He is needed for a quest." He spoke calmly and smiled at the guard as he talked.

The guard looked at his friend, another guard standing next to the gate. "What do you think, Eric? Should we let him in?" Eric nodded and so the original guard escorted him through the outer gate and into a bailey. After about five minutes of

walking, the guard told the stranger that he should fasten him donkey up by the stables. This he did and then they both went to see the Commander of the Watch.

The Commander of the Watch told the stranger to wait so that he could inform Lord Arthur of his presence.

"There is an old man here to see you, my Lord," announced the Commander of the Watch.

"Where is he?" asked Lord Arthur. "Bring him in at once."

The stranger was shown into the great hall where Lord Arthur greeted him. Upon seeing Lord Arthur, the stranger pulled back his hood and Arthur exclaimed, "Uncle Merlin. It has been such a long time. How are you?"

"I am fine, thank you. However, the kingdom is in great danger and the king has asked me to come and see you to ask if you would complete a quest."

"Of course," replied Arthur. "What do I need to do?"

Arthur and Merlin sat down and ate a great feast of sausages, chicken and venison followed all manner of vegetables. As they ate their fills, Merlin explained that the Princess Olivia had been captured by a witch and taken to be held hostage in a castle high in the northern mountains. The witch was in league with dragons: finding her and freeing her would be no easy task.

"I shall set off on my quest at first light," said Arthur. "I will take my best friend with me if that is okay. "

"That would probably be a wise thing to do," agreed Merlin. "I have some magic potion for you which will turn you invisible for a couple of hours. It might come in useful. Only use it sparingly though as it has a few pretty nasty side effects."

"Okay. We'll only use it if we absolutely need it."

"Who is your best friend?" asked Merlin.

"He is called Lancelot. He is really brave and honourable. I will go and see him but then I must retire if we are to set off at first light. It is really good to see you again, uncle," said Arthur. With this, he went to see Lancelot and then went to bed.

The next morning, just as the sunlight hit the top of the battlements on the highest sections of the keep, Arthur and Lancelot rose. They packed their saddlebags with food, water and a blanket. Arthur slipped the magic potion into his saddlebag, but didn't say anything about it to Lancelot. Both men were accomplished archers and swordsmen and so both carried a sword and a bow. At the side of each saddlebag, a quiver of arrows dangled down the horses' backs. Merlin came to wish them a safe journey and by the time the light had hit the sundial in the middle of the castle, they were off.

Soon, the castle was a distant memory and the roads started to deteriorate into muddy paths. For several sections of the journey, the friends dismounted their

steeds and led them by the reins, especially when they were travelling through woodland. The lower branches made riding uncomfortable as they were constantly riding into them and banging their heads.

Once they were out of the woods, the two knights remounted their horses and rode. They rode and they rode and they rode until they came to a bridge - Troll's Bridge. As they approached the bridge, both men felt a sense of unease seep through their veins which caused them to shiver.

Arthur halted his horse and turned to Lancelot. "There is something wrong here, my friend. It feels unnatural. Let's wait here a minute and think."

"I agree," replied Lancelot. "I feel like we are being watched."

After a moment's thought, Arthur said to Lancelot, "I see it as we have two choices: firstly, we could charge the bridge and kill whatever appears in our way; I see this as the weaker choice; alternatively, I will go and you wait here and we will see what happens."

"The latter does seem a better way of approaching the situation," agreed Lancelot. "However, I feel that I am a stronger knight than you so I should go onto the bridge first." Without waiting for a reply, Lancelot dug his stirrups into his horse's sides and with a jolt, the great steed jumped forward. As he approached the bridge, Lancelot leaned forwards and whispered in Humphrey's ear - Humphrey being the name of his horse - "Steady boy. Take this slowly."

The wooden beams that ran from side to side of the bridge, creaked as Humphrey's first hoof was placed upon them. Timidly, a second hoof and then a third made their way onto the bridge. As the fourth was just about to touch down, there was a flash!

Humphrey reared up onto his hind legs and it was all that Lancelot could do to hold on. Again and again, the frightened horse reared, kicking its two front legs ahead of him. Lancelot was stunned by the bright light and he still had purple spots in his eyes when he thought he saw a man, the size of a house, standing in front of him.

"This is my bridge and you cannot cross!" yelled the stranger whom Lancelot still could not really see very well. On the other hand though, Arthur could see him and he didn't really like what he saw. He was the ugliest man he had ever seen. His face had a strange green complexion to it. His hands were the size of tennis rackets and he was bald. The clothes he wore were tattered and muddy. As he stood there shouting at Lancelot, the smell he gave off was pungent to say the least. A sharp caustic smell that burnt the back of your throat and your nostrils.

