<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M, M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Merlin (TV)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Merlin/Arthur Pendragon (Merlin)</td>
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<td>Character:</td>
<td>Merlin (Merlin), Arthur Pendragon (Merlin), Gaius (Merlin), Uther Pendragon (Merlin), Geoffrey of Monmouth (Merlin), Leon (Merlin), Gwaine (Merlin), Hunith (Merlin), Gwen (Merlin)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of King, Prince and Priestess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-09-06 Completed: 2018-09-26 Chapters: 57/57 Words: 128812</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

Following the attack of the Great Dragon on Camelot, Merlin's mind is about to go out of balance since he is tormented by the sense of guilt for poisoning Morgana and for the terrible price the citadel and the Lower Town had to pay for his bargain with the dragon. As he tries to escape his growing sympathy for Arthur, the prince surprisingly makes the first move to cut the distance between them.

Meanwhile, the attack of the knights of Medihr, the escape of the Great Dragon and the disappearance of Morgana lead Uther to believe Morgause has not been working alone. Driven into paranoia and his usual anti-magic stance by the loss of Morgana, Uther prepares for big war. As there are no signs of Morgana, Gwen must somehow deal with the fact her mistress is gone, and the world suddenly seems an empty place for her.

With the shadows of war more visible than ever, Merlin must find a way to follow his destiny when swords, court intrigues, magic and love stand his way.

Notes

This is my first Merlin/Arthur fic which I have been planning for a while. I would love to thank all the amazing fandom of Merlin. I am exceptionally grateful to @versaphile for the stunning fannish resource she provided with the map of the Kingdom of Camelot. Dedicated to the five-year anniversary of Merlin finale <3

For updates:
https://twitter.com/diamond_abyss
A Gift from Arthur

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

The chapters from Merlin's point of view include the following chapters:

1, 2, 4, 7, 9,
10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19,
22, 23, 27, 28,
34, 35, 39,
40, 41, 42, 47, 48, 49,
50, 51, 53

VOLUME I

MERLIN

He kept staring at the ceiling, aware of a weird sensation. Merlin was growing less and less conscious of his body. He felt like he couldn't command his hands, his feet and his fingers, even if he wanted to. All he had were the eyes that refused to get heavy and let him sleep for some time.

He couldn't remember for how long he had been in the bedroom, lying in the same position, motionless and silent. From time to time he would glance over the table and through the window. He did it again: what used to be the diamond blue of the sky was now the murky abyss, with the dying fire of sunset somewhere on the edge.

Was it really him? Was it not him? Was it, after all, easy to trace blood down to the origins of crime? Am I the one to blame?

Blood. There really was no blood. There were ashes, the ruins of shacks and houses, and the bodies that burnt in the Lower Town could only be recognized by the contours of fried flesh. Even if Gaius had not asked Merlin to accompany him on the special order of the king, he would have joined the physician anyway. He needed to see, to smell, to hear the screams of people and to feel their suffering. Their grief and their misbelief. Their tears.

Will Gaius be asking questions? Of course, he will. The old man is everything but stupid. Reluctant at times, yes, and watchful and full of secrets. And the manner to keep those secrets at any cost, including hiding the fact that his apprentice still had a living father. But Gaius was far from dumb. He, of all people in the castle, knew of the ways which held the Dragon and blocked his power. Gaius would seek reasons to explain how the measures that prevented the beast from escaping for years had failed overnight. Maybe he would link it with the Medhir attacks? Maybe that's where Merlin could push the court physician's thoughts into the false direction? Maybe.

"You do realize I have to sack you after all that happened, don't you?"
The sound of Arthur's voice tore the silence and cast away the despair. All of a sudden Merlin felt power in his legs, his arms and his back, when he jumped from the dusty bedsheets to greet the crown Prince. Sacking? For what? After what happened?

Merlin’s heart was racing in his chest. How did Arthur even manage to get into his room without making any noise? The prince looked tired; his fair hair all messed and glued from sweating, and his shoulders pressed by the weight of the armor, with silver flashes in the gathering darkness of Merlin's room.

"Arthur. My Lord. I..."

"…was coming with an obvious explanation of why the prince's servant is sleeping instead of attending to his master's needs?" Arthur couldn't shut the smile down.

"I wasn't sleeping," Merlin protested.

"Of course, you weren't, Merlin."

"Arthur, I wasn't, I swear. I have not been able to sleep ever since we got back. I mean it. I truly do."

"And I believe you," Arthur came closer and Merlin could feel the smell of the prince's hair, the scent he could easily recognize out of all the other scents.

"You what?"

"You heard it. Now take my armor off, will you?" Arthur held his arms wide apart, ready for the routine.

Merlin still couldn't get used to that routine. With Arthur so easy to lose, how could he take something involving Arthur as a routine? Merlin loved those moments when he could feel the tension of Arthur's muscles under the armor. He loved that moment when Arthur totally surrendered to him and let him take control over all his cares.

"Why were you wearing an armor?"

"I had to train the knights," Arthur mumbled when Merlin was pulling the mail over his head.

"Training? Now? When there are parts of lower town that have been destroyed?"

"Father didn't order the trainings to be postponed," Arthur sighed when freed off the mail. He sat down on Merlin' bed. "I have my guesses, but they are only guesses."

"Guesses about your trainings?"

"Yes, I think father wants to send the first search party for Morgana, maybe they are already set to leave in a couple of days. So the knights must be prepared."

"And will you be the one to lead this search party?" Merlin hated himself for not being able to shape his voice in the confident manner when it was so needed.

"And you don't want me to leave, do you?" Arthur looked into his servant’s eyes, and for a moment Merlin felt bitten by the prince's honesty.

"I don't."

"And why is that, Merlin? Come on, tell me," he punched Merlin in the arm, as he always used to do
when he tried to express some friendly intentions.

"I am afraid of the dragon," Merlin passed the first lies he stumbled upon in his head.

"Merlin..."

"Well, he is wounded, right? I am not sure he is dead. I mean, he might still be somewhere out there, you see. Flying in his dragonish manner over the forests and thinking of..."

"Of hurting me?" Arthur smiled again.

"Who knows, right? I mean, how can you know the mind of a dragon?"

"Merlin, the dragons have no mind. They are just beasts."

"They aren't!" Merlin screamed, for a moment losing control over his temper. He needed to be careful. Arthur mustn't notice how much Merlin knew of magic creatures.

"And what are they?" the prince laughed. "Pets?"

"They are magic beasts."

"Indeed they are," Arthur nodded with a different look, as if he had stumbled upon something too hard for him to think of. "That's why father is taking some measures to enforce the better conditions for our defense. In case this dragon chooses to come back to Camelot. In his dragonish manner."

Merlin smiled when he pictured Kilgharrah flying in a dragonish manner.

"I hope he never comes back to Camelot," Merlin sat down next to Arthur. "I hope he stays out of Camelot for the rest of his days."

"Even if he does, Merlin, it will not promise Camelot the peaceful future. Unless magic stays out of Camelot, too, we are likely to witness more attacks on our kingdom. Maybe even worse than the last one."

"What can be worse than the dragon?" the thoughts made Merlin shiver.

"I don't know. Maybe two dragons?"

"There are no more dragons," Merlin replied with carelessness that invited some sorrow into his voice.

"Merlin?"

"My lord?"

"I suppose you have been to the Lower Town?" the prince asked carefully.

"Yes. His majesty assigned Gaius to the special task. To take all the measures against the spread of decease in the Lower Town. Too many dead people," Merlin closed his eyes. "We had to burn the bodies. I mean, they were already burnt but we had to burn them again. We couldn't let the wells get polluted."

"Merlin?" Arthur asked carefully, putting his hand on Merlin's shoulder – a move that alone made Merlin nervous and ready to fall apart.
"Yes?"

"I guess this is not how you imagined your service to me when you signed up?" Arthur spoke slowly, as if choosing the best words.

"I never signed up!" Merlin cheered. "Your father forced me to become Prince's servant."

"Why didn't you ask me to set you free then?" the prince asked in a playful manner, turning to Merlin so that the servant could see the smiling face of Arthur, his eyes and his lips.

"I don't know... There turned out to be something about your royal pratness that I grew quite fond of."

"What? Did you just say fond?"

"Well not that..."

"So, you are quite fond of polishing my armor and mending my clothes and..." Arthur grabbed him by the shoulder to hold him in his arms.

"Stop it," Merlin whispered, not very willingly, as if afraid he might respond to the prince's actions with something he had dreamed of.

"Merlin, are you blushing?"

"What? No, Arthur, why would I? What's the point?"

"Point?"

"Why have you come?"

"Just to see. So, this is how you live, ha?"

"You've been here before, haven't you?"

"To the Gaius chambers. Not to yours."

"You've been here when you were searching the castle for something magical. You just forgot, because you keep searching the castle for something magical all the time. Anyway, it's pretty miserable here," Merlin sighed.

"Well, you still live in the castle."

"I do."

"Merlin, I know you are not used to seeing this," Arthur began. "Not used to helping dispatch of the bodies burnt by the fiery beast. To fighting the dead knights summoned by the priestess of the old religion. I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to, you know..."

"What?"

"Have some time off."

"Are you mad at me for something?"

"Why?"
"Then why are you asking me to go?"

"I'm not asking you to go, I'm just..."

"Thinking that I'm only as strong as I look? That's wrong. I'm stronger than that. I have never wanted to leave your side. And I never will."

It was already too dark in the room, but Merlin could swear that the prince's eyes were shining with pride.

"I am happy to hear that. Really happy. So happy I have this mad proposal for you."

"Mad?" Merlin repeated with a sneaking suspicion to his voice.

"Sort of. I know it is not what you've come to expect from me. But I haven't expected the things you've done either. I thought to honour you for all the things you did for me these days. I can't knight you. You know why. But you rode to fight the dragon with me. You saved me when I was knocked out by the dragon's poison, there, in the forests of Essetir. You helped me to defend my father until the last minute when we were under attack of the dead knights. So how about improving your housing conditions?"

"Improving?"

"Remember that door in my chambers that has been locked for ages?"

"I do. You always say it hasn't opened in years."

"It's actually meant to be a room for my servant. But I never really wanted any servant to sleep next door because most of them were spying on me for my father. But I came to trust you."

Merlin felt like his heart, worn out by the sense of tremendous guilt for what Kilgharrah had done to so many people, was slowly being filled with love and care brought by the words he didn't quite expect from Arthur.

"Arthur?"

"Merlin?"

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Oh, Merlin, don't be such a girl," the prince rose to his feet. "It's just that I want you closer so that you are not late with my breakfast. Like you are every single day."
Fears of Uther Pendragon

Chapter Summary

Gaius brings some news about what's been eating King Uther

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

Merlin heard Arthur greet Gaius when the prince was making his way out of the chambers. Looking Arthur's way, Merlin for some reason recalled the day when he saw the prince in those chambers for the first time.

Even without that visit, the day was not an easy one to forget: he had just come back to life from the poison which Nimueh had so cunningly used against him, and was trying to warm himself with some food Gaius was quick to serve. Merlin didn't believe it when he saw Arthur enter the room. He thought the prince was simply not supposed to visit this part of castle. It was surely too strange to see him, in all his brightness, with his fair hair, the dance of joy in his eyes and the hesitance Arthur tried to mask with the artificial confidence of his voice.

"Still alive?" he inquired in a manner that would make them both laugh.

"Yes. I understand I have you to thank for that?" Merlin tried to keep up that game of stupid protocol, when in fact all he wanted was to give Arthur a hug. He might have done it, had Gaius not been there, overhearing every word of their conversation.

"Well, it was nothing. A half decent servant is hard to come by," he said, stressing the half decent part intentionally. "I was only dropping by to make sure you were alright. I expect you to be back to work tomorrow."

"Oh, yes, of course. Bright and early!"

Arthur turned around and was about to leave when Merlin lost control over the temptation.

"Arthur!"

The prince turned around and their eyes met; Merlin allowed his look to linger on Arthur for much longer than appropriate, as if seeking for something in the blue of the prince's eyes.

"Thank you, Arthur."

"You too. Have some rest."

After Arthur had left, Gaius started telling something about Arthur having a heart of honour, because of what the prince had done for a servant. Merlin, however, was hoping Arthur had chosen to risk for him because of something other than honor. Because of something he hoped to find in Arthur's
He shook the memories off and went down the old creaky stairs, offering Gaius some help with the bags from the market the physician was carrying. Gaius was stepping carefully, as he always did after a long time spent working. The two days that passed since Arthur had gloriously defeated the dragon were filled with even more duties for the court physician. The Lower Town had suffered greatly from the vengeful attack of the beast, and Uther, still furious from the unresolved mystery of the dragon's escape, demanded to stop the spread of decease at all costs.

"Did I just see the prince walking out of you chambers?" Gaius, amazed, was staring at the closed door in disbelief.

"You did," Merlin nodded, surprised with the flavour of pride to his sleepy voice.

"What was he doing there?"

Merlin was afraid he would blush again. There were things he wished they were doing, and the things he wished were the same things he was afraid of. There was enough confusion in his life about everything: about his destiny, about the ways to help innocent sorcerers escape Uther's violence, about his bargain with Kilgharrah that left so many people dead, about what he had done to Morgana to save Arthur and the kingdom from Morgause. He didn't want another confusion to make everything even worse.

"He asked me to move into his chambers," Merlin whispered, trying to battle the gloomy thoughts.

"What?!" Gaius looked as if he had learnt that Arthur had magic.

"Well, not into his chambers, but in that servant chamber he has," Merlin clarified quickly, afraid of being misunderstood.

"Those chambers were empty for ages! Why would he want you to occupy them?"

"Because he thinks I am his friend?" Merlin suggested.

"Oh, Merlin. This is not good," Gaius took a seat beside the table with a look that didn't betray a shade of content.

"Why?!" Merlin protested, using magic to start the fire to warm the leftovers of the soup. "What's so bad about having Arthur as a friend? I mean, we have a common destiny and we have to build Albion one day and do many other things, right?"

Gaius, too tired to scream at Merlin for starting fire with magic, sighed and put on a fake friendly smile.

"Yes, Merlin, but if Arthur finds out about your common destiny earlier than he must, then you will risk everything. And if you move chambers, you will be in his sight for most of your time, and if you keep starting fires with magic like that, then..."

"Gaius," Merlin smiled. "I can manage my secret. In fact, it's one certain thing I'm good at."

"I know it, Merlin. Else we both would have lost our heads already."

Camelot indeed was a castle where sorcerers could lose their heads easily, and Merlin was a sorcerer...
in the very heart of the kingdom. Sometimes he was careless enough to forget it.

"So what did the King tell you today?" Merlin asked curiously, serving dinner to the hungry physician. "Any news on anything?"

"Uther is furious," Gaius said, watching, rather indifferently, Merlin light the candles with magic. "The attack of the dragon cost him much. Lower Town is the place of trade. The storehouses and the shacks were destroyed; the market, however, didn't catch any fire. Now, if the king hesitates to rebuild the destroyed parts of the Lower Town, all the misplaced people will leave the castle for another place or, possibly, another kingdom. The king will lose his taxes, then."

"But these people have nowhere to live," Merlin tried not to sound overly worried. "He must give them new houses, no matter what."

"And give them he shall. It's just that Lord Blanchefleur, the Treasurer, wishes to discuss the terms more thoroughly. He wants to save some gold by lowering the conditions."

"Lowering the conditions?"

"Making the new houses smaller than the previous ones, or making some families share the house with another family, even though they used to live in their own house before," Gaius explained, not showing much compassion to the problems of the misplaced people.

"But why?"

"Because it's not only the Lower Town that has been attacked. You've heard and seen the Western Tower. It needs repairing. Not to mention other Uther's plans."

"What other plans? Does his majesty plan to hold a tourney to celebrate Prince Arthur the Dragonslayer? While hundreds of people from Lower Town have no beds for the night?"

"Oh, Merlin. That tongue of yours will be your undoing," Gaius sighed. "Nothing has been announced as for the new plans. But Uther is holding a council tomorrow, and I have known him long enough to understand what's on his mind."

"Another Purge? Killing everyone who has seen the Great Dragon?"

"Uther is raging," Gaius spoke casually, finishing the soup. "I can hardly recall seeing him so furious before. He has suffered three terrible blows to his kingdom within one year. A troll impersonating Lady Katrina, the knights of Medhir and, last, but not least, the dragon, and he is fearing for his power and for his kingdom."

"Hasn't he always feared for his power?" Merlin gave a snort of disgust.

"Not in such a way. Morgause is different. You see, there were reasons why Nimueh wanted to harm him. They had a long story going all the way to before the Purge. Morgause, however, despite sharing the hatred for Uther which so many of the witches and sorcerers do, is not acting out of mere lust for revenge. Uther is afraid she is an instrument of one of his enemies," Gaius glanced at the door and switched to whisper.

"What enemies?" Merlin asked loudly, but, catching the look of the physician, repeated in a lower voice. "What enemies?"

"I don't know. Any other king that wishes him dead. Any other king that would gladly take Camelot if he had a chance."
Merlin couldn't understand what the old physician tried to explain. Uther had always been blinded by his hatred for magic; he was very enthusiastic about blaming everything on magic. Why was he treating Morgause in a different way?

"So, he thinks someone wants to start a war with Camelot? And that Morgause is just another weapon to weaken the kingdom before this war?"

"It appears so. And he believes Morgana will be used as a hostage in this war."

"But you told him that he was wrong, didn't you?"

"Is he wrong, Merlin?" Gaius, having finished his meal, was expecting a cup of tea. Merlin, puzzled and confused, started warming the pot of water while Gaius was looking for herbs in one of his bags.

"What do you mean? Gaius, you know who Morgause is. You know what she wants."

"Merlin, for all I know, everything Morgause has done so far was aimed at Uther, Uther and him alone. First, she wanted Arthur to kill his own father. Then, she enchanted the whole castle to kill the King."

"She would have killed Arthur, too."

"We can't be sure of that."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I am trying to say that she has made attempts to remove the king. However, she doesn't want the whole Camelot to suffer. Unlike Nimueh, who attacked the kingdom as a whole – either when she poisoned the water in Camelot, or when she tried to push Uther into the war with Bayard – Morgause, for some reason, wants the Kingdom to suffer as little as possible, and I can see but one reason for such unexpectedly merciful attitude. Morgause doesn't seem interested in the crown. She serves another master, and she intends to present the throne of Camelot to somebody else after Uther is dead, to somebody who wants to take control over a prosperous kingdom rather than a ruined one. Don't forget that Morgause belongs to one of the great houses, Gorlois. The house may still have friends at court."

"Are you saying Morgana was just a tool for her? A tool to kill Uther?" Merlin, who saw tears in Morgause's eyes when she was kneeling over the lifeless pale body of her sister, struggled to believe that.

"I can't be entirely certain, Merlin. Morgana is her sister, after all. When the matters of heart are at stake, everything is harder to predict. The only thing I'm sure about is that she couldn't get far away with her."

"Why?"

"The spell she used drew a lot of force out of Morgana. She will not survive another whirlwind castaway. The spell of castaway itself is exhausting, and Morgause must be very weakened now, not to mention that it obviously cost her much power to set the dragon free."

Merlin felt the betraying weakness of his knees and the unpleasant sounds from his stomach.

"Why did she do that? How do you think? Why did Morgause free the dragon?"

"I can't read her mind, Merlin," Gaius said, looking sleepy. "But I think that it could have been a
great symbol to signal Uther's death. Kilgarra will hardly thank her for that, though. The Dragons only bond with their lords; even in the days of Old Religion, they were wary of the High Priestesses."
King's Morning

Chapter Summary

It has been a week since the Great Dragon somehow managed to break the chains of Belisama and bring vengeance to Camelot. Was Morgause acting on her own? Has she found an ally to overthrow him? Could somebody in the castle betray Uther?

