

CHAPTER ONE – SPRING 487

I could still feel his arm around my throat, his muscles crushing my windpipe. I fought the urge to gasp every time the memory resurfaced. My arms ached from how tightly he had wrenched them behind my back, his one good eye leering at me with frightening clarity of purpose.

“My own family, and on my own watch! I still don’t understand how this could have happened. When those brigands are caught I will feed them their own entrails,” my father bellowed.

“Leodgrance, please. You’ll wake Guinevere. She has finally fallen asleep.”

My mother lovingly draped her uninjured arm over my shoulders as I hunched over the table. But she was wrong; I wasn’t asleep, merely trying to bury the sights and sounds that floated of their own will through my mind. I doubted sleep would ever come again.

“The treaty was supposed to protect us from Irish attack,” my father continued. “Why would Macha betray us when we have set her own kin on the line, the very future of her kingdom?”

“I don’t believe this was done with the knowledge or consent of the Irish queen,” my mother argued, propping her bandaged arm on the table.

My father’s silence was thick with disapproval. The Irish had been raiding the western kingdoms of Britain for years, desirous of our wealth – minerals, gold mines, fertile farmland – and drunk on their own inflated perception of power. Their Queen, Macha, had been harassing my father, ruler of the kingdom Gwynedd on Britain’s

western coast, since they both inherited their thrones nearly thirty years before. This life-long enmity made him unlikely to see reason in any of her actions.

“Think about it, Leodgrance,” my mother went on. “This was no violation of the peace treaty between our countries and it is out of keeping with her character. Macha has always been very direct about what she wants. She always sends an emissary first and if negotiation doesn’t work, then she attacks. There is never any doubt of why her army is there or what it will take for them to stand down.

“No, what happened to us did not bear her stamp. It may well have been insurgents baring their teeth, perhaps even from within her own house. There is no question this was a well coordinated assault. Whoever was behind it is a force to be feared.”

I opened my eyes and raised my head from the cradle of my arms, tired of pretending. For a moment I was aware of the room around me, the comforting warmth of the hearth, my father pacing in front of the door and my mother sitting at my side, a vase of bright daffodils on the table in front of me. But then other images danced before my eyes. My sight seemed to cloud over and a devastated seaport village arose before me, a place I had never seen. It had been attacked at the same time we were set upon in the woods. I didn’t understand why I could see it, but I knew the aftermath as though I was there – the burned out hulls of overturned ships, bodies being carted to the countryside by black-robed mourners for burial, crumbling houses laying bare the broken lives within. I clenched my eyes closed, but the images remained. There would be no respite anytime soon.

“Damn Vortigern and damn the day he allied with the Saxons,” my father swore, denouncing the king whose failed rule two generations earlier had ended in an influx of Saxon invaders to British lands. “Thanks to him, their progeny are now slowly digesting our eastern shores from within. And, since our High King Uther has little time to deal with his country’s other concerns, his lords are left to fend for ourselves.”

“Be careful what curses you fling from your lips, Leodgrance, for your words hold great power.”

The unexpected voice startled me and I whirled to see an imposing figure standing in the doorway, a woman clad in cerulean robes, the crescent mark of a priestess bright upon her brow. She was slender and tall, with long, dark brown hair and light blue eyes that sparkled like the surface of a sunlit lake.

My mother fell to one knee, and bowed her head, black hair falling across her pale face as she touched her right thumb to her forehead, lips and heart. “Lady,” she breathed. It was almost a prayer. “Thank you for responding so quickly to my appeal for help.”

“Corinna, please rise. You need not pay homage to me. I come in service of the Lady of the Lake, but I do not bear her power or deserve your reverence. That you know.”

“But you represent her, Viviane,” my mother insisted as she sat back down and I raised myself to a respectable posture.

Viviane took the seat my mother offered, politely ignoring her comment. “This is Guinevere? I have not seen her since she was a babe.” A gentle smile raised her lips and she inclined her head toward me.

“Yes. I would ask her to introduce herself, but she has not spoken to anyone for days. We fear what this experience has done to her.” The sidelong glance she threw me mirrored the pain in her voice.

