

As we set out, Mother Nature teased us like a two-faced mistress with her charms, blowing warm for a week and encouraging the flowers and trees to burst forth in glee, only to turn icy overnight and coat the emerging buds with a thin layer of ice and snow that melted to a cold rain in the light of day.

Our party was small by royal standards, consisting only of our champions, Kay and Lancelot, Isolde and her champion, Tristan, Octavia in her role as my ladies maid, and my own special invitation, Fiona. She was due to return to her husband in the Summer Country and I wanted her to have the chance to see the rest of the land, an opportunity I was all but certain Malegant would never extend to her.

Arthur had decided to skip the journey north to Lothian since he was in constant contact with its queen, his sister Ana. We would instead begin our journey with a tour of his own kingdom of Strathclyde so that the people who didn't have the means or desire to travel to Camelot would have the opportunity to plead their case before the High King.

Isolde entertained us with tales of her homeland through the drizzle and weak sunshine of the muddy Pentland and Cheviot Hills into the breathtaking lake country with its towering mountains reflected in serene waters ringed by grassy meadows. In imposing fortresses and shabby town squares along the way she repeated nearly the same speech she had given in Camelot, defending her actions against a myriad of arguments, yet always coming away with a pledge of peace.

Isolde stayed with us until we reached Uriens' stronghold in Rhegd. After a brief meeting with Uriens and Morgan and good night's rest, she and Tristan turned south to return to her husband Mark in Cornwall.

I was sad to see her go, not only because she was my friend – and one I didn't see often enough – but because it meant I would have to face weeks under Morgan's roof without an ally. Arthur knew nothing of the animosity between us and I didn't think this was the time to tell him. She was, after all, Uriens' wife and our hostess. I would just have to do my best to avoid her.

Unfortunately, Morgan was not about to make that easy. When Uriens' invited me hunting with his sons, Owain and Accolon, Arthur, and the other men, Morgan insisted I stay behind with the other women. We hadn't seen each other since my wedding several years before, and her feigned interest in catching up with me was enough to convince the men. So I was stuck spending the afternoon with Owain's Breton wife, Yvette, Accolon's wife, Lynors, Morgan and a handful of other ladies in the vast garden behind the castle, while their gaggle of children played nearby.

While Morgan nursed her newest child – a boy, only a few months old – the women chattered endlessly about people I didn't know or things I didn't even pretended to have interest in, I lay back on a large blanket spread in the thin shade of a cluster of leafless trees and admired the grounds. Morgan certainly hadn't lost her touch with plants. To my right, a square herb garden had been relieved of its mantle of decaying leaves and bracken, exposing the moist soil to the warm breeze and filling my nostrils with its rich, mineral scent. A few eager residents, like the tall straight green stalks of wild onion and the furry silver leaves of sage, had decided firmly for spring and were growing as though the cold breath of winter would never again shake their resolve, but most still stood as skeletons of last summer's bounty, or had grown only a singular branch that seemed to be proudly displaying a perpetually rude gesture to the world.

To my left the land dipped downward, forming a slight valley of tender grass in which squirrels dug with industrious paws for last year's store of nuts and birds foraged for bracken to

build a nest for the young that soon would be coaxed from the safety of their eggs by the warmth of their mother's feathers to peer with large, bright eyes upon the world.

A handful of young girls were playing on the valley's edge, snapping up early wildflowers like treasure hunters and trying with unrestrained giggles and unsteady hands still thick with baby fat to get them to stick in each other's hair. On the opposite rim, a larger group of boys had divided into two factions and were feigning war with wooden soldiers and blunted swords. Every so often a rock or a clod of dirt would be lobbed from one camp to the other and the carefully organized ranks would descend into chaos while the insult was avenged.

I smiled, remembering a day not long before Viviane took me to Avalon when I watched Peredur, Bran and the young lords of Northgallis play a similar game on a similar spring day. But they were no longer boys, but grown men, most with families of their own. *Families like I should have.* A sudden chill shook me as I realized my children should be out there playing with them, but they were not and never would be. The ever-present pang in my heart seemed to inhale and expand at the thought and I began to wonder if Morgan had arranged this whole setup simply to irritate me.

As if she could read my thoughts, Yvette leaned toward me. "I really am sorry for your loss, Guinevere. Truly, I am." She patted my hand in a consoling gesture. I nodded my thanks, hoping to end the conversation there, but she continued, her delicately accented voice like the soft chiming of fairy bells. "Do not give up hope. We are all praying for you. The Lady will grant your fondest desires in her own time, of that I am certain."