Chapter Notes

Uther POV

Chapters from Uther's point of view include chapters under the following numbers:

3, 6, 12, 20, 31

Ever since he decided to wear a crown, he never allowed his servants to wake him up. It was, of course, their duty - to wake their king in the morning, to bathe and to dress him, but Uther was always up when the servants would knock on the door. Sometimes he would open his eyes just minutes before the attendance of his serving men; at other times he would spend an hour standing by the window and looking over the citadel, the Lower Town and the villages that were stretching far away from Camelot. Every single day he couldn't help but feel the pride for the fruits of his deeds, for the kingdom that came to blossom under his attentive watch. Camelot was just like a child to him - inclined to misbehave, often thinking that she could do without him, but needing his care and his protection nonetheless.

When the door opened, Kevan, the manservant, stepped in and bowed down. A tall man of twenty eight years, he had a sharp chin and his left eyelid was constantly jerking when he was in the presence of the king.

"Your majesty," he said without raising his head.

"I expect a bath as soon as possible. The day is long and I have much to do before the council."

"As you say, your majesty," Kevan took another bow and rushed to the door to bring the bath which had already been prepared.

"Kevan?" Uther interrupted him at the last moment.

"Your majesty?"

"Has there been any news?"

"None on the matter of Lady Morgana, I'm afraid."

"Then hurry," Uther commanded, his fingers clenching into a fist.
What did the witch do to you, my daughter? Oh, he was gravely sorry he never called her that. He was gravely sorry he was never brave enough to tell her. But she would not understand. Not now. And now there is no more now.

She took after him in many ways, and, he hoped, in the courage and mental strength as well. He hoped she had the ability to withstand the pressure that would leave other people’s minds tortured and broken. Morgana, they will never hurt you. For they know what I am capable of when I seek vengeance.

The bath tub was brought in due time; Uther pardoned the servants, for he never required assistance in personal matters. The water was too hot for him, but he would never blame Kevan for trying too hard to please the king; all the servants were supposed to do that. He called them to get dressed, and when he, in the grey cloak, the heavy black boots, the gloves and the old Roman pendragon crown went downstairs, Geoffreyy, his secretary and the keeper of Camelot records, was already waiting for him by the doors of the royal tower. The old man was wearing his glasses, had a pile of papers in his hands and was wearing dark blue robes. His beard seemed to have gotten even more grey. Accompanied by the guards, they started walking to the throne room.

"Your majesty," he bowed down to Uther, though less than his servants did.

"Geoffrey. I trust you've spent a good night."

"Indeed, your majesty. I hope the sleep came good to you, as well."

"There is not so much sleep when the kingdom suffers as greatly as it does at the moment. Some wine helps to invite dreams even to the troubled minds, though. Any news as of now?"

"The great houses of Accolon, Gornemant, Lamorak, Leon, Dindrane, Caelia, Blanchefleur, Cynric, Geraint, Vortimer and Sagramore as well as Lords of Nemeton, Brechfa, Asgorath, Landshire and Balor, and Ladies of Gedref, Denaria, Ascetir and Daobeth all express their deepest regrets on the occasion of Lady Morgana being lost to the sorceress. They offer whatever help it may take to bring the King’s ward back and assist your fight against magic."

"Thank each of them for their offers. Their kind words will not remain unnoticed."

"As you say, your majesty. The envoy of king Olaf, Lord Morholt, has arrived with the purpose to renegotiate the terms of trade between our kingdoms, according to the Treaty of Five Kingdoms we have signed a month ago."

"Good. I trust the Councilor of trade will handle the talks in our favor."

"We have all the reasons to believe so. The physician is also ready to report on the cleaning of the Lower Town."

"Gaius. Good."

"The Councilor on war will report to you on the numbers of weapons we have after the attack of the beast, your majesty."

When they reached the back door of the throne room, Uther took a breath before entering the familiar hall. He enjoyed being welcomed by the silence of the room; there were still shadows of the night hiding behind the columns, but the light of the new dawn was already knocking on the windows. It was peace and quietness, the two things he valued the most about his kingdom. The two things he ached to achieve more than anything. He put his fingers on the throne and turned to Geoffrey.
"Any petitioners?"

"A few have come from the villages, your majesty, even before the attacks. The one from Ascetir has been waiting for five days already."

"Did they expect me to postpone the attack of the dragon in order to listen to their complaints about the bandits and smugglers?" Uther snorted.

Geoffrey put on a sad smile.

"Any petitioners that arrived after Morgana had been lost?"

"One man from the village in Ascetir."

"Good. I shall meet nobody before the council meeting. After the council, let me hear all the petitions. I will then inspect the project of the trade agreement and hold talks with the Councilor of war. I will ask you to invite the envoy of King Olaf for dinner, together with Arthur."

"And what about the physician, your majesty?"

"I will talk to Gaius if I have time. Now, make sure everything is arranged for the Council. I will be back to the castle shortly after my morning ride and the visit to the barracks."

"Of course, your majesty."

Uther climbed his horse right by the gates - there was nobody outside save for the guards at such an early hour. They brought his ceremonial one, the chestnut horse with the royal saddle.

Uther loved the sight of the inner castle at an early morning hour. He loved to see the walls tower over the entrance, as if sheltering Camelot from any threat that might arise in the world beyond. He loved the reflections of the sky in the glasses of the windows and the silence that would be interrupted only by the snorting and the clinking of the horses.

His morning path lay through the Southern Gates and the Southern bridge to the backyards of the castle, where Arthur was supposed to be training the new knights - providing that servant of his could be on time with the bath and the breakfast.

Uther was riding through the labyrinth of the walls where the echoes of his horse's steps turned into a sonorous attack. He heard the noise of the bridge guardians that were hurrying to line up in front of the royal patrol. The king greeted them by raising his gloved hand.

To the right of the bridge, on the other bank of the moat, the village of Camelot was stretching to the horizon; peacefully asleep, with shy lines of smoke over a number of houses, the village resembled an idyll, and idyll which alone meant to him more than the castle itself, for it was a place where his people could find peace and work to do. To the left of the bridge, on the other bank of the moat, the barracks - the low wooden shacks with the banners of the great houses - were dark-brown and even black against the green of the grass and the blue of the sky. Uther could hear the merry shouts and the clanging of the swords, which meant that Arthur had already commenced the training.

His horse was rather slow. Uther was, in fact, in no hurry - he cherished his morning walks as the chance to think of all the matters that troubled his sleep. He was a rare visitor to the Lower Town and always chose to cross the Southern bridge during his rides. The northern side of the castle was where the main entrance road lay; it was the gate for traders and all the visitors. The Lower Town, enjoying the benefits of the trade, grew so big it occupied both banks of the moat, while the Southern village was separated from the castle and could only be reached through the Southern bridge by the king,
prince, the knights, the lords and ladies and their servants.

Uther crossed the bridge, his patrol following closely behind. His horse was approaching the crossroad: the path to the right led to the village, the path to the left - to the barracks, the smithies and the training fields. It was wise to keep the barracks next to the Southern village which didn't have much about it except for all sorts of craftsmen, for whom the land in the Lower Town was too expensive. It was good that those training for their knighthood had trouble finding a tavern next to the barracks.

There was something strange about the sight before his eyes, though. There was a small crowd of people at the crossroads - men and women, and some children, too, all looking tragically filthy and frightened.

"Who are they?" Uther asked a knight from his patrol.

"Those are the peasants misplaced by the dragon fire, your Grace. Shall we make them go?"

"No. Let me speak to them."

Uther rode closely, but he chose not to jump off his horse.

"I greet you, people of Camelot," he said in a loud voice, and he could see the knees of some men and women tremble when they tried to take bows. "What brings you here at such an early hour?"

"My Lord," the man who was holding a little girl spoke. "We don't want to trouble you, my Lord."

"How can I be troubled with the visits of my own people? I am but a king of Camelot, and it is my duty to protect you."

"Thank you, my Lord," the man took a bow again. Is he going to take a bow every time he speaks?

"My Lord, all the good people with me today, we came to greet you and to show you our respects as we must. We also want to tell you, my Lord, that we have suffered greatly these days."

"How have you suffered?"

"We come from Lower Town, my Lord. Our houses vanished in the dragon fire, my Lord. We have nowhere to live and nothing to break fast on, my Lord."

"Hasn't the Councilor of Camelot provided you with the shelter already?" Uther asked.

"No, my Lord."

"My guard will take you to the royal kitchen where you will be given meals and drinks. By tonight I will shelter you in the barracks, and I promise that in two moons you will move into the new houses."

"Thank you, my Lord. You're too kind, my Lord."

"Now please enjoy my hospitality, and fear not for you and your children," Uther said, smiling at the dark-haired girl standing next to the man that spoke of the crowd's concerns. "All shall be well."

_Could it be Arthur? Could my own son want me dead?_ Uther was facing the most terrifying thoughts as he turned left to ride to the barracks. The bitter examples of life have proven that most of the coups were arranged and brought to life by rightful heirs to the throne. Those heirs wished, for some reason, to become kings or queens before they were wise enough to assume the throne. Why
would Arthur wish me dead? Was I forcing Arthur into marriage? Was I asking too much of my son? Had I hurt Arthur in some way?

Uther didn't think Arthur had any reasons to hate him so much that he would make his allegiance be with Morgause. If only...

Morgause did try to exploit Arthur's inexperience when he was stupid enough to ride to meet her. She tried to corrupt him with the false visions that could have planted the seeds of doubt into his young heart. What if they had reached some sort of agreement?

That would explain much, of course. Arthur's flash of anger when he challenged me to a combat would then be nothing but a trick. Arthur would have told Morgause that killing his own father would not win him support of the court and the knights, and that I were to be killed only by my longtime enemy, the magic itself. That would explain why Arthur and his servant were the only ones to have returned from Idirsholas unharmed to join Morgause in her plan. But why did the attack fail then? What stopped them?

Uther was not eager to believe his own son was plotting with a witch to dethrone him, but life had taught him to take everything into consideration. I trusted Gorlois, too. But why would Arthur, following his possible union with Morgause, volunteer to fight the dragon? To fight the beast that could have easily killed him? Nonsense. Artur is not the one to blame.

He was surrounded by kings that would gladly capture the throne of Camelot. Cenred of Essetir, where magic was still legal. Caerleon of Gwynedd that used to raid Everwick. Alined of Deorham that felt offended with the Treaty of Five Kingdoms. He couldn't write off Odin of Cornwall as well. The old king still grieves over the son whom Arthur killed in combat. He had enemies to the east and to the north, to the west and to the south. He was surrounded by enemies and there could be a traitor within the castle walls.

When he approached the barracks, the archery session was taking place; Arthur, in the meantime, was having single combats, taking men out of the session, one by one. When he noticed the king, he dropped his shield and ran to the patrol.

Arthur seemed strangely active and happy, lively and full of energy.

"Father?" he helped the king dismount the horse.

"I'm glad I've finally managed to catch you on the training field on time, son," Uther said, looking at the promising knights of Camelot with pride.

"Yes. I'm glad, too."

"Have you changed your servant?" Uther inquired.

"No. Merlin just... finally learned how to not be late."

"I'm glad to hear that. Servants are meant to be the best at what they do, otherwise they are of no use. Everyone is replaceable."

Uther thought he noticed Arthur wince upon hearing that, but it was probably just because of the gust of wind.

"Do you want me to present the knights to you?" Arthur asked, pointing at the young men with his hand.
"No. I've met them all, the day they arrived to Camelot. I remember all of their names, but I don't remember which one is which," Uther started walking away from the barracks, inviting Arthur with a gesture. "Listen, Arthur. I come to speak to you not as a father, but as a king."

"Then I shall do whatever my king commands," Arthur replied in the most official manner the prince could imitate.

"I want to request faster training of the knights."

"Faster training?"

"Exactly."

"How fast should this be?" Arthur was frowning.

"I have reasons to believe that Morgause could not get far away from the castle. She may be close enough to Camelot; in point of fact, she may be in reach for our patrols."

"What patrols?"

"I have two hundred and twenty men watching my borders with Essetir. Further one hundred men on the borders with Gwynedd. And eighty men on the border with Deorham."

"But that would mean we have to call our patrols off the borders."

Uther admired how little time it took Arthur to understand the matter. If only he could tell his son more - but how could he when the mission to save Morgana required secrecy?

"Which we can't do," he announced. "because I have reasons to believe Morgause might have forged an alliance with one of the kingdoms and that's exactly what she is expecting me to do. Once I call the patrols off the borders and order them to send search parties for Morgana, she will be able to easily cross the border."

"But father..."

"We have to teach these brave men how to fight and, more importantly, how to behave in the patrols."

"But father, they have just," Arthur seemed to have remembered that Uther was speaking to him as a king and started anew. "My Lord, those training for the knighthood at the moment are as green as the spring grass. We have recently taken oaths from five knights, including Sir Vidor and Sir Caridoc. The trainings of these men began only after the treaty of the five kingdoms. You can't expect them..."

"I can. And I will, because there is no other way to stop Morgause from smuggling Morgana to some other kingdom and using her as a hostage during war. And if we value Morgana's life, we have to risk the lives of our knights. After all, they have sworn to live by the knight's code. They have pledged to serve and protect us, Arthur."

"Not yet."

"And what would you have me do?" Uther asked, jesting with the chance to hear Arthur's most certainly immature suggestion.

"Declare war on anybody responsible for the attack," the prince proposed bravely.
"If I knew the name of the king trying to harm me and Camelot, I would have already had him hanged. Don't you question that. I can't know who exactly is plotting against me. And by the time I find out Morgana might be somewhere behind the thick caste walls, a hostage to the siege."

Arthur didn't hesitate to acknowledge defeat. Camelot, no matter how mighty, could not sustain a war against Essetir, Gwynedd, Deorham and Cornwall at the same time. Even one war could be a challenge.

"I shall train these men as quickly as I can, my Lord. Does it mean we have to change the oath day feast?"

"Arthur, I am afraid there will be no feast this year, unless Morgana is found. You have ten days to make them capable. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Good. Now I am expected at the council. I shall see you at the dinner with the envoy of Olaf tonight."

"As you say, my Lord."
His Rabbit's Foot

Chapter Summary

Merlin is surprised to learn Arthur's been saying some nice things about him to the new knights. Or was it just a sunstroke?

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

The guards didn't ask for the special paper with a royal seal when Merlin came to the gates of the Southern Bridge. They knew that he was the prince's servant, and Merlin gave them a couple of apples he managed to steal from the royal kitchen.

"Thank you, fella," the one with freckles all over his face replied.

Merlin felt a bit sorry for both guards. He didn't want to think what wearing an armor in such a heat felt like. The day was the hottest Merlin could remember that summer: the sky denied a single cloud, it was crystal clear, with the sun boiling somewhere up there. The castle was the best place to be on such a day, for its stone walls never allowed much of the warmth in. Merlin could have stayed in the castle, but he wanted to bring some food and water for Arthur and the knights, as a gesture of gratitude for Arthur asking him to live in the Prince's chambers.

As he turned left at the crossroads, choosing the path to the wooden barracks, he couldn't help but welcome, although quite warily, the feeling of the world becoming a better place once again. When he was packing Arthur's basket of bread, meat and fruits, he crashed some sort of special breakfast held in the royal kitchen for those misplaced by the fires of the dragon. He also heard them discuss the announcement the king had made during his morning ride - it would take less than two moons to rebuild the Lower Town.

There was obviously no way to bring dead people from the Lower Town back to life. But Merlin somehow came to understand that he was not fully responsible for Kilgharrah's choices. I didn't intend to burn the Lower Town. It was the Great Dragon himself who attacked Camelot, not me. He would do his best to be more careful when striking bargains with the magic beasts next time.

Luckily, Kilgharrah was now the one under his control. Sometimes the opportunities that lay ahead because of such new powers seemed exciting, but Merlin respected the dragon far too much to abuse his position.

He looked, with jealousy, at the charming shadows of the Darkling woods to the south; in their thick greenery the air was promised to be chill and the rustle of the leaves would honour a good sleep, but Merlin had much to do in the castle. He still had not finished moving his things from Gaius to Arthur.

The knights were lying on the grass, trying to break fast with whatever they had in the barracks. There were just five of them; Arthur was sitting on a bench, with his sword droven into the ground by his side. One of the knights pointed at him, and Merlin noticed them turn their heads and look his
way. Arthur stood up; he was all glistening because of how the sunrays were reflected by the surface of his armour. The brightness of the sky made the prince squint when he was walking into Merlin's direction, but even with that funny expression on his face, Arthur still looked glorious.

"Merlin?" he sounded naturally surprised when he came to stand face to face with his servant. "What happened?"

"Er... Nothing?" Merlin smiled.

"Then why are you here?" Arthur couldn't get rid of suspicion in his voice. "You never visit the field without my orders."

Merlin was afraid he would be blushing again. Stop it, you idiot. If you keep blushing every time he sends a look your way, he will guess.

"I just thought of bringing you some meat and bread and fruits... I can take it back to the kitchen, if you mind something..."

"Merlin?"

"Arthur?"

"Have you been on a cider?"

"Why?" Merlin laughed.

"Are you actually improving your skills of a servant? Or is it not real? Maybe the heat has given me a sunstroke?" Arthur said, taking the basket from Merlin's hands.

"I thought you suffered a terrible sunstroke long ago," Merlin replied. "That would explain so much about you."

"Merlin?" Arthur, who placed the basket on the ground, approached him so close that Merlin could feel the prince's breath with his nose.

"Alright, alright!" he screamed, trying to run away from Arthur, who, in his mail and armor, couldn't be fast enough to chase and grab Merlin by his shirt. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

The knights were laughing; Arthur was smiling, too, and Merlin came close to his prince and bent the knee.

"I didn't mean to offend you, my Lord. We can, of course, settle this conflict in a combat. My Lord."

"Shut up, Merlin."

Arthur tousled Merlin's hair and fell on the grass to enjoy the food. Merlin got to the ground next to him.

"It's a good idea," Arthur said, packing some meat with the brown bread. "I am training thrice as much as I used to. But even with that in mind, I can't possibly eat all of the food."

"That's for the knights, too," Merlin said.

"They are not knights yet. They are training to be the knights. That's why they need me," Arthur announced proudly.
"Because you're the best knight in Camelot?"

"Maybe I am. Come here!" he shouted to the knights.

The knights literally jumped off the ground and approached Arthur and Merlin.

"I don't believe you have met Merlin," he pointed at his servant, who nodded in return. "Merlin is my manservant."

"The one that rode to Idirsholas with you?" Hengest asked in a voice that suggested disbelief.

"Yes."

"And the one who rode to fight the dragon with you?" Evaine asked.

"Yes."

"The one you call your rabbit's foot?"

"His what?!" Merlin nearly screamed, but got a punch in the shoulder from Arthur faster than he hoped to hear the answer.

"Don't talk much about him, else he gets spoiled," for a second, it seemed to Merlin that Arthur was blushing, too, but it was probably just the reaction of his skin to the intense sun. "Merlin, may I present to you Modron of House Pellinore. He has come from Nemeton, where his father serves as Lord. This is Hengest of House Ragnell. His father serves as the Lord of Balor. Now, these are brothers, Aglovale and Evaine, they are of House Meirchion, their mother serves as Lady of Ascetir. Owaine belongs to the House of Gedref, his mother serves as the Lady of Gedref. We've been to Gedref, Merlin, if you remember."

How could he forget the labyrinth? "He said each of us is only allowed to drink from a single goblet. I had no idea you were so keen to die for me," Arthur was looking right into Merlin's eyes and the warlock felt there was nothing he could hide from the prince that moment. "I'm glad you are here, Merlin. You never cease to surprise me. You're a lot smarter than you look."

Of all the men presented, Hengest was the tallest one. Owaine, the fair-haired boy, seemed two or three years younger than Merlin. Aglovale and Evaine seemed weirdly similar, both dark-haired, both short and chunky, and Modron was the curly one with the dark hair. He was tall, but seemed rather thin for a knight.

