

Viviane was right and it was the last thing on earth that I wanted to admit. The water did indeed miraculously clear my head, and as we followed the road southeast, I found myself in brighter spirits. Eventually, I found the courage to make peace with Viviane, who seemed to bear me no ill will in spite of my earlier attitude.

Perhaps I was becoming accustomed to travel or maybe it was the beauty of the land that calmed my mind and set a slight smile upon my lips. We were far from the mountains of my father's kingdom now, heading into a land of hill and plain, forest and field, a landscape so varied it looked like mother nature had scattered its features at random. Every turn brought a new surprise; here a hill, there a valley, or a sprawling plain. The land was lush and fertile, blooming in a final burst of harvest bounty.

Massive, ancient oaks as old as the Giant's Dance hemmed us in as we skirted the forests of southern Dyfed and the Midlands, their blazing red leaves rasping eerily from the heights as the days wore on. Birds twittered in the trees, enjoying the soft, golden drenching that the declining sun provided, while workers toiled in the fields that dotted the flat lands between forests, their singing scythes transforming fields of nodding grain into cemeteries of stubble as the harvest was brought in to feed animal and man through the bitter, cold days that loomed just on the horizon.

As the wind chased heavy, gray clouds from the sky, we forded the Sabrina, a glittering, gurgling rivulet that marked the halfway point in our journey. I stood on the river's edge and breathed in the clean, moist air and realized that I was no longer afraid or resentful; to my amazement, I found I was happy, happier than I had been in some time. I still missed Octavia and my parents greatly, but I was enjoying the freedom that travel provided. I felt as if life was mine to command, instead of being dictated by someone who cared not what my opinions were. Was this the privilege of being a priestess? My spine tingled at the thought that I might one day be one of them and my stomach fluttered with nervous butterflies anxious to complete the journey.

Soon, the land around us became steep and the grasslands disappeared as we drew ever closer to Avalon. I began to feel a certain familiarity, a feeling of being at home with my surroundings, as if the land itself knew me. When I told Viviane of this, a slight smile played across her lips and her eyes twinkled as if she was remembering the feeling.

“It is a natural reaction. Avalon is your home, so it should not be unexpected that you feel tied to it,” she replied.

“But how can that be?” I asked. “I have never seen this part of Britain before, let alone *lived* here.”

Viviane patted my hand gently. “There are many things you have yet to understand, Guinevere.” She took a deep breath and drew her horse in closer to me, so that we were within whispering distance of each other. “Avalon is a mysterious place, at once within the world that we live in and yet at the same time, not a part of it. It is one of the sacred places on the earth where time and space run together, allowing for the connection of the spiritual and physical worlds. Do you understand?”

I wrinkled up my forehead, contemplating her words. “I think so.”

“Good.” She readjusted herself in the saddle and then continued. “Those who have once been a part of Avalon, always will be. The mark of the Goddess carries across lifetimes and those who have felt her kiss will always long to heed her call.

“Guinevere, the visions and dreams that you have had do not happen to everyone; they are given to a blessed few. These gifts tend to run in families and are usually passed down from mother to daughter. Therefore, the lure of the isle that you feel may mean that one of your ancestors called it home or that you knew it in another lifetime. Your mother’s people also have a sacred isle, like Avalon, so either answer is likely. However, because of the nature of the visions you have had, I believe both to be applicable to you, so you are doubly fated to feel the call of the isle.”

She noted my bewilderment with a soft smile. “Fear not, I mean not to confuse or frighten you. All that I say will become more clear once you have spent some time on the isle and have lived in harmony with its rhythms.”

“You said there is another sacred isle?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “You see, a long time ago there were twelve colleges in Britain where the wisdom of the Druids was taught. Some of this wisdom was shared with the outside world by those who left the colleges to pursue secular lives, while some things were known only to those who took vows to uphold the sacred mysteries. When the Romans came and occupied our lands, they were jealous of the power the Druids held as judges. The Druids were perceived as a threat, and the Romans sought to eradicate them. Because of their actions, only three of the

colleges remain in our country: Avalon, the school of the Archdruid, and the isle in your mother's homeland."

We paused to allow let the horses drink from a small stream and I took the opportunity to allow my mind to catch up. Later, as we rode onward, Viviane continued. "Do you know of the Battle of Mona?"

I shivered. The isle of Mona, or what was left of it, was part of my father's lands. He never mentioned the battle, but I had heard the story from his mother when I was very young. At the height of Rome's madness, the army was given orders by the governor Paulinas to attack the small island. Hundreds of heavily armed soldiers stormed the sacred isle and slaughtered the defenseless priests and priestesses living there. Although I tried hard not to think of the gorish details, their screams of torment still haunted my dreams, and sometimes I fancied I could hear their frantic spells of protection floating upon the wind.

I shook my head to clear it of the violent images floating there. "I have," I answered quietly and looked up at Viviane. Her face had grown drawn and pale, as if in speaking of the tragedy, she grieved for her nameless ancestors.

"After—after the Rape of Mona," her voice cracked faintly, "the few surviving priests and priestesses fled the area, taking all of the ancient wisdom with them. Because of the tradition of only passing on knowledge orally, much of what was once known was lost on that dark day. Those who survived determined that such a loss would never happen again. They split up—some went north and taught your mother's people, while the rest went south—in order to assure that if one community was attacked, others could continue to pass on the old ways. Those who went south hived off into two groups, the men following the Archdruid to the Giant's Dance, the women following the newly elected High Priestess who founded Avalon."

"Why did the men and woman not go together?"

Viviane sighed. "It is a long story, dear child. It is partly because men and women have a different focus in their studies. Women have the mysteries the Goddess teaches, and men follow those of the God. However, I will not deny that there were problems on Mona. They also divided so that neither group could unjustly influence the other."

I was about to ask another question when Viviane drew her horse to a halt. "I think that is enough for one day." She pointed to a valley that lay below the crest of the hill we were

traversing. “There lies Aque Sulis, the western-most jewel of the duplicitous Roman Empire. We will lodge there tonight.”