

Chapter 1

When the fever of battle and escape left my body, the pain began.

Those first few days after Lancelot rescued me are a blur. I can recall riding with him toward Lothian, but not how I got here. My next memories come in flashes, like bits of the sight, rather than actual recollection. First the world is black, then searing light pierces my eyes, and the left side of my body is on fire, burning, skin crackling and peeling back, leaving tender flesh and muscle exposed. Strong arms hold me down when I try to fight the sting of water and wine. By the time, the sweet scent of honey reaches my nose, I am worn out, numb, spent from the pain. A mug of warm, earthy liquid that tastes like berries fresh from their stems and smells of the winter wood is pressed to my lips. I drink it down, hardly feeling a thing as gentle hands slather it on my weeping wounds and bind them.

This is repeated twice daily, along with the painful sloughing of dead skin. I don't know how bad my wounds were, but I recall my caretakers beginning with the top of my head, where my hair should have been, peeling away layers of dead skin like autumn leaves. This I watched when I was conscious, detached, my healer's mind amazed, as though it were happening to someone else. Lancelot and Anna worked their way down to my hip, where they would stop for the morning, only to resume half a day later, so that my skin was refreshed as much or as little as it needed, left to heal under the honey-herb mixture.

Then I remember nothing except long stretches of blackness, interspersed with periods of agony. Had I an axe, I would have happily cleaved myself in two, if only to stop the sharp, burning pain. Many times before I had burned myself while cooking, on a candle flame or practicing manipulating the element of fire on Avalon. Then, I thought I would die from a wound no bigger than my little finger. Now, with half of my body flayed, skin pulling and pinching as it tried to recover from the deadly kiss of the flames, I prayed that the Goddess would deliver me, promising that I from this moment forth, I would suffer such small injuries in silence, without complaint. But that was when I could form rational thought. Most of the time I could do nothing but scream, and when my throat grew raw, my screams were silent.

One day, when I woke, I found the pain, while still present, was much more manageable. Anna, Arthur's sister and King Lot's wife, was sitting by my side, holding a cool, wet cloth to my forehead, her grey eyes as full of love and concern as a mother's for her child.

"Praise Brigid, you are with us once again." The relief in her voice was so great, I wondered just how close I had come to dying after all. I tried to sit up, but Anna placed a firm hand on me. "Do not move. Your wounds are exposed. I was just about to cover them when I felt you stirring."

I looked down, eyes drawn to find the source of my pain. From my shoulder, down my left arm, to my hip, knee and part of my left shin were pockets of red, angry blisters, bubbling through what was left of my skin as though still trying to release the fire's heat. Around them, the skin was twisted, blackened and tough. I had seen my share of

battlefield burns and knew enough of healing, to understand just how badly I was injured. I searched Anna's gray eyes for some sign I was wrong. "These will scar, won't they?"

She pressed her lips together. "I am afraid so. But that is the least of your worries. Until these blisters burst or go down, you are at risk of blood poisoning. That is why we needed to get you to someone with more knowledge than I."

I was only partially listening, having raised my healthy hand to my left cheek. The skin was leathery, pulled tight over my cheekbone. What was worse, I could not feel the touch of my own fingertips. I moved my hand to my ear with the same result. Snapping my fingers, I was relieved to still be able to hear the sharp sound was as much clarity as ever before. But when I brushed my hand through my hair, it came out in my hand in dry, straw-like clumps. I stared at it for a moment before the tears began to fall.

Anna began to dress my wounds as I held my head in my hands and cried. It was then that I felt a gentle rocking sensation that had nothing to do with my sobs. Curiosity won out over self pity and I stopped crying long enough to be still and listen. A gentle hiss and slap of something – water? – accompanied the swaying. For the first time, I looked around, eyes straining in the dim light of two hanging sconces, a fire burned down to embers and a single taper on a bedside table. The walls were plain wood, the ceiling low. There were no windows. Over Anna's head, I could see the outline of a rope hammock fastened to one wall. Lashed to another were several boxes and barrels.

"Anna?" I asked slowly. "Why are we in the cargo hold of a ship?"

Anna looked up, seemingly surprised I had just noticed. "I told you. You need to be with those who can help treat your wounds. I can only do so much."

"I thought you meant to take me to Avalon."

She shook her head. "It would take far too long and me much more dangerous, with the kingdom in upheaval after what just happened. Lancelot thought it wise to take you to Brittany. We should reach land today."

"Where is Lancelot?"

Anna jerked her chin upward. "On deck with the men, where else? Is there nothing he cannot do? The other night we faced strong winds and he helped steady the mast and save the sail as though he'd been at sea his entire life."

Perhaps he had. Lancelot had done and seen so much as an itinerant warrior that little surprised me anymore. "Did anyone else accompany us?"

