

The marketplace buzzed with all the din and confusion of a town celebrating a festival or royal visit. But there was nothing out of the ordinary about this day; it was a day as any other in the town commonly referred to as Bath by those of non-Roman descent, a prosperous trading town at the crossroads of three major Roman roads. It was a small town by empirical standards, but to me it seemed enormous.

I gazed in wonder at the chaos around me. From either side of the road, vendors hawked their wares, both living and man-made, to the throng of visitors clogging the narrow road that led up to the temple and healing springs. At one stall, a jeweler haggled in a strange tongue with a dark-skinned woman of the East over the quality of stones in the bangle that he was trying to persuade her to buy; in another, a shrewd businessman counted the coins from his most recent sale, while nearby a goat who had escaped his seller's attention was being loudly berated by a linen vendor for nibbling on his wares. The animal did not seem to care, for it turned and walked away in the middle of the peddler's tirade, more interested in gobbling up a stray scrap of tin discarded on the roadside by the metalworker who was busy banging away at a piece of pewter a few stalls up.

The smell of exotic spices, yeast, and vinegar assaulted my senses as we walked on, passing a booth laden with fresh fruit, warm, soft disks of bread, and bottles of sharp wine. Viviane declined the offer of a glassblower to come over and inspect a vase, but did acquiesce to buy us each a small roll and an apple, which we nibbled as a snack as we slowly advanced toward the temple. A few feet down the road, Viviane paused and told me not to wonder off while she spent some time examining the herbs proffered by a curvaceous, flaxen-haired maiden.

My body obeyed her orders but my eyes and imagination were off in an instant, talking in the myriad of treasures the marketplace had to enjoy. All around me I could see potential gifts for my family. Imported bath salts from the desert countries for Octavia; a shiny, sharp, bone-handled knife for my father; exotic, sweet perfumes for my mother; brightly colored ribbons for my own hair. But I could purchase nothing. I would not be seeing my family again for years and Viviane assured me that there would be no place on Avalon for trinkets of finery. She would not even let me bring one of the farmer's kittens with me for companionship, saying this was an experience I would have to go through alone. At the moment that was exactly how I felt: alone, despite the pressing mass of people, alone and sad.

But my spirits lifted once again as we approached the temple, which sat in majestic splendor in a slight hollow near the center of town. We passed through an ornate, double arched gateway into the sacred area. Viviane directed me to remove my shoes, which she handed to a waiting servant. The cobblestones were warm under my feet and I felt inclined to walk around, so while Viviane conversed with the servant, I took in the complexity of the area.

The courtyard was surrounded by a colonnaded veranda with a sloping roof, under which some of the pilgrims sought shelter from the sun. Behind us, the wall was littered with small, dedicatory altars, whose inscriptions I guessed explained their purpose, but I cared not to verify my hypothesis. Directly across from this stood the temple, but it was guarded by two priests and Viviane had already warned me that I would not be allowed near it so I didn't bother paying it much attention. From somewhere in the south, the healing spring bubbled merrily, and I was about to go investigate it, when I caught sight of the altar, which stood a good distance in front of the temple on a raised limestone slab. It was decorated according to the season, laden with grain, harvested fruits and vegetables, and late-blooming flowers. The top surface was stained red from the continual spillage of sacrificial animal blood, but even that somehow seemed appropriate.

Walking around the western side of the altar, I came face to face with the statue of Sulis Minerva, the patron goddess of the springs. Despite being carved out of precious metal, she looked like any other woman, with her hair parted in the middle and a serene expression on her face. The more I looked at her, the more she looked like *every* woman; there was something about her that resembled my mother, while I could see pieces of Octavia and Viviane in her as well. She even seemed to have Rhosyn's determined mouth set. Maybe it was a trick of my eyes or simply my imagination, but I thought I saw myself reflected in her, too. In that moment I finally understood my mother's belief that all women were of the Goddess, and I vowed in my heart to continue on to Avalon and learn everything they had to teach me there.

Viviane slipped off quietly into the temple with the other priestesses, leaving me to enjoy the baths. She had made certain that a servant named Priscilla tended to every one of my needs, and so the kindly woman was now helping me off with my clothes and into a robe, which would be discarded after we reached the baths.

