

The sun was nearly down before the last of the peasants, a gnarled old couple dressed in rags, skin like aged leather, were ushered from the room. The basket of eggs and loaf of coarse barley bread they had left in gratitude for our assistance still sat between us at the base of the dais. I rubbed my eyes and cheeks wearily; it had been a long day and I was grateful to see it end. Arthur's face was drawn and I was certain he was as anxious as I to see the crowd disperse.

We rose in unison and thanked everyone present for their attendance. Arthur was just about to bid them goodnight, when raised voices outside the hall drowned out his words.

"The king is no longer seeing petitioners. You will have to come back another time," one guard said.

I couldn't be sure of the reply, but I thought the petitioner said, "He will see me."

Arthur must have heard the same because he held up a hand indicating the doors should be opened.

Four of Uriens' guards were admitted, trailed by a tall, slender young woman in a gray cloak, her face obscured by a hood as she demurely kept her eyes on the floor. A murmur rose from the crowd. It was more than a serious breach of etiquette to come before the king uninvited and unannounced once the pleading day had officially ended; it was a crime.

Kay and Lancelot rushed forward to stop the group before they reached us, but Arthur motioned them to move aside. The guards parted in unison, leaving the girl alone several feet in front of us, vulnerable and exposed to Arthur's hostility.

"What is the meaning of this interruption? Who are you?" he demanded.

She raised her head and lowered her hood in one graceful motion, revealing auburn hair that hung to her waist, creamy skin tinged with pink at her cheeks and large almond colored

eyes. I expected someone in her position to cower or at least show due respect, but the look she fixed on Arthur was almost haughty.

“I come bearing a gift from my lord,” she replied simply, ignoring Arthur’s other questions.

Arthur’s jaw tightened and he shot me a quick look of annoyance.

“And who is your lord?”

Again, she answered as she pleased, sidestepping the question. “My lord bids me tell you he is truly sorry he will be detained when you pass through his kingdom and so begs you to accept this gift as a token of his remorse and as a sign of his fealty to you.”

“And why does he not deliver it himself?” Arthur’s voice was strained and I knew he was losing his patience.

An embarrassed little laugh escaped her lips. “My lord is far too humble to presume to come before you in person and so he sends me in his stead.”

I could feel Arthur’s whole body singing with tension. He balled up his left fist in frustration and was pressing it to his lips. “And who exactly are you?”

The woman bowed, finally obsequious. “I am of no consequence. I am but a humble servant.”

My brow knit as I watched this incongruous woman rise from her bow. The gown she wore was not made of the coarse material common among servants and those of lower rank. It was a fine material, and richly dyed the color of fertile earth to accentuate her beauty. She was no servant; that much I knew.

I didn't like the way she was dodging all of Arthur's questions. Her answers were suspiciously vague and seemed almost rehearsed, lacking the natural stumbles and pauses nerves usually cause in such situations.

I knew Arthur was close to losing his temper with her, so I confronted her myself. "You say your lord is too modest present his gift in person, and yet you dare show *your* face, uninvited, and after you were asked to leave. What are we to presume of you, then? Only beggars and fools are so bold. Which are you?"

She turned to me with a small courtesy. For the briefest moment, her expression was one of pure loathing, but she quickly recovered and her cheeks reddened, as if on cue. "I beg your pardon my Queen, but I am only following orders."

"Whose orders?" I asked. "Tell us and we will let you be on your way. We are not in the habit of accepting gifts from anonymous strangers."

She shrank back like a wilted flower and dropped her eyes to the floor. "I dare not, my Lady."

I fixed her with a cold stare. "Then I am afraid we must ask you to leave."

One of the four guards came forward, his arms full of what appeared to be fabric with something heavy on top of it. "She was carrying this, my lord, but she is unarmed, we made certain."