I wanted desperately to tell her not to be afraid, that all would be fine, but I could not. It would be a lie. Whenever I came close to sleep, it all began again. My mother’s cry rang in my ears as I was pulled from my horse by unkempt men with strange markings on their left forearms. Their foreign tongue was menacing, but the meaning of the blade needling my side needed no translation. I could smell the stench of their skin in my nostrils even now. I balled up my fists and fought the urge to scream, to beg anyone who would listen to make the visions stop.

“What were they after?” Viviane’s voice was gentle, musical like the tinkling of bells.

After a moment of silence, my mother answered. “We differ in opinion on that subject. I believe we were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, but my husband believes this was an attempt to kidnap our daughter.”

“To take from us what we have taken from them, in a sense.” My father added hastily.

Viviane did not respond. I couldn’t bring myself to look at her, but I could sense her eyes on me. I didn’t like being spoken about as if I was not in the room simply because I did not wish to talk about what I had been through.

“Their reasons will come to light soon enough. For now we have other matters to attend. Corinna, will you be traveling to the village tomorrow?”

“Yes, I intended to. A slight shoulder wound will not keep me from those who need my help. But I do not wish to leave my daughter.”

“Go and tend to the needs of your people. Leave Guinevere with me.”

My mother began to protest, but Viviane cut her off. “The injured need a healer and you are one of the best along the western coast. I could do no better if I visited each home myself, and the compassion will mean more coming from their queen. Besides, it will give me a chance to talk with Guinevere.” Her tone indicated the subject was closed.

My mother nodded and rose. “It has been a long day. We should retire and leave Guinevere to rest.” She guided Viviane and my father out of the room.

I hesitated before crawling into bed, anticipating another night of torment alone in the dark with my memories and those strange ghost pictures. I prayed my mother would return later in the night. Though I was no longer a child, I didn’t want to be alone.

Halfway down the hall, their footsteps stopped. I could barely make out my mother’s whispered words.

“Viviane, I fear for her safety, for her future, if these raids continue.”

Viviane’s voice was soothing. “I understand, Corinna. Neither I, nor the Goddess in whose name I come will ever allow her to be harmed.”

My whole body seemed to believe her words, and with that assurance I slipped into the land of dreams.

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The next day I found myself alone with this strange, beautiful woman. She sat across the trestle table from me as I ate my noontime meal, watching me with thoughtful, hypnotic eyes. I was fascinated by their color, which seemed to shift between sea and sky, and could scarcely look away from her face. I thought her the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, pale skin set off by a cloud of chestnut hair beneath the folds of a gauzy veil.

“I know you do not wish it, but you need to talk about what happened, Guinevere, or it will stay bottled up inside of you.” Viviane urged as I slurped my soup. “It is difficult to know peace with troubled thoughts coursing through your mind.”

I shook my head and raised my gaze to the roof overhead, refusing to meet her eyes. Some part of me knew she was right, but I was afraid if the compassion on her face matched what I heard in her voice, I would start sobbing uncontrollably. Viviane was very kind to me, but she was still a priestess. I did not know how one was supposed to act in a priestess’ presence, but I knew I did not want to break down in front of her.

Letting the silence hang between us, I busied myself by trying to remember the name of each bunch of carefully preserved herbs clinging to the rafters overhead. Some, like the woody sage and fragrant rosemary were easy; we used them often to flavor our meals. But others refused to take root in my memory. All I could recall is they were collected at the full moon or on midsummer, according to my mother’s stringent requirements.

“How old are you, Guinevere?”

I blinked at her, startled out of my reverie. I still didn't wish to speak, but the resolved set of her mouth told me a reply was required. "Nine," I mumbled, shoving another spoonful of soup into my mouth to prevent her from questioning me further.

She laced her fingers together in front of her on the table. "Do you know how old your mother was the first time her clan fell victim to a cattle raid? Five. Her entire village burned to the ground. And Octavia was only a few years older than you when she escaped the barbarians ransacking the countryside near Rome. She fled her family's decimated villa as the lone survivor."

Viviane was right. My lady's maid had faced far more danger than I. She had crossed a vast ocean as a stowaway on a tin trader's ship bound for an unknown destination. When she arrived here, my family took her in. It was a story I often begged her to tell, but until now, I always thought it more an adventure tale than harrowing experience.