"No. When Aggravane showed up to warn us that Arthur was on your trail, we decided to leave immediately. You had been at Traprian Law for less than a day, but there was little I could have done for you there that I cannot do here. We didn't know whether Arthur approached as friend or foe, and you were in no condition to be left untended." Anna poured water over her hands, soaking them in a basin.

I forced myself to a sitting position then, and the room spun as my reward. My entire left side flared like a fire catching tinder and for a moment I lost all sense of myself as my sight darkened and ears went deaf. But then as I collapsed back – my bed was also a hammock, I now noticed – the world righted itself and I could once again hear the spray of the waves against the hull. "Arthur," I spoke slowly, willing my stomach to stop roiling. "could not have come with ill intent. He did not order my death, nor did he wish

for it. Marius and Morgan drugged him so that he could not stop them from killing me. I saw it in a vision as I fought the flames.”

Anna dried her hands on her skirt and sat next to me, silent, staring at the glowing embers as she turned this information over in her mind. After a lengthy silence, during which I dozed, she said, “That does change things. I have no doubt those two are capable of murder, especially in joined forces. But even if Arthur bears no ill will toward you, that does not change the fact he exiled Lancelot to Brittany. By going, he fulfills his duty to his king, and avoids any additional punishment for the fighting that ensued after your escape. Some of the Combrogii died, Guinevere.”

I swallowed, trying to force down the lump in my throat. “Who?”

“[insert names here].”

“And Aggravaine, how was he when you saw him?”

“Shaken, but physically fine. He wished to accompany us, asked me to tell you he stands by what he said, but that he will not interfere in your life with Lancelot. I do not claim to understand his meaning, but he said you would.”

“I do.” A small, wistful smile played at my lips, but never fully formed. “He promised to be with me to the end. He simply wishes me to know he still cares.”

Anna squeezed my hand. “He always will, as will the rest of us. Despite what Bishop Marius may have you believe and what the chaos of your trial may have suggested, many people still care for you. Everyone on this ship thinks of you as their queen, Arthur’s words be damned.”

I closed my eyes. “I wish they would not. I cannot handle such responsibility. Not now.”

“No one is asking anything of you now. Only that you focus on healing. The Goddess will tell us what is to come after.” Her soft lips brushed my forehead. “Sleep now and rest. The future will reveal itself in its own time.”

#

We traveled deep into Brittany, far from the crashing sea and Lancelot’s fortress on the coast. He brought me to the Forest of Broceliande, where he grew up under the tutelage of the Lady of the Lake, much like Morgan had done on Avalon.

Broceliande was an ancient tract of land, where the forest stood virtually untouched by the hand of man or the passage of time. Trees towered above us, their trunks arrow straight, so high in some places we could not see their tips. Here and there, a gnarled yew twisted in on itself or a grove of massive oaks blocked the path. Ferns flourished in the shadows, providing cover for chipmunks and other small animals, while hawks and songbirds watched from the branches above. Here, the rivers tumbled in graceful waterfalls, usually no taller than a man, but sometimes tiered with rock so that they appeared to stretch on for ages.

In my small cabin beneath the canopy of green and filtered sunlight, I felt like I was in another world, somewhere even more magical than Avalon. As on my own holy isle, I felt an undercurrent of energy, soft, yet insistent, pulsing just beneath the surface of

the earth. But unlike on Avalon, where the energy could be traced to its source beneath the Tor, here it seemed to only be directed, guided by the many tall, narrow standing stones that dotted the forest.

The priestesses here were clad in vivid green, oftentimes blending in with their surroundings. Like me, they bore a sacred mark on their foreheads, only theirs was a three armed spiral within a circle, the sign we would call a triskele. The woman stirring a stinking, spitting brew over my hearth also wore a silver belt, studded with healing stones of amethyst, malachite, citrine, several shades of quartz and X. At her throat was a necklace of copper acorns and oak leaves dipped in bronze, perpetually in their full autumn glory. This was her sign of rank. The Lady herself was watching over me.

She appeared to be about my age, with long, straight burgundy hair and a joyful, round face dotted with freckles. This could not be the same Lady who had raised Lancelot. But then, Avalon was no longer ruled by the same woman who instructed me.

The Lady was a woman of few words, working silently as she spooned the warm, brown liquid into a bowl and then cleansed her hands in water from her own holy spring. As I watched, she dipped her fingers into the paste and began carefully applying it my wounds, starting at my feet.

They were still painful, and I bit my lip to avoid crying out at her touch, but the blisters had burst somewhere between the ship and here – I had no memory of that part of the journey thanks to a high fever which was only cured when they submerged me in their lake, with wailing prayers to Brigid and X, their goddess of healing.

As she painted my skin, I noticed there were bits of green and chunks of brown among the mud. It was probably rude to ask, but my professional curiosity had overridden my pain as an itch that demanded to be scratched. “If I may be so bold as to ask, what is in this poultice?”

