

The reason why

He was eighteen when I first saw him. I can't even remember why he came - there was some gathering of all the Regional and Minor Lords and he'd come to scribe for the Earl of Olery - the previous Earl, that is, for he was still alive then.

Up until then I'd always thought 'love at first sight' to be a foolish idea, invented by bards to make a good story and certainly something for silly young girls. Yet, there I was a woman in her prime, dedicated to a life of service and well placed to become the next housekeeper of one of the most prestigious households in all of Bremmand, suddenly struck dumb at the sight of a handsome youth.

And you were so handsome then. Tall and dark and with a face fresh and clear.

If any of the other servants in the castle had told of a similar experience I would have snorted and told them not to be so ridiculous and, in truth, I felt ashamed to be so taken with a stranger - one considerably younger than I. So I told no one and took care not to draw attention to myself as I learned more of him. From carefully casual questions of the visiting staff attending their various masters I was able to make myself acquainted of him without a hint of my true feelings becoming known.

His father was an administrator in Castle Bremmand and had secured this position for him with Olery the previous autumn. He was ambitious and determined and applied himself with a dedication that some seemed to scorn. I admired it. After all, I too was ambitious and had no objection to someone else who used their talents to put themselves in a good light and gain advancement. I knew he was destined to go far - I just didn't know *how* far he would actually go.

He stayed at the castle for just over two weeks serving his master well and, in all that time, I only had speech with him once. With so many people in the castle - and the King due any day - the place was a frenzy of activity and I was kept on the run from morning to night, helping Mistress Volette (the aging housekeeper I was determined to succeed) in making sure all our esteemed guests were kept comfortable. So, while I was always on the lookout for him, my sight of him was usually from afar as I attended to my duties. Once, however, when the early spring blusters died down for an afternoon and our guests decided to make the most of it by riding out on a hunt, we met face to face.

Taking advantage of the quiet, I was supervising some of the maids in giving the Earl's main audience chamber a thorough clean - something that had been impossible since the influx of dignitaries, constantly coming and going in the public spaces of the Castle. I had just cleared all the discarded papers from the great table so it could be washed - I would never permit the girls to touch official papers, even though my Lord was meticulous in not leaving anything of importance lying about - when he wandered in, clearly harassed and looking for something. He seemed almost put out to see us there and particularly annoyed to see the table bare of papers.

"Is there something I can help you with, sir?" I asked him. Calling him *sir* was a feckless attempt at flattery for, as a scribe, we were equals and I owed him no such deference. He didn't seem to notice, and barely looked at me.

"My Lord has left his accounts book here, I think," he said in irritation. "At least, I hope so, for I can't find it and I've no idea where else it could be. He and the Earl of Prijd were discussing Olery finances this morning, so he must have had it with him then."

"I don't think I've seen it," I replied glancing doubtfully at the papers in my hands. "Shall we look?"

He seemed flustered by my presence and how carefully I leafed through the documents one at a time, looking for the rows of numbers that indicated accounts. Soon he became impatient.

“Let me have them,” he demanded and nudged me aside so he could rifle through the pages with more haste. He didn't seem to like me so close and accused me of crowding him as though he was eager to examine the papers alone.

Were you already thinking of betrayal, even then? Was that what you were really seeking that day?

“Forgive me, sir, but I stand responsible for the household. While I am sure your intentions are honourable, My Lord looks to me to ensure nothing untoward happens to the papers in his care, and some of these belong to our other guests.”

He gave me a sideways look then and I could see the beautiful depth of his dark eyes. I felt my pulse quicken and hoped that my face wasn't flushing in his presence. “You are most dutiful,” he replied and then pushed the papers back at me with irritation. “Well, what I'm seeking isn't here. Now I suppose I'll have to turn his rooms upside down looking for them,” and he cursed crossly. “Sometimes I wish he'd learn to trust me instead of constantly walking off with his papers and making everything difficult for the rest of us.”

And then, with a final bad tempered snort, he headed off out of the hall and on to his next searching place.

Do you remember that day? Did you even notice the under-housekeeper who gazed at you like a foolish maid? Would it have made a difference to your life if you had?

I saw him a few times more after that before the conference drew to a close and his master, like all the other nobles in our midst, returned to his own lands taking his retinue with him. I thought that would be the last I ever saw of him so, like a child, I raced onto the battlements to watch his departure and stayed there, abandoning my duties, until they were out of sight.

