

Soft music and raucous laughter reached me on the perfumed summer breeze as I made my way back to my chambers in the dim torch light. I smiled, joyful in the knowledge that Camelot was caught up in the ecstasy of the midsummer revelries. Normally, I would have been the first to join in, but pregnancy had sapped my strength and left me in a constant state of fatigue, so I thought it best to retire for the evening.

The halls were quiet and I thought myself alone, until I turned a corner and saw Lancelot advancing toward me. I raised a hand in greeting and made to call out to him, but stopped when Bors and a handful of his men burst out of a room. Lancelot and Bors sized one other up for a moment before Bors snorted and angrily bumped shoulders with Lancelot as he passed.

Lancelot stared after him. "Perhaps we did not get off to the best start," he said as I neared.

I watched Bors' receding figure as he stalked down the corridor. "I think not."

I placed a reassuring hand on Lancelot's arm and took a deep breath, trying to decide the most delicate way of saying what was on my mind. "Bors is a proud man. He does not take kindly to correction, so you will need be very diplomatic in your dealings with him." I smirked as a thought occurred to me. "Actually, you should be very gentle in your interactions with all of the Combrogii. Brothers in arms though they may be, they eye one another suspiciously even on the best of days, so think how much less trust they have for a foreigner, especially one who begins by telling them they are wrong."

Lancelot nodded, seeing my line of reasoning. "I fear I have painted myself a fool."

We advanced slowly down the hall. "I would not say that, but it would be wise for you to try a different tack, something less chastising, more encouraging. As you noted, they are experienced soldiers and horsemen, not green squires who do not know their way around a

saddle. In your new role, they will be forced to look up to you, like it or no, so it is important you give them a reason to respect you.”

As we continued on, Lancelot voiced a few ideas, some of which might actually work to turn the tide in his favor. Rounding a corner, we nearly ran into Fiona, who hardly noticed us in her own preoccupation. She quickly passed us by with small, purposeful steps, but I called out after her.

She turned at the sound of her name. Her eyes were red, cheeks flushed. Something was obviously wrong. Fiona and Malegant had been living at Camelot for several weeks now, in residence for the summer months as Arthur continued to train the Combrogii. These breaks in Fiona’s normally cheerful disposition did not escape my notice; in fact, I thought they were becoming more frequent.

I gestured to Lancelot to leave us, and he did, but only after a concerned glance in Fiona’s direction.

I grasped Fiona’s ice cold hands in my own. “Lady Fiona, I was just looking for you.” I fibbed.

She met my gaze distractedly, yet with suspicion. “You were?” Her voice shook and I could see she was eager to be away from me, away from everyone.

“Yes. My ladies maid tells me you are the best knitter in the whole of the Summer Country. I was hoping you could help me with a garment I am working on.” I was making things up as they came to mind, but I was concerned about the girl and knew she would not confide in me in a public space.

I dragged Fiona along by the hand until we reached my apartments. Crossing to the window seat, I picked up the knitting I had begun earlier in the day and held it up. “My child will

be born amid the winter chill and I want to make sure he or she has plenty of warm clothes to wear.”

Fiona lingered hesitatingly in the doorway. “Could you not buy everything you need? You are the Queen.”

“Yes, but I want my baby to have something made by his mother.” Fleetinglly, I noted my unintentional use of the masculine pronoun and wondered how much of me was hoping for a son.

Forcing my mind back to the task at hand, I pulled Fiona the rest of the way into the room and forced her to sit, bending down next to her so I could shove the block of woven yarn in her lap. “My mother taught me this pattern when I was young, but I seem to have forgotten the next step.” It was only half a lie. I knew very well what to do next, but I was hoping to gain both her attention and her trust.

Fiona took the material from me, along with the needles, and began deftly moving them, passing the yarn between her fingers with expertise as she explained what she was doing step-by-step. “Now, you try,” she said as she handed the garment back to me.

I had intended on acting the part of the novice to keep up the ruse, but I had no need. As soon as my fingers began to move in the familiar pattern, I was transported back to the day I first learned how to do this stitch. I was maybe seven or eight years old. My mother was large with child and was going through similar preparations. She showed me how to knit a sort of jumper that would protect from the deadly drafts everyone feared during the dark time of the year. She was so radiant, so full of expectation. It broke my heart to remember that my sister died only hours after birth.

Coming back to the present, I looked down at my hands and found I had tangled my fingers in the yarn. Fiona giggled, oblivious to my painful memories. "It is alright. You will get it," she said encouragingly. "You just need to practice."

I studied her face. Her tears had dried, but an angry welt was quickly forming across her left cheekbone. "And you need wine," I told her. I poured her a glass and encouraged her to drink.

She looked at the glass uncertainly. "My husband does not like me to drink. He says it makes women 'wanton of lips and hips.'" She wouldn't meet my gaze.

I patted her on the hand. "Men say many things, few of them wise. It will be our secret," I promised.

Fiona giggled again and took a sip. "Will you not join me?"

I had a feeling she would feel less guilty if I assented, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Even the thought made my stomach churn and I had no wish to suffer the sickness again today. I shook my head. "Alas, I cannot. Ever since I found I was with child, I cannot abide even the smell."

Her large eyes grew even wider and she put the cup aside. "Oh, I'm sorry."

I pushed it back in her direction. "Have no fear." I went back to my knitting, making each knot slowly so she would buy my deception. She continued to drink, staring absently out the window, her mind far away, as the wine began to numb whatever pain she was harboring.