Viviane pressed on. "I am telling you this so you understand that while you are frightened now, it will pass and you will be fine. You have two examples in your household as living proof. Won't you please try to explain what troubles you so?"

I tried to remain stalwart, but my own body betrayed me. Tears began to fall and my whole frame shook as I fought back the memories again. My resolve weakened and dissolved, tears turning to sobs as I choked out an account of what had taken place.

My mother and I, along with a handful of servants and two guards, were out taking in the fresh spring air in the budding forest just beyond the castle walls. Riding next to my mother on the golden palfrey my father had given me for my ninth birthday last summer, I was enraptured by her account of a springtime custom in her homeland.

My mother was a Votadini, one of four Pictish tribes that inhabited an area known as the Gododdin in a mountainous territory far to the north.

“Each year when the snow and ice break, we ride through the land, much like we’re doing today, and call to the Goddess, who is just beginning to wake. Like a butterfly, she is transformed from an old woman in the depths of winter to be reborn as an innocent maiden who graces the spring with her gentle beauty. But she needs to hear our voices to know when to awake. So we shout, ‘Goddess, Great Mother, can you hear us? Wake now, we call you forth! Wake and bring life to the land.’”

I giggled, imagining her and her mother and all the relatives I had never known walking through the forest, calling out to a woman they could not see.

My mother leaned toward me in her saddle. “This chanting was often accompanied by banging stout staffs on the earth and rapping on trees to make sure the Goddess didn’t fall back asleep – as you often do in the mornings.” She pinched my nose playfully and I laughed again. “It may seem silly to you, but this ritual is very important because as the Goddess grows in strength, so does the earth around her. She is the reason life comes back to the land each year.”

She smiled at me warmly, green eyes twinkling. “Why don’t you try it, Guinevere? Call out to the Lady and bid her rise from her wintry bed. Follow my lead.” She straightened her back and held her head high, looking every inch the queen as she called, “Maiden of the spring, awake and make the buds burst through the ground.”

I bit my lip apprehensively and looked to her for reassurance. She nodded and I blurted, “Bring the birds back to their nests and make the flowers bloom.”

She laughed and stopped her horse to hug me tight.

It was then they attacked us, a group of heavily armed men. At first I thought the din part of her tale, like the racket created to awaken the earth, but I quickly realized we were surrounded on all sides by men who had been lying in wait. The noise I heard was the clash of their swords on our soldiers' shields. My mother immediately drew her sword and placed her horse protectively in front of mine, shielding me from most of the onslaught.

What happened next was a blur. I tried to defend myself, but a stout arm grabbed me from behind, choking me and blocking all else from view. I was dragged from my saddle onto another horse and my arms wrenched behind me, defenseless.

I heard my own scream and saw my mother turn, her face a mask of unmistakable fury. She cried out and then she and my captor were battling, my body the only impediment between them. I squeezed my eyes shut in fear as their blades clashed dangerously close to my nose. I heard my mother curse as she was struck. Then my captor screamed and I felt his grip on me release as I was sprayed with blood. I opened my eyes just in time to see his arm dangling loosely at his side, nearly severed by my mother's blade.

Realizing I was free, I pitched to the side with all my might, tumbling to the dirt with a painful jolt in my hip and shoulder that knocked the breath out of me. The next thing I knew, my assailant was on the ground next to me, my mother's sword buried halfway up the blade in his stomach.

I could still smell his blood. As I told of how the remaining men ran off to save their lives, Viviane enfolded me in her arms and let me cry myself out.

It felt like hours passed.

Spent, I picked up my spoon, trying to pry it from the layer of congealed soup in which it floated. It finally let loose with an odd sucking sound.

“My mother has been training me to fight since I could hold one of these,” I sighed, brandishing the spoon. “All that effort and I could not even draw blood from the men who wanted mine.”

“Guinevere, you are young, you still have much to learn –”

“Gwenna!” Viviane was interrupted by the cheery cry of Octavia’s young son as he bounded into the room and landed on my lap with a painful thud.

“Peredur, where is your mother?”

“She’s, ah, wit yer mum,” he shined his bright smile on me, “helping dos people.”

I started to laugh, but the laughter died on my lips as the room went dark and images of the ruined village flashed before me, exactly the same as the night before.