We walked through a series of rooms, some hot, some cold, others filled with steam, before finally reaching the Great Bath, an impressive, rectangular-shaped pool of water that was

fed directly by the spring. It was early evening by the time we entered, so there were few people to disturb the privacy, most having abandoned the area in search of the night's dinner.

Water was the only sound to be heard, rushing, trickling, bubbling, falling all at once. On the north end, a charming ornamental fountain flowed, bringing a playful, calming air to the room and providing yet another source of liquid music to the ear. It was a welcome change from the chatter and pointless noise of the marketplace and temple courtyard.

Priscilla led me to a set of shallow stone stairs near the place where the spring flowed into the bath and helped me remove the robe. She told me that I could lounge wherever I wished and that she would be back to collect me when the hour was up.

I stood on the edge of the pool, uncertain how to proceed about getting in. Steam rose off the waters and those already immersed in them appeared warm, their blushing faces betraying the heat of the waters. I gingerly stuck a toe in and found the water to be pleasantly warm. Soon my whole body melted into the waters and I found my strained muscles loosening in the heat. I breathed in the warm, moist vapor and felt my whole body being renewed.

As my body relaxed, my mind began to wonder. My eyes drifted from the hourglass that Priscilla had set on the water's edge to remind me of the time, to the small shrine that was built around the spot where the spring issued forth from its mysterious source to empty into the pool below. Around the rusted spout that guided the fall of the waters an indented, disk-shaped decoration had been crafted from metal of the purest gold. On its inner ring it was decorated with a continuous leafy scroll that seemed to spiral into eternity, while its outer ring depicted several women draped in ritual garb separated from one another by bands of foliage.

The sound of the water and the steady fall of the grains of sand in the hourglass that was visible in my peripheral vision became hypnotic as time wore on. Before my eyes the shrine began to change as I gazed at it through twisting tendrils of steam. The disk seemed to take on a different shape, the inner ring of spirals becoming a steep hill around which the women danced, the flora separating them shifting into a ring of standing stones. Soon this vision took on a life of its own and I realized I had been transported. I was there dancing with them, breathless beneath the light of the full moon.

I was still deep within this reverie when Priscilla returned to retrieve me for the massage that completed my rejuvenating afternoon. She had to call my name several times and shake my

shoulders in order to get my attention. One glance into my eyes told her that I had not fallen ill as she had feared, but had been, in her words, “transported by the Goddess.”

I did not speak of my vision to Viviane that night as we sat in the loud, smoke-filled lower room of the inn and ate our tasteless meal. I wanted to keep that experience to myself alone, not to subject it to her analysis. It was very real to me and what she thought of it mattered not in my opinion. I knew now that I was destined for Avalon and that they had made the right choice in forcing me to go.

I expressed that sentiment to Viviane as I slurped at my stew, but she was paying me little attention. I could have told her I saw a unicorn today and she would have remarked that it was wonderful. Her gaze was fixed on some object over my head and her brow was wrinkled in deep concern. I turned my head to see what so fascinated her, but all I saw was a group of unkempt men pouring over their cups as they argued amongst themselves.

“Guinevere, do not stare!” Viviane admonished in a harsh whisper. “We do not wish to draw attention to ourselves.”

My head whipped around at the tone in her voice and for a moment I thought I glimpsed fear in her eyes, but just as quickly, it was gone, replaced by the unreadable mask I had grown accustomed to. I looked at her questioningly and she returned my glance with a silent warning to ask no questions. Her gaze returned to the table behind me and with a gesture that could have been interpreted as smoothing down her hair, Viviane moved the veil back slightly on her head, revealing the blue crescent. In doing so she threw a meaningful look toward the table.

I glanced over my shoulder again and caught the tallest of the three men staring in my direction. Frightened by the animalistic darkness in his eyes, I dropped my gaze to the fire, not daring to raise it again. A sharp whine accompanied by the creak of straining wood signaled that the men had risen from their seats, and soon after I heard the shuffle of their footsteps as they made their way out into the night.

I turned back to Viviane, only then realizing that I had disobeyed her order not to look at them, but she did not seem to notice.

After a moment’s thought, she grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the table. “We must find Rhys, for it is time for us to retire for the evening,” she said by way of hasty explanation.

