

In the dark of the moon, troubling dreams began to rob me of sleep. Each one seemed to be a continuation of the next. Sometimes I was man, sometimes beast. In the latter, I wandered in a midnight forest snuffling through fallen leaves beneath the towering oaks, a clear, starry sky above me. Occasionally, I would stop to consume an acorn or wild mushroom, or raise my snout to scent the breeze.

I would wake, restless, but not completely free of whatever evil spell had hold of me. When my eyes closed again, I was human, a warrior, a hunter perhaps, clad in heavy armor, stumbling through the same dark wood. Unlike the animal, who could pass through underbrush and thorn unharmed, I had to fight against the ancient fingers of the forest. Brambles snagged my armor and branches tangled in my hair. The light from my torch cast dancing shadows before me, illuminating my feet, but providing little evidence in the way of tracks or droppings. But somehow I knew I could only make this journey under cover of darkness. Daylight would provide no aid.

When I woke, the question was always the same: who was the hunter and who the hunted?

After a week of this, I gave up. Trading my sleeping gown for a fur cloak and tunic, I slipped down the hall in search of Grainne or Morgan. Surely, they would be able to give me some insight into the meaning of these dreams.

Opening her door silently, I found Grainne asleep in the arms of Owain. That was a coupling I did not expect, but it made sense. He was smart and so was she. Both were kind hearted and sought justice. I smiled, happy they had found one another.

Not wanting to disturb them, I decided to search out Morgan instead. Her room was empty, but her maid, who sat staring into the fire like one afflicted.

“She rose in a hurry some hours before, but bade me remain here. She said if I followed, she would curse me.” The young girl didn’t take her eyes off the flickering flame.

That piqued my interest. Something was troubling Morgan as well. I touched the girl on the shoulder and she jumped, clearly frightened. “Be at peace. I am queen here and I promise no one will harm you. Will you feel better if I give you something to help you sleep?”

The girl shook her head slowly. “No, thank you. I am fine.” She turned back to the flames.

I doubted very much that she was fine, but I was not going to argue with her. I had more important things to do.

Padding through the halls on feet light as air, I tried to think of where Morgan would have gone. I searched Arthur’s room, the kitchens, the still room, all of her favorite haunts, but there was no sign of her. I was halfway across the courtyard, headed for the barracks – maybe she was tending to a recovering soldier? – when I heard a faraway clanking, like metal striking metal. It was familiar somehow, but out of place in the late hour.

I followed the sound down the street and through a winding maze of corridors to the blacksmith’s shop. That was where the sound was coming from. Now it was a small chink-chink-chink, as though the smith had changed to more delicate hammer.

The door was part-way open, but not far enough for me to squeeze through. It ground as I slid it open, and Morgan looked up, face streaked with ash, blue eyes daring me to come any closer. One hand was on a throwing dagger I had no doubt she wouldn’t hesitate to use.

It took her a moment to recognize me. Then her steely façade deflated. She suddenly looked weary, the black circles under her eyes growing more pronounced as I approached.

“What are you doing here?” Morgan’s voice was flat as she went back to plaiting tiny metal circles into armor.

I sat down on the bench next to her, grateful for the warmth of the forge. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“Why don’t you then?” She said irritably.

I took a deep breath, willing myself not to be rattled by her rudeness. “Morgan, what are you making?”

She didn’t look up from her work. “Armor, leg gauntlets, if you must know.”

“Why? For whom?”

Her fingers flew over the rings, twisting them into seamless interlocking plaits faster than an old woman moved her knitting needles. “Arthur. Who else?”

A chill ran down my spine. “You’ve had the dreams, too.”

That made her look up. “They started a few weeks ago. I only know he is in danger. From what or whom I do not know.”

“I think I do.” I told her about my dreams, only now understanding I was dreaming of Arthur and the beast he hunted, or that hunted him. “But how did you know to make leg guards?”

She looked at me like I was daft. “Guinevere, you are a warrior. Think about your armor. Where are you most vulnerable?”

I pictured myself in full battle armor. If I was lucky, my head was protected by a helmet, my chest and back by thick leather armor, arms by leather guards, feet and shins by thick boots.

“My neck and thighs,” I answered.

“Exactly.” She turned to the forge and tapped again on small silver buckles. “I knew that whatever hunted Arthur would strike low, so I went with armor for the thighs. They hold a major

vein, that, if severed, can cause loss of life in span of only a few heartbeats. I will not let that happen to him.”

“How do you know how to do all this?” I watched her attach leather thongs to the buckles and then fasten them to the mail, in awe of her skill.

“When you thought I was cavorting about the hills on Avalon, I was learning the skills of the forge from Brianna. I am a Daughter of Brigid.”

Daughters of Brigid were specially trained priestesses adept in the skills of metallurgy, in addition to midwifery and poetry, Brigid’s other two main attributes. In ancient times, they were the ones who armed warriors. Now it made more sense than ever that Morgan became a camp woman after leaving Avalon.

She smirked at me. “Surprised? There is a lot you don’t know about me. That is your problem, Guinevere, you don’t ask. You assume. That will get you into trouble someday.” She rose. “Stand up. I want to try these on you.”

I did as she commanded. “But Arthur’s legs are much bigger than mine.”

“I know that. But at least I can see if the buckles are on straight. I can’t very well reach my own thighs to put them on, now can I?”

As she fastened them on, I looked down at Morgan’s swollen belly. She was now at least seven months pregnant. “How are you going to get these to Arthur? We don’t even know where he is.”

She stepped back, examining her work as well as she could, given that the gauntlets were about to fall down around my ankles. “I do.” She gestured to the table where a map and crystal lay. “I found him last night near the X forest. Now, thanks to you, I know he hunts the boar, Ysgithyrwyn.”

“But I thought Ysgithyrwyn was only a legend.”

“So did I, but you and I should know better to believe that things like that come only from the imagination.” Morgan removed the heavy armor from my legs.

“Come to think of it, I have heard of disturbances in that region. But no one has mentioned a boar.”

Morgan tinkered one final time with her creation, making minor adjustments. “They will. Just you wait and see.”

“What do you mean me? Don’t you mean we?”

“No. I mean what I said. I will deliver this to Arthur, along with the only weapon that can penetrate the boar’s spines – the Spear of Lugh.”

My mouth dropped open. “Surely you jest.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Her face was as serious as could be.

“How do you...where?” was all I could manage to say.

“I told you before, if you asked you would know more about me. I was the Keeper of the Spear before all that business with Rowena and the poisoned cup. When I was dismissed, Viviane told me to take it with me and ensure that it, and it’s new keeper, were well hidden. I am the only one who knows where it is. The spear will wound the boar enough for Arthur to remove one of its tusks, which is said to be magical. Excalibur can accomplish that, but without the spear, it is useless. Only the spear can end Ysgithyrwyn and his reign of terror. You don’t want it to continue goring innocent villagers, do you?”

“No,” I answered automatically. I thought for a moment about what she said. “So Arthur needs you, or his life is forfeit,” I said quietly, feeling quiet helpless, useless even.

Morgan’s smile was sly, as always. “Of course.”

“But you are too far along in your pregnancy to sit a horse without danger to your child,”

I protested.

“I am. So that is why I will be taken by cart. I leave at first light.”

I helped Morgan gathered her tools and cool the forge. As she passed me by, she patted me on the cheek. “Don’t worry. You have Lancelot to take care of.” There was a tone of mocking in her voice. “Surely that is honor enough for a queen.”