

As time passed, I nearly forgot about the incident at dinner as we settled in to life back home in Camelot. Except for a few snide remarks and a closer watch on Aggrivane, Arthur didn't seem inclined to action. For a while, I thought it was someone's idea of a joke, a crass attempt at the lowest form of humor now that we were free.

But then the second note arrived, no less sinister than the first. It was delivered by messenger, a young, frightened thing who could give us no insight into the writer's identity other than he was paid by a hooded man, whose face remained in shadows, save for one moment. When the light illuminated his features, the messenger swore he beheld the Lord of the Wood, leaves in his hair, skin tough as tree bark.

The message was longer, though no less sinister than the first. *Before you close your eyes to life, the final image you see will be of my love. I will breathe your last breath so that you will live on forever in me.*

Arthur's eyes blazed with hatred as I read it aloud with trembling fingers. "This is more than an unresolved crush. This bastard wants you dead."

I wasn't surprised when within the week, Aggrivane was given a special assignment as an envoy in Brittany. Camille chose to go with him, so for the first time in my life, it was as though we had never met. I never suspected him, but I breathed a little easier, knowing he was out of easy reach of Arthur's wrath.

Whoever was sending the notes was crafty. Summer passed without another word and Arthur was convinced his plan had worked. That is until we tumbled into bed one night. Arthur's hands were tangled in my hair, his lips working their way slowly down my collar bone to my breasts, when I rolled onto my back, only to be greeted by a sharp pick in my back.

"Ow!" I yelped, rubbing the stinging spot on my back where the pain originated.

Arthur pulled away reluctantly. “What is it?”

That was when I realized I was laying on something. I twisted onto my side and pulled. I stared at the sheet of vellum with name written neatly across the reverse and a single red rose in my hand. “Arthur?” I asked, praying this was a love note and he was playing coy.

He licked away the blood away from my thumb, but not before a drop smeared the surface of the note, turning my name to scarlet.

I unrolled the smashed note, heart beating faster, but not from passion, from fear. Part of me already knew what I would see. Before my eyes, the stick-like letters of Ogham swam into terrifying focus.

*Your heart, your power, your very soul is mine, for we are one, in this life and the next.*

In smaller letters was a hastily scribbled addition. *I am watching and can reach you no matter where you are.*

After that night, Arthur launched an all-out man hunt to find the source of these disturbing notes. It gave the restless Combrogii something to occupy their time and made both of us feel a little more secure, even as the messages continued coming, one here, two there, seemingly left by ghosts in the most intimate locations. In the meantime, Kay and Lancelot were set to guard me at all times.

In late autumn, Bors returned to court, dragging with him a recalcitrant man I judged to be near to my own age. Bors tossed the man to the ground and he fell with a thud at our feet.

“He has confessed to sending the notes. He can recite each and every one, even those we have not made public.”

“Who is he?”

“Annis, a minor lord of the Summer Country. He’s been in and out of jails the length of Britain and bears the marks of it in his body.”

The man pinned me in his dark, demonic gaze. “This is not the life the gods intended for you,” he ranted. “No, you were not meant to marry this brute, but another of equal power and greater strength. The gods seek retribution. I am but their messenger.”

Arthur was shaking with rage. “I supposed you are the one whom she was supposed to wed?”

Annis shrugged. “I am who I am. What I do is directed by one greater than I. Someone greater even than you.”

Arthur picked Annis up by the collar. “You threatened my wife and now you dare mock me?” He roared.

Annis leaned close as though to whisper something in Arthur’s ear. “And I will see your blood stain these stones.” With the swiftness of a Sidhe warrior, he unsheathed a hidden blade, but Arthur caught his wrist just before the metal met the soft flesh of his neck, blunting what could have been a deadly blow into a surface wound. Arthur growled and twisted the man’s wrist back, the snap of bone hanging sickly in the air before the pain caught up and Annis screamed. Temporarily incapacitated, he barely noticed as Arthur’s forehead met his own, forcing him back.

In the space of a breath, I was on my feet. I lunged at Annis, knocking him to the ground. Poised over him, breathing hard with rage, all my fear poured out in a torrent of rage I didn’t think myself capable of.

“Is this what you wanted to see?” I asked almost seductively. “Is it? You can take this image with you to the depths of the underworld. And tell your gods, whoever they may be, that it

will take more than a few idle threats to bring down this queen.” I plunged my dagger deep into his heart.

Annis jerked and gurgled, but it not cry out. As the life drained out of him, he merely smiled. “You are no better than I,” he croaked.

Arthur stood over me now. His labored breathing filled my ears as he tried to pull me away. But I would not let him. I wanted to watch this bastard die. His breathing was slowing. As his head titled to one side and his eyes took on a glassy sheen, I spit in his face. “May your soul wander with no rebirth and no rest and may your gods curse your descendants forever more.”

Arthur finally succeed in prying me away and I clung to him, shaking in shock. His was not the first life I had taken, but it was the first I had cursed. It was my right as a priestess, but I that didn’t mean I felt good about it. “What has he done to me?” I cried.

Arthur rocked me like a child in the middle of the staring crowd. “He has made you a true warrior queen and a greater priestess. You told me yourself that the goddess has a dark face and now you have experienced her. All who take lives must face her at some point. Those who are weak will crumble, but you did not. I could not be more proud.” He kissed my forehead.