"It's an honour," Merlin tried to keep the things official. Knights or not, the men were of noble descent. "I've brought you some food because of the longer training."

"The first food news of the day," Hengest seemed more than happy.


"Is it a challenge, Sir?" Hengest reached for his sword.

"Stop it, all of you," Arthur asked half-heartedly. "The break is not long enough. You better have some food and then some rest. We will be doing a lot of shield practice today, it's exhausting."

"Merlin, you're a treasure," Owaine, who grabbed two apples from the basket, winked at him.

"Thank you," Merlin was awed, for it was the first time that somebody of noble descent would speak so kindly to him.
When the knights were far enough for them not to be overheard, Arthur leaned closer to Merlin and lowered his voice.

"Treasure. I can't believe Owaine said that."

"What?" Merlin felt that Arthur was accusing him of something.

"You're not anyone's treasure, Merlin. You're my servant."

Merlin was completely lost. Is Arthur being jealous? Is he trying to say I'm his? Is the prince suffering a sunstroke, after all?

"So... were you right about search parties?" Merlin decided to inquire, to push them both away from the awkward scene.

"I'm afraid so," Arthur clearly was not pleased by that. "Father spoke to me in the morning. He said we will be searching for Morgana."

"Where?"

"Merlin, we don't know where. That's why we will be searching," Arthur said, rolling his eyes.

"I get it."

"Or do you?"

"I really do. And these knights will search for Morgana? Have they ever met her or seen her at all?"

"Modron has. And Owaine. The others have not. But the problem is that we can't pull our patrols off the borders to search for Morgana. That would make it easier for Morgause to smuggle her out. We will have to send the knights from the castle for her."

"Knight are great fighters. Why are you so worried? It's no more dangerous than the other tasks you have used the knights for."

Arthur looked the way of the knights, as if to make sure they were not heard.

"Remember the knight's code, Merlin?"

"All of it?"

"No. The rule that all the knights are of noble blood."

"I remember that. I tried to overcome this rule when I presented Lancelot to the court."

"Which I still can't believe you did," Arthur sighed. "Sometimes, Merlin, you act... Anyway. Knights are of noble birth only. So I don't think the idea of sending their offspring hunting for the witch will please the nobles of our lands."

"Don't they do everything your father orders?" Merlin was surprised to hear that Arthur was afraid of the reaction of some nobles.

"They do. Of course, they do. But it's not so simple. Court is an intricate matter."

"Like the matters of heart, for instance. Right?"
“Merlin?”

“Arthur?”

“Shut up.”
Old Wounds

Chapter Summary

Three days after Arthur defeated the Great Dragon, Gwen and Gaius meet before Uther's council and the physician has an unexpected offer for Morgana's longtime maid.

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV

I've always thought that Gwen was a little underdeveloped as a character in the series, so here we're going to take a look at her kindness, her vulnerability, her good heart and her courage. Gwen's going to play an important part in the life of the castle.

Chapters from Gwen's point of view include chapters under the following numbers:
5, 7, 8
12, 18,
21, 24, 25, 26, 29,
30, 32, 33, 37
45

Was it about the fact that the day was so bright and sunny, as if intentionally designed to combat the darkest night that conquered her heart? Or was it about that pleasant and even somewhat merry fuss in the castle, where all the servants were busy with setting everything for the council?

It was due to both and something else - an evanescent flash of realization. She was alone. All alone. She was surrounded by people, yet she felt so miserably abandoned, misplaced and forgotten that it physically hurt to be alone with her own thoughts. Her brother had not written for ages and she had all the reasons to worry for him. Her father had been killed by the guards of Uther a year ago. And now Morgana was kidnapped and Gwen simply felt out of this world, felt that everybody was so busy with his or her duty that nobody cared that there was a lonely girl drowning in sorrow right before their eyes.

Morgana and Merlin were the only things that kept her from insanity after her father's death. However, even with their support, there were often times, in the late hour of the night, when she felt so desperately alone her heart began to race. And now Morgana was gone and Merlin seemed as sad as she was.

Since Morgana was taken by Morgause, nobody in the castle thought of offering Gwen a different position; they seemed to have forgotten she was a human being, too, and was supposed to be cared about.

Morgana tried to understand her. And she often succeeded. She, too, had lost a father, and either really had some affection for her or was the greatest pretender Gwen had ever seen. No, she didn't doubt Morgana's sincerity for a moment. Morgana had always been unfairly kind to her, even
protective at times and generous when it came to holiday presents. She did her best to keep Gwen busy with something in order to ease her grief to a possible extent. Now she was gone, and all those idiots in the Lower Town were spreading rumors that the king's ward was dead. Idiots.

They were preparing for the council, Gwen knew that. They were probably planning to discuss the result of the dragon's attack. Gwen had seen the graveyard of the shacks and houses in the Lower Town and always tried to look the other way when near those ruins. She had often seen women cry and misplaced children ask for some food at the market. She had given them all she could, and it still didn't feel enough to compensate the evil that befell them.

Gwen saw Gaius talk to the Councillor of Camelot, Lord Sagramore, the fat long-bearded man with a heavy chain and a medallion over his neck. She also recognized the Councilor of war, Lord Accolon, the broad-shouldered giant with ginger hair and a fist that could break a stone, and the Commander of the knights, Sir Leon. Councillor of trade, Lord Cynric, and Councilor of provision, Lord Lamorak, as well as the royal Treasurer, Lord Blanchefleur and Lord Monmouth, the Secretary, were expected to arrive soon.

"Gwen, my dear," Gaius approached her silently and stood nearby, giving her a worried look. "How are you these days? You must be so sad over what happened to Lady Morgana."

Gwen wanted to respond anyhow, but she suddenly realized her lips were moving without any words passing them, and then the tears were running down her cheeks on their own.

"Gwen? Gwen, my dear, what's the matter?"

Gwen shook her head, powerless against the outburst of feelings she neither wished to nor had the power to control. Gaius, frightened by the answer he didn't quite expect to observe, took her by the hand and led her to the farther side of the corridor.

"Gwen, my dear, what happened? Has anybody hurt you?" his voice was mild and even somewhat sweet.

"No, nobody hurt me," she mouthed before gaining the strength to repeat the words. "Nobody hurt me."

"Then what's the matter?"

She tried to stop the tears by breathing in deeply, just as her father taught her.

"Gaius, it's so... it's just too difficult to explain, and I'm afraid, it's even harder to understand..."

For whatever reason, her words made Gaius smile.

"Gwen, it's no secret that I am an old man, and I hope I have lived far enough to have some wits in my head. There are many things I can understand, I can assure you."

"It's just... Gaius..."

"Is it about Arthur?" Gaius surely sounded ashamed to pose such a personal question.

"What? Arthur?" Gwen was even surprised Gaius brought Arthur up. "No, Arthur has nothing to do with it. Arthur's too busy these days, I understand that. Gaius, it's just that... it seems that I don't have a place at this castle anymore. This always used to be my home, and now that Lady Morgana is gone they.. they don't need me. Nobody needs me anymore. Nobody."
"Oh, Gwen, that's not true!" Gaius began to expectedly comfort her. "Don't you speak such nonsense, child."

"But nobody is bothered that I am without a place now!"

"Gwen, it's just that they were bothered with other matters. Three days have passed since Camelot was nearly consumed by fire. There is a large part of a Lower Town to rebuild, no to mention the Western Tower. We have lost over two hundred lives. Everyone was so busy they might have overlooked the matters of the castle life. Don't you worry, child. In fact, I was going to discuss your promotion with the king after the Council."

"You were?"

"Indeed," Gaius smiled.

"And where would you have me go?"

"I was thinking of making you an assistant of the court physician or assigning you to the House of Leon."

"Your assistant?" it was too much of a confusion for Gwen. "What is Merlin going to do then?"

"Merlin moved to Arthur's chambers yesterday. He is still my apprentice, but I fear Arthur might be needing him more than I do in the nearest future."

Gwen was smiling through the tears. Working for Gaius would be a different thing, not something she was used to, but it would be doubtlessly better than a job in the kitchen she was afraid of.

"Gaius, that would be wonderful! I would be so happy to work for you."

"I think the king will not mind," Gaius smiled in return. "After all, you have been Morgana's maid for so long, and you have earned the right to be regarded as a loyal and trusted servant."

"Do you think we have lost her?" Gwen switched the subject as soon as she heard Morgana's name.

"I hope not," Gaius said, and there was something to the old physician's words that made Gwen doubt his sincerity. "Uther would be devastated to learn there is no way to bring her back. Now forgive me, Gwen. I must go. Be sure to drop by later, I can make you a cup of herbal tea. And Gwen, this is still your home. Whenever you need to talk to someone, you know where you can find me."

Gwen was walking home down the Main Street of the Lower Town. She turned left before the apothecary, happy to recognize the familiar features of a smaller street, with private houses and shacks, pigs and geese and chickens locked behind the fence and the light stink of muck in the air. Children were running around, playing the new game where one of them pretended to be the dragon while the others were meant to slay him. It always fascinated Gwen to see how children were able to turn even the darkest and most horrible tragedy into a game, but not out of their ignorance, but out of their hopefulness.

*They were really hoping they could bring her back. Uther would be devastated.* Gwen was thinking about what Gaius said about the King. *Devastated if he learned that he would not be able to bring her back.*
Had he not already lost her by the time Morgause attacked the castle? Would he not be devastated to learn what she was saying about him just days before Camelot suffered the attack of the magic knights?

It had happened just days before the attack. Morgana rushed into the room, in her white dress with golden knitting and her black hair, slightly curled that day. She looked wounded and betrayed, tears were dancing in her eyes, but the look frozen in them was not a pitiful one - she was consumed by rage, and her voice was stronger than Gwen ever recalled.

“He is an angry narcissistic beast. He would have us all believe magic is a foe, when in fact it is only a foe because it questions his power. He is a tyrant. He is like a beast that keeps swallowing the victims and he will have to kill many more before he is satisfied. It pains me to realize I'll have to see his face every day. Oh, Gwen, forget what I just said.”

Gwen was shivering when she caught her mistress like that: fiery with rage, executing the wickedly worded curses for Uther Pendragon.

“Gwen, have you ever wondered why so many people want him dead?” Morgana asked, not able to hold her rage.

Gwen couldn't help but try to seek an answer to that question. Which was not an easy deal. She knew that all the sorcerers and their kin had the rights to wish Uther dead for the Great Purge. But there was nowhere to learn anything about the Great Purge. From what Gwen heard in the talks of the elderly servants, there used to be days when magic was a part of Camelot's life. Her own father remembered those days, too. And then the Purge came and magic was outlawed. Some said that a witch murdered Queen Ygraine and tried to kill Arthur.

None of it concerned Gwen. Gwen only cared about the Purge because it was clear that Uther's hatred for magic crossed the boundaries of sanity and made him suspect even his closest allies and search for sorcerers in everybody. In the last two years, Gwen, Merlin and Gaius had all been accused of using magic without any proof. Uther had almost seen Gaius taken to the stake and given to flames. And the three of them had been lucky to prove their innocence. Many other innocent people were not so lucky. Just like father.

What ever caused the Great Purge, Uther spent many an effort to hide this secret.
Council of Uther

Chapter Summary

The carefully planned attacks of Morgause let Uther believe that she doesn't intend to harm the whole Camelot; she just wants to get rid of him. But whom is she trying to put on the throne instead of Uther? Some other king, must be no doubt. Uther tries to prepare for a possible invasion.

Chapter Notes

Uther POV

They were all on the exact same places they always occupied when the council was called. The long oak table was stretching from the throne. Geoffrey, the Secretary, Lord Blanchefleur, the Treasurer, Sir Leon and Lord Accolon, the Councilor of war, were on the left side. Councilor of trade, Lord Cynric, Councilor of provision, Lord Lamorak, Gaius and Lord Sagramore, the Councilor of Camelot, were on the right side.

"My Lords, I thank you for making the way to our Council on time, even though the heat is terrible and it plays against the serious attitude to the matters of state," Uther began.

"I'd rather be here than in the barracks, ha!" Lord Accolon slammed his fist against the table and laughed so hard Uther had to close his eyes. Lord Accolon would always behave as if he was shouting during the war council rather than a civil one.

"Indeed," Uther nodded. "There are two urgent matters that deserve our most attentive inspection. It is, as you all know, the attack of the beast. I am eternally grateful to my son for saving us all from this curse of magic."

"As are all the commoners, my Lord," as Lord Sagramore spoke, the chains and the medallion over his neck were producing pleasant clanging sounds. "They even call him the dragonslayer."

"I hope the glory will not spoil the Prince's heart," Uther did little to hide the pride for the feat of his son. "But as a Councilor of Camelot, Lord Sagramore, how would you describe the results of the evil?"

"Gruesome, my Lord. We lost 76 people the first night of the attack. We lost 52 people the second night of the attack. We lost 29 people the third night of the attack. And 17 people the last night of the attack. Another 35 people died from suffering for days after the fire burnt their skin."

"Which brings the total?"

"To 209 people, my Lord," Lord Sagramore made a sad conclusion. Sighs of grief were emitted over
"Why were so many people lost on the third and fourth nights?"

"Many were hesitant to seek shelter in the castle, my Lord. They saw that the beast was attacking our castle the most."

"Was there no chance to help the wounded, Gaius?"

"There was, my Lord. We were doing everything in our powers. But the burns of fire are the terrible wounds, my Lord. When too much of the skin is touched by fire, the damage is irrevocable."

"What part of the Lower Town was most damaged?"

"The one closer to the Western Tower of the castle, my Lord. When the beast started to attack, those houses caught most fire. Some craftsmen building suffered as well, and, sadly, the storehouse."

"Why were not all the people misplaced by the fire provided with food?"

The silence that fell was so tense that any noise produced in the room felt like rumbling. Most of the Lords were trying not to look Uther's way.

"My Lord," Lamorak, the Councilor of provision, a short, almost tiny old man who had so little meat on his bones he would look like skeleton had he not covered himself with layers of robes, spoke with a weak voice. "The fire burned the storehouse. The only provision left in the castle right now belongs to the emergency storage within citadel. It is to be emptied only at extremely important events, like war or that time when the spell threatened to destroy our crops last year. There are also markets and their granaries, but they are not within my competence."

"And was this attack not an extremely important event?" Uther was questioning Lamorak. That old man was best at coping with his duties, but whenever something unforeseen happened, he seemed to lose his mind.

"It was, my Lord," Lamorak said, looking into Uther's eyes with the honesty of a child who was about to be punished by his father.

"So you have done nothing to feed those people?" Uther was drawing an end to their discussion.

"My Lord, I have ordered the supplies of food from all the neighboring villages. There were some which we received the following day, it's just that they were not enough... The biggest one from Brechfa is expected to arrive tomorrow, my Lord."

"Good," Uther said. Lamorak is not, after all, completely useless. "The forty burnt houses must be rebuilt in two moons. And when I say rebuild, I mean to recreate the previous living conditions of those people. Lower Town had rather expensive housing, by the standards of commoners. That's why I would like to ask you, my Lords, and all the eleven great Houses of Camelot to help me do it. I propose that every great family donates money for two houses. The royal treasury will pay for another eighteen houses."

"Is the Treasury in need for additional help from the Great Houses, my Lord?" Lord Blanchefleur, the Treasurer, a man of Uther's age, with thin long fingers that were constantly knocking on the table when he felt nervous, seemed surprised by the decision. "There is enough money for rebuilding the Lower Town in the Treasury. It will take much of our savings, but we can withstand it without the help of the Great Houses."
"Which brings us to the second urgent matter of our discussion. War."

The sighs emitted over the table were those of panic.

"My Lord, who are we going to fight?" Lord Cynric, the Councilor of Trade and the most hated man on the Council, was expected to ask this question. War always meant the loss of trade, and the loss of trade meant the loss of incomes for both, the Treasury and Lord Cynric. Even though many of the Councilors openly despised Lord Cynric and called him a thief, Uther loved the way Cynric performed his duties. He was an open book, a man whose intentions were so simple they made him comfortable. The man wanted to be rich, and even though he was clearly spending more on his personal needs than he was supposed to earn, nobody ever managed to provide any evidence of his thefts.

"Are you afraid the battles will require some of your coins, Lord Cynric? Ha!" Lord Accolon slammed his fist against the table once again. "Don't you worry, we hardly expect to see you at the battle among the knights!"

Some of the Lords smiled, even though Uther didn't expect to see them fight the battle either. Gaius was keeping a solemn face. Lord Cynric had a goatee on his chin that was constantly mocked by everybody in the castle – not a single day passed without a new joke about Cynric’s poor beard being told. Cynric was eight years younger than Uther, dark haired and always in the rare eastern amber robes. His right shoulder was visibly lower than his left one.

"Silence, please," Uther didn't like it when he had to raise his voice. "My Lords, I understand that raising an army when people are still remembering this attack with horror in their hearts is not a good time. But I have reasons to believe that Morgause, the witch that attacked Camelot before the dragon..."

"Which one? I've lost counts," Lord Accolon was about to slam his fist against the oak table again, but the look of Uther was enough to change his mind.

"The one that put the whole castle to sleep," Uther reminded them, although there clearly was no need. "I have reasons to believe that Morgause has aligned with some other king in an attempt to destroy Camelot and me. She kidnapped Lady Morgana to use her as a hostage in the war to come."

"Why isn't any king hurrying up to declare the war on us, my Lord?" Lord Accolon changed his attitude, for the matters of war were of his concern.

"Because they don't have Lady Morgana yet. Secondly, I think that the plan of Morgause was to have me declare the war first. She wants me to follow my guesses and suspicions and to declare the war, to raise an army and to lead it to a battle. That would leave my castle defenseless, and they would probably strike where we do not expect and put the castle under siege. With about two and a half moons before the crops season ends and with our storehouse destroyed, the castle would not last long. Simple as that."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"We will raise an army. But a small one, and this army will not go to any battle. The army will stay near Camelot, waiting for the enemy to attack. We will also strengthen the defenses of the castle and prepare for a possible siege," Uther declared.

"How big must this army be, my Lord?" Lord Accolon looked as if he was ready to start raising banners the very moment he learnt of Uther's plans.
"Less than a thousand men," Uther replied.

"But, my Lord, the whole city of Camelot has about one thousand men who can hold a sword," Lord Accolon seemed to be protesting.

"Which I very well remember," Uther said. "Considering the mind of my people who have just suffered the attack of the beast, I will not require more than one hundred commoners to join the army. Of our territories in the south I shall require: of Gedref - 70 men, of Nemeton - 60 men, of Balor - 60 men. Of our territories in the west I shall require: of Denaria - 80 men, of Landshire - 50 men, of Daobeth - 70 men, and of Asgorath - 150 men. Finally, of our territories in the east: Brechfa must send 200 men, and Ascetir - 70 men. Camelot will pay all the costs of keeping the army, so my good lords and noble ladies will not spend much time gathering them. I think we can expect 200 men from Brechfa and 70 men from Ascetir to arrive in 4 days. They will be traveling without much provision and weapons, there will be little to slow them down. The rest will not come so fast. It may take 8 days for our southern and western lands to send men to Camelot, and the message will reach them later, too. So in about ten days, by the time our southern and western men arrive, I will have Brechfa, Ascetir and Camelot men ready for defense."

"And the knights?" Sir Leon asked, looking worried. "My Lord?"

"We will only need a small number of the knights to command the army. The army will be placed between the village of Howden and the castle of the Ancient Kings," Uther declared.

"How soon must we inform our Lands of your decision, my Lord?" Lord Accolon sounded as serious as never before during this meeting.