“Guinevere?” Viviane called my name, but it was a few moments before I could respond.

“I – I am sorry. I must have been daydreaming.”

Viviane rushed around the table and looked me over seriously. “No, I do not think you were.” She placed a hand on my shoulder and bent over me. “Tell me what just happened.”

I told her what I had seen, from the thin thread of smoke rising from the coastline to the last vestige of ransacked homes and shops.

Viviane looked concerned. “You are sure you have never been to this village before.”

“Yes. Why? Did I do something wrong?”

She sat back down at my side. “No, not at all. Tell me, have you ever seen anything like this before?”

My brow wrinkled as I thought. “Not that I can recall.”

“What about your dreams? Have you ever had any that seemed to be out of the ordinary, like they were something else, something real?”

I wasn't sure why Viviane was asking such strange questions, but I did my best to remember. On my lap, Peredur prattled on in his own bubbling, boyish language, scooting a wooden dog across uneven beams of the table top, making it jump and tumble in a game of his own imagining.

“Yes, there was one not too long ago.” I ran my hands through Peredur's golden curls. “Remember, Peredur, I told you about it.”

He paused, hand in mid-air, and looked up at me.

“I had a dream about you and me. We were all grown up. You looked a lot like your father. I was lady of a big castle, even bigger than this one, and you were a knight. You came back from fighting dragons in a far away land and brought me this beautiful golden cup as a present. The cup shined like the sun and you told me it was magic. Because you gave it to us, we were always happy and there was no more war. Everything was perfect.”

Peredur smiled up at me and kissed me on the chin. “Pretty cup,” he said and went back to playing with his toy.

A range of emotions played across Viviane's face. She was trying to conceal them, but I could see my words had touched a nerve. I was starting to wonder again if I had said something wrong.

“Guinevere, there are legends told about that chalice. If you have glimpsed it in your dreams, it means you are very blessed. It also is a portent of great things to come for this land.”

My brow furrowed. “I do not understand. What does my dreaming about a cup have to do with the future of our country?”

Viviane didn’t get to answer. Below, my mother and Octavia called out a greeting. They had returned from their mission of mercy.

As we rose to meet them, I looked out the window where the sky was already darkening, for dusk still came early this time of year. I shivered. “Do you think they will catch those men?”

She squeezed my hand. “I know they will.”

CHAPTER TWO

The soft night wind and lullaby of the crickets swirled around me, enfolding me like a blanket. My needle dipped into the taut muslin, followed by a tail of colored thread. I sat back and examined the stitching. My hand was much steadier now, growing more confident with each pass, and slowly a pattern was beginning to emerge.

I rubbed my heavy eyes, listening to the soft sounds of the household slumbering around me. Viviane had been spending a lot of time with me over the last few weeks, teaching me how to rid my mind of those horrible memories when they reappeared. When I was awake, it was easier to force my mind to happier memories – sparring with my father in the tiltyard or sitting at my mother’s feet, absorbing every word during council meetings where the western lords met to discuss and resolve their common issues – but in sleep I had little control. Still terrified of what I might see in my dreams, I fought my increasing weariness as long as possible.

A gentle hand rapped softly at the door just as my needle pricked the cloth once again.

“Guinevere? Are you awake, my love?”

I looked up to see my mother silhouetted in the doorway. “Yes mother.” I set the material quickly aside.

She walked toward me and the moonlight caught her face. She seemed weary, her features drawn.

“What is it mother? Are you not well?”

She sat down on a stool in front of my chair. “Guinevere, there is something I have to tell you.”

My heart leapt to my throat as I reached out to take her hands. “What is it? Has there been another attack?”

“No, darling.” She took a deep breath. “Do you remember when I told you something special happened when you were born and I would explain it to you when you were old enough to understand?”

“Yes,” I answered, uncertain where the conversation would lead.

“Well,” she sighed. “The time has come.”

“You will understand more deeply what I went through that day when you have children of your own. I labored to give birth to you for many hours, but it seemed you would share the fate of so many of your brothers and sisters before you and enter this world with eyes already closed in death. My body gave out. I could push no more. I was so tired, so—” My mother’s hands and voice trembled as she spoke. “I knew that if I gave up, both my life and yours would be forfeit, but I could not find the strength to go on.

