

A week later, after Arthur was completely convinced I was well, we held our pleading day. The few lords that brought complaints against Uriens or one of his sons were seen first, as their cases were likely to take longer than the petty suits raised by common folk. Most were challenges to Uriens' previous rulings and Arthur upheld them all, save one. A chieftain from an area on the western coast accused Accolon of cheating him out of his share of the duty collected from incoming ships in his port. Accolon had never been the most trustworthy of men and the chieftain's case seemed to have merit, so Arthur asked them both to bring any evidence they had to court at Lughnasa, when we expected to be back in Camelot and could devote more time to the matter.

Having heard the major cases, the hall fell into a sort of lull as we waited for the peasants to make their way in from the surrounding villages. Around us, courtiers and spectators chattered in small groups. Lancelot, Owain and Accolon were hunched over a game of dice in one corner, while Morgan stared thoughtfully out the window from her throne.

*She's probably plotting a new way to make me miserable,* I thought. In public, she was as deferential as she could manage, only slipping up with an occasional disdainful glare that no one else seemed to notice. But when we were alone, she unleashed her venom on me at every turn. Her taunts had become increasingly cryptic, hinting that she had knowledge I did not, knowledge that would one day place her above me. It was obvious that whatever she thought she knew was also what she thought gave her power over me, but despite her clues, I couldn't figure out what it was.

Arthur fidgeted restlessly in his chair for a while and finally decided to get up and join Uriens, who was leaning against a pillar about ten feet away with his youngest son, Mordred. After a few minutes of indecision, I stood, rubbed my sore rear end and joined them.

Arthur was deep in conversation with Uriens about a possible solution he and I had discussed last night by candlelight for how to handle the influx of immigrants from York. We all knew that Uriens would benefit from employing the skilled workers however he could, but the unskilled masses were beginning cause trouble in the towns and terrorize the countryside as roaming bands of brigands.

Isolde's mention of the mines in the Highlands made me think of the multitude of lead and copper mines we had in Gwynedd. Surely, my cousin Bran and the local chieftains who ran the mines would welcome the additional laborers. And I doubted many of the displaced would object to the prospect of employment. Mining was dangerous work, but when your choices were that or starvation, the answer was pretty simple.

I was just about to offer to send a letter to Bran on Uriens' behalf when I felt a tug at my skirt. I looked down into Mordred's dark eyes and he smiled. "You have a moon between your eyes just like my mother," he observed, pointing shyly at the mark of priestesshood on my brow.

I smiled and did a quick calculation in my head. He had to be four or five years old now, but he spoke with the intelligence of a child twice his age. "Yes, I do," I answered warmly.

"Does that mean you are friends?" His expression was warm, eyes alight with curiosity.

He couldn't have picked a more loaded question even if he'd known the circumstances surrounding our relationship. I chose my words carefully, cautious not insult his mother, but not wanting to lie to him, either, especially since children are apt to repeat everything you say to them. "I have known your mother since we were young girls. She and I spent many years together and that mark shows that we have made the same promises to the Goddess."

Mordred's brow creased as he tried to understand my answer. "So it is like you are from the same clan? Some of father's men have matching marks, too."

I swallowed hard, the wisdom of his words touching my heart as I looked over at Morgan, who was now watching me suspiciously, probably none too pleased to see me conversing with her son. He was right; we were bonded like tribal kinswomen, just in ways he was far too young to understand. I knew I should try to be kind to her, but she made it nearly impossible.

“What is my bright young boy quizzing you about?” Uriens broke in, a proud smile lighting up his face as he put an arm around his boy.

I looked at his shock of gray hair, wondering if he had ever been as fair-haired as his youngest son. Mordred certainly didn't get that from Morgan. Owain, Uriens' eldest, was blond as well, so it was possible. His other son, Accolon, on the other hand, was as dark in skin and hair as a native Roman, but I thought I remembered hearing they had different mothers, so it was impossible to tell. I shook my head to clear it of these wandering thoughts. “He was just asking why Morgan and I both have a crescent tattoo and what it means. He is very smart,” I said, smiling down at Mordred again.

Mordred's cheeks reddened. “Thank you, my Queen,” he responded with a polite bow and that made Uriens beam even brighter.

A group of dusty travelers was beginning to trickle in, so Arthur and I had to make our way back to our thrones to hear the afternoon's pleadings. “I look forward to having you as a member of the Combrogii one day, Mordred,” I whispered to him.

Mordred's face lit up at the prospect and for the briefest moment, I could see him as young man, bowing before an aged Arthur, swearing his allegiance and undying loyalty. But something of Morgan's cunning showed in his dark eyes and I shivered. Sometimes the veil separating the present from the future was best left undisturbed.

