

Once the spring equinox came and went and Beltane neared, I felt my resolve to do better slipping away. I had yet to face the reality of what happened to me while I was in Malegant's possession. Though I knew Viviane was aware, for Lancelot told her, I could not bring myself to speak the words aloud in this holy place. Thus, they stayed trapped within me, polluting my blood and my life force, even as I sought to heal. The need to cleanse myself came from beneath my skin, a feeling of roiling smoke in my veins, as though by killing, cursing and being violated, I had damaged my very soul. I needed to start over – to remind myself who I truly was.

I asked Viviane for permission to retrace the steps used by a priestess preparing to take her vows. Only instead of the testing ritual at the end, I would undergo a purification similar to the one we all experienced when our moon blood first began to flow. She gladly agreed.

Standing before the mouth of a small cave at the base of the Tor, Viviane blessed me. “Guinevere, priestess of the Lord and Lady, I here and now vow you to silence for the period of three moons. In this time of silence you will be secluded from the world, consuming nothing but bread and water. Meditate upon their mysteries and know them well, for when you emerge from her womb, you will be transformed.”

Grainne helped me remove my blue priestess robes and clad me in white. She bound my hair in knots to symbolize my many inner demons, and wished me well.

I stepped into the cave that would long be my home with some trepidation. When I was a priestess in training, they had secluded me in a forest hut, so this was a new experience for me. A fire was burning brightly within, and plenty of firewood was stacked against one wall, along with a felt pelt for a bed and some provisions. My daily ration of food would be delivered to the mouth of the cave each morning and I could drink as much as I pleased from the portion of the underground spring that surfaced within the cave.

Day upon day, night after night, I meditated on the teachings I had learned while a student on this isle so many years ago. The names and functions of the gods and goddesses, the elements and their correspondences, skills such as divination and herb craft, and so many sacred incantations. I found that I could tell the phase of the moon simply by how its light reflected upon the walls. On the nights with no light – the new moon – I prayed to be purified from all my faults and strengthened to let go of the past. When the light was at its strongest – the full moon – I invoked the Goddess, drawing energy from the earth and sending it back out with the intention of being whole. Each ritual ended with meditation, silent time alone with the gods.

But the night before my last new moon, the one during which I would be purified, and remerge from my seclusion, something strange happened. When I began my meditation, it seemed to me that the whole Tor pulsated. It wasn't unusual for me to be able to feel its heartbeat – all priestesses learned to sense that – but what was strange was the intensity. It throbbed all around me, a sonorous vibration that was both part of the rock that surrounded me, but also part of me. Once my heartbeat matched its pulsing, the slow rhythmic thrum of drums began. I assumed it to be coming from far above, on the tip of the Tor, where my fellow priestesses would be celebrating. But no. The closer I listened, the more I realized it was coming from within this very chamber.

I stood, following the sound to the very back of the cave, but as I approached it, the wall seemed to shimmer and disappear, opening up to a vast network of caverns, bisected by the flowing white spring and watched over by countless stalactites that threatened to fall and impale a trespasser at any moment. Onward I walked until my small swan lamp illuminated a large room in which the spring pool in a spiral pattern. As my eyes adjusted, I found I was not alone. Sconces were lit in every corner, each watched over by a Sidhe guardian, attired in regal robes of

green, blue, red and white, each to match an element. I barely had a chance to look upon their tall forms and long faces before another being captured my attention.

Presiding over the pool was an elderly woman, whose face seemed to be continually changing, in that as I looked at her, I saw elements of different women in her features: one moment, my mother, another Argante, and then Octavia, even Aine.

“Seeker of wisdom, know you who I am?”

I bowed. “I do. You are Ceridwen, mother of all mysteries, keeper of the cauldron of life and death.”

The old woman plunged her staff into the pool of water, string it so that it flowed desoil, along the route of the pattern carved into the stone. “Indeed, I am she. It is my staff that makes this pattern and brings new life from death. That is why you are here, seeking new life?”

“I am.”

“Then you must first be rid of the old. Step into the waters and be born anew.”

I shed my robe and stepped into the clear water, which was deceptively deep. It covered me all the way to my neck. It was warm, like a pleasant bath.

“Name that which you seek to shed.”

“I wish to be purified from all enmity toward my fellow priestess, Morgan.”

The water immediately began to heat and I scrambled around, seeking relief. When I attempted to get out, the Sidhe guards blocked my path. I looked to the Goddess for help.

“Purification is painful. If it is truly what you seek, you will endure. What else ails you?”

“I wish to be purified from my experiences of violation and regain my sovereignty.”

The water began to boil. It took all that I had not to scream. My skin felt like it was peeling off again, and when I looked down, the water had become lava.

“You have come to the right place. But now you must name your experiences to me, for I cannot heal what you yourself cannot admit.”

Without realizing what I was doing, I told her my whole story, from the moment I met Morgan, through every agonizing detail of my time with Malegant and my most recent encounter with the woman with whom I now shared the title “wife.”

She nodded approvingly. “That is who you have been. Who do you wish to be from this day forward? Declare your identity now.”

“I am a priestess of the Goddess and God, who are called by many names. I am Queen of Camelot, lover and wife of Arthur and mother to this realm. I am Sovereignty herself for I am a representative of the Goddess on earth. Thus has it been and thus shall it be unto my dying day.”

The Goddess waved her hand and the water began to cool. “These are the roles for which you were born and so I affirm them. I blessed you on the day of your consecration and I do so again now. Remember your vows and uphold them, no matter what pain they may bring, for we are with you.” She laid a hand upon my brow and, as on the day of my consecration, I felt heat like the kiss of the sun enter me from where the crescent was inked into my forehead.

Beside her appeared a handsome man with leaves in his beard and antlers in his hair. He was naked except for a fur cloth at his loins. I would know him anywhere – Cernuous, the God of the Greenwood. “Be blessed priestess and know your work is far from done. Your greatest tests are yet to come,” he said in a voice as deep as the ocean, as rough as the bark of a tree.

He leaned forward and kissed me, his lips igniting a flame within me that burned hotter than any I have ever found at the height of ecstasy. He bent me backwards until even my head was submerged beneath the waters.

When I opened my eyes, I was laying on the fur pallet in the cave, completely dry. That was when I heard Viviane calling my name. I rose, shaking, and followed the sound of her voice to the mouth of the cave.

It was morning, just after dawn, the mists still swirling around us like clouds, Viviane led me to the confluence of the white and red springs, where a grove of yew and alder trees grew. Grainne greeted me with a hug. As my sister priestess and attendant, it was her right to participate in the last part of the ritual with me.

We knelt on the cold earth, looking up at Viviane. Nimue stepped forward and placed a crown of blossoms on each of our heads as Viviane intoned, "Priestesses, be blessed and purified. In the names of the Goddess and God, may you be as innocent as the day of your birth."

We bent down in unison, scooping up handfuls of water, splashing it on our faces and then drinking it. We washed our feet and used seashells to dribble water in over each of the sacred spots of our bodies, while chanting. "May our eyes be blessed, and our ears too, that we may hear and speak the will of the gods. May the center of our sight be blessed, along with our hearts, that they may be always foremost on our minds. May our tongues, hands and feet be blessed, that we may always speak highly of them and do their work, no matter what paths we tread, for all lead back to them in the end." We took turns sprinkling water over one another, saying, "Priestess of Avalon, may you be forever blessed."

We stood. Grainne unpinned my hair, flowing free as I was now free, and helped me wash it in the stream.

Viviane regarded me fondly. "Did you find the healing that you sought?"

I smiled and embraced her. "Yes, thank you."

"And now?"

“Now I am ready to return to Camelot.”