Her face lit up. "It is your gift my King, and one for you, too, my Queen." She grasped whatever was on top and the fabric shook out into a river of burgundy velvet that slowly resolved itself into a hoodless cloak. As she brought it forward, I could see that the heaviness on top was in fact its jeweled collar.

Lancelot stopped her from coming any closer, but she ignored him, speaking over his shoulder to me. “This one is yours, my Lady. Will you not try it on?” She held the garment out pleadingly.

Lancelot looked at me questioningly. The whole situation was odd, and tiny pricks of intuition were nibbling at my gut, telling me something was wrong, but I had no idea what. I toyed with the idea of dismissing her simply on that reason alone, as was my right as Queen, but I knew that in the eyes of all present, I had no real grounds to do so. This was our last day in Rhegd and didn’t want to leave on a sour note.

I nodded and Lancelot took the cloak from the woman by its broad collar, securing it around my neck with some difficulty. I suddenly felt much heavier. I looked down at the wide gold collar and saw why it made the whole thing so cumbersome. It was encrusted with six rings of jewels, diamonds, pearls, rubies, emeralds, some polished smooth, others intricately cut and glistening.

A whisper of approval rippled through the astonished onlookers and the woman joined in their joy. “Ah,” she exclaimed, “It is perfect.” She held an identical, albeit much larger, cloak to Kay, grasping it by the lapel to manage its weight. “And now, my lord, will you not accept your gift as well?”

Kay took hold of the fabric just below her hands and the collar flopped over backwards, revealing a smooth, shining underside that gleamed oddly in the light. My stomach clenched. I had seen that sickening sheen before, but where? I racked my brain as Kay moved to secure the cloak around Arthur’s shoulders and the memory came back with a jolt.

“Stop! I yelled, scrambling to my feet and flinging my arm out to block Kay.

Kay halted in mid-gesture, eyes wide with shock, just about to place the collar around Arthur's neck.

"Don't! The jewels, they are poisoned." I immediately ripped my own cloak away and flung it at the feet of its giver, who for the first time looked appropriately frightened.

Arthur's eyes widened and he gaped at me. "What?"

"The collar is laced with poison. I've seen it before. It's the same technique Morholt used on his blade to try to kill Tristan."

Kay dropped the garment as though it had bit him and Arthur turned on the cowering woman, face crimson with rage. "Is this true?"

"Sire, please," she begged. "I know nothing. I only did as I was told."

He repeated his question slowly, allowing each word to punctuate itself in the echo of the chamber. "Is. It. True?"

The woman sank to her knees, shaking her head wildly, tears pouring down her cheeks. "I don't know. I don't know."

Arthur's conflict showed clearly on his face, at least to those who knew him well. He badly wanted to believe she was simply an innocent messenger, but he also knew if she was part of the plot, she had to be punished, and that punishment was death.

I rose and took a step toward Arthur, interlocking my right arm with his left. "There is only one way to find out." I kicked the fabric toward her. "Put it on."

She regarded me with pleading eyes, an expression that was as much a confession as if she had spoken the words. But she grasped the mantle defiantly and started lay it over her own cloak.

"Remove your cloak first," I insisted, "then lift up your hair before putting it on."

“Please, no.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

I squeezed Arthur’s hand. My heart was breaking for her, but if she was guilty of attempted assassination – and her reluctance to do as we asked seemed to prove she was – I could do nothing to save her. “Put it on.” My command came through clenched teeth.

She looked at each of us in turn and then nodded, seeming to accept her fate. Her gray cloak fluttered to the floor like a shadow as she released the clasp. Like a prisoner facing beheading, she slowly pulled her hair over one shoulder to expose the fragile skin of her neck. With shaking hands, she closed her eyes and placed the burgundy mantle around her, just securing the clasp before she gasped and groaned. She fell to the ground, writhing and sputtering in pain as the poison burned through her skin and incinerated her veins on its way to her heart.

Then just as suddenly, she was still.