I spotted the large, redheaded man at a nearby table charming a barmaid whose ample chest jiggled as she squealed in laughter. Viviane quickly tossed a handful of coins on the bar, tapped Rhys on the shoulder with a gesture to follow us, and tugged me toward the stairs.

I rested poorly that night, unable to stay asleep for more than a few hours at a time. Viviane had made certain that Rhys slept in the room next to ours, and I myself had set the lock on the door, but still Viviane's agitation at dinner worried me. She was normally as calm as could be; she had to have sensed something to provoke such a reaction.

I did not have to wait long to find out what it was. Late, in the darkest part of night, my eyes snapped open and my breathing quickened. Something moved in the shadows near the door. I groped for the dagger beneath my pillow and poked at Viviane, silently trying to wake her. A floorboard creaked in front of the bed and I sprang to my feet. I did not even have a chance to scream before a leather-clad hand clamped down on my mouth and another jabbed me roughly in the ribs as I was pulled tightly against my assailant.

"So you have returned." Viviane's voice drew my panicked eyes across the room to where she stood on the opposite side of the bed, calm and collected as ever. "I thought you might. If it is our gold and belongings you desire, they are in the purse under the bed. Take them and get out." Her right hand twitched slightly, but her face remained composed.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and before I could draw another breath, a second man emerged from the shadows. I recognized him as one of the three in the tavern a few hours before, but I could only guess that the man who held me motionless had been among their number as well.

"Indeed we do desire your money," he said slowly, taking a few steps toward Viviane. "But we come for other purposes as well." He gave Viviane a lingering, appraising look. "And I do not believe we will be disappointed."

My eyes widened in horror as I realized the meaning behind his words and I struggled to scream, to alert Rhys that we were in trouble. Not a second later, the one who held me had a sharp blade to my throat.

"Scream and you will not see the dawn."

Viviane's face lost its air of impassiveness at those words, but I could not identify the new look which replaced it. Her right arm shot up to her head as if she was going to scratch it, but just as quickly it fell to her side again.

Lightning flashed and rain began to beat on the roof.

"Well," Viviane's voice softened seductively, her hooded eyes taking on an alluring light, "if my body is what you desire, I see no harm in it. However, no harm is to come to the girl. She is too young yet to bring you any pleasure." Viviane paused. "But you must come to me."

The thief seemed pleased by her proposal, but I could not believe what Viviane was saying. Shock tensed my muscles, and I prepared to struggle for the door, but my assailant held me close, whispering in my ear with ale soured breath all the things he would do to me once Viviane was dead. I squirmed against him, but that seemed only to encourage him more.

The other thief advanced toward Viviane, pausing briefly before the fireplace to remove his belt so that nothing would impede his conquest. In that instant, Viviane's voice rang clear in my head, a command issued both from within my mind and without.

"Guinevere, get down!"

With all my strength I pitched forward, wrenching out of the grasp of my captor, and threw myself on the floor near the bed. As I fell, I saw Viviane's arms swing toward the sky and come down with incredible force. Simultaneously, a peel of thunder shook the building, and the bricks of the fireplace exploded outwards, followed by a snake-like finger of lightning. The lightning struck Viviane's would-be rapist while the flying coals and searing embers took out the man who had held me. In the space of an instant it was all over, replaced by a moment of quiet as still as death.

That was soon disturbed however, as half a dozen people barreled into the room, Rhys leading the way. Questions rained down on us from all sides as Rhys helped me to stand, and the inn keeper checked over Viviane's soot-stained face to make certain she was unharmed. Soon it became apparent that the man nearest to the fireplace was dead, and the other was begging for mercy from anyone who would listen.

In the end, it was ruled by the local authorities that what had happened was an accident of nature, for they had found me on the floor nearly under the bed, and Viviane was several feet across the room from where the explosion took place, so neither of us could have been at fault.

But that explanation did not satisfy me, and I asked Viviane about it as we lay in a more peaceful bed many hours later.

“You summoned that storm, did you not, Viviane?”

She did not answer me directly. “As an earthly representative of the Goddess, a priestess holds in her hands the power to give and take life, just as the Goddess does. Better one guilty man lose his life than two women whose time has not yet come. Now, speak no more of it and go to sleep, Guinevere.”

But sleep would not come to me that night. I lay awake until late in the morning contemplating what had taken place and the frightening mystery surrounding it all.