

“I pray you will forgive me for calling on you unannounced,” my father said once everyone had gone.

I smiled at him. “You are my father. You of all people need not stand on ceremony before me.”

Octavia served my father a cup of warm, mulled wine hastily prepared in a kettle over the fire from supplies in the cabinets. I could tell she was glad to have the opportunity to serve him once again, but I also did not miss the concern etched into the lines around her eyes and mouth. It meant she saw it, too.

He was wasting away before our eyes. It probably began with my mother’s death. When I returned from Avalon, I had attributed his leaner frame to grief and nothing more. Perhaps that’s all it was, but now it was clear his body was being eaten away from the inside. His sunken eyes and jutting cheekbones, drooping jowls and ill fitting clothes meant only one thing: he was not long for this world.

I tried to hide my fear and sadness behind a mask of pleasantries, but just as when I tried to feign I hadn’t been the one to place burrs in Lyonesse’s saddle as a little girl – although my cousin Bran had helped – he saw straight through my pretense.

“Guinevere,” he sighed. “I am an old man who has lost his wife, twelve children, and now my grandchildren and very nearly my only daughter. Please, do not pretend his visit is something it is not. I wanted to see my little girl one more time while I still have some dignity.”

I knew not what to say. I could only stare at the cup wobbling in his shaking hand. The blood in my veins had turned to ice and my thoughts fled. All I knew was I could not face this grief on top of losing my children. It was too much, far too much for one heart to bear.

“Arthur told me what happened after you gave birth, what happened to you. I am so grateful you chose to come back.”

“I am not sure I am.” My own words shocked me, seeming to come from someone else. But they were true, I realized. More followed in a torrent of hot tears as I unburdened my soul of pain I hadn’t known I suffered until now. “I married Arthur because I had to, because you wanted me to. I know he loves me and I have grown to respect him, but I do not feel even half the love you bore for my mother. So what if I had died? What would it have mattered? We could have all been together, me, mother, you, and my precious babies.”

Something inside me broke in that moment, something I do not think ever fully healed. I threw myself at my father’s feet, wailing. “I never even had the chance to hold them in my arms. I saw only a glimpse of my son’s face and nothing of my daughter. I dream of them every single night – motherhood is not a bond easily broken, even by death. I dream they are broken and only I can put them back together with this kisses and caresses I never had the chance to give them. I may have had one glorious moment with them in the spirit world, but that is little comfort when I wake in the night, hearing them cry and scream with voices they never even used upon this earth.

“Will I be forever chasing ghosts? First mother, then my babies and soon, far too, soon you will leave me, too. I don’t know if I can endure on my own. Help me, Dah, help me.”

I hadn’t called him by that term of endearment in years. I looked up at my father now, salty tears streaming uncontrollably. I was desperate for the comfort he always had in abundance, but at the same time weighed down by guilt that my last moments with him were in such a desperate, selfish state, rather than me comforting him as I should be.

He took my hand and pulled, far too weak to lift me to my feet, but I understood and forced myself upward, sliding onto the couch next to him. I laid my head on his chest, listening

to his heart beat, trying to memorize the sound. He stroked my hair and I closed my eyes, not bothering to try to stop the tears from seeping out.

“Guinevere, I told you I am thankful you chose to live. Do you want to know why? Because you can do so many things your mother and I never dreamed possible. We did our best to prepare you for greatness, but you exceeded even our grandest expectations. You are Queen. You have the ability to bring peace to this land. That is what would have been lost if you had chosen to stay with your mother in the Summerland.

“Do you remember when you used to ask me why I fussed over my supper and tossed in my sleep? It was because of threats you have already begun to placate. Thanks to you and your friend Isolde, Bran will never know what it is to rule a kingdom under constant threat from the Irish. Barely a year as Queen and you have already subdued a Pictish revolt that would have brought shame on your mother’s people, and so far your diplomacy seems to be holding against the Saxons and that is only the beginning. Only the gods know what you may accomplish.

“I know you grieve, Guinevere. So do I. But as rulers, we are more than mere people. We hold the lives of our citizens in our hands. The right choices can save thousands of lives and assure peace for future generations. Never forget that dream, my daughter. It is what this castle, this town was built on; it is why I risked everything to bring your mother to this land. We all play a part in it, but yours is the greatest.

You say you do not love Arthur. Perhaps you do not feel the passion you have had for others, but if you do not love him, why is the thought of him what kept you from letting go? There are many types of love. I was fortunate enough to have one kind with your mother, the kind you no doubt felt for Aggravaine, but that is very rare in this world. Arthur is your husband

and he is a good man. Abide with him and you will grow to love him in a deeper, more enduring manner. That is the kind of love that will see you through even the greatest of trials.”

My father kissed me on top of the head and I thought about his words as his voice trailed off. I sat up, facing him and clasped each of his hands in mine, wanting to see his reaction to what I was about to say. “Mother gave me a message for you. I did not tell Arthur because it was not meant for him.”

My father’s lower lip quivered.

I took a deep breath. “She said to tell you there is nothing to forgive and that she loves you still.”

For a long while, my father only stared at me and I began to wonder if he had heard me. But then he squeezed my hands and blinked away a tear. “She has forgiven me?” His voice was almost inaudible.

“Yes, Dah. But she believes you did not transgress. You have no need for forgiveness in her heart, only love – the same unending love she has always had for you.”

My father’s face brightened. “Corrina,” he sighed her name, “thank you.” He looked at me. “And thank you for telling me. You cannot know what peace you have brought this old man. My sweet girl, what can I do for you?”

“Oh Dah, you have done more than I could ever ask for already.” I laid my head back on his chest, thinking over his words, tonight and everything he had ever said to me. “Dah, there is one more thing.”

“What is that?”

I was crying again. “When the time comes, hug your grandchildren for me.”