The doors were barred with heavy timber beams, thicker in some places than the trunks of an ancient oak. Outside Uriens’ privy chamber, I could hear the scuffle of boots against the stone as the guards shifted restlessly. Somewhere, far below us in bowels of the castle, the dead woman’s body lay cold and hastily shrouded, her soul long ago subject to its own justice.

I shivered in the midnight air as a breeze guttered the candle flames, sending ominous shadows scuttling for refuge in the dark corners. Part of me knew we were safe, but after our brush with death, I felt strangely hollow and vulnerable in a way I had not since I was a child – since the attack in the woods that nearly cost me and my mother our lives. I drew my shawl up

around my shoulders and sat down next to Arthur on a long wooden bench, leaning into him and seeking consolation in his warmth.

“Uriens,” Arthur had said comfortingly, “we know you had nothing to do with this. There is no dishonor to your household, rest assured.”

Although Uriens’ had once joined Lot in revolt against Arthur, Uriens’ heart was never in it, and through the years that had passed, he proved himself a valuable ally and faithful subject, so we had no reason to suspect him.

The old man’s hands were trembling as he reached for the goblet of strong wine Morgan offered. For his sake, I hoped she had included a few herbs to bring him solace. Uriens smiled wanly. “Alas, I cannot be so certain. That cloak could have come from anyone. While I would like to believe my family and servants are innocent, until we know for certain, I will not rest easy.”

“Husband, you take too much on yourself,” Morgan chided, perching lightly on the edge of his chair and running a gentle hand along the side of his face. “If we could control the actions of all our subjects, assuming it was even someone from our kingdom, we would live every day in peace. Even the Goddess cannot boast that, so why should you expect it of yourself?”

I was surprised to see Morgan show such love and tenderness toward Uriens. She had never seemed capable of such kindness during our time together so I didn’t expect it now, especially in a marriage was not of her choosing. But there it was right in front of me, melting away Uriens’ fears and calming his troubled heart. As he clasped her hand lovingly, I could see in his eyes how grateful he was to have her as a wife.

Given the rumors swirling around Morgan’s sudden departure from Avalon, I immediately wanted to suspect her, but as with Uriens, it simply made no sense. Yes, she was

talented with herbs and would know better than anyone in the kingdom which could be poisonous when its oils were touched the skin, but that didn't mean she would use that knowledge for ill, especially under her own roof and on a King with whom she got along quite well.

That was the problem for every member of their household, from Uriens' children to Camille and all of his servants. No one had motivation to wish Arthur harm. In fact, he was probably more popular in Rhegd than in any other part of the country, save Camelot. The people in this land had long memories, and they had known him as a benevolent King. After all, he had been merciful to their beloved ruler for his part in the rebellion and had done much to help their coasts rebuild from years of Macha's raiding and plunder.

"I believe this threat was deliberately delivered into your hands," I said to Uriens. "Can you think of any enemy who would find it to his advantage to cast suspicion on you?"

Uriens shook his head and gazed intently at me from across the table. "I am an old man, Guinevere. I have made many enemies and have done many terrible things for which I will soon have to account before the Lady. A man rarely rises to power without spilling some blood." His eyes grew distant as he relived crimes of long ago.

The fire popped and spit in the silence. All eyes remained on him, but no one dared move, lest we interrupt a reverie that may provide some insight. After taking a deep breath and letting it out with a sigh, Uriens focused his attention once again on me.

"To answer your question, no, I cannot think of anyone specific who would want me to appear guilty."

Morgan sat straight up in her chair, rigid with inspiration. "I think you've hit on the key point, husband. It doesn't really matter who paid this woman to deliver the damned thing. What

really matters is who wanted to entrap you. Who would benefit from discrediting our reign and throwing the kingdom into chaos?”