“Then up above me, I saw this glowing, white light.” Her eyes changed and she looked at the ceiling, seeing once again that great wonder. “At first I thought I was dying, but then the light took on the shape of a woman. She kissed my forehead. The spot where

her lips met my skin blazed with tingling heat, and from her touch I drew the strength to bear down hard one final time. You were born.”

She looked at me lovingly and squeezed my hands before continuing.

“Viviane was there – you were her first childbirth as a priestess – but even she did not see what I had. No one in the room knew what had occurred until after you were placed in my arms. Then they, too, saw the light as it swept over your wrinkled, crying form. Your tiny eyes seemed to follow it until it disappeared, leaving everyone in the room questioning what had occurred.”

My mother’s eyes were shining with unshed tears. “But Viviane understood. It was she who gave you the name of Guinevere, which means ‘white shadow.’ She alone understood the significance.

“You see, it has long been said that when a shadow passes over a child at birth, it foretells her future. Yours was white, a manifestation of the maiden Goddess. What I am trying to tell you, Guinevere, is that you were chosen at the hour of your birth by the Goddess.”

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, but could find no words. My mind was reeling and my body felt numb with disbelief. I was chosen by the Goddess? Was my mother serious? The whole conversation felt like a dream. I was tempted to pinch myself to be certain I hadn’t nodded off over my sewing.

“I understand your confusion, Guinevere,” my mother said soothingly. “But let me try to explain. Viviane told me about what you have seen. I believe you have the sight and so does she. The village I visited last week was the very same as the one in your

visions. I saw with my own eyes the details you described, things you could have not possibly known.”

I was still struggling to make sense of what she was saying. “But what does this mean?”

“The sight is a very rare gift, Guinevere. The visions and dreams you have do not happen to everyone; they are given to a blessed few. These gifts tend to run in families and are usually passed down from mother to daughter. I have little of it myself, but such abilities are in our blood, well known to the line of warrior women from which you descend.”

“But why? And how do I make them stop?” I didn’t care how many others were similarly afflicted, I just wanted my mind back under my own control again.

She stroked my hair gently. “You cannot make them stop, but they can be controlled. Viviane can teach you, but you have to go with her to Avalon.”

“Avalon? But that is very far away.” My heart plunged into my stomach as the implications of those words became clear in my mind. “I do not want to leave you!” I clung onto her as though I would be dragged from her that very moment.

She kissed the top of my head. “I know. And I do not want you to go, but this is how it must be. Think of it this way, just as I have taught you to wield a sword, Viviane can teach you to control and use what you are given to see.

“Guinevere, on the day you were born, I promised Viviane that when the Goddess called, I would give my daughter over to her service. That day has come.”

Tears welled in my eyes and I fought them, but to no avail. My mother hugged me close and I listened to the rhythm of her heart as she tried to quell my fears.

“I am not asking you to leave us for life; it will only be for a few years, at most, and that is if you choose advanced training. You will not be locked away as in some Christian convent. When you have completed your studies, you may come back home. Guinevere, you know that even with the knowledge of my homeland, I can only teach you so much. The priestesses on the isle can help you understand your gifts and what they mean. They will teach you to follow where the Goddess leads.”

My throat had swollen shut with fear, sadness and anger; I could not speak. Hot tears streamed like rapids down my cheeks as she spoke. My own mother was giving me up to a community of strangers, to a woman I had met only days before. I knew it had been a mistake to confide in Viviane.

My mother was crying now, too. “Guinevere, I know this is all happening so fast. I was surprised by it as well. But know this: your fate is only uncertain to you because you do not understand it. But the Goddess has her plan and all things in it will come to pass, regardless of our preference for or against them.”

I wondered who she was trying to convince more, me or herself.

“I dread being apart from you, Guinevere. You are all I have. But this had to happen one day. Whether you were taken in by another kingdom to be educated or left our house to be married, we could not be together forever. We will only be apart in body, not in spirit. Love will bind us always and our hearts will know when something important happens to the other.”

I shook my head and pulled away from her grasp, wrapping my arms defensively around me. “No! I will not leave you and father!”