"Immediately. Our farmers will start collecting their harvest in two moons already. Which means that whoever wants to harm Camelot must accomplish his tasks in two moons," Uther took a breath and switched to a stronger voice, to show everybody the seriousness of his intentions. "If my foes start raising their banners tomorrow, it will take them no less than five days to raise and equip the army. It will probably take them five days to reach Camelot's walls, if the army initially was assembled close to the border with Camelot. So, I assume we might expect an attack within ten days. Maybe earlier, if their banners are already raised and the army – fully equipped and ready for the march."

"My Lord, what if the army is bigger than we expect?" Gaius asked.

"We must be fully informed of the numbers of our foes. That is why I am strengthening our patrol chains on the border with Essetir, as well as on the borders with Gwynedd and Deorham. Whenever the army crosses our border, we shall know the estimations of the patrols."

"How many reasons do we have to believe there is a war planned against Camelot?" Lord Cynric asked, and, surprisingly, no angry looks came his way.

Uther didn't hesitate for a second.

"Many enough. If you want peace, prepare for war."
Rooms and Chambers

Chapter Summary

Merlin wakes up to find Arthur in his bed, and Gwen is surprised to meet somebody in Morgana’s chambers.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV, Gwen POV

It was the second night that didn’t trouble him with the bad dreams. Merlin was even wondering if sleeping closer to Arthur could produce some healing effect for his conscience. He was even thinking about consulting Gaius, but the old physician could misunderstand the question.

Sleeping so close to Arthur was also a test. Merlin realized it was stupid to deny what he always tried to escape. He might be trying to escape it for as long as possible, but he must have the courage to call it by its name. He was falling in love with Arthur. Inevitably. Slowly. Ever since he lost Freya and Arthur was there to try and cheer him up. The way Merlin’s body reacted to the moments when the prince would touch him. The way Merlin started to hold his breath when Arthur would take a bath. The way his perception of the world seemed to change when Arthur would send a smile his way. The way he stopped repressing the visions of him and Arthur together when he would be falling asleep.

The ride to Essetir, when they were looking for Merlin’s father, changed it all. Merlin felt like they were finally bonded. He remembered when he first felt it.

He was gathering wood and trying to keep the fire stronger when he heard Arthur’s voice from behind his back.

"I always thought that silence would be a blessing with you, but I find it just as irritating. You're a riddle, Merlin."

"A riddle?"

"Yes. But I've got to quite like you."

Merlin was happy Arthur couldn't see his face. He was sure that everything was written in his eyes, and he had become an open book, just like he had once tried to persuade Arthur.

"Yeah?" Merlin wondered, trying to sound the most casual.

"Yes. Now I realize you're not as big a fool as you look."

Merlin felt like he wanted to turn around and to grab Arthur and hug him, and to not let go of the prince for as long as the forest permitted. Merlin was not blind. He could notice how Arthur was cutting the distance between them ever since Merlin helped him to get rid of a troll-stepmother.
Arthur had announced, to Uther and his court, that Merlin was to be taken seriously. "Father, let's settle this once and for all. If what Merlin says is wrong, he must bear the consequences. But if there is some truth in what he says..."

He listened to Merlin when his servant was pleading to spare the life of Uther, even though the king had tried to convince Arthur with exactly the same words Merlin later used. "This has been her plan all along! To turn you against your father. And if you kill him, the kingdom will be destroyed! This is what she wants!"

And when Arthur said that Merlin was the kind of servant he would love to have in his next life... And then he said he got to quite like Merlin beside the fire in Essetir.

Merlin felt they were getting as close as he could never dream of, and now that he was sleeping in prince's chambers and Arthur's hand was on his cheek... What?

Merlin tried to open his eyes quickly, but the eyelids were too heavy from the dream. Yet it was Arthur, as sleepy as he was, staring at Merlin.

"You look ridiculous when you sleep," the prince whispered, trying to hold off the giggling.

"thur?" Merlin closed and opened his eyes again.

"Rise and shine!" the prince slapped Merlin on the nose and rose to his feet. "You wouldn't believe me if I said how long I've been wanting to do this, Merlin!"

"Do what?"

"This rise and shine thing! You just can't think of anything new to say, can you? Every morning, it is the same thing. Rise and shine, rise and shine."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Merlin whispered. "How about... shake a leg?"

Arthur, who was about to leave the room, turned around with a bewildered look.

"Up and at 'em?" Merlin suggested.

The prince walked closer to his servant's bed.

"Let's have you, lazy daisy?.."

Arthur was towering over him, refusing to say a word, but carrying that playful fire in his eyes.

"What?" Merlin laughed. "You don't love any of them, do you?"

"No," Arthur whispered.

Before Merlin could ever realize what happened, Arthur jumped into his bed and tried to cover Merlin's head with a blanket. Merlin, however, felt that it was a lot easier to wrestle Arthur than to fight with him; Merlin, despite all his clumsiness, was nimble when it came to freeing himself. Before long Merlin was on top of Arthur, pressing the prince down to his bedsheets and holding him by the wrists.

Arthur, for whatever reasons, was dying from laughter.

"Where did you learn that?" he tried to rise and flip Merlin over, but his servant turned out to be stronger than expected.
"I've been spying on your dance moves at the feasts," Merlin sighed, fearing that his powers would not last any longer.

Arthur managed to overthrow him and Merlin, to his joy and horror realized the prince was now pressing him to the blanket, with Merlin's legs instinctively wrapped around Arthur.

"Arthur, stop it."

"Give me a reason why I should," the prince replied, slapping Merlin on the cheeks and on the nose.

"Why must I give some reasons? It's you who wakes me up earlier than needed."

"Right." Arthur suddenly let go off Merlin and climbed out of his bed. "We need to hurry. We have to go."

"Where? It's too early to go anywhere!"

"To the forests of Ascetir," the prince announced in a carefree manner, as if it was just another casual news.

"But it's nearly a day's ride! Those forest paths are slow!" Merlin screamed.

"I know that. That's why we will need supplies for three days. And water the horses - we will be going without breaks. At least we will try."

"Arthur, what's the matter?"

"One of the petitioners yesterday said there was a witch in those forests. Father thinks he might be talking about Morgause."

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Gwen had just delivered Hollyhock and Feverfew for Lady Percival, and some other potion for Sir Olwin. Gaius had warned her that Sir Olwin was as blind as a weevil, so she had to warn him not to take all the potion at once, which Gwen obviously did. Gwen could feel that lords and ladies felt more comfortable when it was her who delivered their potions, because Gwen never allowed herself to step away from the official protocol of the serving maid. It was what they most appreciated - those protocols, as if they constantly required to be assured of their privileged position.

Gwen was walking in the eastern block of the castle, passing Arthur's chambers, when she realized that Morgana's chambers were just rooms away. She was curious if they had already been given to some lord or lady from the Western Tower.

There was nobody in the small hall. A tall black candlestick was leaning on the wall, and a couple of black marble statues in the corners. There were two entrances to Morgana's chambers, including one was through the stone staircase that formed an arch over the pass to the eastern block. Gwen went up the stairs and knocked on the door. Silence was the answer. Gwen knocked again to make sure she would not be intruding into any of the lord's or lady's privacy.

Hesitantly she entered the room, keeping her head low because the doors were the lowest she could remember in the castle. The sunlight, having no trouble in slamming through the uncurtained windows, infected the room with the amber glow. Everything was the way Gwen remembered it. A chestnut chair was standing by the window, a silver mirror by the wall. An empty table with three candles was in the center of the room, and Morgana's wardrobe was in the end of her chambers.
There was something about the room that reminded so much of Morgana. Gwen had seen a lot more luxurious personal rooms in the castle, the ones with furs and golden mirrors, expensive beds and the furniture brought by the traders from Mercia. Morgana was never interested in that. Her elegance didn't rely on the richies of her stepfather; she had a sense of aptitude that others at court failed to put on even with the most peculiar outfits.

Gwen couldn't begin to understand what it meant to lose Morgana. She still hoped that Morgana would enter the room, and speak in her fashionably irritated manner. Something about the fact that being a king's ward doesn't mean accompanying Arthur to the feast. Something about Arthur being a jouster. Something for them to gossip about.

But those memories were not the only ones. It would be an insult of Morgana's legacy to picture her as a happy king’s ward flying around the castle in her newest attires. She was not happy. At times, her mistress seemed so miserably far from happiness Gwen thought Morgana was the most unfortunate lady in the castle. Morgana refused to be Uther's pretty bird in a cage, for she had the abilities and talents few other men and women could boast about. She was among those who rode to Ealdor. She was not scared to fight the beast that was poisoning the waters of Camelot. She was ready to protect Arthur and to always warn him of the dangers. She was merciful to save the life of a Druid boy. She in so many ways was so much more advanced and even superior to the limited thinking of all Uther's men at the Council, who would certainly refuse to recognize the commoners at Ealdor worth fighting for. She was always the first one to help people whenever Camelot was attacked.

Yet Uther kept her off the Council, despite her requests to become the Councilor of Camelot. And all his men refused to accept that a girl was a stronger and more capable leader than they could ever be. This attitude, the fact that Uther was always trying to make her stay in her comfortable cage when she wished to fly, was one of the reasons she seemed perpetually unhappy with her life. But there was something else, something fueling her nightmares. What was it, Morgana?

"What are you doing in Lady Morgana's chambers?"

Gwen didn't believe the voice rising from behind her back belonged to King Uther.

"My Lord," she took a bow and refused to stand up.

Uther seemed to have lost some weight. His cheekbones were visibly sharper, and she had not remembered the last time the king had sunken cheeks.

"What brings you to my ward's chambers?" Uther was demanding an explanation.

"My Lord, I'm Gwen. Morgana's maidservant."

_Not that you remember, even though I was her servant for so long. But how can you remember when I am but a serving girl._

"Of course. Her maid. But what were you doing here?"

"I miss her, my Lord," Gwen didn't think of the consequences before saying that.

Uther was utterly shocked. He seemed to be ready to accept any sort of explanation, but the one involving a maidservant missing Morgana seemed out of his expectation list.

"We all miss her," he said, looking at Gwen with some curiosity. "You're a loyal servant. Morgana always appreciated that. She was asking me to send a patrol of knights to rescue you when Hengist kidnapped you."
And you refused. You demanded to know how many men you would have to sacrifice to save a servant. A servant.

"She was always more than kind to me, my Lord."

"As she was to all of us."

Except for you. She couldn't understand how you could live with yourself.

"Gaius told me yesterday that you would be his new apprentice."

"Indeed, my Lord. I have already performed my duties today."

"I hope that you don't find much pleasure in your new position. I have all the reasons to believe that Morgana would be back soon, and I know she would be more than happy to take you as a maidservant. Now you have to leave the chambers."

"Of course, my Lord."

And what were you doing here?
When Gwen finds new job in the castle, she still can't get over the fact that Morgana is gone. The absence of Morgana has bared the lies and deceits sprouting in Camelot since before the Great Purge.

Gaius was following the line on the beige page of the disastrously old book with his finger. There was something boiling in the pot on his table, and it didn't look safe to Gwen when she entered the chambers.

"Ah! Gwen!" he said happily. "It took you longer than I expected. Were there any problems with Sir Olwin?"

"There were no problems with him. He seemed very nice and gallant. Have you found Merlin?"

"He is evidently not in the castle," Gaius shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't seen the prince either, which means that wherever they are, they are probably together."

"They seem to be spending a lot of time together these days," Gwen tried to make this remark sound innocent.

"Well, Merlin is Arthur's servant, after all. He came to treat the prince as befits, and Arthur... Arthur... I think he finally grew fond of the boy."

"Later than anyone," Gwen started mixing the herbs for that special tea of Gaius. "Everybody in the castle seems to be charmed by Merlin."

When Gaius heard that, he dropped some leaves onto the floor. Gwen was quick to pick them up and hand back to the physician. She didn’t even know what it was, but the leaves had bitter and heavy smell.

"What's wrong, Gaius?"

"Isn't it an exaggeration, Gwen? I think the kitchen maids dislike him."

"They dislike everybody," she laughed. "Gaius?"

"Yes, Gwen?"

"There are rumors," she said as she was pouring water into the tea pot. "All over the Lower Town. The apothecary and the market. The taverns. The smithies are as busy as never. Everywhere. Is there
"Gwen, there is no need to fear," Gaius indeed spoke as if the terrors of battle seemed irrelevant to him. "Uther will only need one hundred men from the city."

"So there will be war?"

"There won't be a war if we are lucky. Uther is just preparing his defenses."

"And who is the enemy?"

Suddenly, Gwen realized she could be going too far. It was her first day in the new position and she was already questioning Gaius on the matters of state affairs.

"Gaius, if it is a secret and I am not supposed to know..."

"I trust you enough to tell you," when Gaius said that, he left his potion and walked to the door. He looked out to make sure there was nobody outside.

*He is too careful for someone who seems to be loyal to Uther.*

"We don't know it ourselves, Gwen. It may be any other king who has plotted with Morgause."

"Morgause?"

*Oh, that witch.* Gwen remembered her. She remembered the morning when she started feeling sleepy and weak, and when she woke up, she had learnt the terrible news. Morgana was gone. A witch stole her. *Disappeared in the flames that freed the dragon, that's what they said at the market.*

"Gaius. I know we must not be talking about this within the castle walls. But can you tell me one thing?"

"What is it, child?"

"I've just met King Uther."

"Where?" Gaius gave her a disapproving look.

"In Morgana's chambers. I went there because... I don't know why. I just was near and decided to drop by and to see what it looked like... They still keep all her belongings there, you know? Like she is going to arrive tomorrow. And Uther was there, too. He asked me what I was doing there, and when I said I was there because I missed Morgana, he seemed to soften. He looked as if he really cared, as he was a man able to love somebody. What happened to him that he got so wicked?"

"Gwen, you're speaking treason," Gaius said in a lower voice, encouraging Gwen to switch to whisper, too.

"What was before the Purge, Gaius?"

"Pardon?"

"Before the Purge began. How did Camelot live?"

"Gwen, I don't understand the question."

"Well, how did you live? Were you constantly in fear for your life? Were you afraid a sorcerer will
kill you or curse you whenever you left your house? Were their griffins and dragons on the streets of Camelot?"

"Gwen, what makes you so interested in this?"

"I was just thinking of my father and what he was killed for… I can't stop thinking of it, even though you wouldn't tell by the look of me, I know. I was thinking that if Uther didn't have such cruel laws against anybody who had anything to do with sorcery… my father might have lived. And I was wondering why the laws are so cruel. They are cruel because of the Purge. But what was before the Purge? What sort of darkness had there been if the Purge was seen as a rescue?"

Gaius was staring at her. There was neither shock nor surprise in his eyes; on the contrary, the old physician had the sort of look that suggested he had long expected Gwen to say something like this and that his worst expectations came to pass.

"Gwen, my dear, above anything else you have to understand that if anybody learns we are having such conversations we may lose more than our positions."

"Gaius, I would never tell nobody. I decided to ask you because you are the only person I trust and you must remember the days before the Purge. You were a young man back then."

"Well, not so young. The Purge happened twenty two years ago."

"And what had been before?"

"Before the Purge, we had a society where magic was not persecuted. And there were those who used magic for good and those who used it for evil as well. There were less bandits and Slave traders because they were afraid of the punishments of the court sorceress. And for ten years which Uther ruled after he had conquered Camelot, we had magic legal, and there were no wars with other kingdoms. It was one of the longest eras of peace."

"So it is possible to have peace and magic at the same time?"

"Gwen, you are speaking treason for the second time."

"But it is possible?"

"It was possible until a certain time. I don't think it's possible under Uther's reign. But you must never ask me to speak of the Purge again. It is a secret which I have sworn to keep."

"Gaius, I am as good at keeping secrets as Merlin."

"Gwen, I have never discussed such matters with Merlin!"

"But he has worked for you for more than a year…"

"Merlin is in no way curious about what happens or happened at court. Arthur gives him so much trouble he can't possibly think of anything else."
Merlin and Arthur are on the way to the village of Gedney to deal with the mystery reported by Uther's petitioner the day before. Merlin is afraid of facing Morgana, for it would mean he'd have to face his darker side, too. As fears and anxiety tear his mind, the casual conversation in the tavern leads to entrusting Arthur with one of the kingdom's biggest secrets.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

There is some angst and hurt in this one, because, you know, the bigger the secret, the bigger the pain.

The mists have seized the forests of Ascetir. Entwined into the rain-kissed paths and the cool silence of the thickets, they were scaring the horses and making Merlin nervous. The wind was cold; it was running from the tops of the narrow mountain chains, biting Merlin in the face and making him close his eyes from time to time. The forest was as thick as Merlin could expect, and healthy green from the warm and rainy summer; when they rode over the tops of the hills it felt nice to watch the lush greenery swaying in the wind.

Could it really be Morgause? There was something Merlin didn't like about these mists. Camelot was less than a day's ride away, and yet Ascetir bared no signs of the heat that besieged Camelot. The mists seemed unnatural, intentional. Paired with the thickets of the forests, they could indeed serve as a veil.

The fact that Morgause, if it were her, was so close to Camelot after the attack... Merlin could think only of two reasons to explain such tactics of the priestess. Firstly, it could be that she herself was so weak after the attack that she had no strength to keep moving, and she needed to stay in the forests for some time. Maybe she was afraid of Uther's knights and patrols searching for her and decided to cast the mists that would hide her.

But Merlin couldn't understand what exactly could consume so much of the witch's power that she would be forced to regain her strength in the forests. The whirlwind spell which she used, as Gaius had described, was rather exhausting, but only in a way that it didn't allow the use of another whirlwind spell for weeks. It reduced magic power greatly, leaving so little that casting a heating spell would be a challenge. But it wouldn't stop her from walking or riding a horse.

The other reason made him shiver and tied his stomach into a knot. What if Morgana is alive? What if Morgana is with her? It would be the second reason to explain why Morgause would choose a location so close to Camelot for her hideaway. Morgana could be too weak. Merlin had no idea about how strong Morgana's magic was, but the soporific enchantment Morgause had used drew its strength out of Morgana's magic. Every second the spell was working, Morgana's magic was getting
weaker. After the whirlwind, Morgana would be lucky to breathe.

Morgana. Will I ever forgive myself for what I did? Have I become a monster because of what you made me do?

"Merlin?"

Arthur's voice brought him back. The path had a slight incline and the horses had to slow down a bit.

"Sire?"

"Remember I told you I'd stop bringing you with me if you were so scared?"

"I am not scared! I am watchful."

"Watchful?"

"Yes."

"A big word from you."

"The only one that fits. With all these mists everywhere, there must be someone who would keep us both safe," Merlin said, repressing a smile.

"And you suppose you can do that?"

"Of course, I can! My Lord, I am the most qualified person to do that. Your royal backside would be in great trouble if I were anything but watchful."

"My royal what?" Arthur rode closer to him and tried to slap him on the nape; Merlin, who saw it coming, was quick to bend his head.

"You heard it," he said with vivid cheerfulness to his voice.

"Merlin, do you know how many times you will have to wash the floor of my room to..."

"Our room."

"What?! Merlin!" Arthur was looking his way with fire in his eyes, which meant that Merlin would suffer the consequences of what he had said once they reached the village.

"I am sleeping next to you, forgot it already?" Merlin decided to have all the fun while it was lasting.

"I must have been insane when I offered it to you. And if you mention my backside again, you will be sleeping in stocks, Merlin."

"Of course, my Lord."

The village of Gedney appeared beneath the hill. Its grey-roofed wooden houses, unlike in most other villages, were not lined up in linear streets, but were rather circled around the central building, a two-storey stone tavern, thus forming a big circle in the very center. The horses started racing, sensing the end of the tiring journey. When they dismounted and tied the horses, Arthur was looking excited.

"You know what is the best thing after a long day's ride?"
"Eh... sleep?"

"No. A nice cold tankard of mead."

The tavern was larger than the one in Camelot, probably because it was the only one in the village and was supposed to give seats to all the citizens, while in Camelot there were plenty others. There were about two dozen of people there; most of them having supper, but a few were drinking, making loud jokes and shouting at each other.