As she spoke, Morgan flitted around the room, gathering things from odd shelves and drawers. She returned to the table with a sheet of velum, a pot of paint and a brush. Arthur cleared away the items in her path, save the candles in their tall holders, so she could spread the sheet out flat. We all gathered around as she began to paint a map of the country, drawing in each of the kingdoms with their undulating, contentious borders. When that was finished and we had all given the paint a moment to dry, she lifted a silver chain over her head and held it out before me.

I watched the crystal pendant glimmer in the candlelight, knowing exactly what she was asking me to do.

“Do you think you still remember how or do I need to remind you how we solve mysteries on Avalon?” She asked with a hint of a laugh an arch of her eyebrows that reminded me of our younger years.

I took the necklace from her and moved to where I had the best view of the map, bracing myself, palms downward against the solid wood of the table top and closing my eyes.

“What is she doing?” Uriens asked.

“I have no idea,” Arthur whispered dubiously.

“She’s going to try and locate our would-be murderer,” Morgan answered.

“But her body is right here below us in the cellar. The guards are waiting to see if anyone claims her before burial.” Uriens sounded certain we were all mad.

“Which no one will, lest they implicate themselves,” Arthur added.

“Will you all please be quiet?” I asked. “I need to concentrate.”

A hush fell over the room and soon all I heard was my own rhythmic breathing as I sent my consciousness downward, becoming one with the earth beneath me. I sent a silent prayer to the Goddess to guide me to the source of this injustice, and without opening my eyes, held the crystal above the map. I could feel the chain go taught as I let the crystal fall, its sharp point poised just above the paper like the pen of a bard awaiting the thunderclap of inspiration.

I began to move my arm slowly over the page and Morgan acted as my eyes, guiding me with her voice from kingdom to kingdom, pronouncing each innocent as the crystal swung in regular measure over each. As my hand neared the edge of the table, I felt the crystal begin to vibrate, subtly at first and then with increasing urgency as the chain began to swing wildly in my sweaty palm.

For a moment, my mind went completely blank and then I saw the servant woman once more, very much alive and talking someone I could only see in shadow. She was laughing and flirting, drawing someone into her confidence, completely unaware she was being watched. Then suddenly, my perspective shifted and I saw Fiona pressed up against a polished wooden column as though she could make herself melt into it. She was spying on the assignation, but whatever she had expected to find, this clearly was not it. Her face was a mask of shock and betrayal.

When the vision was over, I opened my eyes, the pendulum still looping erratically over the southern kingdoms like a bird whose young were threatened by some predatory being. I watched its arc take in the southern Midlands, eastern Dyfient and most of the Summer Country. I was relatively certain I knew from which kingdom the killer came, but we had no proof.

I asked one of the men standing guard to bring Fiona to us. "She knows something, of that I am certain," I said to the group, pacing in a semi-circle in the center of the room, hands fidgeting like trapped butterflies. "I just do not know if it is enough."

Fiona entered the room then with great trepidation, shoulders hunched as though they bore a great weight, eyes fixed to floor, feet shuffling hesitantly through the rushes and sweet herbs covering the floor. It struck me how much she resembled an oft-abused dog who expected more punishment at its master's hand. I tried to calm her, explaining what had happened as best I could after she took a seat and nervously sipped the wine Morgan offered. I as I spoke, her gaze shifted fretfully between Morgan and Uriens as though she was afraid they were going to pronounce her eternal doom.

“Fiona, did you know that woman, the one who brought in the cloak?” I asked, keeping my voice as gentle and light as I could so as not to frighten her further.

Fiona dipped her head and mumbled something no one understood. Her hands were tightly balled around each other in her lap and she seemed to be studying the fingernails of her left hand.

Seeing we would get nowhere questioning her in front of people she barely knew, so I asked if I could have a moment alone with her. Arthur, Uriens and Morgan discretely withdrew to the window and busied themselves looking at the stars.

I crouched down in front of Fiona, one hand covering hers, the other on the arm of the chair for balance and repeated my question.