“He has already agreed, Guinevere. Viviane will take you to the isle and let you see it for yourself. If, at that time, you do not wish to join the priestesses, you are free to return to us. No one on the holy isle can hold any woman there against her will. If at any time you wish to part from them, they cannot stop you. In many ways you would be more free there than here.”

The possibility of being able to come back home lightened my heart a little. I could go to Avalon, prove to everyone I was not meant to be there and return to my normal life. I nodded my head in submission. There was nothing I could do.

She led me to bed, lying down beside me just as she did when I was a little girl. At intervals her body shook as she silently wept. Outside the early spring night continued its mysterious song. As the fear slowly subsided, I realized my future lay open before me like the night sky. I began to think about Avalon and wonder at its possibilities. I had heard of the mysterious isle since childhood and now I was invited to be a part of its ancient wisdom.

I knew from the stories my mother told that Avalon also was called the island of apples or the isle of glass. It was a strange inland island – the only one of its kind – somewhere far to the south in the heart of the Summer Country. Tradition said Avalon was created before time began when the sea swallowed the earth before spitting some of it back out as the country we called Britain. Avalon was now protected by the remnants of that sea, which formed a lake on all sides, save a narrow sliver of rugged land no one dared try to find for fear of the consequences.

While some dreaded the wrath of the gods, most worried more about the vengeance Avalon’s inhabitants would take on trespassers. Priestesses traveled through

this part of the country, but they were a rare enough sight for the common folk to mythologize them. Many revered them as gentle daughters of the Goddess who would do no harm to anyone. Others cowered in fear from dark seekers of unnatural forces who, according to a few accounts, chose to roam the countryside in animal form, transforming back into humans only to cause mischief. But everyone agreed the priestesses were keepers of powerful magic that could influence the weather, bring forth life from the barren or curse the wretched with unspeakable suffering, according to their will. Having met Viviane, I began to suspect the truth lie somewhere in between these tales.

I was more interested in the island itself. Our servants spoke of Avalon with awe and reverence, describing an earthly paradise so unlike the world in which we lived – a holy place of temperate breezes and unending sunshine, where disease was unknown and crops needed no tending to produce a bountiful harvest each year without fail. Its springs were rumored to heal every illness and even grant eternal youth. Some even believed the hillsides teamed with faeries, dragons, elves and all manner of mythical creatures that only came to ordinary mortals in their dreams.

Smiling as I pieced together all the stories I had ever heard about Avalon into a fantasy of my own making, I snuggled up to my mother, who had finally succumbed to sleep. By the time my own eyes finally closed, excitement had replaced my fear.

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Early the next morning, as dawn fought to illuminate a milky gray sky, I began to regret my foolish excitement of the night before. The weight and reality of Viviane's plan hung heavy in the air as the household began to prepare for our departure.

You would think by looking at the somber faces of the maids who dressed me that they were preparing me for execution or sale into slavery in some savage country. My mother was little better. Although she tried to put on a brave face in front of me, I knew my impending departure upset her greatly. I could tell because she paced and fidgeted as she filled my head with years worth of motherly proverbs and admonitions; normally she was so calm that not even the overthrow of the king could cause her to show a single ounce of agitation. I, on the other hand, was beginning to feel overwhelmed by her endless stream of advice and soon found my head pounding.

It was mid-morning when my belongings were finally packed. Viviane was anxious to get our journey underway. She waited out in the courtyard, making a final check of the horses and told me to go say my farewells. My heart sank at the task, but I mustered up my courage and bid my friends farewell. Although they wished me blessings and speed, I could see that beneath the chubby faces and youthful curls, they were just as jealous as I had imagined, though some hid it better than others. I gloried in my triumph over them as I went from one to another, exchanging kisses and promising to think of them often.

The last of the pack was Peredur, who I knew understood even less than I what was going on. But he offered me a tight hug when Octavia explained he would not be seeing me for a while.

He looked up at me with an innocence that was heartbreaking. "Gwenna?"

“Yes, my love?”

He reached into his pouch and fished out a small wooden object. “Here,” he said, thrusting it into my hand. “Bricru – he potecs you when yur, um, scared.”

I looked down at the small piece of wood in my hands. It was Peredur’s favorite toy, an ornately carved dog modeled after one of father’s hounds. Peredur’s father had made it for him shortly before he went off to fight with King Uther’s army, in order to help his son conquer his fear of the dark.