Long cider-stained tables were all around in no particular order, and Arthur quickly noticed the least occupied. As they walked to the table, many eyes were following them, but as soon as it became clear the fellows were peaceful, the noise filled the hall again.

"Do you think it was a good idea?" Merlin asked, when he took his seat. It felt so good to finally sit on something that was not a saddle.

"What was a good idea?"

"Coming here?"

"What is the point of asking if we are already here?" Arthur rolled his eyes.

The maid, a fat woman with a kind oval face and smiling green eyes, approached them quicker than they expected.

"Afternoon. What it'll be?"

"Two cold tankards of mead, please."

"It'll be two tankards of mead, and one for such a handsome fellow!"

Even in tavern, Arthur seemed to enjoy attention.

"Well, you wouldn't be the first to say it," he replied.

"Oh, no, sorry. I was talking about your friend here," her eyebrows started dancing Merlin's way.

"Him?"

"Me?" Merlin was surprised himself. "Oh, well... Thank you."

When she was gone, Arthur kept staring at him in disbelief.

"What? Can't I be handsome?"

"Apparently you can. I'm afraid she has some mental affliction, though."

"Oh you can't just tolerate me being praised."

"Praised? Merlin, it was a compliment from a tavern maid!"

The maid smashed the tankards against the table.

"Your mead, fellows. Paying now?"

"Of course," Arthur fished the coins out of his bag. "Here you are. Now tell me, what's your name?"
"Mary."

"Mary, I am Sir..." Arthur's lips were moving silently as he was struggling to make up a name.

"Mary, this is Sir Thomas," Merlin said in time to prevent the awkwardness. "He is a knight of Camelot."

"A knight?" Mary asked with suspicion. It was probably because she had seen many men proclaim themselves knights of Camelot in order to escape the pay for drinks.

"He just gets shy when he speaks with women," Merlin said. "It's a sort of affliction."

Arthur made his "you will not get away with this later" face.

"Mary," Arthur said. "I have come all the way from Camelot not to drink mead, although this is the finest mead I can remember. I have the seal of the Commander of the knights of Camelot with me. It has been reported to us that your village has trouble, and I came here to help you."

Mary's look changed in a blink of an eye. She was afraid the moment she heard Arthur was a knight of Camelot.

"Sir Thomas! Our village stays out of all the troubles! We never seek troubles here. We are honest people, we earn our bread by chopping wood!" she was speaking in a higher voice, as if it were a plea for Arthur to believe she had done nothing wrong. "We have some great masters who can carve beautiful furniture! Old Richard and the Crafty Lotty. Lady Meirchion from the castle of Ascetir has even praised them and thanked our village for the good service!"

"What does it have to do with the witch?" Arthur was frowning.

"We have never had magic here. The source of evil is alien. It comes from elsewhere. Not from us."

Merlin was disgusted. Not with Mary, but with how strong Uther's hatred for magic had spread through the land. Even people in all the small villages were fearing they would be prosecuted even though they were clearly innocent. It took one magic incident to make their knees knock together. They think Arthur may accuse them of magic. They are right to fear. Has Uther not condemned the whole villages and tribes to death when he was cleansing Camelot?

Arthur was smart enough to understand that.

"I have no reason to doubt the honesty of all the good people here. I also do not doubt that you have nothing to do with it. I am here to hunt that witch. And kill her, if need be."

Mary was shining with relief.

"Then you must not go to the woods at night, Sir."

"Why is that?"

"This is no ordinary mist. People get lost in it. You can't see past it. Even if you are standing shoulder to shoulder. It's the work of magic. Even the light of the torches doesn't shine through it."

"What happens in the morning?"

"The mist disappears. It crawls back to the mountains, where it seems to come from, with the first rays of sun."
"How long has it been happening?"

"A week, Sir. We thought that whoever did it would leave the forest. But we were wrong."

_Morgause took Morgana away 10 days ago._

"Then it is the best time to try and hunt this witch. Has your village ever captured a sorcerer? Has it ever helped to seize one? Has it ever denied shelter to someone with magic? Can some sorcerer seek revenge?"

"No, Sir. Not that I remember."

"Thank you. We will go hunting on the morrow."

"Will Sir need a bed for the night?" Mary asked, trying to show some manners in her gestures.

"That would be very kind."

"Will Sir need help from any of our men?"

"No. The more men, the bigger the chance to scare off the prey."

It was a modest room by Arthur's standards, but not any worse than that room of Gaius where Merlin used to live. Of all the bad things about it, the greatest misfortune was the one bed in the room. Arthur, however, didn't seem to be paying attention to this fact.

"So what do you think, _Merlin_?" Arthur asked as he was sharpening his sword.

"About what?"

"About Mary's story?"

Merlin shrugged.

"I didn't like the mists from the first sight. They are strange, considering how hot the days in Camelot are. People are strange, too. I mean, they are so... they could have tried to hunt the witch themselves. During daytime."

"They are frightened, Merlin. Much like everyone else who comes across something magical."

"Maybe they are. But it's not only the witch that frightens them."

"And what else?"

"You and your father."

Arthur stopped sharpening the sword.

"My father?"

"Mary was afraid when you said you were a knight and that there was trouble in the village. She was afraid you may think somebody in the village has anything to do with the mists. Arthur, can't you see how deeply your father's hatred for magic has affected people?"

"_Merlin!_ This is not hatred! Magic is banned because of its evil nature!"
"But even after it got banned it's still hunted with such enthusiasm that even innocent people that clearly have nothing to do with magic are afraid to death when a knight of Camelot arrives!"

"Merlin! You will keep your mouth shut!"

"Yes, Arthur, right. Keep my mouth shut. Go on. Ask what you always ask me to do when you can't give any sensible arguments to what you're saying!"

"Because I don't need arguments for you, you half-wit! I am the prince and when you discuss my father's policy, your word doesn't come any close near mine! And you will do well to remember it before you try to speak of the King!"

There was nothing short of fury in Arthur's eyes, but Merlin's look was filled with pride for what he was saying. Suddenly, Merlin collapsed. He couldn't control his impulses, he was even afraid he might use magic to hit Arthur. Everything he had been through the past week finally managed to ruin his emotional balance; all those people the Great Dragon had killed, the loss of his father to Cenred's soldiers and his murderous kindness for Morgana... They were all rising, as screams, in his head. Morgana.

"Maybe I'm a half-wit, but I am not the monster that is your father, and at least I wouldn't chop your head off if I learned you had magic!"

Arthur rose to his feet, grabbed Merlin by his shirt and slammed him against the wall. Arthur was so fast that even Merlin's magic could have been worthless to protect him against the prince.

"One more word about my father, Merlin, and you will regret the day you chose to be my servant."

"What's the matter, Arthur?" Merlin was whispering right into Arthur's face; the prince was so close Merlin thought their noses might touch. "Does the truth hurt you and all the illusions you've built about the merciful king Uther? Do you think he would have spared Morgana?"

"Morgana?" Arthur let go of Merlin's shirt and put his hands around Merlin's neck. His fingers were hot to the touch; he was hurting Merlin and Merlin couldn't stop tears that were running down his cheeks. "What are you talking about? Answer! Now!"

"Morgana has magic," Merlin coughed the words out as Arthur seemed to forget he was strangling him.

Arthur let go and made two steps back.

"Have you lost your mind?!" he reached for the sword.

"Arthur!"

"Merlin!" Arthur's sword was now pointing at Merlin's chest. "Swear to me! Swear to me that what you have said is true! If you're making this up, I will never see you again!"

"I swear to you, Arthur," Merlin said, feeling how liberating the truth was. "I swear with my mother's life."

"How do you know?!"

Merlin was sure the hilt of the sword was shaking in Arthur's hand and his voice was wounded.

"She came to our chambers in the evening. She was looking for Gaius. She thought she needed some
remedy or something, she thought there could be something that would help. She was in great fear, and in panic, but Gaius wasn't there and she started talking to me because I was the only one in the room. She said that she could lighten candles, she could start fire with her eyes, she could see the future in her dreams. She said she knew it was magic.

"And what did you do?" Arthur's sword rose higher, pointing at Merlin's neck.

"I couldn't do anything. She ran away and it was late already. She regretted telling me. The next day, when I found her, she was already packing for her journey to the druids."

"She was KIDNAPPED!" Arthur screamed.

"No, she wasn't. She went to them willingly. She wanted to find out about magic, about what it was and why she had it."

"Merlin!"

"Arthur, it's true! I couldn't tell you, and I couldn't tell your father. I couldn't because I didn't know if her life would be spared. So I followed her. To the very camp of the druids. She met Mordred there, the boy we saved. I overheard her conversation with the druid. He told her that magic was neither good nor bad. Magic was like a sword; its power and nature was in the hands of those who would wield it. It could be used for both, great good and great wrongs."

"And she? Did she say anything?"

"She didn't have the chance. Your dogs were barking. You were close. I helped her escape. I brought her back to Camelot. She didn't want to go back because she said Uther would kill her now. That's why she was so afraid of the witchfinder. That's why she decided to help steal the crystal."

"No, she didn't."

"She did. And she helped Alvarr escape."

It was too much for Arthur. Maybe Uther’s comment of Alvarr’s escape was echoing in his head. Let this be understood, whoever has done this, they have betrayed me. They have betrayed the kingdom. If I ever discover who it was, they will rue the day they were born.

"And you swear it's true?" Arthur asked with the last pitiful chance of hope Merlin’s story was but a violent joke.

"I swear, Arthur. It’s the truth."

Merlin bent the knee. All his flashes of anger against Arthur were gone. All he cared for was for Arthur to understand.

"I'm on my knees in front of you, and I'm talking to you not as a friend or a servant, but as a man of Camelot to his Crown Prince. All what I said is true, my Lord."

Arthur dropped his sword.

"When we get back to Camelot, you will go back to Gaius. I don't need you as a servant any longer. You will find somewhere to stay."

Arthur opened the door and pushed Merlin out. The next moment, Merlin's bag and Merlin's boots were flying into his face.
After Arthur throws him out of the room, Merlin meets somebody in the night tavern.

Merlin saw the door slam before his nose, and for a moment he thought of knocking and begging Arthur to let him explain everything. Please, Arthur, please. It's not supposed to end like this. Why was his heart fluttering in his chest? Why were tears running down his face? Arthur, please.

Suddenly, Merlin felt like there was nobody in this world he hated more than he hated Arthur. How are we supposed to bring magic back and help Albion to the age of peace and prosperity when Arthur seems so stubborn about his loyalty to Uther? Was Kilgharrah's prophecy some cruel jape? Could the Great Dragon be wrong about us sharing a destiny?

Maybe it's what I deserve for what I had done to Morgana. The sense of guilt from giving hemlock to the king's ward was slowly poisoning his heart as well. There were opportunities. There were other chances. I could have talked to her while we were alone. I could have asked her if she knew anything of the attack, if she had any idea about what Morgause intended to do. The knights of Medihr didn't show any mercy to Arthur, and the ones Merlin met in the corridor were ready to slaughter him as well. Even if Morgause's intentions were directed at Uther only, her dead knights could have cut both, Merlin and Arthur, without raising an eyebrow. What was Morgana thinking if she agreed to help Morgause? Why didn't she ask for more details? Or maybe she accepted my and Arthur's deaths as the costs she had to pay to break Uther's tyranny?

Merlin went down the stairs, to the tavern hall which, without all the guests, was wrapped in some sinister and ghostly twilight. The moonlight was slashing through the window, and the milky mist was crawling into the square, silent but dangerous.

"Trouble sleeping, fella?"

Merlin rose his hands instinctively, ready to unleash his powers against the voice coming somewhere from the darkness. One of the tables wasn't empty. There was a man, a long-haired tall and broad-shouldered man, whose face was comfortably masked by the darkness of the hall. He had a drink in his hands, and two or three empty or full tankards on the table.

"Didn't mean to scare you, fella. So? Trouble sleeping?"
"Oh. No," Merlin had a sense the man was not a threat. "Or maybe... Is it trouble sleeping when I've got nowhere to sleep?"

"Why not have a drink or two before you find out?" whoever it was, he was glad he found a companion for drinking.

"I can't come up with a better plan," Merlin replied, sitting down opposite the man. "Who are you?"

"I'm Gwaine. And what do they call you?"

"Merlin."

"Pleasure to meet you, Merlin."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm a guard. I am working for Mary, she owns the place and serves the drinks. You must remember her."

"I do."

"I have to watch that none of the guests from up there sneaks down here and enjoys the drinks right there without leaving any coins in return."

"Do you leave coins for these drinks as well?" Merlin thought he knew the answer.

"Mary is smart enough to take their price out of what she gives me in the end of the week. But I always get a bed for a night and drinks, so it's not that bad, ha?" Gwaine laughed.

"Doesn't sound any bad to me," Merlin smiled and tasted mead from the tankard Gwaine offered him. He was feeling so lost he tasted more.

"So, Merlin. Your master is giving you a harsh time, ha?"

Merlin was staring at Gwaine, trying to imagine what this guard of drinks looked like. For all Merlin could judge from this darkness, he had big eyes and large and long nose.

"How do you know? About my master?"

"Oh, Merlin, please. There are books thicker than these walls. You were shouting at each other so loudly I thought you would tear the walls down."

Merlin wanted to hit his own head against the wooden table. Idiot. What sort of an idiot. Now this whole damn tavern may know that king's ward has magic. How long will it be before the rumours travel all the way from the forests of Ascetir to the Lower Town of Camelot, to the Markets, to the barracks and then, somehow, through one of the Councilors, to Uther? He drank more. And another sip. Oh well.

"Well, we had an... argument."

"Who is he?"

"Who is who?"

"Your master."
"Sir Rhonas of Camelot," Merlin wasn't sure he got the name right. "He is a knight. I am his servant."

"Merlin," Gwaine finished his drink and was now inspecting Merlin's face the same way Merlin had just tried to examine his. "There are no knights who would allow a servant to raise his voice the way you did. A servant you may, be, but not of a knight."

"Gwaine. I can't tell you who..."

"And you don't have to. I am not stupid, Merlin. This village has a magic trouble. Uther is a furious dog that eats magic for breakfast. And there is only one person he sends to deal with magic, it's his puppy Arthur. He sent him to kill a griffin last year, if what they say is true."

"Arthur is not Uther's puppy."

"So? We really have a prince in those chambers? The Dragonslayer?"

"Gwaine, I beg you," even though that night Arthur was a stupid heartless bully to him, Merlin didn't hate him enough to expose prince's life to any threats. "Don't tell anybody."

"I will not. It's just... I heard Arthur is different. I thought he would never sleep in a tavern."

"He is not as bad as Uther," Merlin said softly, even though he didn't know if it was what he truly believed in.

Gwaine couldn't hold off laughter.

"Merlin! How comes the prince's servant thinks the king is bad? You must be thicker than you look, ha!"

"Uther is horrible," Merlin wanted to spit on the floor after pronouncing the king's name. *Is it me or the mead?*

"Don't tell me," Gwaine, who in the meanwhile finished another drink, straightened in his chair. "My father was a knight in Caerleon’s army. He died because of Uther in a battle, leaving my mother penniless. And when she went to the King for help, he turned her away."

"So you didn't know him?"

"I was named after him. I only know him from the stories I've been told."

"Yeah, I know how that feels. I met my father just briefly before he died."

"Why?"

*Because magic is illegal in this land.*

"He was banished."

"What had he done?"

"Nothing. He served the King."

"But the King turned against him? That doesn't surprise me."

"Arthur is not like that, I tell ya. Arthur is brave. Arthur rides to fight griffins while Uther's ass
spends all the time on that throne. Arthur helped to save the druid boy, and Uther would have gladly killed a child with his own hands. Arthur would never hurt innocent people."

"He hurt you, though?" Gwaine asked in a lower voice.

"I did something bad."

"Like what?"

"I had a secret from him."

"We all have our secrets. And the right to keep them. Listen, Merlin, where are you going to sleep?"

"I guess here," Merlin looked around. "On the floor. Or on one of the benches. I am not going back to that room. Arthur will gladly see me crawl back to him on my knees."

"He isn't the only one who would gladly see you on your knees."

Merlin spent some time figuring out what it was supposed to mean.

"Gwaine?"

"Merlin. What if you spend the night in my room? How do you say? You deserve better than this dusty floor. I can give you some heat. You know."

Gwaine leaned over the table and before Merlin could say anything, he felt Gwaine's finger make a way from Merlin's cheek to his lips. Gwaine's hand was warm and radiant with care. Merlin wanted to bite and suck that finger, but he managed not to.

"Arthur will need me in the morning," he whispered.

"And he shall have you at dawn. Before that, you can be with someone who can treat you right. With care. And love. Which you deserve."

"How d'ya know I deserve love and care from spending a quarter of an hour at the table with me?"

"It's written in your eyes, Merlin."

*His lips.* Gwaine's lips pressed against Merlin's and Merlin didn't know what to do about it. He had never been kissed that way. Gwaine was caring and tender, yet strong and longing. Merlin's mouth was clearly getting out of his control, as his lips were getting more and more responsive to Gwaine, whose tongue was doing wonders. *So good.* He smelled and tasted so fresh and so fun. *Damn it.*

"You have never been so wrong about a man," Merlin had to put his hand on Gwaine's cheek to stop the kiss.

"Why?"

"I'm a horrible man."


Merlin would spend the whole night listening to his sweet songs and tasting his sweet lips, but he was not in that kind of mood. The mead could have tricked his mind, but it could not trick his heart. *Arthur has just pointed a sword at my chest.*
"Gwaine, I'm horrible, I mean it. I have killed a friend." Merlin rose to his feet, turning over the bench accidentally. "I don't deserve love and care."

Gwaine wasn't going to rise. He didn't seem like that one man in a tavern who would try to comfort you and to redeem your every wrong if you agreed to drink with him.

"I don't know about you, Merlin. But I've seen murderers. I've seen slave traders. I've seen bandits and smugglers. I don't recognize you as one of them. Whatever you say you did is not so simple. You want to say you took a sword and cut your friend's throat in a sleep?"

"No."

"You killed him when..."

"Her."

"You killed a girl?"

"I don't know if I killed her or not. She may be alive."

"Merlin, what are you saying?"

"Nothing. Forget it, Gwaine. Thank you for the drinks. I... I must go."

If only he could talk to Morgana. If only he could get a chance to explain. If only she would be eager to understand. Where are you now? Merlin, with his arms around his knees, was sitting on the floor beside the door to Arthur's rooms, shuddering, broken and drunk. The words of Kilgharrah were creeping into his mind when he was falling asleep. I have warned you about her in the past, but you have failed to take heed. She is dangerous, and now she has chosen to turn her back on her own. You must kill her, young warlock. The spell is woven with magic of such power that even you are not immune. You must act now before it's too late. If you do not, then Camelot will fall and Arthur will die, and the future you were destined to share will die with him.
The Betrayal

Chapter Summary

Merlin tries to soften Arthur by pledging his full allegiance to the prince, but Arthur reacts in a prattish way.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

So, the warning once again: the prince and his warlock seem to be fighting, because Arthur's very angry Merlin kept Morgana's secret from him. Mild angst/hurt alert.

He must have slept for a couple of hours. When Merlin woke up, he felt he needed to throw up because of how badly his stomach seemed to accept the mead. He walked down the stairs again; Gwaine was sleeping on the same bench where they had kissed.

They had kissed. They had kissed.

Merlin’s mind was crashed with the thought of kissing Gwaine. Almost a stranger. He came closer to look at Gwaine when the echoes of dawn were already tearing the night sky apart and there was some light in the hall. He had a heavy nose, yes. And a very prolonged face and a high forehead. And his eyebrows were so hairy. And the jawline Merlin would often imagine in his fantasies.