“I thought she looked familiar,” Fiona confessed, her voice barely audible, eyes wide with fear. “But I cannot place where I have seen her. My husband often entertains the chieftains who still rule the old tribal territories that make up his kingdom. Many of them bring their wives with them.” She leaned forward conspiratorially, so close I could feel her breath on my lips, and added, “Some of them have several wives and even some mistresses.”

She made a sound of disgust and I suppressed smile at her innocence.

“But then again, I cannot even be certain I saw her at home. It could have been while at was at Camelot or at any point on our journey.”

Fiona was right. Just because she recognized the woman didn't mean she was from the Summer Country any more than Morgan and I knowing one another meant we were in league together. For all we knew, the woman could have followed us all the way from Camelot, looking for the perfect opportunity to present her lethal gift.

When I told Fiona what I had seen, the color drained out of her face like water through a sieve. She clutched at my hand, nails leaving red crescents in the delicate skin beneath my fingers. “I remember that night,” she breathed, her expression suddenly wild. “My husband was in private conference with a few of the tribal rulers and a woman he insisted was a foreign emissary. Even then, I did not believe him.”

Her eyes were cold as marble. “He dismissed me to bed, as was usual when he had business he did not wish me to know about. But I snuck back in through a concealed servant's entrance – a risk I had never dared take before – but something about that woman twisted my insides, compelling me back. Clutching my night robes around me like armor, I willed myself to be silent and invisible as I pressed against one of the pillars that lined the perimeter of the room. I wasn't close enough to hear what was being discussed, but it was clear that woman was of some use to the men in the room. She flipped her auburn hair flirtatiously and laughed teasingly, touching my husband's forearm with appalling familiarity and walking her fingers up to rest beneath his chin. And what is worse, he not only enjoyed it, but seemed to expect it.” Fiona's voice dripped with acid.

“I knew he was not faithful to me, but to witness it was another thing entirely. I slid to the floor, my back against the pillar, silent tears wetting the collar of my gown and for a while forgot

their presence. By the time I looked back over my shoulder, the woman had a heavy purse in one hand and was nodding in agreement to whatever the tribal lords were proposing. She turned to leave them, leveling one last enticing glance at my husband. ‘Use me well while you have me, my lord,’ she called over her shoulder. ‘I could be in anyone’s employ on the morrow, for I change my loyalty faster than the weather.’

My husband chuckled appreciatively. ‘How well do I know, mistress, how well do I know.’ And then she was gone.” Fiona ended her story with a sigh of deep sadness.

I hugged Fiona and thanked her for her candor. “You have nothing to fear from us, so sleep well,” I said, kissing her on the forehead and sending her off to bed.

Arthur, Morgan and Uriens crowded around me like a cluster of hens on newly scattered seed as soon as we were alone again. I told them what Fiona had said, and even Morgan, whose calculating mind could usually unravel any mystery, looked astounded.

“So that is it?” Morgan spat. It was somewhere between a statement and question, her incredulity evident. “The bitch who tried to kill our High King could have been anything from a common whore to a spy or a trained assassin. And we have no idea who paid her. It could have been Malegant for sure, but how many other power hungry wolves were in the room with him?”

I stared at Morgan, mouth agape. It was unlike her to use such harsh language and her tone suggested she was taking this more personally than I would have expected. A tiny pit of wariness formed in my stomach, sinking like a stone in deep water.

As she paced, Morgan’s eyes flittered to Arthur almost involuntarily and she flexed her fingers, opening and closing her hands at her sides, as if she was unsure what else to do with her anger. Uriens carefully pried her fingers open and tried to calm her, but she was like a cornered

cat, claws bared, fur standing on end, itching for a fight. I had the feeling if the woman in the cellar below us were not already dead, Morgan would take great pleasure in killing her, slowly.

Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, a tiny voice, so familiar from our years on Avalon, warned me to be wary of her. But I was weary, so tired my mind had begun to feel like it was made of clouds, and so attributed it to our old rivalry and the strain of the day, forcing it to be silent.