My eyes welled up with tears. “Thank you, Peredur.” I hugged him once again.

Only two farewells stood between me and the journey south. My father faced me now, tall and imposing as ever, and he held up remarkably well compared to the blubbering women, a few hastily blinked back tears the only sign of his emotions. I wrapped my arms around his waist and placed a kiss upon his cheek.

“Be well, Guinevere,” he said with a forced smile. “Mind Viviane’s commands, for she is in charge of you now.” He knelt down so his line of sight was level with mine. “Remember I love you and if you have need of anything – anything at all – send word to me and you shall have it.” He kissed me briefly on the forehead, where one day, if my mother was right, a blue crescent of priestesshood would be stained. “May the gods be with you.”

“I will, father. I love you.” I was finding it difficult to speak without my voice cracking and trembling. It was hard for me to believe that my time of idolizing him was over; Viviane was to become my new role model. Hot tears pricked at the corners of my eyes and threatened to overflow.

My father stepped back into the shadows of the gateway and my mother came forward, as if to join Viviane and me by the horses. Was she going with us?

“No, Corinna,” Viviane said reprovably. “This is a journey Guinevere must make alone.”

My mother caught herself and instead clutched me to her in a fierce embrace. I had not noticed until that moment how beautiful she was, perhaps because I had never had a reason to look closely at her; I had taken her continued presence in my life for granted. Now, as I gazed up at her, the wind stirred her raven hair into a cloud that framed her face, a somber halo highlighting her beauty. In spite of the tears that threatened to fall at any moment, her eyes sparkled like emeralds and her face, although contorted in sorrow, showed not a single wrinkle by which to number her years. I dared not look at her again; this was the memory of my mother I wanted to take with me to Avalon.

Suddenly, my mother’s words about the length of my stay on the isle rang through my head and I began to understand what all the fuss had been about. It might be years before I saw my family again. A shot of terror and panic raced through my veins propelling hot tears to fall in torrents upon my cheeks.

“Momma, I do not want to go. I am afraid,” I whispered and held my mother ever closer, as if this action could prevent us from ever being divided.

“I know, my love. I know,” she answered quietly, kissing my hair and rocking me back and forth like a babe in her arms.

At that moment, Viviane drew near, pulling slightly on my arm. “Come child, it is time to go.”

I clung to my mother's arm with all my might, resisting Viviane's tugs by digging my fingertips into my mother's skin, no doubt causing her bruises that would last for days. I glanced at my father with pleading eyes, but he appeared reluctant to get involved in the struggle. In the end, my effort proved useless as Viviane succeeded in prying me away from my mother, who now wept like a banshee, but was honor-bound to offer no further resistance.

I was set into a saddle and reins placed in my hands, but with tears blurring my vision, I could scarcely see Viviane let alone the road ahead. I could not think to get the horse to move.

Someone nudged the animal forward, but in my addled state of mind I could not keep myself aright and nearly toppled to the ground. Viviane caught me in her arms and gently lifted me up into the saddle in front of her, instructing the guard who accompanied us to walk my horse next to his. As the mare started forward, Viviane stroked my hair and cooed softly in my ear.

"It will be alright, Guinevere. Let it all out."

I leaned back against her, inhaling the soft scent of lavender and lemon balm from her clothing, and continued to sob, frightfully uncertain about what lay ahead. Around me the road and the forest passed, a sea of bleeding colors and misshapen images, slowly putting miles between me and the only life I had known.

CHAPTER THREE

After a few hours, my tears gradually ceased until I sat in sullen silence on my own horse, refusing to speak a word to Viviane. We rode in silence through a cold, soft drizzle that was more of a nuisance than an impediment to travel. As the day wore on, the rain began to dampen my cloak and the world around me became unfamiliar as we passed beyond the holdings I had known. That night we lodged in the barn of a kind farmer and broke our fast the next morning on soft, pungent cheese made by his wife's own hands.

For the next two days we traversed the foothills of the Cambrian Mountains. I began to feel a twinge of excitement in my stomach, but at the same time stubbornly refused to let go of my grievances, and thus my mood remained sour. I spoke to Viviane only as necessary, rebuffing her attempts at conversation when we stopped to water the horses or nibble on the small pack of bread, withered apples and smoked meat my mother had prepared.