Merlin pushed the door of the tavern to enjoy the instant bliss of the forest wind. It smelled of wet leaves, of berries and of warm wood. It smelled of those dozens of times when Arthur took him hunting, and of the times when he would be gathering wood while Arthur would be by the fireplace, watching him.

Merlin refused to believe he would never ride with Arthur again. Tears can change nothing. Arthur could be angry with him as much as he wanted, but it didn't mean Merlin would let the prince go to the woods alone. Morgause was dangerous if Arthur were to regard her as an enemy.

Merlin started with watering the horses and giving them some food from the large bowl by the tavern. Food for horses was always included in the bills. He then took two empty buckets from the yard and cleaned them with a spell, the first spell he learned, and ironically, the most useful one when he was at Arthur's side.

He filled the buckets with the water from the well and looked around to make sure there was nobody to witness his magic. The village was asleep. The skies were scattered in the pale-grey sky that was slightly turning blue in the east. The trees and bushes of the neighboring hill were frozen in the chill of the morning air. Somewhere there, in the east, there was Ealdor and his mother. He hoped she was fine. He needed to write a letter to her, it had been long since the last time she received a word from him.
Merlin focused his sight on the water in the buckets. If what Mary had told was true, the mists in the forests may make it hard to find Arthur if they were separated. Merlin remembered the spell that would make anyone who touches the charmed water leave a golden tray only the sorcerer would see. He glanced at the buckets, rose his hands and whispered:

"Ey fallai, ey bid y dwir en gadel y olurhein oireid!"

The water gleamed for a moment, and then went back to normal state.

He was still not sure how Arthur would welcome him. He hoped Arthur had slept enough and would rethink what he had said yesterday. He hoped it was as painful for the prince to think of their parting as it was for Merlin. I will not bear. Not without him.

He was a bit hesitant in front of the prince’s door, but when the thought of losing Arthur crossed his mind again, he opened the door with a kick.

"Rise and shine!" he shouted.

Arthur, already dressed, was standing by the window; when the door opened he turned around and raised his sword. Merlin, with two buckets of water, stepped over the threshold and met the angry look of the prince. He hoped there was more pretense than genuine feelings to it.

"What part of get back to Gaius did you not understand?!" Arthur asked, irritation battling anger in his voice.

"I guess you're not happy to see me, eh?" Merlin tried to ignore that Arthur, once again, was armed in his presence. "I've brought you some water. This one's cold, this one’s hot, but not boiling, so that if you want to wash your face. There are no baths here, so. So. So, so, so. How was your night?"

"Get out," Arthur came to stand close to Merlin. "Don't make me throw you out of the room again."

Merlin was brave enough to look right into Arthur’s eyes. The blue shining seas, they turned cold to Merlin and were captured in the storm of fury. Arthur’s lips were zipped and his fingers shaped in fists. It was the face of a stranger, and Merlin wanted to scream from how he had managed to ruin everything in one night. An idiot.

"Go ahead. Throw me out! And then you will have to throw me out again, because I will again enter this room without knocking! And then you will have to throw me out of the forest, because I will go with you!"

"You are not going with me!" Arthur had his index finger pointing at Merlin’s chin.

"There are sadly no stocks here, Arthur. And no other knights. You will have to put up with me for one last day, and then I will be gone, if it pleases my Lord," Merlin took a bow, but accidentally kicked the bucket and spilled half the water on the floor.

Arthur rolled his eyes.

"What wrong have I done to deserve this? Shut the door, you simple minded fool. "

He took his shirt off and started washing his face, his neck, his hands and his arms; when Arthur was flexing his muscles, Merlin couldn't take his eyes off the prince even if he were ordered to.

"Where is my breakfast?" Arthur inquired demandingly.
"I... the tavern's still closed, my Lord."

"I didn't ask anything about the tavern. I asked about my breakfast. Go find something. Find this Mary girl or whatever. The horses were supposed to be carrying some supplies which you have not forgotten to pack, right?"

"Of course, my Lord."

Merlin ran down the stairs. Maybe Arthur's ice took time to melt. Maybe nothing was lost, after all. He found slices of cottage cheese and bread in one of the bags, and rushed back to Arthur.

"So?" the prince asked. He looked fresh from washing his face with cold water, but the purple lines under his eyes suggested Merlin was not the only one to suffer a night of poor sleep. *Maybe he was thinking about me, and about what I told him. Maybe he doesn't know if his father is right anymore.*

"Here," Merlin put the bag on the prince's bed. "Not so much, but still something."

Arthur ate, greedily. He didn’t thank Merlin in any way, but the aura of hate seemed to be gone.

"Now if you want to go with me, you'll have to remember one thing," he began, but then smiled. "Your face looks as if you have swallowed a lake of cider last night."

Merlin smiled back.

"You want any of these? " Arthur pointed at two of the last slices of bread. "I can't tell for how long we'll be in the forest."

Merlin ate with great appetite, too. He would die even for a dinner that Gaius used to cook.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Here's some water," he threw a water skin into Merlin's hands. "Now remember. If you want to go with me, you'll have to... Firstly, no talking. And try not to make any noise. We don't know who the source of the mist is. We are to go into enemy's territory and we have to be careful. Such a mission requires special stealth skills which you..."

"Arthur?" Merlin felt a strange itching in his throat and in his hands. The room was going round. *The water. "Arthur, what? You've poisoned me?!"

"Poisoned?" Arthur barked out a laugh. "You're talking rubbish."

He pushed Merlin onto the bed and Merlin didn’t know why he couldn’t do anything to stop Arthur. His body refused to obey.

"You will just fall asleep. Because you're not going with me. And when I come back, I'll tie you up and I'll carry you to Camelot on the back of my horse. And then I'll throw you in the stocks, and nobody, neither Gwen nor Gaius, will help. So that you can learn that whenever the prince gives you an order, you must OBEY!"

The aching heaviness of Merlin's eyelids was pushing him to sleep. He felt betrayed by Arthur’s commanding scream. He wanted to whisper something that would change Arthur’s mind in a blink of an eye.

"Arthur... Please!"

The prince grabbed his crossbow and his sword and left the room without giving Merlin a look.
“Arthur, I love you,” he whispered to the darkness which came fast and swallowed his mind without meeting much resistance.
Winds of war

Chapter Summary

Uther is enjoying his wine in the evening when Sir Leon brings the news of Cenred's invasion.

Chapter Notes

Uther POV; Uther is not surprised it's Cenred, and he gathers more and more evidence that suggests Cenred and Morgause had it all planned.

It was the second time of the day when he was left alone. King Uther heard the door close, and emitted a sigh of relief. Alone, now. He took off his cloak, his gloves and the crown. Uther opened the window and poured himself a cup of wine. Despite his strong habit of never drinking wine after dinner, he found it hard to resist drinking these days. Wine soothed the nerves and softened the burdens of the heart, that's what they said. But with an insane witch that, in her desperate attempts to overthrow him, kidnapped his daughter and freed the last dragon, wine was a poor remedy. Even though that Roman wine Lord Cynric had was exceptionally good.

The night sky saluted him with the glow of the stars, their light dimmed by the rise of the growing moon. Camelot was safe asleep, with the candle-sustained fires still dancing in the windows of the Lower Town, and some distant quarrels of the late-night drunkards reaching the Royal Tower.

Arthur rode to Ascetir yesterday, well before dawn. He has been away for two days and there has been no word from him. But two days is too little a time. I must be patient.

Uther wasn't worried for Arthur more than he usually was. In his son's years, he himself was ready to become a legend of feats. Arthur was strong and brave, talented and disciplined, he was the best knight in Camelot. He had been instructed under no circumstances to take part in a fight with Morgause. Uther needed to make sure the witch was hiding with Morgana in the forest of Ascetir before sending his knights to do the rest.

Uther turned around when he caught that sound. Steps against the stone. Was it? Or was it not? Uther pricked his ears. Heavy steps against the stone, and the clanging of metal. Someone in the armor was climbing the stairs. At such an hour?

Without hesitation, he reached for the crown and his cloak. Whoever it was, something other than a drunk fight must have happened so that they had the courage to disturb their King.

Three heavy knocks on the door. A matter of great urgency. Before Uther could speak, the door opened and Sir Leon marched into the room. He bent the knee as he tried to deliver the news.

"My Lord, I am sorry to ruin the king's rest at such an hour. But our patrol at the border with Essetir has been butchered. Seventeen people escaped the death and brought the news to Camelot. Cenred's army has crossed the border near the village of Engerd. It is marching to Brechfa through the
Cenred. Uther's desire to smile was physical. *That rogue. Stupid and impulsive.* Uther wondered how Cenred had met Morgause. There were plenty of options, of course, for Essetir welcomed all sorts of sorcerers and witches. It was a matter of time. *And now he is marching on Brechfa, trying to occupy Camelot's most precious land, the land which alone produces from quarter to third of all the harvest in the kingdom.*

"What will be the orders, my Lord?" Sir Leon forgot to rise.

"You must accompany me to the throne room. Who else knows of it?"

"I have sent for Lord Accolon, my Lord."

"Good. Send for Gaius, and nobody else."

"As you say, my Lord."

Uther rushed down the stairs, the thoughts dancing in his head. The castle, wrapped in the embrace of the warm summer night, was enjoying the peace of dreams. *For how long will this peace last?* It was now for him to decide. There was no point in ringing the warning bells. There was no point in panic. Uther had learnt many bitter lessons in life, and one of them said: *the good decisions don't come unless the heart is cold and the mind is at rest.* Letting emotions take over the mind was stupid and treacherous. He was now responsible for the future of his kingdom.

The spearmen were at their positions, and by the look of the king they would understand that the only thing that could have dragged Uther out of bed was war. *There will be whispers at the market by morning.* But Uther didn't care about them. He cared to put Cenred in his place and to show him and every other king that no monarch, with or without magic allies, would be able to defeat Camelot.

They were walking to the throne room along the balconies of the eastern block. Uther glanced at the inner yard of the castle, where the guards were also at their position. Everything seemed fine.

When they entered the throne room, Lord Accolon was already shouting at the knights, hurrying them up.

"Go on, light them torches! How will we find the king in the throne room if it's as dark here as in the black cat's arse?"

"Lord Accolon," Uther greeted him. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

"My Lord," Lord Accolon bowed down. "Grievous news, my Lord."

"For Cenred, but not for Camelot," Uther replied and gestured the knights to get out. "Don't let anybody in without my permission, except Gaius."

He sat down on the throne. Leon and Lord Accolon were the only two tiny figures to inhabit the hall.

"What exactly happened at the border with Essetir?" he asked Sir Leon.

"Our southern patrol was attacked yesterday, in the evening, my Lord. It was a butchery. Cenred's men tried to kill as many as they could. Those seventeen that survived rode to the castle of Brechfa, they arrived long past the sunrise. Their horses were nearly dead. Twelve of them remained, for they were wounded, my Lord. One of them died. And five knights changed horses and rode to Camelot.
without rest, along the southern road."

"Did they try to estimate how large an army Cenred has pulled towards our borders?"

"When they escaped the fight, it was already dark, my Lord, but by what they saw, it was an 8 column-formation with about 50 rows."

"A standard one," Uther muttered. "So Cenred is bringing an army of 400 men. How long before they reach Brechfa? Lord Accolon?"

"Three days, my Lord. They are marching down the wastelands of Isgaard. The roads are fine there, but the land scarcely has any people left. They will not be able to seize any villages for food. The will have to make breaks, so maybe three and a half days."

"Cenred will not attempt the siege of Camelot with 400 men. It's nonsense. This castle has seen larger armies," Uther said, addressing Accolon. "What is his intention?"

"Intention! Ha! The rotten coward of a bandit is afraid to fight us. He knows his soldiers are made of ratshit and will lose a battle in open field. He is marching on Brechfa to seize her rich lands and get access to the villages with food and maidens for his soldiers. That's where he will rest till the harvest days. If he has more soldiers in Essetir, they will be arriving at Brechfa, too. They will be raiding the villages to the south of Camelot, trying to destroy our crops. Cenred knows Camelot is in the dire need of food now, and he will only march on the castle before we gather our harvests."

"And what if the army of Camelot marches to Brechfa to meet my armies from the west and from the south? What if we strike him, as three hammers from three sides?"

"Then he will burn all the harvests in Brechfa and be gone to the east, to where he came from, my Lord. That's what ratshit cowards do, my Lord. And Camelot will lose quarter to third the crops we expected to gather in two moons. And, my Lord, there will be at best one hammer in such a plan. Those five hundred men destined to arrive from the west and from the south are as green as the hair between..."

"Lord Accolon," Uther broke the poetic comparison that was to come. "The only roads that lead to Camelot from the south lie through Brechfa. Those green men from Balor, Nemeton and Gedref will not make it to Camelot past Cenred's army. I shall withdraw my call off these three lands."

"That would be most wise, my Lord," Lord Accolon nodded. "No need to waste the green lives."

"But the lords and ladies of Nemeton, Balor and Gedref must arrive, still. For their safety. And the call for the army from our western lands must be dismissed, too. Instead, I must order the west to raise a larger army."

“How large?”

“Two thousand swords. They must raise and train the army, but they shall not march unless I call for them.”

"The order will be sent immediately, my Lord."

"Your majesty," Sir Leon spoke suddenly, as if he recalled of something important he was meant to tell. "The young Lord Gingawaine is here."

"Rion?" Uther frowned. "Gingawaine's nephew?"
"Yes. His uncle sent him together with the five surviving knights. He is here for your orders. Lord Gingawaine sent a message with him. The 200 men that you demanded two days ago would depart on the morrow, but he himself remains at the castle of Brechfa and is ready to give Cenred a good welcome, if you order."

"I'm sure he is," this time Uther couldn't resist a smile. "When I raised the rebellion against the Council of the druids, he was the last lord to submit to my army. He fought, and when he lost, he sent for dragonlords. This man fights till the very end."

Uther remembered how terrified he was when the roar and the flame of three great dragons tore the night sky. Nimueh, who was standing by his side, kept assuring him that her magic would work. You must trust me, Uther Pendragon.

"My Lord, have you called for me?" Gaius entered without knocking and when he looked at the Councilor of war, the Commander of the knights and the king all in one room in the middle of the night, he was quick to guess.

"Is it Cenred, my Lord?" Gaius asked, out of breath from the quick walk.

"Yes. That ratshit is marching on Brechfa," Accolon answered and was about to spit on the floor but stopped from the look Uther was giving him.

"Brechfa is sending 200 men to Camelot at dawn," Uther explained to the old physician.

"What are we to do with the castle and with the small folk of Brechfa?" Gaius inquired.

"That's what we are trying to settle. It's clear that we must demand the castle of Brechfa to prepare for the siege. But they must send as many of their knights to Camelot as possible, for Cenred will kill all the knights if the castle falls. The less people the castle has, the longer their supplies will last."

"And what's to be with the small folk?"

"Cenred will need as many commoners as it takes to work on the crops. The rest will suffer," Uther concluded. "If I order for Lord Gingawaine to defend the land against the army of Cenred, I will lose the knights, the commoners and I risk losing the crops. If I demand that the knights and the nobles flee to Camelot, I will lose the commoners and I risk losing the crops. But if I demand that the commoners flee to Camelot as well, they will cause chaos in our castle and our supplies will be gone before we train the army. Since there is no way I can fight Cenred’s army before he seizes the land of Brechfa, there is only one thing I can do. Sir Leon, tell young Gingawaine that he shall deliver this message to his uncle: king Uther orders for Lord Ryence Gingawaine, three fourth of his knights and all the noble lords and ladies of Brechfa to travel to Camelot. The castle of Brechfa is to prepare for the siege with the remaining forces."

"They are proud people, my Lord," Gaius warned him. "They will not like to leave their land to the army of Essetir."

"That doesn't concern me. As a king, I must think of all the kingdom. Lord Accolon, how many people have joined the army of Camelot since the Council?"

"One hundred brave green men in two days. They are already in the village of Howden, training, just as you demanded, my Lord."

"Make it another hundred. Sir Leon, there will be sixty-four knights in the army of Camelot. Send them to Howden right now."
"As you say, my Lord."

"And send our patrols to the forests on the border with Brechfa. If Cenred decides to attack sooner, we must be informed. That will be all for both of you."

When he was left with Gaius, he lowered his voice and started asking the questions that only Gaius was supposed to hear.

"How powerful is Morgause?"

"She is nowhere near as powerful as Nimueh in her best days, my Lord," Gaius came closer to the throne. "Morgause is the priestess of the old religion, but she is the priestess of Nemaine. She is not as cruel as Nimueh, who was the priestess of Dunau."

*Three priestesses, of earth, fire and water, and the Supreme One to rule them,* Uther remembered.

"Can she provide some sort of assistance to Cenred? The one that will give his army a solid advantage?"

"I don't think so. Not after the whirlwind spell. My lord, I believe Cenred is walking into a trap."

"What trap?"

"I believe that they had an arrangement. She was supposed to kill you and Arthur when the castle was asleep, and free the dragon as the symbol of the triumph of magic. Cenred was meant to attack when he learned of that symbol. It was a sign for the attack."

"But she didn't kill me. Why did she free the dragon then?"

"She was close, my Lord. Maybe when she was freeing the dragon, she thought there was little time left before she destroys you. But she failed. Her magic failed."

"And you think Cenred is a fool to be marching upon a misinterpreted sign?"

"Which tells us that she is nowhere near his side. Otherwise she would have told him. Sire, there is a great chance she is weakened and a greater chance she has been the driving mind behind Cenred’s attack. It all looks too well-planned. His army is in Camelot less than a week after the dragon tried to burn the castle. They must have started marching when they got the news about the beast."

"When he comes to Brechfa and learns that I am not dead, what will he do?"

"He will probably stay in Brechfa for as long as possible, my Lord. The land is rich. He will use it as a sort of fortress. And he will use envoys to Camelot to gain what he always wanted."

"What concessions will Cenred insist on?" Uther frowned. "Ascetir?"

"I believe so, my Lord. Cenred always thought that Ascetir belonged with Essetir."

"What makes him think I will agree to the new terms? He broke our treaty shortly before the attack of Morgause and her knights."

Uther smiled again. All the parts of the riddle were coming together for him to see the obvious. *He broke the treaty so comfortably in time to send Morgause behead our kingdom and then invade our eastern lands. He will pay for this.*

"The war will cost Camelot more than it will cost Essetir, Sire," the voice of the physician was
strong, yet he wanted his words to be taken as a warning. “He will have the power to destroy our most harvest-rich land. If we decided to fight him, he will burn the crops."

"He needs Ascetir because he wants their taxes?"

"He is largely in debt, my Lord, that's what they say about him."

"And he thinks that fifty thousand people living in Ascetir will be happy to pay his debts? Well, that I can understand. Gaius, does anything unite him and Morgause? Apart from their tolerance towards magic, of course?"

"We can't be certain, my Lord. They are both young and passionate, so we can't rule anything out."

"You will do well to instruct the younger physicians for the typical battle wounds."

"Of course, my Lord."

It was not the first attempt to bring him downfall. He had been on the throne for thirty-two years. He had learned much, and he was ready to teach Morgause and Cenred a lethal lesson.
Into the Woods

Chapter Summary

Merlin wakes up in the room to find out that Arthur has never come back from the forest. This time, Merlin is ready to do everything to save the prince, including using magic in the presence of his master.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Merlin opened his eyes, he saw the silhouettes of trees and bushes of Ascetir swaying in the wind. It was dark already. He kept blinking until he gained control over his consciousness. He couldn't believe Arthur was hating him so much he preferred to drug him with a sleeping draught rather than have a companion in a witch-hunting journey.