Now, a sensible person - a grown woman at that - would have let the matter go at that and accepted that it was a brief, glorious fantasy that was to be enjoyed and forgotten. But I could not forget. He was forever in my mind. I thought of him all the time. I dreamed of him. I made up fantasies in which he returned and admitted to being just as taken with me and pledging himself to me. I wouldn't say I pined for him, however, for that would be absurd - I barely *knew* him.

I didn't know you at all, my love, did I? In fact it seems that no one really knew you.

Over the years, one might expect that my thoughts moved away from my fantasy lover and in some ways they did. I never forgot him though, and my feelings for him never faded. Just as I'd never believed in love at first sight, I'd also never believed that people had a 'love of their life' and yet, he was truly mine. I did hear word of him from time to time - gossip among servants is commonplace and I enjoy it as much as the next woman. I heard how he had left Olery and gone to Frewmet and then, when his father died, back to Castle Bremmand. He advanced well in his career and became a trusted advisor to the royal family.

Trusted? Hardly that, my love, but even knowing what I know now, my heart is still yours.

As expected, when Mistress Volette finally became too old to head the household, she recommended me to My Lady and the appointment was made. I didn't have long to prove myself worthy of the position though for, before a moon-cycle had passed, a fire broke out in the castle and she, her two oldest children and her father-in-law the Earl all perished. It seems a bitter irony that because the servants were housed in the meanest parts of the castle they were furthest from the fire and not one of us was harmed.

In the years that followed we struggled to keep the household together, rebuilding and refurnishing the damaged parts of the castle, trying to do our best by the new Earl who was at best disinterested in the place and, in truth, seemed to hate it even more now than he had in the past. He even took his only surviving son away with him to Castle Bremmand so the place became more and more lonely and isolated.

Then came the invasion. Disaster after disaster befell the Kingdom and the Empire arrived. My Lord never returned to us and for months we lived in uncertainty and fear as we heard rumours and then firm news and finally sight of the invading enemy. The Castle was taken over by an Empire Count - not a bad man, I suppose but not Bremmandish and I found I couldn't serve him. Like many of us, I tried, unable to think of how I would live if I weren't there but eventually, I couldn't show loyalty to a representative of a people who were so determined to harm us - we who had lived and served in Bremmand all our lives.

I had an uncle in the south so headed there, living for the first time in the heart of the Great Forest. It was strange for me, but I am nothing if not strong and I learned to adapt to this new land. I had heard no word of my love in that time.

I was sure you had survived though. So great was my love that I knew I would have felt it had you perished in those days.

In the forest, however, his name was on everyone's lips. He had borne witness to the death of the royal children; he was in the sway of the enemy; and, eventually, that he had been in the service of the Empire all along - *years* before the fall.

I couldn't believe it! How could *anyone* have done such a thing, let alone him? At first I was angry - doubly betrayed by him - but then, over time, my love outweighed my anger. He must have had a reason. There had to have been good cause for him to act as he did. And, if that was so, my love for him did not need to waver.

I am yours forever, my love.

Not long after that, my love was given the post of Regional Lord in the very lands where I now lived. I could hardly believe it - he was here, within twenty miles of me. I almost set out that very day to try and see him - but while my thoughts had never left *him*, I doubt he had even considered *me* once in all that time. So I waited. And Brem rewarded my patience for the existing housekeeper left and, hearing this, I set out at once to secure the post.

The steward, Nyder, was surprised to have such a well-qualified applicant to the post - so many servants were abandoning their posts that coming across one willing to work for the new lord was a novelty. He could hardly ignore my credentials however, and in fact knew of me from my time as housekeeper at Langate. So I was appointed that very day.

And there you were again, my love. As handsome as you'd ever been.

You didn't recognise me, of course, but now we were together and I was determined that I would be your most loyal servant from then on. You didn't always make it easy - love or no love, you were a difficult man to serve and I have a temper that doesn't tolerate that well. Still, I did my best and, to the last, kept faith with you even when all others turned against you.

You are gone now and I don't know if I'll ever hear word of you again, for no one knows where you have gone to. Perhaps, one day, we shall meet again. For now I stay here and watch and wait but you are always in my thoughts and, I know, you live on. Still no one knows of my feelings and they never shall; but Brem and the gods and the universe itself all know. Staval and Afrial are bound together forever in love.

End