The Lady smiled up at me with rich brown eyes that glimmered with flecks of gold in the sunlight streaming through the open door. “From one priestess to another, I will answer. It is a mixture of mud, oil, honey, wormwood, bark from the white oak, mallow root and wax. And of course, the mud is the base that holds it together. It will draw out the poison from your blood and close up your wounds. After that is done, I will make you a vial of it without the mud, which you must massage into the scars daily. It will keep them supple and minimize their visibility.”

I wrinkled my nose at the thought of reeking of sulfuric mud every single day.

The Lady must have understood my distaste, for a smile lit her voice, turning it to honey. “Do not fear. It will smell much better without the mud. It is our springs which give it its distractive aroma. I can even infuse it with lavender if you would like.”

“I would like that very much. Is there any chance I can learn to make it?”

She stopped painting then, reaching for the large dock leaves she used as wrappings. “Why do you think you are here?” Her tone was light, teasing.

We were interrupted then by a soft rapping on the open door. Lancelot was standing there, waiting for permission to enter.

“*Entre,*” the Lady commanded, continuing her work. She was up to my ribs now.

Lancelot bent down and kissed her on the cheek. “*Demat, mamm.*”

Hello, mother. Or at least that was how I translated his greeting. I would have to ask him about that.

He had been speaking Breton almost exclusively since we arrived, but switched to Brythonic for my benefit. "How is our patient today?"

"She is healing well. You will be able to take her home after the next full moon."

So soon? I had been hoping to stay here. After so many years of strife in Camelot, I longed for the peace and quiet of the forest, for a return to my life as a priestess. Perhaps I would be able to convince Lancelot to let me stay. After all, as a child of the lake, they let him come and go as he pleased. Surely, he would understand.

We waited in awkward silence for the Lady to finish her ministrations. She gave us a knowing look before departing and said to Lancelot something I could only translate as a command to be sure handle me gently, a phrase I understood only because he had used it before in relation to the horses.

When we were alone, Lancelot hurried to my side, lying on the bed on my uninjured side and pulling me into his arms. I breathed in the scent of him, so like the woodland itself that had I not already known, I would have guessed him home. "I haven't had the chance to thank you," I said, burrowing deeper into his arms and nestling my head against his chest, as if the heat of his body could heal me of its own volition.

"For what?"

"For saving me. For coming back. For not believing what everyone said."

"Do you not remember?" He angled his body so I had to look up at him. "I am sworn to you until my dying breath. I have been yours since I thought you gave me that flower at the tournament. I chose you over the grail. Why do you think I would abandon you when you needed me the most? I love you and I always will."

Emotion welled up in me and tears pricked at my eyes, though from happiness or fear, I could not discern. "Even with this?" I turned my head so he had a clear view of the part of my neck and cheek that would forever be withered.

He gently stroked the side of my head, where the black fuzz of my newly budding hairline met my face. "Beauty fades. Even had the fire not damaged your skin, time would have eventually. You are still beautiful to me, even more so for your scars. You are a warrior woman. You earned your scars just as truly as if you had received them in battle. Do you know what I see when I look at you? I see a woman who triumphed over the strongest adversity and lives to tell that tale. And even more than that, you have your sight, your hearing and your mobility to do it with. You still have a bright future ahead of you.

"Those flames may have marred your skin, but they did no serious damage, and they certainly did not touch your spirit. *That,*" he put great emphasis on the word, "is why I really love you. I love your ability to come back from every attempt of your enemies stronger and braver for it. That is what will always make you Sovereignty herself, title or no."

Pushing myself up with my good arm, I kissed him then, soft, but deep, letting myself fall into the dizzying void where we were one and only our love mattered. After a while, Lancelot pulled back. We were both panting, bodies yearning for one another. I

could see the desire in his eyes, but knew I was in no condition to satisfy him. “I am so sorry. I wish –”

He placed a fingertip on my lips. “No apologies. Our desire will only grow with the waiting and its fulfillment be that more intense. Loving you for so many years before you returned my feelings taught me that.”

He laid his head on my chest. For a while, neither of us spoke, caught up in our own thoughts. Then I decided to ask the question that had been needling at me since the Lady spoke earlier. “Do you really intend to take me to your home when I am healed?”

“Of course.” He entwined my hand with his. “Where else would I take you?”

I hesitated. Would I sound disloyal if I gave voice to my desire? I bit my lip, grateful he could not see my indecision.

But he felt it and guessed the source. “You wish to remain here.”

“It is so peaceful here. For the first time in years, I feel safe, like I have a purpose beyond being someone’s conduit to power that isn’t rightfully theirs,” I hastened to explain.

Lancelot sat up. “I understand that *ma karantez, my love*, I do. But if you were to stay, we would be parted. It is true that I am staying here now, but this is a special circumstance. The Lady would never allow me to stay permanently.”

“Isn’t she your mother?” I blurted out the question with much less delicacy than I would have liked.

