

“Guinevere, come quickly!” Grainne’s frantic voice reached me before her reddened, puffing form came into view.

“Guin—ever,” she struggled for breath, “you must come quickly. One of the marsh women is having trouble in delivering her child. They say she will die if she does not receive assistance. You are the only one,” she gulped in air chopping her sentence into two fragments, “who is qualified to bring her aid.”

My forehead wrinkled, for deep down I did not wish to go. “Why can none of the others go in my place or at least accompany me as an assistant? What about Morgan?” I inquired. “She is the more proficient healer.” The words were true, but left a sour taste in my mouth nonetheless.

“Morgan is in charge as acting high priestess so she cannot leave the isle.” Grainne reminded me.

I rolled my eyes at the thought of the delight Morgan must be taking in her newfound title, but Grainne was too caught up in thought to notice.

“I know you wish this job did not fall on you, but you are the only one. Argante is ill and Mona is tending to her, so neither of them can go. We have not heard from Viviane in some time, but it is doubtful that she will return from Strathclyde in time to be of any service.” Grainne looked at me with pleading eyes. “I have not yet completed my training as a midwife, so I cannot be of any help, but I will look after Natalya for you. You must go.”

That is how I found myself two days later standing at the edge of the lake on the outskirts of the marsh community, a sweaty, bloody mess. I was exhausted, but the woman’s baby had been delivered successfully and both mother and child were well. I, on the other hand, was determined after the previous night’s ordeal never to have children of my own and was ready to return to the comfort of Avalon.

I stood waiting patiently for the barge to make its way over to me, propelled in my direction by the currents of the water. I was too tired to make any effort to bring it over to me faster than the winds would allow. As I waited, my heavy eyes wondered over the land, bringing back memories of when I first saw this side of the isle nearly five years before. A light haze of green dusted the countryside as spring took its first tentative breaths, the trees barely budded out amid the chill air that still smacked of winter. As my eye traveled up the Tor, I casually noted that the abbey had fared well in the passing years, nearly doubling in size since I first laid eyes

on it. The little huts at the base, barely visible through the branches still lacking leaves, had grown in number as well. Apparently the community of Joseph continued to attract many followers. If only they were all as understanding of our ways on the other side of the isle as their holy founder had been, perhaps there would be no need to hide within the mists.

I was about to step aboard the barge to do just that when I saw a figure emerge from one of the huts. I had only heard rumors of the wild appearance of those reclusive men, so I delayed my action in order to get a look.

To my great surprise, the man that emerged from the shelter was no crazy-eyed, hairy hermit, but an attractive, young man. He was well groomed, with shoulder length dark brown hair and a clean shaven face. Judging from the way he was dressed, he appeared to be of royal stock, and he carried himself with an air of dignity and importance, the like of which I had never seen. I was quite taken by him, but this came as little surprise to me because he was the first man, save the Archdruid, that I had seen in several years and I was in the prime of my breeding years; any man would have been attractive to me at this point.

But there was something different about this man, something mysterious and seductive that drew me toward him, the same kind of danger that would attract a young maiden to a dark faerie. As I stood trying to put my finger on this force, he noticed me, his chocolate eyes engaging mine in a stare so intense I thought I would melt and be swept away by the waters of the lake.

The stranger seemed to sense the effect he had on me and a slight smile played on his lips, giving him the expression of a tom cat that knows his prey is caught in a trap and now has leisure to play with it as he wills. He stood there content, holding my whole essence in the strength of his gaze, until one of the marsh women called out my name and the spell was broken.

“Please, do not leave without letting us repay you,” she said with a thick accent, thrusting a small purse filled with pungent herbs into my hands. “The Lady will know what to do with it.” She bobbed her head in a gesture of respect.

“Thank you.” I, too, gave a slight inclination of the head. “Argante will be much pleased.”

When she had gone, my gaze returned to the island, but the stranger had disappeared, taking a piece of me with him, or so it felt.

By the time I returned to the isle, Viviane was back home and was eager to hear how my first birth without assistance had gone, and I was anxious to tell her of my pride at being able to find my way through the mists on my own. I told her what had taken place and she told me of Uther's struggles to unite the rulers of the land. By that time, Mona and Grainne had joined us, not wanting to be left out of the gossip.

I screwed up my courage and told them about the man I had seen on the island and of my attraction to him. Viviane's face fell as I spoke, and it was clear by the look in her eyes that she knew of whom I spoke.

"That is Malegant, Lord of the Summer Country," she explained, not bothering to hide the malice in her voice. "He was probably out collecting taxes from the Christian brothers."

She took a deep breath. "Be wary of him, Guinevere. He has an ill temper. Should you ever have the misfortune of being near him, keep your guard up at all times," she warned.

"Why?" I asked, confused. "What has he done to deserve you to speak of him so?"

"I have never met him myself," Viviane conceded, "but he has sullied more than a few novices. Some have even left our community for love of him."

"What is wrong with that?" I could not understand the problem.

"Guinevere, it is a serious matter for a novice to forsake her vow of purity, especially if she keeps it from the rest of us, which all did. More than that, those that chose to leave us because of him all suffered greatly after leaving the isle. I am not saying that Malegant had anything to do with that pattern, because I have no way of knowing. I am simply warning you to be careful."

Mona stuck her head into our circle. "The marsh people say that he worships no god at all, and some of the priestesses say his wealth and power come from darkness."

Viviane frowned at Mona. "Novices are more likely to be the source of those rumors, Mona. You know better than to believe such things. He is rich and powerful by right of inheritance, like any other noble. All I do know is that Malegant has given us reason to mistrust him, and you should too, Guinevere."