We continued south, spending nights in village inns or wherever we could beg hospitality. Soon massive, ancient oaks as old as the Druid's Circle hemmed us in as we skirted the forests of southern Dyfed and the Midlands, their bright, tender leaves announcing the birth of spring. Birds twittered in the trees, enjoying the soft, golden drenching of the ascending sun, while the toil of workers plowing the fields awakened the earth from her snowy slumber.

As the wind chased heavy, gray clouds from the sky, we joined another group of travelers and forded the Sabrina, a glittering, gurgling rivulet that signaled we were nearing the end of our journey. I stood on the river's edge, my back to the water, and breathed in the clean, moist air. Watching Viviane entertain the family who would part from us at the next branch in the road, I realized I was no longer afraid or resentful; to my amazement, I found I was happy, happier than I had been in some time. I still missed Octavia and my parents greatly, but I was enjoying the freedom that travel provided. I felt as if life was mine to command, instead of being dictated by someone who cared not what my opinions were. Was this the privilege of being a priestess? My spine tingled at the thought that I might one day be one of them and my stomach fluttered with nervous butterflies, anxious to complete the long journey.

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We drew our horses to a halt. Only a stone's throw away, the path disappeared into dense fog that made it impossible to see what lie beyond. Only the summit of a tall hill pierced the veil from time to time as the mist rolled and curled in a sinuous dance. I glanced over my shoulder. The way we had come was as clear as a summer's day. I scanned the horizon behind me, but there was no sign of the strange mists we now faced. I shivered. They seemed to have arisen in this spot from their own accord.

From somewhere just beyond my view, I heard the gentle sound of water lapping land. *The mists must obscure a lake or slow river*, I thought. At least that would explain where they came from.

Viviane tied our horses to a tree and strode confidently into the blinding fog. I followed hesitantly behind, unsure of my footing because I couldn't see my feet, much less the way ahead. I held myself rigid, afraid of toppling face first to the ground. Slowly, the terrain beneath my feet softened to mud and then sand. Cool water was lapping at my shoes. I had found the water's edge.

A soft sloshing reached me as Viviane waded into the waters. Within moments she reappeared, pulling a small boat blackened and waterproofed with tar. Each end was upturned in the shape of a swan's head and decorated in intricate scroll-like patterns. I guessed the two of us could fit in it comfortably, but any more would surely topple it and send us flying into the blue-gray waters.

Viviane pulled a long pole out of the belly of the boat and helped me aboard, following after me. She untied the mooring from a dock I could not see, sank the thin pole into the invisible water and we began to move slowly away from the land.

The boat glided smoothly across the lake, which scarcely seemed disturbed by its passage. As we moved, the world around us became even more engulfed in mist, until the shore was no longer visible and we floated in a land of milky vapor. Somewhere to my right, a lone loon laughed, its disturbing call adding to the apprehension that was beginning to take hold in my stomach. Around me, the invisible land whispered with an energy all its own, a force collected over endless ages, echoing ancient wisdom that was just beyond my understanding.

Viviane sank the staff once again into the waters, and I saw them ripple as if breathed upon, but I no longer felt the sensation of motion even though I knew we continued to advance into this shadowy world. The air around us cooled. Its clammy

fingers seemed to caress me as we passed, an otherworldly greeting from the spirits of the earth and water.

We continued to move through the silvery haze, tracing a course I could not perceive but that Viviane seemed to know well. It was as though she could see through the mists. I would later learn that navigating through the maze of sandbars and other perils obscured by the fog was all part of becoming a priestess. Nature had provided a perfect ward against those who would do harm to inhabitants of the isle. Like the tides that responded to the urgings of the moon, every morning, the mists rolled out across the lake, cutting off access to the uninitiated; each evening they contracted around the Tor, the tallest, most sacred hill on the island, providing a thick blanket of protection to those who slumbered in the darkness below.

Eventually the boat stilled and Viviane lifted the pole into the boat, a trail of water dribbling after it. I started as she gave a sharp whistle, which was answered a short distance in front of us. I nearly toppled over as the boat was heaved forward by unseen hands; we were being pulled to shore by the one who heard Viviane's greeting.