Arthur drew his bow. He loaded an arrow from his quiver (which you will remember was sitting astride his horse, next to the saddlebags). He let loose his bow

and it twanged as it forced the arrow forward. It flew a straight and determined flight deep into the creature's arm.

There was a loud yelp that nearly deafened both knights but before the troll - for that is what he was- could recover, Arthur had let loose another arrow and then a third. The last of these shots found the troll's heart and he collapsed to the ground dead. Arthur mounted his horse and chased after Lancelot who by this time had recovered the full use of his eyes. Both men and their steeds - Humphrey and Jackal- charged across the bridge and kept riding at full pelt for at least another mile.

At this point, they came to a fork in the path. Should they go left or right? Lancelot looked as far ahead as he could but there was no sign of what lay ahead on either path. Arthur said, "I think we should take the left path as that seems to lead uphill and our ultimate destination is the northern mountains. What do you think?"

"Seems reasonable to me."

They pulled the left reign down and gave their horses a gentle nudge with their heels. On they rode for, probably, another couple of hours until the afternoon sun started to fade into evening. At this point, they found a clearing and set up camp. Lancelot gathered wood whilst Arthur caught a couple of rabbits. As the sun finally descended beneath the horizon, the two men could be heard laughing and talking while they feasted on game stew. It was a clear and cold night. The stars could be clearly seen from their clearing. Both men settled for a good night's sleep before they could see what tomorrow would bring.

Arthur woke to the smells and sounds of cooking sausages and bacon, eggs and fried bread. It was a fine day and gentle layer of smoke drifted across the meadow in which they had spent the night. Arthur looked across at his friend, yawned and then said, "How long have you been up?"

"Probably about 2 hours at a guess. The fire had died down and so I went gathering wood to begin with. I checked both our saddlebags and thought that this would be a good meal to start a long day's riding. Was I wrong?"

"You were not, my friend," replied the grateful knight.

After breakfast, the two knights cleaned up their fire and then mounted their horses. They rode and they rode and they rode until they came to a forest.

As they entered the forest, they sensed that they had made a mistake. Before them, the path slithered left and right. Overhanging trees leaned in as if to listen to your every word. Great oaks, hung with lichen or strangled by ivy, lay both north and south of the path which meandered this way and that, not seeming know where it was going. The light soon left them and they were caught in a perpetual gloom, even though it was not midday. The dusk made it difficult to see much further than ten or

fifteen feet ahead and on the odd occasion, it made seeing the low lying branches impossible.

After hitting his head three or four times, Arthur said, "This is getting beyond a joke. I am going to dismount and walk." Lancelot joined him. As they walked, they could hear the sound of running water somewhere in the near distance. Sure enough, they came upon a stream and kneeling by the side of the water was a lady. Her golden hair ran down the length of her back and she was singing such pretty tunes that both men were captivated by her voice.

Lancelot, who was unmarried, thought this is the girl I am going to marry. He called to her. She stood up and turned. Lancelot, and Arthur for that matter, was shocked. She was, without doubt the ugliest woman he had ever seen in his life. She had a long hooked nose that seemed to bend slightly from left to right as well as down over her face. Her chin stuck out nearly as far as her nose and when she smiled... Well that was a different experience altogether. Her teeth, yellow and brown, were buckled and stuck out, horizontally in some cases. She had a strong case of halitosis which only the strongest mouthwash could have cleared, not that that mattered as she obviously never brushed her teeth. The front three looked like gravestones in an ancient burial ground - her fourth was missing altogether.

Lancelot pulled himself together. "Excuse me, fair maiden. We are searching for the path to the northern mountains. Can you help us?"

"Yesth," she replied. "But only in exchange for a kiss." She had an obvious lisp, which was little wonder judging by the path the air would have to take when leaving her mouth.

Lancelot looked at Arthur, but it was too late. He was already inviting him to dismount and give the fair maiden a kiss. He was also finding it very difficult to hold a straight face. Lancelot nodded and gave Arthur a look to tell him that he would not forget this event in a hurry and Arthur would owe him a massive favour in exchange.

Lancelot was going to give the girl a polite peck on the cheek when she grabbed him and smothered his face in hers. After what seemed like long enough to Arthur, and like an eternity to Lancelot, the girl released him.

Once he had recovered his senses, Lancelot enquired, "Which way?"

The girl pointed along the path to the place where another path joined their original course. "Take that path and you will be there by thisth time tomorrow," she said.

Both men bid her farewell and continued along the path until they reached the junction. As they walked up the new track, they noticed that the light was getting brighter and the trees were becoming less entangled into each other. By dusk, they

were out of the wood and laughing about Lancelot's exploits earlier in the day. They set up camp and bedded down for the night.