For a moment, he was taken back, but then regained his composure. “Yes. She is ageless, or so it seems. In truth, she had me very young, the result of a ritual practiced here that is like unto your Sacred Marriage. But even she cannot change the rules of the grove. Just as no man other than the Merlin can stay on Avalon – and even he does not take up permanent residence, so it is here.

“I am sure your spirit is in need of healing, just as is your body. Remember, I know what it is to be utterly broken and undone. I need to return to X, to make sure all is ready for us to take up residence. I will stay there until the moon is full to give you some time alone here. Does that please you?”

I knew what a sacrifice it was for Lancelot to be apart from me, now that we were together and finally free of the prying eyes of Camelot. I hated to ask this of him, but I needed it. I needed to reconnect to my roots as a priestess before I could give myself over totally to him. I nodded, silent tears writing what I could not say on my cheeks.

He kissed my tears away. “There is no need for sorrow. I offer this to you freely. Three weeks is not so hard a sacrifice when we’ve been waiting X years to be free.”

#

In the days that followed, the Lady had me out of bed and walking around at increasing intervals. Soon, I was standing by her side, learning to make the golden, sticky brew that would make my healing skin supple and minimize the visual reminders of the day I nearly died.

By the time the moon was full, I was feeling much back to my old self. When the sun set, I followed the women of Broceliande deep into the wood to an area where the tall, thin menhirs stood in rows among the trees. Unlike on Avalon, the priestesses did not form a circle, but rather a triangle, with the stones forming the two long sides, priestesses in between each. The Lady stood alone in the center, her back to small fire, a silver cloak worn over her green gown, giving her the air of being made of moonlight.

The Lady lifted her arms, nodding to the moon in a small bow. "Great Mother, called amongst our people Diana, X and X, we call on you this night to bestow your blessings upon these your maidens gathered here. Deign to hear us and grant us to know our heart's desires."

One of her attendants came forth with a small silver disc, bouncing bright silver light across our faces as she walked. She placed it in the Lady's hands. One by one, each priestess came forward and stared into its depths before returned to her place, some with blank expressions, others fighting back smiles or tears. Finally when none were left, she motioned to me.

"Gaze upon the face of the mother and learn what she wishes to tell you."

I swallowed, unsure of which of the many questions I would find answered in the shining surface. Looking down, I fought the urge to shield my eyes from the blinding white light that took away my physical eyes, while amplifying my inner sight.

For a few heartbeats, I saw nothing but flashes of white. But then, as though a curtain had been raised, I saw Arthur. He was conferring with a small group in Camelot's great hall. Among them were Morgan and Marius, both bound in shackles, Kay and Bedivere, ensuring they did not escape. Also present were two smaller men who had the look of monks about them. As the vision took hold, I began to hear their conversation.

"-That is why I was in the hall that night, my Lord," the one with a Celtic tonsure was saying. "When the Lady Morgan came toward your chambers, I feared being caught where I ought not to be, so I hid in the shadows at the end of the hall. I expected her to go inside, but instead, she turned a key in the lock and moved a heavy statue in front of the doors, blocking them." He looked up at Arthur, pleading. "I did not know you were within. If I had, I would never have left without doing something. I thought, perhaps, with the queen's verdict due, you were housing her or maybe even Lancelot in there, that you had asked the Lady Morgan to be certain that person did not escape."

Arthur watched the monk pensively. I knew my former husband. He was trying to decide whether or not he believed the monk's story. He nodded to Kay, who handed him a small vial. Arthur held it up so that it caught the light and turned to the other monk, the one with the circular tonsure of Rome. "And this? You said you witnessed Morgan giving it Bishop Marius?"

In between worlds, I almost gasped. I had seen that vial myself and well knew it contained the drug that kept Arthur from stopping my execution.

"I did," he answered in a clear voice. "I thought nothing of it, because she often makes healing oils for the sick. It was not until brother X told me what he had seen and we heard of your plight during the burning that we put the series of events together."

“This is preposterous,” Bishop Marius burst out. “How do we even know that is the same vial you claim you saw me with?”

“Because,” Kay answered, “there was still some liquid inside. I myself drank the rest.”

“You bloody fool! It could have killed you,” Morgan hissed. Then, realizing that her words sounded like an admission of guilt, added, “Do you not know that I make tinctures to ease the sick into a painless death, as well as to cure? How were you to know what you consumed?”

“I did not. I drank its contents on the word of my High King.” Kay circled around her. “In truth, for a while I wished it would kill me. I have never been so sick in all my life.” He turned back to Arthur, whose face was now flaming with anger. “What I experienced corresponds exactly with what you said you experienced. I have no doubt this is what made you so sick.”

Arthur’s jaw pulsed with unexpressed rage. “But how did it get to me? We have two men who swear on their lives that Morgan gave the vial to the bishop and then later locked me in my chambers. The later is odd behavior for certain, but does not constitute a crime. Anyone could have poisoned me. Perhaps my wife,” he nodded to Morgan, “was involved, but we are still missing that which ties them together and makes the bishop complicit beyond trying to burn Guinevere without my permission. Until we have that, I cannot bring charges of conspiracy against the king’s person against them.” He motioned to Bedivere. “Take the bishop back to his cell. I will deal with my wife.”