Outside we could hear the mummers singing traditional hymns that told the tale of the midsummer feast, of how although it was the longest day of the year, today also was the triumph of the night, when the dark half of the year began. I watched the slow procession of lighted torches bob through the fields, knowing Arthur and Merlin would be at the head, bedecked in

garlands of larkspur, vervain and mugwort. I wished I could be among them, helping to bless the maturing crops to abundant harvest, but I feared the smoke and the heat would be too much for my fragile stomach. Arthur had only reluctantly let me go after Lancelot's installation when I swore if he did not, the night would end with his queen vomiting on his boots.

When it seemed Fiona had consumed enough wine to be more talkative, I started carefully down the line of questioning I had been waiting to pursue since seeing her in the hall.

"You seemed rather upset when I met you earlier. May I inquire as to the cause?"

Fiona stared at her lap. "I appreciate your concern, but it was nothing. I assure you all is well."

I leveled a scrutinizing gaze at her I knew would tease out the truth. "Fiona, are you certain? It seems your mind is greatly burdened and that is a double shame on a night such as this."

She saw my expression and she smiled, but without sincerity. I let the silence hang, willing her to confide in me, but she seemed resolute to keep her own council, so I pressed on. "What happened to your cheek? It looks painful."

"It is a little sore," she admitted. "Someone elbowed me at the feast." She tried to sound lighthearted, but her tone was forced.

I pretended to be astonished. "Really? How?"

She shrugged and gulped down the last of her wine. "You know how unruly crowds are. I am small and easy to overlook. If I stand behind someone above a certain height, I am likely to get hit if they are not careful."

Her story struck me as very well-rehearsed, about as practiced as her excuse for the bruises on her arms a few weeks prior. She had blamed them on a natural inclination to

clumsiness, but I'd never even seen her so much as take a single misplaced step. Then she suddenly took at wearing dresses with sleeves down to her fingertips and refusing to push them up as the rest of us were doing to relieve the heat. I had no way of proving the accusations that were bubbling up in my mind, but I was certain there was much more to the situation than she chose to reveal.

I was pleased when she reached for the flagon of wine and poured herself another glass. "You are very blessed, you know," she observed.

"I am," I agreed. "But so are you. Has Lord Malegant told you I have asked to make you one of my household ladies? I would like the pleasure of your company beyond the summer."

Fiona's huge eyes lit up like stars and her mouth fell open. "I had no idea. Thank you." Impulsively, she bounded over and enfolded me in a tight embrace. Then, realizing what she had done, she shrank back into her chair like a wounded animal, head bowed, eyes on the floor again, as if expecting me to strike her. "Please forgive my boldness, my Queen."

I clasped her hand. "Fiona, I would like us to be friends. Please do not stand on formality because of my title."

She nodded her ascent.

"What makes you call me blessed?" I inquired, bringing the conversation back to its original track.

Fiona was beginning to sway in her chair. "I," she hesitated, trying to choose her words through her now wine-addled brain. "I simply meant you are fortunate to have a kind husband like the King."

I smiled ruefully. "Indeed. Perhaps I should hold more gratitude toward my father for the match. How did you and Lord Malegant come to be wed?"

Fiona's expression darkened. I had obviously touched on a sore subject. "My husband courted me for quite some time because he wanted access to my father's land. Don't look so surprised. I am under no illusion that he loves me. When we were courting, he charmed me and I was besotted, but I see things differently now."

She was quiet for a time, lost in her memories. When she continued, her voice was thick, words slightly slurred. "My father did not act fast enough for Malegant." I was surprised to hear refer to her husband by his first name, something she rarely did. "So one night, his men set upon our household and carried me off by force. S' legal that way, you know." She propped her head up on folded arms and shifted to her side, watching me through heavy eyelids.

I could see the logic – if you could call it that – behind Malegant's actions. From our interactions at council meetings, I knew him to be bold and ambitious. He was already ruler of the largest kingdom in the country, but the Saxons were quickly encroaching on his eastern borderlands. If he had any aspirations of enlarging his holdings, he would have to look to Powys in the west because his northern neighbor, Cadwalla, king of the Midlands, had only sons as heirs. Besides, the enmity between the two lords was strong enough to inhibit any alliance even if Cadwalla had a daughter.

In many ways, Evrain was fortunate to hold the keys to Powys. As I had learned from his unfortunate visit to Northgallis, he knew what power he wielded and was in no hurry to squander it. I could almost see him toying with Malegant, stringing him along with half formed promises that led to greater and greater demands. Though I didn't know Malegant personally, he had proven he was not a patient man and certainly was not one to take kindly to games.

Even though I thought it barbaric, disrespectful and unseemly, I could see why he would resort to the oft-overlooked ancient law of marriage by force. According to its mandates, if he

could kidnap Fiona and successfully ferry her unharmed from her father's house to his own, she was considered his legal wife. Her consent was not required or even considered, and there was no way for her father to seek recompense. Now that I thought about it, I was surprised more brides were not made this way.

A surge of pity overwhelmed me for the girl now drowsing in the chair across from me. Evrain had shown he had little use for women beyond breeding sons, so she had likely gone from a household where she was considered a nuisance to one where she was collateral in a game of political subterfuge. And I had strong suspicions that Malegant treated her far worse than Evrain ever did. But as I listened to her softly snore, delicate features finally relaxed in sleep, I had to accept that was a conversation for another day. I would learn no more tonight.