

The deepening winter chased us indoors for our lessons. During the months we could not learn on the hillsides and valleys of the isle, our school was a low stone building adjacent to the House of Nine. Three rooms served the three levels of pupils: novices, priestesses-in-training and anointed priestesses. On my first day of lessons, Argante had warned us that on Avalon learning never ended. Those with special gifts were encouraged to help others improve weaknesses even after they received the mark of the goddess.

Through the wall I could hear Viviane's honeyed voice as she guided one of the other students in divining the future by casting lots hewn from sacred wood. Divination sounded exciting and it was tempting to listen, but I had to keep my mind focused on my own instruction. There would be time enough for divination later.

Today, Argante was teaching us about Avalon, a sort of history lesson. Some of the girls who were familiar with the stories from having lived here for some time played with their hair or watched the snow skittering and swirling outside the long windows. Morgan was picking idly at the hem of her dress. Next to me, Grainne was wrapped around Argante's every word, trying to memorize each one as it escaped her lips.

"In ages past, there were twelve colleges in Britain where the wisdom of the Druids was taught," Argante was saying. "Some of this wisdom was shared with the outside world by those who left the colleges to pursue secular lives, while some things were known only to those who took vows to uphold the sacred mysteries. When the Romans came and occupied our lands, they were jealous of the power the Druids held as judges. The Druids were perceived as a threat, and the Romans sought to eradicate them. Because of their actions, only three of the colleges remain in our country: the school of the Archdruid, an isle in the rugged lands far to the north and here."

I raised my head, suddenly interested. There was a place like this in my mother's homeland? I wondered if that was where she learned her skills as a healer. I wished I could write to her, but that was forbidden. A wave of homesickness swept over me. I would have to ask her about it the next time I saw her – whenever that was.

I continued to watch Argante, but she said no more about the Pictish school. She moved on in her lesson and was now ticking off important moments in the history of our faith. I stopped listening as the swirling snow drew my attention.

*How can anyone believe Avalon is place of eternal summer?* I wondered as a draft snaked its way beneath my robes and goose pimples raised on my skin. The cold stone floors were covered in thick fur rugs and a fire blazed in the center of the room, but even that was not enough to keep out the chill.

"Guinevere," Argante was calling my name. "You are from Gwynedd, surely you must know of the battle of Mona?"

I shivered. The isle of Mona, or what was left of it, was part of my father's lands. He never mentioned the battle, but I had heard the story from his mother when I was very young.

"Yes," I answered and my voice squeaked. I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment.

"Will you please share with us what you know?" It was a command, not a request.

The rustling of fabric followed as my classmates turned in unison to face me. Even Morgan, who seemed bored by any lesson that did not involve practice as well as lecture, was waiting for me to speak. I cleared my throat and took a deep breath, deciding to start at the beginning.

“As the Lady has said, when the Romans learned that the Druids held judicial power over our tribes, they were very jealous. They wanted to control our people in all respects, so they began to persecute the Druids. The Druids, like us, were a peaceful people who did not wish to fight, but they would not give up their faith or their traditions to intimidation. So they retreated to the island of Mona, where they continued their ways in safety for some time.

“The governor Paulinas was greatly angered by what he viewed as blatant disrespect to Rome, so in a fit of madness, he ordered his army to attack the small island. Hundreds of heavily armed soldiers stormed the sacred isle and slaughtered the defenseless priests and priestesses living there.”

Although I tried hard not to think of the gory details, their screams of torment seemed very real to me. I fancied I could still hear their frantic spells of protection floating upon the wind.

I shivered from the cold, self-conscious sweat that had broken out as I spoke. “That is all I know,” I added when no one else spoke. I looked up hesitantly to see sorrow etched on every face. Mona was quietly weeping.

“Mona is named for this island and frequently relives this tragedy in her dreams, so you will understand why she is upset,” Argante explained.

Grienne’s hand shot up. “Why does she dream of such things?” she asked bluntly.

“It is rude to pry into the affairs of others,” Argante chastised coldly.

“No, please answer. I want to know why I am cursed.” Mona’s dark eyes pleaded even more than her small, delicate voice.

Argante watched her in disbelief for some time. She seemed to be collecting her thoughts. Finally, she took a seat in front of us.

“The sight works differently in every person. Some can see the future, while others are given the gift of seeing things as they occur or, as in your case,” she inclined her head to Mona, “long after.”

“But how can that be of any value? What is done is done. How can seeing past events do any good in the present?” Mona’s voice rose in exasperation with every syllable.

“How can we ever plan a better future if we do not learn from our past?” Argante countered. “Think about it. If you burned your hand, but did not remember the pain, how would you know not to touch the flame again? It is the same in battle or politics. If no one remembers the successes and failures, then our lives are but one pointless circle with no hope that future generations will advance.

“You hold a special power, Mona. Knowing someone’s past gives special insight into their motivations, which is much like being inside of their minds. Do not discount the gift you have been given. If you develop it properly, it is a blessing that could prove very useful.”

Mona smiled her thanks.

Argante rose and continued her lesson, pacing the width of the small chamber. “After the Rape of Mona – that is what it is called for that is what it was – the few surviving priests and priestesses fled the area, taking all of the ancient wisdom with them. Because of the tradition of only passing on knowledge orally, much of what was once known was lost on that dark day. Those who survived determined that such a loss would never happen again. They split up—some went north and taught the tribes of the Goddin, while the rest went south—in order to assure that if one community was attacked, others could continue to pass on the old ways. Those who went

south hived off into two groups, the men following the Archdruid to the Temple of the Stars, the women following the newly elected High Priestess who founded Avalon.”

“Why did the men and woman not go together?” I asked.

Argante considered my question, choosing her words carefully. “It is partly because men and women have a different focus in their studies. Women have the mysteries the Goddess teaches, and men follow those of the God. However, I will not deny that there were problems on Mona. They also divided so that neither group could unjustly influence the other.”

Grainne’s hand shot toward the ceiling again, but Agrante ignored her. “Those with long memories tell of a time when priest stood against priestess –”

In the main hallway, a high chime sounded, indicating the end of the lesson. Argante would have to finish her story another day.

As we filed out of the room, I saw Morgan touch Mona’s shoulder. The two girls slowed and I passed them, but I could still hear their voices.

“Will you try to see my past?” Morgan asked shyly. “It would mean very much to me to know where I come from.”

Mona squeezed her hand and when she spoke, her voice radiated warmth. “I don’t think it works that way, but I will try.”