Merlin felt rejected and betrayed. The cruelty of Arthur’s action was easier to understand than to accept, for when he tried to imagine that Arthur could easily forget everything they had shared, everything Merlin had done for him and everything Arthur had done for Merlin, he almost refused to carry on. *I came to quite like you. Are you really going to face this dragon with me?*

The good thing was that he wasn’t in Camelot. He was terrified to imagine how they would all be laughing if they saw him brought back to the castle tied up and on the back of Arthur’s horse. And all those “I told you so” from Gaius. *No.*

He rose to his feet, slowly, his legs were disobeying him, and so were his arms and even some of his fingers. It was too dark in the room, and Merlin lit the candle with his eyes. Arthur's clothes and bags were on the floor. Merlin walked down the stairs; the evening in the tavern was loud and merry. The folk didn't seem to care much about him, and Merlin went outside.

Arthur's horse was still there, too. Merlin swallowed from nervousness and looked at the forest and the mist. *The mist. It's still here. And Arthur hasn't come back. He has been gone since morning.*

Terrified, Merlin whispered the spell which he had used to enchant the water in the prince's buckets. Suddenly, there appeared a path of golden fire on the ground, Arthur’s trace visible to the sorcerer who had cast the spell. He grabbed an unlit torch from the horse bag and started running.

The trace lay past the tavern, past the small neat houses, past the logger huts straight into the forest of Ascetir, the forest that was disappearing into the thick mists that were flowing from the thickets. Merlin didn’t care. He was running. Arthur had been missing for the whole day. *The trace leads to the forest. This is no ordinary mist. People get lost there.*

The path was disappearing under his feet as Merlin was running into the woods, allowing the trees and bushes to scratch his face. He fell a couple of times, once hitting on his elbow so hard he feared...
he had broken his arm.

There was no way to tell where he was. The murky world of the night forest was twisting his mind, the noises of wind and the whispers of the mists rousing the most wicked fantasies. The forest didn't like him, Merlin could tell it. It was hissing against someone who was not afraid of the mist and who could see even though the mist wanted him to be blind.

When the trace brought him to a sort of small meadow in the middle of the thicket, he stumbled upon something and fell again. Merlin lit the torch in his hand with magic. It was Arthur's crossbow. No. Please, Arthur, stay. Stay with me. I love you. You can't just leave me after saying all those things. Arthur's sword was glistening nearby. Merlin was ready to cry, but then he realized that there would be no golden path if the prince were dead. He is alive. Captured maybe, but alive.

Merlin took the sword and the crossbow in his hands and kept on chasing that golden path. If Morgause even tried to harm him, I will kill her the way I killed Nimueh. Suddenly, Merlin had to stop because he could see the end of the golden path. It was leading to a cave inside a small mountain, and Merlin could see the shadows from fire dancing on the stone walls.

There was nobody around. Deep into the woods, covered by the lush greenery of the silent trees, it was a perfect hideaway for whoever wanted to capture Arthur.

There were few opportunities for him. Artur was alive, but for how long? What was supposed to happen to him in that cave? Merlin knew that whoever brought Arthur so deep into the forest didn’t wish him any good. It was a threat to be dealt with, and Merlin breathed in. There was an iron decisiveness in his heart. He would do anything to save Arthur, and if he needed to use magic to protect the prince, so be it. Even if Arthur watched.

Merlin took the sword in his right hand and tried to cross the threshold of the cave, but he was immediately pushed back by an invisible barrier that made a weird noise. Merlin bounced back, fell on the ground and hit his right shoulder; the sword flew out of his hand.

Before he tried to get the sword back, he sensed somebody was coming out of the cave, somebody bothered by the fact that the magic barrier reacted to the intrusion. Merlin thought that a barrier was a great spell and promised himself to look for such in the magic book Gaius had given him if he were to return to Camelot. As quickly as he could, Merlin jumped left and crawled behind the big oak tree.

The figure that appeared out of the cave and walked a few steps to the forest was not Morgause. It wasn't human at all. Short and fat, with dark-green greasy skin, it was a troll. But unlike Lady Katrina, this one seemed to be male - it was easy to tell since it was not wearing anything. A troll. Just a troll. A creature of magic, but made of flesh.

Merlin had never felt braver. He whispered the spell and the grass under the troll's feet was set on fire. The creature burnt its feet and screamed; angry as a wounded beast, the troll shot some spell into the woods, hoping to reach the intruder. The lightning struck a tree far away from the oak tree behind which Merlin was hiding. Merlin cast the griffin spell over Arthur's sword; it glowed with blue, rose from the ground and was sent flying right into the head of the troll.

The sword hit the creature right in the nose and sliced all the way through its head; the blade came out from the other side. The troll didn't have the time to understand who brought his end, and fell on the ground.

Merlin felt something in his blood, a sense of liberation, and the mist started to melt and vanished from the forest as if it had never been there. With his feet, however, Merlin felt something else. The small mountain was shaking. Arthur.
Merlin jumped over the troll’s dead body into the cave whose walls were trembling. Having forgotten a torch outside, he whispered something and a small fireball appeared right in his hand, lighting the narrow tunnel of the cave. The smell was unbearable. Something rotten. Something dead. It reeked of troll. Merlin was stepping carefully, afraid that the creature might have set some traps in his hideaway; fortunately, it seemed that whatever magic the troll had, it had died when the sword sliced his head in two pieces.

A small fireplace appeared soon; there were rotten trees and corpses of forest animals everywhere. Arthur’s body lay in the cage that was hanging in the air and seemed to be made of bones. Merlin broke the cage with magic and tried to catch Arthur’s body when the prince fell out of it. The mountain was trembling. It seemed that the cave was about to collapse because of the death of the troll. Arthur was too heavy for him to carry, and Merlin grabbed Arthur by his hands and started dragging Arthur out of the cave, sweeping the ground with the prince.

He dragged Arthur’s body as far away from the entrance as possible, to the oak tree that shielded him from the troll. The grass near the troll’s body was still burning, and Merlin could see Arthur’s stupid sleeping face. Arthur. *Your bravery is charming had it not been dangerous. And that’s why I’ve got to be near you, how stupid must you be to not understand.*

He embraced Arthur and held him in his arms. He enjoyed the smell of his hair and the heat of his skin, even though the prince’s clothes did carry the odor of the troll’s cave. Merlin had to shove his hands under Arthur’s shirt and check that the prince was physically fine. He had no visible wounds.

Merlin took his shirt off and sat down, leaning on the tree. He placed his shirt under Arthur’s head and put the prince’s head on his knees. Merlin started crying. He didn’t know why – he just was. Those were not the tears of happiness. Those were the tears he was drowning in but struggled to let them out. He wasn’t crying, he was weeping.

He didn’t understand why, if his magic was so good, he had to poison Morgana. They were not as close as him and Arthur, but he cared about her enough to never harm her. He hated himself for not thinking about anything better in that situation. He hated himself for not being able to produce a wise and kind decision when put under so much stress. He was so much afraid of losing Arthur that he preferred to lose Morgana. *Did she deserve that? Did she know what she was doing? Maybe she was. Maybe she didn’t think it was reasonable to ask Morgause for details of her plan. And what if Morgause used her against her will? What then?*

And people in the Lower Town. Kilgharrah didn’t kill them because of Merlin, but Merlin couldn’t get rid of the feeling that he hadn’t done enough to dissuade the Great Dragon.

If he was meant to one day bring about change and welcome magic back to Albion, then why did he do such terrible things? And what was with Arthur? *Will he ever speak to me again? Now that because of me he knows the biggest secret of his family?*

"Are you crying?" Arthur was frowning; the prince opened his eyes, but was lying on the ground, with his head comfortably on Merlin’s knees.

"ARTHUR! You're alive! Arthur! You're back!" Merlin pulled Arthur by the hands and in a moment his hands were all around Arthur, and his cheek was pressing against Arthur’s as he was shaking the prince with all his joy.

"Merlin. You are worse than a troll now. Stop being such a girl."

"I won't! I thought I'd lost you," he held Arthur stronger. “Thought you'd left me."
"Merlin, stop crying," Arthur tried to, to no success, free himself from Merlin’s embrace. “Where is the creature, Merlin?"

"There,” Merlin let go of Arthur. The prince sat on the ground, rubbing his head and looking the way Merlin was pointing. “It’s dead. Cut him with your sword."

"How?! I wasn't able to move when I saw it! It used some magic against me!"

"I suppose it did," Merlin shrugged.

"How did you manage to kill her?!"

"It's a he. Judging by the trunk between his legs."

"How did you manage to kill him?!"

"He dragged you here,” Merlin started making up yet another story. “To the cave. I have been wandering in the forest for all day. I finally found your crossbow and your sword in the wood."

"It hit me with some spell or something. I don't remember anything after that," Arthur sounded ashamed.

"Lucky for you, you're no better than a troll. You leave so much traces behind that I managed to find the place where your crossbow and your sword were left, after all. And from there, the troll left another trace. But no bigger than yours. You're the worst hunter in the five kingdoms."

"A perfect match to the worst servant in the five kingdoms,” Arthur said. “Merlin? Keep going. What did you do?"

"I couldn't break into the cave. It was sealed."

"Sealed? With what? A giant rock?"

"He used some magic to create a barrier. When I tried to come in, I bounced back as if there were an invisible wall."

"Are you hurt?” Arthur sounded worried.

"I’ve hit me shoulder. Actually, yes, now it hurts rather badly."

“Let me look,” Arthur demanded.

“Arthur, I…”

“I said let me look.

Merlin turned around, without standing up. Arthur’s fingers were touching the cold of his back and the sharp bones on his shoulders. Merlin straightened up and was ready to shiver from every touch.

“You’re lucky. It’s not a fracture. Might be just a bruise.”

“Then I heard that somebody or something was coming out of the cave,” Merlin turned around and was facing Arthur again. The cold of the earth was slipping through his trousers. “I took your sword and tried to stand by the exit. I didn't think much. I remember Lady Katrina. I know what they are capable of. I had one chance. I used it. When I cut him, he started spitting out fire and some spells, but he missed. Then he died, and the mist was gone."
"So now you're a trollslayer? To match me being a dragonslayer," Arthur jested to the awkward sobs of Merlin. "Will you stop crying? Merlin, why are you crying? I am alive, you can see that."

"I'm crying because I didn't tell you about Morgana when I learned," Merlin was ashamed to let Arthur look him in the face. "Because I didn't trust you enough. Arthur, I lo... I was so afraid that you were dead and that the last thing we said to each other were..."

Arthur did the last thing Merlin could believe would ever happen in this world. He grabbed Merlin by the neck and pulled him into a tight embrace, letting Merlin cry on his shoulder. Arthur was running his fingers through Merlin’s hair.

"Guess you're my rabbit's foot, after all," he whispered into Merlin’s ear.

"Arthur," Merlin started running fingers through Arthur’s hair as well. "Will you forgive me?"

"Merlin, you just saved my life. You can't be feeling sorry for that!" Arthur smiled.

"I'm always there to save you if I can."

"How many time's always?"

"Arthur."

"Alright," Arthur let go and looked in the eyes of Merlin. Arthur’s eyes were again loving-blue. "Listen. I'm sorry I threatened you. I may be rash at times. And I will never ever again give you a sleeping draught. I am sorry for pushing you out of the room and making you sleep on the floor in the corridor. And for sacking you. But you must understand how I felt. Merlin! Will you stop crying, after all?!"

"So, you're not sacking me?" Merlin said in a hoarse voice, already himself too irritated by the tears that refused to stop,

"I guess there is nothing in the world that will make me sack you. I've tried it all. And I could not dream of a braver man by my side."

"Arthur, I lo... I..." Merlin started hugging Arthur again.

"Merlin, let go of me, will you?"

"Alright, alright. I’m just happy to know you’re safe."

"Now, where are we? What way is the village?"

“Arthur,” Merlin asked, rising to his feet. “Do you think we shall bring the troll's head to Camelot?”

Chapter End Notes

Arthur is not the best man when it comes to apologies, but when they're back at the inn in Gendy, we may learn the prince is better at expressing his feelings with actions.
Right and Wrong

Chapter Summary

Arthur asks Merlin's opinion on what to do with the secret of Lady Morgana. Should Uther ever learn his ward had magic?

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV.
Arthur is going through some changes of his judgement, and much like always, he relies on Merlin's opinion.

It wasn't that easy to find a way back to the village. Even without the sinister mist, the forest was still a place where one could get lost without much effort. The rain was slanting Ascetir, but Merlin and Arthur were safely shielded by the crown of leaves that served at the roof against the rainfall. The daylight was struggling to break through the leaves as well, and even though it was well past sunrise, the air in the forest was as grey as it gets in the evening after the sunset, when the light is melting in the sky. Merlin knew they were heading in the right direction, because the forest was getting thinner, the trees - younger, and the squirrels - rarer.

Arthur was Arthur. He was making his usual remarks about Merlin being a forest guide when they were struggling to find their way out of the woods. Merlin, who couldn't explain that his navigation was based on a spell that showed the way to Arthur, but wouldn't show the way back to the village, had to think of some remarks as well.

"How comes you're miraculously helpful one day, and as useful as a broken crossbow the other?" Arthur asked, punching him in the shoulder lightly.

"At least I was not molested by a cave troll," Merlin replied and was quick to run away.

Arthur started chasing him, jumping over the fallen trees and trying to grab Merlin by the hand. He was wearing no armor and Merlin couldn't hope to be escaping for long; when Arthur's hand clenched around Merlin's wrist, he pulled the servant and carefully slammed him against the tree.

"You've got a lot of nerve for a wimp," Arthur whispered with a wild smile as his other hand grabbed Merlin's free wrist.

"I may be a wimp, but at least I'm not a dollophead," Merlin was smiling, too. Oh, teasing Arthur was his second most favourite thing after magic.

"There's no such word."

"It's idiomatic."

"It's what?" Arthur laughed, still holding Merlin.
"Well, you need to be more in touch with the people to understand."

"Describe "dollop head"."\n
"In two words?"

"Yeah."

"Er...Prince Arthur."

"Merlin," Arthur was dangerously close now, in fact, so close that Merlin knew it was a matter of a moment before their lips could meet. He shook his head. He mustn't stare at Arthur's lips. "You do understand that we are alone in the woods and I can do anything to you and nobody will rescue you, don't you?"

"You'll do no such thing!" Merlin protested, his smile growing even wider.

"Oh, but I will," Arthur said and in a moment Arthur's hands were tickling Merlin under the shirt.

"Arthur, stop! Arthur! For the love of Camelot, Arthur, you know I'm afraid of that!" Merlin was hardly breathing from the laughter.

"So that you don't think of saying things about me and the troll again. Come on, let's go," Arthur put his hand on Merlin's shoulder and they kept walking. "Merlin, there is now one thing I want to ask of you. But not as of my servant, who you still are."

"Then as of who?"

"As of someone I can trust. Can I trust you, Merlin?"

"You can always trust me. You know it."

"If you were in my position, would you tell the king about Lady Morgana?"

Merlin stopped. Arthur stopped, too. It wasn't hard for Merlin to believe that Arthur needed advice; what shocked him was the fact that Arthur was openly asking for it, thus acknowledging his own limits of judgement.

"If I were in your position, I would try to understand why she went to the druids in the first place," Merlin suggested innocently. "Why she didn't go to you. Or your father."

"You assume it's because she was afraid to die by my father's hand?" Arthur snorted. "That's gibberish. My father would never hurt her. You can see now how devastated he is."

"But imagine if there were any other man or any other woman that came to Uther and told him she or he had magic. What would the king do?"

Arthur winced. He clearly didn't like to get under Morgana's skin to understand how horrific her position must have seemed.

"Morgana's not just any other man or woman," he began, desperate to seek an apology for his father. "She is his ward."

"There were members of great houses slain during the Great Purge. Blood can't keep you from Uther's justice."
"Are you questioning the king's law?" Arthur's tone was as serious as ever.

"No," even though Merlin was full of courage after saving Arthur, he knew he had to proceed carefully, step by step. "I'm just saying that Morgana was growing at court. She has witnessed executions, trials. She of all people knows how much the king hates everything magical. And she was right to be afraid. She probably didn't want to put him in the position where he was to decide her fate."

"But she went to the enemies of the kingdom! To the druids!"

"From what I've heard about them from Gaius, druids are peaceful. During the Great Purge, Uther drowned many druids he suspected of sorcery. And some were children, killed for the magic they were born with."

"You believe everything you hear from Gaius?" for some reason, Arthur voice seemed to rise from some sorrowful place.

"Uther was searching the castle for a druid boy just last year. He meant to have him killed," Merlin reminded.

Arthur's silence was angry.

"Arthur, I'm just trying to explain to you that she went to the druids not because she wanted to take sides or something. She wanted to learn what magic is, and what it means to live with magic. Nobody at the court could explain her that."

"And do you think I shall ask my father to explain it now?"

"You have no proof she has magic."

"I am his son. My words mean everything to him."

"In the matters when he is to rule out a sentence for his own ward, he will demand proof, Arthur. And if you say the source of this suspicion is your servant, he will probably have me killed."

"I won't let him."

"Arthur, there is no need to fight your own father because of me. But I am flattered."

"Shut up, Merlin."

"Morgana went to people who know much about the days before the purge and then she came back. She returned to the castle, even though Uther hates everyone like her."

"He doesn't hate. They are dangerous."

"How is Morgana dangerous?"

"Morgana is... another matter, I've told you, there's..."

"How is Gaius dangerous?"

"Gaius doesn't have magic now. He had it before. Not now."

"Arthur, people are born with it. They live and die with it. There is no way to get rid of it. The only thing that is special about Gaius is that he doesn't practice, but if he were to cast a spell tomorrow, he
would easily do."
"Did he tell you that?"
"Yes."
"Merlin, if my father finds out his physician is talking magic with my servant..."
"Gaius is careful enough. And he must have earned your father's trust somehow."
"He must have."
"Whatever the case, your father is not the best source of information about this situation."
"Are you speaking treason again?"
"Has he ever told you about the days before the Purge?"
"No. Why?"
"Has he ever told you about those ten years that he ruled the kingdom with magic legal? All those years before you were born?"
"We never talk about it."
"Have you ever wondered why?"

The innkeeper Mary begged to take the bag with the troll's head out of her tavern when Arthur and Merlin brought the news that the village was free from the mists that besieged it. People from the village were curious to come and take a look at the remains of the creature that started ruining their way of life. Arthur presented the bag to an old man who claimed he once was a soldier in Uther's army at the battle of Ashes, but requested the bag to be returned in the evening because he had to bring it to Camelot.

Arthur then went to the village to talk with the commoners and to ask if there was anything the castle of Camelot could do to help them in any way.

In the evening, Merlin was outside the tavern, feeling happy for no obvious reason. He had noticed that in the past two weeks his outbursts of joy and sadness, of hope and remorse happened almost randomly and were spiraling out of control. Still, he managed to handle them somehow, either with tears or with anger, or with kissing strangers.

He was looking at the pinkish sky and enjoying the homely view of the houses with lines of grey smoke floating in the air. Gwaine came from one of such houses, and sat down beside him.

"So it's true that you hunted a troll in the forest?" he asked.

Merlin looked him in the eyes. When sober, Gwaine was so handsome, with the pink of the sky dancing in his brown eyes.

"Not that I'm happy about it."
"I heard they stink."
"I don't think the cave will ever recover from that stench!"

"Any idea why the creature chose to haunt this forest?"

"No idea at all. Maybe he was looking for something? Gaius said trolls are greedy."

"And who's Gaius?"

"A physician in Camelot."

"Is he a good man?"

"As good as a man can be in Camelot," Merlin said, the sadness whispering through his voice. He was not a good man himself and he chose not to judge others. Gaius was in Camelot for most of the Purge. He had seen so many innocent sorcerers die, but he chose to be a part of Uther's court nonetheless.

"Was the fight with a troll the only thing you and your master did in the woods?" Gwaine asked, chewing some grass.

"Gwaine!" Merlin looked around to make sure Arthur was not close enough to hear them.

"Are you two in love?" Gwaine smiled, his eyebrows dancing suggestively.

"We are not!"

"Then what's with all the looks between you two?"

"The looks?" Merlin felt genuinely confused.