It was a warm night and both knights slept soundly. The sun had risen and was a quarter of the way across the sky before either of the men woke. By the time they had eaten breakfast, packed away their blankets and got on their horses to continue their journey, it was nearly noon. They had to make up time, so they set off at a canter. By now, the trees were gone and they could see the northern mountains ahead.

They rode and they rode and they rode until they came to foot of the largest hill (or mountain, depending on how energetic you were feeling). Looming above them was a single tower within whose walls, they expected to find the Princess Olivia. Both men stopped. They realised that there was to be a difficult climb up the hill, but the thing that worried them most was a distant creature that was circling the tower high above them.

Now I have heard it said that dragons must have been astonishing creatures - half crocodile and half eagle with a pinch of lion thrown in for good measure. I have heard how knights traipsed round the countryside, thoughtlessly killing them off. I have even heard, from those who obviously knew less about them, that they were honourable creatures that just guarded what was rightfully theirs. However, these stories are exactly that: stories. If you knew as much about dragons as I know about dragons, you would know that they were creatures to be feared. They were cunning and evil. They stole property and lives without a thought for anyone or anything else. Anything that was passing by, be it a threat or not, would end up incinerated into a pile of charcoal. Their flames were unlike normal flames for they stuck to the skin and once ignited, you had no chance of survival. Screams of their victims echoed through the ages as they were burnt alive. These were the thoughts that ran through the heads of Arthur and Lancelot as they stared upwards in fear.

"How are we to get passed that thing?" asked Lancelot.

"If we can get close, Merlin gave me some magic potion," replied Arthur. "It will make us invisible for about an hour. We have to break into and out of the tower in that time if we are to survive."

The two men stood there looking up, contemplating the possibility of their survival. It was slim.

After a long silence, Arthur said, "We ought to make a start. I think it would be best for the horses if we tie them up and leave them down here. We'll put a stake in the ground, give them twenty yards of rope each and that should see them able to eat grass for as long as it takes."

Lancelot looked at his friend. "It might take forever," he commented.

Arthur cut a stake from the branch of a nearby tree and then fastened both horses to it. He left them plenty of rope so that they could wander for quite a distance in every direction to eat their fill. Both knights patted their horses and said farewell. Then, they started walking up the hill.

It took longer than two hours to reach the summit of the hill. They had to keep a wary eye on the dragon circling overhead. As both men crouched by the wall, Arthur reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle of magic potion. He took a sip of it and passed the remainder to Lancelot. Lancelot took a small sip and passed the almost empty bottle back to Arthur. After carefully putting it back in his pocket, Arthur stood up. By this time, he was translucent and quickly moving to transparent on the see through scale. Slowly, he started to climb up the outside of the tower.

By the time he reached the top of the tower, he was absolutely exhausted. He clambered over the battlements and walked to the corner where several steps started to lead down into the tower itself.

Within a couple of minutes, he came to a thick, wooden door. A bar held it firmly closed. Arthur leaned into the door and whispered, "Princess Olivia... Princess Olivia... Are you there?"

From behind the door came a faint reply. "Yes. Have you come to rescue me?"

"Stand back," said Arthur. He tried to push the bar up but it would not move. He crouched beneath it and pushed up with all the strength he could muster. With a creak, and then a crack, the wooden bar moved. Arthur pushed again. This time, the bar toppled from its holders and the door was free to open.

Arthur swung the door open and said quietly to the Princess, "You will need to follow me."

"Who? I can't see anyone. Where are you? Who are you?"

"Sorry: I forgot. I have had to take some magic potion to make me invisible so that the dragon would not see me. Here, I will put it on the bed. You need to take a sip."

Princess Olivia found the bottle of magic potion and took a solitary sip. Within a couple of minutes, the Princess was as transparent as Arthur and Lancelot. They quietly slipped out of the bedroom and continued down the stairs. At the bottom, there was a single door which Arthur was able to open easily. Outside, Lancelot was waiting (although of course, he still couldn't be seen). If they could have seen him, they would know that he had his bow drawn and covering every move of the dragon as it continued to circle above. The three of them moved down the hill, still using rocks and valleys for cover, just in case the dragon detected them.

By the time they reached the horses, all three of them were opaque again. Lancelot had fallen deeply in love with Princess Olivia. Unlike the last lady he fell for,

Olivia had a soft and gentle face. Her hair cascaded down her back and her eyes were as blue as the distant ocean.

Arthur offered his mount to the Princess and the three set off back to their home castle. It took about a week to get back and once the three of them had rested, they had a great feast to celebrate the return of the Princess. The King came to collect his daughter and he thanked both Arthur and Lancelot. Merlin came to see them as well.

Lancelot was promised the hand of the Princess and two years later, they were married. I would love to say that they lived happily ever after, but there were many more adventures to complete before that could happen.