With that the vision faded softly into silver, then gray, then my sight returned. When I came back to myself, I found I was whispering to myself when I should have been screaming, “No! I know what happened. I can give the testimony you seek.”

Now I understood the dazed look some of the other women had; I was in no doubt that was the expression I now wore as I tried to understand what I had just seen.

But the Lady gave little time for contemplation. Far too soon, she continued the ritual, once again invoking the Goddess. “At the full unveiling of your face, we also petition you for those things we lack.

The attendant who brought out the mirror now gave each of us a candle, which we lit from from the fire while asking for that which we desired. Clutching the lighted taper, I squeezed my eyes shut, still thinking of my vision, and prayed, *Grant me wisdom, Great Lady. You do nothing by chance. Show me your will, that I may do it without hesitation.*

Still holding our candles, we processed out of the henge, following in the footsteps of the Lady. Instead of leading us back to the community as I had expected, she took us to a clearing in the woods, stopping in front of a tall stone archway that continued in on itself, forming circle. This portal was flanked on both sides by a low stone wall, and through it, was visible the gleaming white orb of the moon. A path ran through it, leading out into the forest beyond.

The Lady called to me, and I hastened to stand before her, not understanding what role I was to play. “In addition to honoring the full moon, we are here to give thanks for your recovery, Lady Guinevere. You came to us deathly ill and by practicing the arts

handed down by generations, were we able to honor the Goddess' will that you live yet many more days.

You likely do not remember this place from when you joined our community. It is the gateway between worlds, between the sacred and the secular, the past and the future. It is on this threshold that I give you the greatest gift that is in my power to bestow – the hand of my son.”

In that moment, Lancelot stepped out from behind the tunnel, stopping underneath the great arch of stone. At the same time, the Lady placed a hand on the small of my back, urging me toward him.

“Lancelot, what is this?” I whispered as I drew near, apprehension and excitement intertwining in my belly like snakes.

“You will see, *ma karantez*. Do not fear.”

“Do you love my son?” The Lady asked.

“I do,” I answered, without hesitation. “He has been for me a balm in some of my darkest moments.”

“And do you wish to be bound to him in spirit as well as flesh?”

Looking up into Lancelot's eyes, which were gleaming pale blue in the moonlight, I realized what was happening. This was an ancient wedding rite, the kind blessed by tribal shaman long before the days of Rome and their written contracts. When a couple pledged their love and declared themselves spirit-bound, they were tied to one another until death. “I would like nothing more.”

The Lady took my right hand, and joining it to Lancelot's, wound a thick golden ribbon embroidered with intricate Ogham symbols around our wrists. I recognized the runes for fertility, love, peace and prosperity among them. She then presented each of us with an end of the ribbon.

“To show your mutual consent and dedication to this union, your hands alone will tie the knot that binds you.”

Grinning at one another like love-sick adolescents, we wound our ribbons together, at first stumbling over how to interlace them to form a knot. But then our second attempt succeeded. We pulled and the knot held fast.

The priestesses surrounding us sent up a cheer and then began to chant in a language I did not understand. “They are thanking the gods and asking their blessing on us in our native tongue, far older than the one we use now,” Lancelot explained leaning down to me.

I put a hand on the back of his neck, drawing him down even closer to me. “Then perhaps we should seal our union.” Without waiting for a response, I pulled him in and kissed him deeply, the way I had so long wished to do at Camelot, free of fear and secure in our love.

When we parted, the Lady gave a sharp whistle. From out of the shadows behind Lancelot, two young women led horses packed as for a journey. “My students have packed your belongings while we celebrated. You will begin your lives together this very night.”

One by one, the priestesses came forward and wished us well, or gave us their blessing. Finally, the Lady again stood with us. “You understand that this union is not legally binding, but will hold through your future lifetimes? Your souls will forever call to one another.”

I nodded. “I have had enough of husbands and wives and marriages for several lifetimes. In what time remains, I simply wish to be happy.”

Lancelot raised our joined hands and kissed them. “And I, too.”

The Lady untied our hands and handed to me the ribbon. “Keep this in a special place, and when times are hard – and they will be – look upon it and remember this night. It will help you remember why you chose one another.”

She kissed me on the forehead then, giving me a brief blessing and turning to her son. “Guard her well, as you have for these many years and treasure what the gods have given you.” She kissed him on the cheek and then said something in Breton I did not understand.

Lancelot smiled, nodding as she spoke. “This is not farewell, *mamm*. I am sure Guinevere will visit you often, and you know you are always welcome in our home.”

The Lady’s expression was joyful, but her eyes showed a reticence born of knowledge not of this world. I was not as certain as Lancelot that this parting was not final.

