

## Twisted Tongues

by Alexandra Beaumont

My thighs were stained grey by the cold sludge, clinging like ink to my bare legs. The clay-like mud gripped around to my waist, pressing into every gap it found on the way up. My arms, outstretched, held a trembling child. Her lips quivered as I lowered her into the swamp, which was carved out in the centre of a small ring of trees. I lived near this swamp in a small hovel in the woods, where her mother had found me and begged me to save her from the fever.

The child's lips and nose were the only part of her poking out from the swamp now. Her faint breath left trails of mist above the mud-pool where I stood naked, save for the sludge.

Her mother had followed me, still weeping after she had surrendered the fever-burnt child to my arms. Now the woman, dressed in wisp-embroidered greens stood on the banks of the swamp with her hands pressed deeply into her eyes in terror.

I waded with the mud-clad child to the edge of the bank, placed her down. The sludge across her forehead: cool, soothing, naturally pushing away the heart. I took the child's hands and blew life into them. I was the mother she needed then as her own howled into the winds with useless prayers.

We stood like that for hours, my fingers trembling as I stood in the swamp. Eventually her mother knelt by her child, put her emerald cloak over my shoulders as I fetched fresh mud and lathered it over the child's forehead.

Wolves howled in the cavernous woodland when the girl finally opened her eyes.

'Thank you. Lady, thank you,' the mother whispered. I smiled in the moonlight, my raven hair hanging over my eyes and its tips brushing the cheek of her daughter.

Placing my hands in the crispy frosted grass, I heaved myself out of the swamp. The sucking sound of the mud releasing me echoed around the small glade. I stood barefoot upon the grass then, the swamp clinging to every scrap of hair upon my bare body.

'Carry her for me, please.' The mother said.

'Carry your babe?'

'Yes, she is covered with mud and I must be clean for the court.'

'What is mud, when there is love?'

I took the child, and dropped the cloak from my shoulders to wrap it around her. She could not be more than ten.

'I hate children, but does that mean they should suffer?' I whispered, walking into the night with the mother stumbling awkwardly behind me in her courtly finery.

In my hovel in the woods, the mother looked even more out of place - perched on a milking stool by my crumbling fire hearth.

'You judge me.' She said.

'Do I?'

'I see it in your eyes.'

'Is it for me to judge?'

'You judge that I choose not to muddy myself for my child.'

'Is she a child that you chose?'

A long pause, and then the mother spoke. 'I am the wife of a King, my choice was predetermined.'

I shrugged, battled with the fire and thrust a few thin logs onto it. The child slumbered under a threadbare wolf pelt as I tore bread and heated pottage on the hearth.

'You have many herbs and trinkets here, the trappings of a hearth-hag.'

'Does that make me a hag?'

'In their eyes, yes.'

'But you came to me anyway?'

'I had heard of you, the woman who only speaks in questions. We can help each other.'

'Is that all you heard?'

Another pause. 'No. I heard your geas twists your tongue into questions for some great failing you made. Come to court, take my husband's thanks for saving our daughter. Please.'

'Do I look like I belong in court? Does I get no say in my own solitude?'

We ate the pottage in silence, no words - just the howling of the wind and the whimpering of a dreaming child hoping for a better world.

In the morning the sun splintered through my rickety hut.

The mother was already awake, sitting on my bed beside me - staring at me. Her eyes were bright like freshly cut grass where sheep have left only fresh blades poking through the soil, too close to the earth for their clumsy teeth.

'Can I aid you, Lady?' I said.

I had cleaned my mud-wrinkled skin before I let myself sleep, and now I rested my pale hand on her knee where she sat.

'If you do not come to court then I will not have the answer of how my child was cured to give them. I can save you from your curse of solitude.'

'So, I must be called hearth-hag to be an answer for you? You will use this power over me after I saved your child?'

'Power comes in different forms. I am the only woman with power in court, that should matter.'

'Why?'

'Because I want you by me, I want another woman in court. My child is sickly, you are her cure. My heart is sickly, you could be my cure.'

'What makes your heart sickly?'

'There is no-one in my likeness, except that ill child.'

A gentle beam of sun simmered through her golden hair, and I almost left with her then.

‘Will they let me go and come as I choose?’

‘Yes. If I ask.’

‘Do I have your promise?’

‘Yes, but I hope our power will meld together into companionship. Your hag-herbs, my courtly guile.’

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She was lucky I left with her. Her path from the woods would not have been possible without me. She’d found her way here by chance, following the words of a local farm-hand. The court’s castle held more stone than I had ever seen. Less trees than I ever thought possible.

After a long promenade through the streets, where the people around us clutched at the fluttering train of the mother’s emerald gown. She was the only greenery in this grey-hued fortress, and I watched her walk ahead of me. Her daughter limped at her side, and I shuffled along dutifully two steps behind.

I knew of the court, everyone did. Everyone knew the King, and his reputation. When I stood before him, his fine crimson-soaked leather coat stood boldly out against the throne he sat upon.

‘Husband, King.’ The mother said. ‘This woman saved our child from the fever. I have brought her here as my healer and personal companion.’

‘This is my court. My court is of questing knights. She is no knight.’

‘I am no knight, husband.’

‘You are the exception.’

I raised my head. ‘Would you make me a knight, a knight of the herbs?’

‘Herbs are not questing, hearth-woman.’

I stepped close to him, my hands against each other but my eyes stayed firm. ‘Do you not see that a quest is more than swords and finery? Do you know there is bravery in staunching death? Would you deny me?’

Fine dressed men circled me as I spoke, one even ran one hand down my fraying grey dress.

The King stood, and raised his voice to the court. ‘My answer is no. You won my mother with your herbs, now you win my wife. I know your geas.’

‘How can you?’ I spat.

‘You came here before. We all know how you stalked these halls, whispered your truths. So, my father made it so you could never tell the truth, only ask questions.’

My green-clad lady turned to face me, she smiled. ‘Is it true?’

Her skin, soft and silken under my crinkled fingertips as I stroked her cheek. ‘Will you ask me again one day, if my tongue is free?’

She nodded, and I turned to leave then. No-one stopped me, and I walked back to solitude again. It was on the drawbridge as I reluctantly hobbled away towards the shadows that a hand grasped my wrist.

My green-clad lady stood there, grinning brightly. 'I don't have long.'

Shouts from the halls even echoed after her, urgency thrumming through them.

'They told me you were freedom itself, if I could find you.' She said. 'They were right. I will find you again, when my husband is free from this world and I am free from him. Keep me in your heart, sister.'

I gripped her fingers then, breathed in her apple blossom scent. 'What is your name?'

'Guinevere.'

'Do you know my name?'

'Morgana.'

'Will you permit Morgana to bring your hour of freedom closer, in any way I can?' I said.

She brushed my hair with her lips. 'I welcome it, light up Camelot with your truths. Bring me to you with all the fires you can bring.'

'Will you find me, one day?'

'I will.'

I took her hands and I crushed them between mine, because I am just the freedom of her resplendent story. As her husband's knights tore her from me, I turned away. I ran through the fields for the first time since my tongue had been cursed. In the long grass I found my energy, bursting brightly within me as I tore my grey rags away from my flesh.

In my forest I forsook my healer's herbs, finding the roots and weeds to weave a darker power. Their vines wrapped around my hands, wrapped around my heart. In my mind I kept her face, and the purpose she had brought unto me.