

“I think I want to become a Christian,” Arthur admitted late one winter night.

I watched the firelight cast dancing shadows on his naked chest while I considered my answer. I wasn't completely surprised. He and father Dafydd had been spending increasing amounts of time together, and from what I saw, Arthur mostly listened, observing everything the Dyfedian priest said.

“He has asked me to begin formal study with him so that I may be baptized in spring,” Arthur added when I didn't respond.

I reached up to caress his cheek. “My love, care not by what name you call your god, as long as you respect the gods of others, you know that.”

“So you aren't upset?”

“Why would I be?”

He took my hand and kissed it, eyes alight. “Father Dafydd says the Mysteries of Mithras and Christianity have much in common. They both involve sacred banquets with God, only in Christianity he is called the Son of God, instead of the sun god. And when I am baptized, they will bathe me in water and place a mark on my forehead, just like they did when I was a Mithrian initiate.”

He chattered on like that for an hour, sounding much like a young apprentice freshly returned from his first day of studies. I hadn't seen him this enthused about something since the end of the hostilities with the Saxons. Nor did his excitement dim as the months passed and Father Marius taught him the rules which he must now follow or the prayers he must say or led him through the intricacies of their Mass. The night after each session, after we made love and talked of personal matters, Arthur would tell me what he learned. His memory was so strong, I often felt I was learning the basics of this new faith with him.

One night he suggested we pray to his God to grant us the children we seemed destined not to have. There was no rule against this in my faith, for as a wise man once said “what doesn’t work with one god, try with another.” And so we did.

But as he told me about their “one” God who was made of three men – one who stayed in heaven, one who floated around among the people like a breeze, and one who became human and was murdered by his own people, only to come back to life and return to heaven, I realized I could never join him in his newfound faith. The tenants of Avalon were too deeply ingrained in my heart. To lose my goddesses, my deep reverence for nature and faith in my own ability to commune with the divine, only to be forced to beg a male god for forgiveness and submit to a hierarchy of men who didn’t view me as their equal was beyond my ability.

Having watched conservative Lyonesse and progressive Pellinor argue on any number of occasions, I was aware that our vast differences in faith could, and most likely would, cause discord between us. Still, I couldn’t help but think one of us being Christian was a good idea politically because that way our people had someone to whom they could relate, regardless of their faith in this ever-changing world.

Arthur had only one request, which he posed to Father Dafydd when the latter announced Arthur was ready. “Please, Father, I wish my baptism to be a private affair. Word will spread, that I know, but I wish to have only those dearest to me present. Though other rulers may choose to make a show, I wish to influence no one. My people may keep whatever faith they like.”

So as Father Dafydd led our small band – Arthur, Kay, Lancelot, Ana, and myself – to the spring that fed Camelot’s main well one bright spring morning, I was proud of Arthur – proud of him for following his convictions, although Bedivere and others our inner circle thought he was mad.

We were deep in the woods, where we were certain no one would find us. On either side of the spring, budding trees with tender, pliable leaves watched over us, bearing witness to the sacred event. Before us, the spring made its slow, but steady progress toward the sea, carrying in its depths the last of winter's chill as snowmelt from the mountains. On the far side of the lake, where Arthur would emerge after the ritual, a fire burned brightly, warming a copper basin.

As Father Dafydd mumbled the opening prayer in Latin, I wondered if he knew this spring, like so many in the area, was dedicated to the goddess Coventina. Either way, it was only fitting that the old and the new be joined on the day of Arthur's entrance into Christianity.

Father Dafydd tucked his robes in his belt and waded into the water to just below his waist, his face betraying shock at the extremity of its chill as he said another blessing. Then he beckoned Arthur to follow him. Arthur, clad in a simple gray, woolen tunic, waded into the water, shivering visibly as the water met his skin. When he stood before the priest, Arthur bowed. Father Dafydd placed one hand on Arthur's head and pushed him down, until even the crown of his head was submerged in the gray-green waters. "Baptizote, Arthur, High King of the Britons, in nomine Patris –"

Arthur emerged only long enough to be submerged again.

"– et Filii –"

Once again he broke the surface and was pushed down again.

"–it Spiritus Sancti."

Arthur stumbled toward the shore, clambering over lichen-covered boulders, hampered by the dead weight of his tunic. Once he was on shore, I quick helped him out of his tunic and into a pristine white robe, which was supposed to symbolize the virgin purity of a newly redeemed soul.

Father Dafydd trailed behind, seemingly unaffected by the water, though Arthur was shivering, edging ever closer to the fire, even as he tried to maintain a stoic facade. The priest produced a small vial from his belt and unstopped it. Wetting his thumb with the oily contents, he traced a small cross on Arthur's forehead, while saying, "May you be forever blessed by the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." Then he set the vial aside and laid both hands on Arthur's head, praying silently.

I couldn't help but marvel at the similarities to the ritual I had undergone at my consecration. I smiled, thinking the gods seem to like to mark their own with holy oil, no matter what the tradition.

The blessing complete, Father Dafydd bade Arthur to sit on one of the stones near the fire.

Arthur, dazed by the cold and likely entranced by the ritual, seemed not to understand him. I went to him and led him to the rock. "Sit," I instructed.

Arthur followed my command, looking at Father Dafydd expectantly.

The priest removed the copper basin from its hook above the flames. Dipping a small white cloth into the warm water, he knelt and began to wash Arthur's feet. "On the night before he died, our Lord Jesus Christ performed this same act for his apostles, telling them that if they wished to become the greatest, they would have to become the last. As High King, you are the greatest in the land, so it is your duty, especially now as a Christian, to be a servant to your people. Remember that though you sit on a throne, it is they you serve."

Father Dafydd stood, finally allowing his tunic to fall freely once again. "Let us pray together as our Savior instructed us." Together, they chanted in Latin a prayer addressed to God the Father I had heard many times in Pellinor's household.

Father Dafydd placed the basin back on its hook and raised his arms, as though encompassing all present. “I ask each of you now to pray for our new brother in Christ. If you do not share our faith, please pray anyway, for God hears all prayers, no matter in what language they are spoken.”

We all bowed our heads. I said a silent prayer of thanks to the God and Goddess for sending me a man such as Arthur, who, even though he was not my first choice, had turned out to be all I could ask for. I asked them to watch over him and guard him and light his path, no matter what name he called them in his worship.

“After washing his apostles feet, the Lord commanded them ‘As I have done for you, so must you do for others.’ Go forth, Arthur of Britain, named this day a son of Christ Jesus, and serve your people.”

Arthur embraced Father Dafydd. After clapping Kay and Lancelot on the back and hugging his sister, Arthur stood before me. He kissed me softly and said, “This day could not have happened without you. I am blessed to call you my spouse. I swear to you now, I will do nothing to shame you or make you regret the support you have so freely given me.”

His words were meant to warm my heart, but instead, they sent a chill down my spine. My vision swam and for brief moment, I saw him before me on a very different day. He glared at me disdainfully as he drank from a golden chalice. Then just as briefly, the vision was gone and my husband was restored to me, warm and merry, but I couldn’t shake the insidious dread that we would both live to regret his words.

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