She threw an arm around her son and squeezed. “Still, be well and know that I love as much today as the day you were brought into my care. May Helene bless your journey.”

With that parting words, we crossed through the threshold, mounting our horses and turning them toward Lancelot’s home.

#

Lancelot lived in his ancestral home of X, built by the great King Ban of Benoic. Though only a fraction of the size of Camelot, it was impressive by any standard. It’s outermost defenses were faced in stone to protect it from the relentless pounding of wind and salty surf. Four square watchtowers, one set at each cardinal direction, rose above the walls like swords perpetually at attention. A long wooden plankway led to the garrison from the road, exposed so that anyone approaching would be seen long before they were prepared to fight. Built on the headland facing the X sea, it must have been an imposing sight to anyone approaching by sea. Approaching from land, it looked like a falcon guarding its nest in the valley below, where a burgeoning village lay serene and peaceful.

It was not hard to get used to this place being my home. I took to it faster than I had Camelot, Avalon, or anywhere else I had lived, save Northgallis. I cannot explain it, perhaps it is the sense of peace and isolation – feelings that once would have made me bored and restless – that led me to feel at ease, or simply the knowledge that Brittany was not at war, at least not at moment.

That was one thing I noticed about this land. It felt far less volatile than Britain. I was certain it had seen it’s share of raiding mercenaries, power-questing lords and

territorial disputes like any land, but the people here didn't seem as inclined toward war. Although, they did not have Saxons, Irish and Picts threatening them at every turn; nor did they have a High Kingship to shed blood over.

It was these ruminations that led me to seek out Lancelot one warm afternoon. Unlike Arthur, who could be found always in his study at his letters, Lancelot was most commonly found in the stables with his horses. He was whispering to a honeyed gelding as I approached. She shied away from him at first, dancing backwards, but he tried again and she calmed, still not letting him touch her, but at least listening to what he had to say, ears twitching and swiveling with every word.

She appeared relieved when I approached, careful not to frighten her. I came from behind Lancelot so she would have view of me. He, however, did not, and started when I wrapped an arm around his waist.

“Guinevere, *mon dieu*, you caught me unawares.”

“I can see that. I did not mean to startle you.”

“It is fine.” He glanced up at the horse. “We are just about done here. Will you come with me to the stables? We can talk while I groom her.”

I hugged him close. “As long as you save some attention for me after.”

He turned, embracing me, his head rested on mine. “*Ma karantez*, I will always have time for you.”

When we were ensconced in the horse's stall, Lancelot brushing her hair with long, languid strokes, and I perched atop a bale of hay, he asked, “What is on your mind? I can see in your eyes that you are troubled.”

Uncomfortable at his accurate assessment, I bit at my thumbnail. “Have you had word from –” I almost said ‘home’ but caught myself in time to correct my error – “from anyone in Britian? How are things in Camelot?”

“I have been in touch with a few of the lords. The last letter I received said that the people of Camelot were greatly distressed with what happened with the bishop and the fighting that followed. Many are now calling for his blood, but Arthur has yet to decide on a punishment.”

“What is there to decide? The bastard tried to kill me. Do to him in kind. I would love for him to experience the terror of being engulfed in flame.” Even I was surprised at the bitterness in my own voice, but not at my own thirst for vengeance. With that I made peace long ago.

“A rumor has circulated among the people that Morgan had a hand in those events as well. As you would expect, those who have long sided with her will hear nothing of it, while those who long for your return, or have a distrust of Avalon, are calling her a witch and seeking to restore you to the throne.”

Though I initiated it, this conversation was making me irritable. “Did no one think to ask me, what I want?” I grumbled.

Lancelot looked up from the horse's mane. “And what is that?”

His question took me by surprise. “To be here, with you, of course. I have had my fill of Camelot and its intrigue.”

Lancelot looked down, as if trying to frame his thoughts. When his eyes met mine, there was no malice in them, only X. “Have you? You have been a queen for so long, a warrior longer still. This quiet life will suit you only so long. You have a restless spirit, one that seeks to be and do more, much like my own. I think that is one of the reasons why we are a good match. I have been giving this some thought and I wonder if we should not seek another position elsewhere.”

“But will that not look an act of aggression against Arthur? Though I do not seek the throne myself, as the former queen to ally with another, especially in another land, might give cause for aggression against him.”

Lancelot sighed. “I do not have the answers, my love. I only wonder if country life will grow boring for you, as it did for me. Why do you think I set out all those years ago?”

We lapsed into silence then, the only sounds the chattering of birds in the tress outside and the soft snuffling and dancing of the horses. I laid my head back against the wall, trying to decide whether or not to tell Lancelot of my vision. On one hand, I wanted to hide nothing from him, but on the other, I was unsure how he would react to my inclination to delve back into the addar’s lair, as it were, even if only to see justice served against Marius and Morgan. I decided to keep my peace for now.