If I was anyone else, anywhere else, not the Queen living under the watchful gaze of a lifelong enemy, I would have rested my head on her shoulder and absorbed all comfort her large blue eyes seemed to want to offer. It was strange, but of all the well-wishers who had visited by

bedside, knelt before my throne or sent their felicitations over the last two years, I felt the most connected to this woman, a foreigner whom I had not known before this morning. Perhaps it was because, unlike so many of the courtiers and supposed friends I had known, Yvette did not appear to have an ulterior motive, or maybe I sensed she understood my pain on a deeply personal level, I longed to pour my heart out to her. But I could not. Being the Queen meant closely guarding your secrets and never revealing your vulnerabilities, lest your enemy sneak in and take advantage of them, so I had to live with my loneliness.

Yvette turned from me when Morgan asked her a question and I glanced back to the mock war playing out in the valley. I was discretely brushing a tear from my eye when I saw her. She had floated in among the children without attracting any notice and was now mediating some dispute between Morgan's tow-headed son, Mordred, and one of Lynors' obnoxious brood. Her wavy brown hair had grown out since I last saw her and her face had lost some of its childish roundness, but there was no doubt it was Camille.

My heart sunk as I watched her compassionately, yet assertively, deal with the children. I had forgotten all about her, forgotten that she lived here, that she even existed. Perhaps it was my way of dealing with a reality I didn't want to face. But now I had to; she was right here in front of me. I could hear gentle, soft voice on the wind, insisting Mordred apologize to Lynors' boy for some offense I hadn't seen. I was immediately filled with hot, overwhelming jealousy that I had to fight to keep from reflecting on my face.

Morgan had followed my gaze. "That is Camille, Aggrivane's wife," she said twisting a lock of perfectly straight, rust-colored hair between two of her fingers and carefully watching my reaction as she rocked the infant in her arms.

I looked her square in the eye, meeting her challenge. “We’ve met,” my voice was steely and I instantly regretted the emotion it implied.

Morgan greedily took the bait and dropped the lock of hair she had been playing with as she leaned back, relishing her victory. “Well, then we must invite her to dine with us this evening. She usually eats with the children so she can mind them, but one of the servants can take over just this once.” Her tone was polite enough to escape Yvette and Lynors’ notice, but I caught the undertone of amusement.

“Actually,” Morgan continued, “you’re lucky she’s here. Aggrivane tried his hardest to get her to go to Lothian with him.”

“It is such a shame she turned him down,” Yvette put in. “She could use a change of scenery. All she ever does is pray and mind the children. It’s not right for a woman to be so somber.”

“She’ll have one of her own to add to the brood soon enough,” Morgan said offhandedly, with a quick glance at me to ensure I had heard.

“Yes, in about seven months, I think,” Lynors giggled, her plump cheeks reddening in the sun.

My throat constricted at her words. Either Aggrivane’s story about them living a chaste marriage had been a lie or things had changed. Either way, I was now not only looking at my former lover’s wife, but the mother of his child. The child that at a happier time in my life could have – should have – been mine.

My throat constricted with emotion – hatred, jealousy, sadness or some mixture of the three – and despite the open air all around me, I suddenly felt trapped. I looked around frantically for some means of escape. I couldn’t stay here, not with her, with them. I didn’t know which was

worse, seeing Camille or watching Morgan's obvious joy at my distress. She was reveling in it like a cat lounging in the sun.

Hot tears picked at the back of my eyes and knew I wouldn't be able to control them for long. I rose, heading hastily inside, and ran headlong into Uriens and Arthur, the first to return from the hunt.

The tears spilled over as I guiltily raised my head to Arthur and clutched at his arm for support as my legs gave way. He bolstered me in his strong arms and his face scrunched up in concern. "Guinevere, what is going on? Are you alright?"

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my voice, but all I inhaled was the stench of hay and horse sweat that rose from his clothes. It was too much for my already traumatized system. "I don't feel well," was all I was able to get out before my stomach revolted and I rushed back outside to avoid retching all over him.

Yvette came over to the edge of the garden and stroked my back soothingly. Lynors just clucked her tongue and said, "My, my, maybe Camille isn't the only one with a seed in her belly."