As it turned out, I needn’t have worried for the Goddess had other plans. That night during supper, a messenger arrived from port with a letter.

Lancelot read it quickly, eyes widened as they traced down the page. Then, he slammed it down with a fury rarely seen, an unexpected rage that caused me to recoil. “How dare he think to come here, to my home after all he has done?” he said, more to himself than to me. Then to his attendant, “Tell the men to be on their guards and prepared to defend if needs be. We will meet him with a full show of force.” Finally, he turned to me. “Arthur is headed this way even now. He desires to see us both.”

#

Thanks to Lancelot’s vantage point, we knew Arthur was near a full day before he and his men made landfall and approached the castle. In many ways, it was good, but it made me nervous. Why would Arthur be coming here now, and why did he bring a contingent of soldiers with him?

The letter gave no indication of whether or not Arthur came in peace or with ill intent, so. ~~For all we knew, he could be hoping to storm the castle, slay Lancelot and take me back to finish the justice Maruis began. Given his temperament, it was not likely, but it was possible.~~

Lancelot took every precaution. He had the castle stocked and guarded as though we were expecting a siege, though very few of those men would be visible to Arthur and we had no intention of letting on what we feared.

“He does not travel with enough men to start a war,” I pointed out as Lancelot and I sat on one of the towers, watching the royal party approach down the broad avenue leading to the gates. “I would venture they are only for personal protection.”

“But he could have more.” Lancelot cocked his head in the direction of the ship. “It would not be difficult to retreat to the woods and wait for reinforcements to come ashore.”

“But it would not be wise, either. Has Arthur ever been here before?”

“Not that I am aware of, unless he had some business with my brothers who held this fortress in my stead.”

“Good. We have that to our advantage.” Without meaning to, my hand tightened on my sword.

“Are you certain you are ready for this? It has not been that long since last you faced him.”

Beneath my crimson tunic, my knees shook. I was aware Arthur never intended to have me killed, but that was months ago. Regardless of what I saw in that mirror, the Bishop could well have turned him against me by now. Or perhaps Morgan had convinced him I really was guilty. It wouldn't be the first time I was the victim of her lies.

I took a deep, ragged breath, trying to calm the lightheadedness that threatened to engulf me. I grasped the rough stone until my knuckles were white, but even that didn't stop my fingers from trembling, palms from sweating. No matter how I turned it around in my head, I was still one of Arthur's subjects, his disgraced queen, a fugitive of his justice. I had no idea if he would arrest me or simply order Lancelot to stand aside while he severed my head right here. No, Arthur was a compassionate man. I had to remember that. I was his wife. His justice would be private, though he might still drag me in chains through the streets of Camelot first.

“It has been long enough,” I said through gritted teeth, all previous thought of aiding Arthur in his quest for answers gone from my mind, replaced by a bitter rage I could scarcely control. This man abandoned me for Morgan, then imprisoned, divorced, dethroned and nearly murdered me, all because I fled into the arms of another. Now was not the time for peace offerings. It was time for revenge.

We climbed down from the walls and made ready to meet Arthur in the courtyard. Lancelot chose to stand behind me, for though this was his home, I was Arthur's equal and he of inferior rank. He twined his arm around mine and cupped his hand over my much smaller one. “Remember that I am here with you. I support you in everything,” he said into my hair.

I took few tiny steps backward, so that I could feel his body behind mine. “And I, you.”

The sun was high overhead by the time Arthur and his small contingent of men, including Kay, Bedivere and Bors, approached. Drawing to a halt in front of the barred entry, he called out, “Lancelot du Lac, I seek an audience with you in peace. Will you admit me and my companions?”

For a wild moment, I thought Lancelot would deny Arthur entrance – he was, after all on our land now and held no sway over us as our king – but then Lancelot gave the signal and the gates groaned inward.

Arthur entered first, followed by Kay and Bedivere. Almost immediately, he addressed Lancelot. "I am aware I am an unwelcome guest in your land, and for that you have my apology. I would not have come were it not of the utmost importance."

Lancelot stepped forward, crossing his arms. "What, please tell us, is of such import that you track us like dogs and disturb our peace?"

A muscle in Arthur's jaw twitched. "I cannot explain it without first saying how very sorry I am for everything that has come to pass. I never intended for any of it to happen." He turned to me, hunched over to be closer to my eye line. "Guinevere, you must believe that I did not order your death. I would never condemn you to such a fate."

"No, but you would let me be publicly humiliated, tried and found wanting in front of the entire court. And for what? Our personal affairs. You should have called a halt to all of it long before Marius got involved. It was our business – you, me and Lancelot – no one else's. We could have worked things out, maybe even peacefully. But you let your son and that damned bishop run the whole thing. You are not the man I married, strong, confident and loving. You haven't been for quite some time. You are now nothing more than a priest's plaything."

"I do not blame you for being angry –"

"Angry does not begin to describe how I feel, Arthur Pendragon," I cut him off, turning my face so that he had a clear view of the scars I would forever bear thanks to him. "Whatever you came here to ask, speak it, and be gone from here. I never wish to see your face again." I wrapped my arms around myself in a vain attempt to control the shaking that wracked me as rage flooded my veins. It was taking everything I had not to burst into tears.

For a moment, Arthur stood with his mouth half open in surprise at my pronouncement, then disappointment flashed through his features. But as painful as that was, it was nothing compared to the stony façade that followed, or the coldness of his voice. "If that is what you will. I traveled here, first to offer my sincerest apology for the way both of you were treated." He his eyes met mine with a detachment that was heartbreaking, even for all my anger at him. This was no longer my husband, but a stranger, a man on a mission. "I have under my protection two men who implicate Morgan in my inability to stop your near-execution. One says he saw her bar my door. The other that she gave Father Marius the vial of what made me ill. I cannot condemn her on that basis alone."

"Where is your wife?" I interrupted, making a show for scanning his assembled men. "Had she not the stones to face me in person?"

Arthur swallowed hard. "She is being held at Camelot, and she is no longer my wife."

"Ah, did you divorce us both on the same day or did it take you longer to shake off her spell?"

"Guinevere, please. I came here seeking peace."

A cold laugh escaped my lips. "Rich words coming from you."

Arthur took a deep breath, clearly fighting to remain calm. "You told me that once that you are at the mercy of the sight when someone you love is in danger. If you still

bore me any bit of affection during those last days, you had to have seen something. I need to know what you know of that night.”

“How do you know I will not speak ill of her, of both of them, simply out of revenge?”

“Because I know you.” Arthur grasped both of my hands in his. “You are not capable of such a thing.”

He was right. Feeling his hands around mine was weakening my resolve. His touch had so many memories associated with it, so much of my life, that it was impossible not to be moved, no matter how hard I railed against it inside. “While I waited for word in my cell, I slept and in my sleep I dreamed. I saw Morgan give Marius the vial. He put a few drops from it in your Communion wine. That is how you became ill. As for the rest, I can only take the word of your witnesses about how the doors were barred. When the flames nearly consumed me, I saw you sick and retching, trying in vain to reach me, so I knew you did not order me dead.”

“Yet you let me believe you did.”

“You had much more to apologize for than not stopping the bishop.”

Arthur conceded the point with a curt nod. “Will you help me, then? Will you return to Camelot with me to speak of what you know?”

I took a wary step backward, bumping into Lancelot, who wrapped his arms protectively around me. “Why do you need me? You can have Marius killed simply for disobeying my orders and trying to murder me. As for Morgan, you know she was involved, your witness confirms that.”

“You know the law. In order for justice to be served in the eyes of my people – all of my people – especially those who have turned against me for what happened to you, there can be no question about their guilt. Both of them will deny any involvement to their dying breath.”

“I am to be the one who condemns them? That is rich, especially since you renounced me as queen. I no longer have any power, or have you forgotten? Find your stones, Arthur. Surely Morgan hasn’t possession of them for so long that you have forgotten where they hang. You are High King. See to them yourself.”

I had no desire to accompany him anywhere. What’s more, I still feared for my life, not so much from Morgan and Marius – they had been neutralized – but from the throngs of people who at jeered me on my way to the stake. They certainly would not be happy to see me again, and attempts had been made on our lives before, in much better times.

Arthur ran a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated. “You know how I govern my kingdom. Without your statement it will look as though I am unjustly persecuting Morgan and Bishop Marius. They have very powerful allies, so you know what that could mean. Open rebellion.” Arthur’s bloodshot eyes were pleading. “I am trying to save Camelot.”

“So all of this – your contrition, your journey over sea – “is to save your own hide. If I don’t testify, you fear you will be viewed as unjust and someone may try to overthrow you.” I studied him for a moment, thinking of all the pain he put me through

since my return from being kidnapped by Malegant. “Personally, I think that is exactly what you deserve. What you did to me, even putting Morgan and Marius’ involvement aside, is unforgiveable. Yet you dare ask me for help.” I shook my head and turned, signaling to Lancelot I was ready to bring this farce to an end.

Arthur called after me. “Is there not anything I do to turn your heart?”

“I’m sorry, Arthur, she no.” Lancelot answered for me.

But something in Arthur’s voice made me stop. I had never before heard the High King of Britain beg. Slowly, I turned, wickedness blooming in my heart like a night-loving flower. I placed a hand over Lancelot’s letting him know all was well. “Yes, there is.”

“Name it and it is yours.”

“I will return to Camelot with you and tell my story if, and only if, you grant full pardons to me *and* Lancelot in open court and personally guarantee no harm will come to either of us.”

A range of emotions flickered across Arthur’s face – incredulity, pain, serious deliberation and finally, acceptance. “It will be done.”

“We will be ready upon the morrow.”