"The way he looks at you, Merlin. Have you never noticed it? What's in his eyes?"

Loving-blue.

"Maybe it's the light?" Merlin was not sure if he was as good a pretender when it came to concealing his feelings for Arthur as he was in hiding his magic.

"Does he know I kissed your pretty mouth the day before yesterday?"

"No. I tell you, I'm his servant. Just a servant."

"I don't believe it for a second," Gwaine spat the grass on the ground and started stamping his foot in a manner of easy frustration. "But even if it's how them things are between you two, you're both stupid as rabbits. You must be lovers."

"Merlin. I understand. It was a drunk kiss. And I was a drunk idiot to try and exploit your position. For that I am sorry. And..."
"Come on, Merlin," Arthur shouted, approaching the tavern. "We're to ride at dawn tomorrow, you've got work to do!"
Do Something

Chapter Summary

Merlin and Arthur share a bed in Gedney for the first time.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

Very NSFW and smut warning :)

When all the work was done – horses were fed and watered, their things packed, the notes about the problems of the village of Gedney taken, and the message sent to the castle of Camelot, Merlin felt so grateful for a bed for the night. The contrast of the coldness and wetness of the forests was still on his mind. Arthur's sword was polished and his clothes were drying up after washing on the rope above the fire in the tavern yard. He could finally sleep.

The prince was trying to figure out if there was a way to repair the crossbow, standing by the window, shirtless. The muscles of his back made his spine line so… Goddess help me.

Merlin took his shirt off and jumped into bed. Arthur turned around and looked his way with a sly smile.

"Merlin. I am prepared to face every manner of horrors in this world, but I am not going to share a bed with you."

"Then go to the forest and find another horror to face," Merlin mumbled, feeling sleepy from the moment his head touched the pillow. “I'm not sleeping on the floor tonight.”

"Merlin! Are you getting cocky because you saved my life?"

"No. Not that big of a deal to get cocky about."

Arthur blew the candle and got into bed. It was made of stone and the mattress was dumped right on it; as Arthur lay down next to Merlin, there appeared an incline because Arthur's weight was superior. Merlin was slowly sliding closer to Arthur. Soon their elbows were touching; Merlin felt his heart sinking in excitement and longing for Arthur. It was the first time the prince was sharing a bed with him. What if. Goddess.

"Not a big deal?" Arthur's voice had never sounded so close in bed. "Do you think I've forgotten where your ribs are?"

"Arthur, I'll scream if you attempt to tickle me," Merlin threatened.

"And I'll throw you in stocks if anyone ever finds out I shared a bed with a servant."
"I will not tell anyone."

"Good. Sleep well." Arthur messed up Merlin's hair.

"Er..." Merlin didn’t know what he was doing, he couldn’t understand how he got so brave all of a sudden, but he caught Arthur's hand and pressed it to his lips for a kiss. "Sleep well, my prince."

Merlin's heart was galloping. He wasn't sure that it was right to do what he was doing, but asking himself to keep calm when Arthur was so close to him was stupid. The prince, however, didn't hurry to take his hand off Merlin's lips. Instead, Arthur touched Merlin's upper lip with his index finger.

"Merlin?"

"Yes?"

"Why is your skin so hot?"

"I don't know. Your skin is even hotter," Merlin turned on his left side to face Arthur. The prince was wide-awake, and Merlin met the look in Arthur's eye he was never expecting to cause. Longing-blue. "What are you looking at?.."

"You. What are you staring at?"

Gwaine's words illuminated his mind. Do something. Do. He grabbed Arthur by the neck and pulled the prince for a kiss. The last thing Merlin saw before he closed his eyes was the lust and fear in Arthur's eyes.

Merlin, unlike two days ago, was sober and could sense every second of it. Every thought in his mind was vanquished by the tenderness of Arthur's lips, which proved to be softer than Merlin expected, but much stronger, responding to Merlin's lips with a wary eagerness. Merlin climbed on top of Arthur and couldn't stop kissing. He was a prisoner to a dewy sensation, to the feeling of closeness, to melting away in Arthur's lips; he was kissing Arthur as if he had delayed this kiss for a thousand years; he was running out of air and when he went to lick the prince’s jawlines and to put kisses on the prince's neck, Arthur stopped him.

"What is happening here?" Arthur didn't sound convincing, and his breath was so feverish and hot Merlin could easily ignore the question.

"What does it feel like?"

"It feels like..."

Merlin didn't let him finish. If you say something, he may be scared to reply. He wanted to get back there, to close his eyes and vanish somewhere between his lips and Arthur’s. Merlin shut the prince up with another kiss, this time letting his tongue into Arthur's mouth. He reached for Arthur's cock with his right hand; the prince was hard, Merlin could feel it even through the breeches.

"Merlin!"

Arthur grabbed him by the shoulders and flipped Merlin over, pressing him to the bedsheets. Merlin wrapped his legs around Arthur. Everything changed suddenly; it was no longer Merlin kissing Arthur, but rather Arthur's lips breaking into Merlin's mouth in a greedy and demanding manner, speeding up and producing those wet sounds which drove Merlin mad.

"Arthur," was the only thing Merlin could think of whispering.
"I didn't know you were such a filthy wanton," Arthur whispered right into his ear, letting Merlin feel the heat of his breath.

"I'm not. I've taken a bath."

Arthur slapped him on the cheek lightly. He licked Merlin's lips and was in for another kiss, but when Merlin tried to reach for Arthur's mouth, the prince pushed him back, smiling.

"My wanton."

"Arthur, please, kiss me."

Arthur didn't tease him that time; Merlin felt his mouth opened with some brutally lustful intention, and Arthur not feasting, but showing Merlin that his lips were meant for Arthur. Merlin thought he was about to come from that sensation alone: being pressed by Arthur to the bedsheets, Arthur holding his wrists with his hands and pushing him back whenever Merlin decided to rise.

"Merlin"

"Arthur."

"Merlin?"

Suddenly, it was all over; without Arthur's lips, he felt lost. The prince's face was just above his, and all Merlin could see were Arthur's red-red lips.

"What? Why we stopped?"

"Because you keep sighing so loudly they might hear us."

Merlin put his hand under Arthur's breeches and grabbed the prince's cock, squeezing it a little. When he did that, Arthur pulled off Merlin's trousers, leaving him completely naked. Merlin's sighs stopped mattering the instant he felt his servant's hand touch him.

"You have never been with a man, have you?" Arthur's spirit seemed ignited.

"Never." And I never will, I'll be only with you, he thought to himself.

"You want me to teach you something?"

"I will do everything my prince desires." Else I will fall into pieces.

Arthur's eyes were on fire, too.

"Damn it, Merlin," he said, grabbing Merlin's cock. "You're hotter than the fire in a winter night."

Merlin wanted to tell Arthur to keep his hands off him, because he was about to come any minute, but it felt so good he didn't care. He closed his eyes and pressed his hand to his mouth, trying to silence the moans that, indeed, were getting ridiculously loud. He had done it so many times, but when Arthur was stroking him, it felt so different, the pleasure was driving him insane.

"I love your hair," Merlin whispered and he didn't know why he thought it was the best moment to tell the prince, with Arthur's hand on his cock.

"You do?"
"Yes. And your lips have a funny taste."

"You can taste more than that. More than just my lips. What you say? Come on, Merlin. We are far past the blushing stage. Take my pants off."

Arthur lay on his back and Merlin started pulling the prince's breeches down. His cock was hard and thicker than Merlin imagined. He hesitated to do anything without invitation. Arthur's nakedness was making his mouth water for some reason.

"Good. Now grab it with your hand. Oh yes, Merlin, you're such a good boy. Like that. What do you say?"

The heat of Arthur's cock was stronger than the heat of his hands, and Arthur was pulsing, too. The skin was like silk.

"It's thick," Merlin said with a smile.


Merlin kept stroking Arthur's cock, feeling the tender skin under his palm. Arthur was leaking.

"Now come here. Let me kiss your lips again."

Merlin climbed on top of Arthur. This time, Arthur's cock was pulsing between Merlin's butt cheeks, and the desire that had been playful and lustful before suddenly turned into some wild, animal thirst.

"You want to taste mine?" Arthur whispered, biting Merlin by the lower lip.

"Yes. If you show me how."

Arthur pushed Merlin away and rose to his feet.


Merlin did that. When Arthur gave a command, something inside Merlin made his hands shudder and his heart gallop, as if Arthur's words were more than just words, as if they had some power. Could it be my magic? Arthur was towering over him, running his hand through Merlin's hair. Merlin opened his mouth and did as prince commanded.

"Good."

The smell of Arthur shot up his nose as Merlin could feel the head of Arthur's cock on the tip of his tongue. He tried to kiss it, but Arthur pushed him back.

"No. Merlin, keep your mouth open and your tongue out. Like that. Don't rush it. Do you like it? Do you like the taste of my cock on your tongue?"

"Arthur, yes," Merlin whispered with begging desire.

Merlin swallowed Arthur's cock. He put it in his mouth to moisten it with the spit just as Arthur said. The pulsing heat and the hardness made his mouth wet, and he tried to move his lips up and down. Arthur sighed from pleasure; Merlin’s own arousal seemed to reach its peak. He felt relaxed, safe and secure; Arthur, who usually had to be looked after, could use as much freedom on him as he wanted.


Merlin liked the sense of Arthur's heat in his mouth, the fact that spit mixed with the prince's precum was dripping out of his mouth, down his chin, his chest and his stomach, and the fact that Arthur was grabbing him by the hair and helping him move his head, and the fact that Arthur needed him so much that he was vocal about the pleasure.


"That's the deepest I can go," Merlin let Arthur's cock out of his mouth for the first time since the prince put it there.

"It's not true, Merlin," Arthur opened his mouth with his index finger. "I will help you. Now take a deep breath. Breathe-in. Good?"

Merlin nodded. His mouth felt unfairly empty without Arthur’s warmth.

"Now open your mouth. Take my cock."

Merlin wrapped his lips around Arthur's cock and as the heat filled his mouth, he suddenly felt Arthur moving all the way down without anything to stop it, and the next moment his cock pressed so hard against Merlin's throat the vomiting reflex made him cough. He tried to let Arthur's cock out of his mouth, but the prince was grabbing him by the head, making him cough and gag with Arthur's pulsing cock almost in his throat.

"Don't push me out. Oh yes, let me go deeper. Yes, Merlin, yes..."

"I was gagging!" Merlin said, when Arthur finally took his cock out of Merlin's throat and was looking at Merlin with a smile had had never before crowned him with.

"I wouldn't let you lose breath, don't you worry. See how much spit there is," he pointed at the flow running down from Merlin's mouth. "It's all over your lips. The deeper I get, Merlin, the more spit. Let's do it one more time. I won't be too hard, I promise."

Merlin nodded, but before he took Arthur's mouth in his cock, he kissed Arthur's balls and tracked his tongue from Arthur's balls to the tip of his cock, easily swallowing the prince.


"I'm still gagging," Merlin complained jokingly, as Arthur pulled his cock out.

Merlin didn't know how it happened - it's just when Arthur pushed his cock so deep he literally swallowed it; he had never imagined one could put any object so deep inside one's throat. The next thing he knew, his own cock was shooting seed at Arthur's leg.

"Oh, Merlin," Arthur whispered in some darker voice. "Look at what you've done. So, you like it? Merlin, you like it when my cock's deep in your mouth?"

Merlin looked up and his eyes met Arthur's. When it happened, the prince suddenly shuddered and tried to take his cock out of Merlin's mouth; Merlin felt the warm seed spurting down his throat, then into his mouth, then all over his lips, his left cheek, his nose, his neck and his chest.

Arthur was tilting his head and breathing heavily. When he looked at Merlin again, he seemed triumphant.

"Merlin?"

"What?"

"If I knew you were so good, I would have fucked you long ago."

Merlin laughed, kissing Arthur's cock and tasting the prince's seed on his lips. It smelled of wheat and sun-warmed grass.
Arthur and Merlin open up about their feelings towards each other a bit.

Merlin didn't know what to do and what to say. Suddenly, when it was all over, he felt confused and somewhat lost. He had a weird feeling he had been sleepwalking and suddenly woke up in the middle of the night from a very pleasant dream. Did Arthur like it? Was it as good as it seemed to me? What are we to do now?

The prince went to the table to drink some water and came back with a waterskin and Merlin's scarf. Merlin was sitting on the corner of the bed, staring at Arthur with a nervous breath. The prince approached Merlin and started wiping his servant's face. Merlin was looking up, smiling.

"Now what's so funny, Merlin?" Arthur asked, smiling, too. "You didn't expect me to let you around with all that mess on your face?"

"It's just that... You know, it's like in Andor, remember?"

"Andor?"

"Yes. When you smeared my face with Gaia berries so that the wilddeoren couldn't..."

"Do you mean to say that my seed smells like Gaia berries?"

"Oh, no," Merlin licked his lips provocatively, trying to taste what Arthur had left. "You smell like wheat and grass under the sun. And you're so warm and taste good. Should have spilled it in my mouth. Sire."

"Don't think I won't," Arthur dropped the scarf on the floor and pushed Merlin on his back. Merlin was too tired to react, and soon Arthur was pressing him to the bedsheets again.

Merlin could feel the heat of the prince's stomach with his own, and he could feel the tension between their bodies when Arthur's chest was rising as the prince took slow but steady inhales.
"The next time, I'm going to put you on your knees, and you'll have your mouth wide open, and you will taste as much seed as I will give you," Arthur was whispering, capturing Merlin's lips with raw kisses.

Merlin tried to kiss Arthur back, but Arthur abandoned his lips to pay attention to Merlin's neck.

"Arthur," Merlin rebelled, not very convincingly. "They may see, you know?"

"What?"

"Your kisses on my neck."

"Do I look like I care?" Arthur replied, pressing his lips right at Merlin's ears.

"And how shall I explain that?" Merlin smiled.

"Say that these are my marks. The marks of your prince that prove you belong with me now," Arthur whispered to his ear again, and Merlin suddenly felt the strongest urge to wrap his arms around Arthur's neck and pull the prince for the kiss. When Arthur spoke like that, there was something deep within Merlin, something that resonated with the words of the prince. It's my magic. Oh Goddess, does she feel him, too? His magic was triumphing because two halves have finally recognized each other. "You understand that, Merlin?"

Merlin nodded, running his fingers through Arthur hair and looking right into Arthur's eyes.

"You understand that you're mine now?"

"Yours," Merlin repeated, mouthing the word.

"You're not to mess with any other men. Or women. Is it clear?"

"Yes, Arthur."

"Good," Arthur let go of him and lay down next to Merlin, grabbing him into a tight embrace. "Now let's try have some sleep, right?"

Merlin tried. The exhaustion of the previous two days consumed most of his energy. The breakdowns he had suffered when he thought Arthur would never want to see him again and when he feared Arthur was lost forever in the forest of Ascetir had nearly driven him insane. The comfort of an inn bed and the heat of Arthur right by his side were everything he needed. He was listening to the rhythm of Arthur's breath, and he thought he could feel the prince's heartbeat with his own chest.

"Arthur?"

"hm?"

"Have you ever wanted to kiss me? Before?"

The prince kept silence for a long time, and Merlin thought Arthur's was far asleep when his voice, surprisingly serious, came from the darkness.

"Maybe. I don't know. There was something about you. Right from the very start, and I didn't know what it was."

"You told me that. When we first met."
"You mean when we first fought."

"I wouldn't call that a fight. You were a pitiful sight."

Merlin felt Arthur's fingers climbing his ribs.

"Alright, alright, my Lord, you were the champion."

"That's better," Arthur sounded content. "You don't understand what that means to me."

"What means what?"

"I've grown up at court. I've seen it all. Uther always tried to promote some respect towards the members of his council, but Morgana was right when she pointed at how mercenary most of them were. How calculated their actions were, even their jests at the feasts and dinners. She taught me to see through people. If you ever wondered why she was so distant from the court, it's because she knew that most of the decency at court was artificial, and she was always asking people to cut straight to the point without the formal crap. They were afraid of her."

"Even your father?"

"My father fears nothing. He dislikes things out of his control, and Morgana was certainly a tougher tart than me. But it doesn't matter now. What matters is that when I came to think that I could read everybody like an open book, you came and you were just one big riddle. So natural. So pure in some way. Always telling me what you thought and allowing yourself to question me even though you knew I was the prince. I didn't understand what your intentions with me were."

"There were no intentions. I thought you were an arrogant are. Another lord abusing his dominant position. But then when I got some time to spend with you, I found out you were... brave."

"Are you actually giving me some praise instead of calling me a... clot...? How was it?"

"A clotpole? You're still one. Arthur, I swear, if you touch my ribs, I'm gonna scream so that they will all run here and break into our room. So where was I?"

"Told me I was brave."

"Yeah, you were brave. And honest. I mean, you acted in accordance with something you believed in. And then you were also kind-hearted."

"When was I kind-hearted to you?"

"That night when I went to Ealdor and you decided to join me. When you found me in the woods in the middle of the night and accidentally pressed a sword against my back."

"I had to. You looked ridiculous."

"I knew you didn't have to come."

"I couldn't stay. When you were gone, I felt so lonely in the castle I wanted to tear all the walls down."

"Because of me?"

"Yes. But I am always slow to acknowledge such things. And then when you said you were ready to drink poison for me, in Gedref, remember? I thought what a fool you were. Fool you might be, but I
couldn't bear to lose you. I had this weird feeling and I let it in my heart there, in the labyrinth."

“What feeling?”

“The suspicion that we didn’t just meet. We met like by some design or something. So that we could have each other…”

"Arthur?"

"…hm?"

"I love you."

"I can see that by how you can't keep your hands off my cock. Not that I mind, but Merlin, let's get some sleep. We have almost a day of ride ahead of us. The road through the forests and hills is a slow one."
Chapter Summary

Noble refugees from the castle of Brechfa come to Camelot, fleeing from Cenred's invasion. Among them - Lord Gingawaine, the Lord of Brechfa, his sister Yrien and his nephew Rion.

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV, where Gwen has to change her job in the castle again, and where we learn some bits of history about Uther's conquest of Camelot that happened thirty-two years ago. Meanwhile, It takes Arthur and Merlin unexpectedly long to come back to Camelot from Ascetir - they must be busy with something :)

VOLUME II

GWEN

Horsemen, horsemen everywhere: in mail and armor and with the red banners of Camelot, they kept riding through the main street of Lower Town into the citadel. Gwen was wondering how the royal stables would cope with all the horses. Will there be enough food and water for the horses? Will there be enough rooms in the castle to welcome all the knights, the lords and the ladies of Brechfa?

For some time, she kept standing in the corridor near the feast hall, by the window, trying to count the number of the knights. She quitted after forty. People of the Lower Town had lined up in the main street, saluting the knights arriving from Brechfa. Their coming was met with relief and with the hidden joy, for it meant the castle gained some more protection. Still, this half-secretive nature Uther used to prepare for war did little to dispel the fear among the commoners. Gwen had heard rumours at the market. Another hundred men were taken to Howden. And many more arrived to Howden from Brechfa. Cenred of Essetir invaded the kingdom and was marching through the wastelands of Isgaard, and the king was still to say something.

“Gwen, here you are,” Gaius was waving his hands in the corridor, running to her as fast as the old physician could.

“Is everything alright?” she was not accustomed to seeing Gaius run around the castle – that’s what he usually kept Merlin for.

“No. Lord Cynric’s maidservant has fallen sick,” Gaius said.

“Umberta?”
“Yes. She has caught a cold. Happens often when it’s so hot outside, but still chilly in the castle and the contrast just…”

“I don’t want to serve Lord Cynric,” Gwen protested. “I haven’t heard a single kind word about him. They say he is rude and rich.”

“But Lord Cynric has already found himself a new servant. Umberta was supposed to serve Lord Gingawaine and his family.”

“Gingawaine? The Lord of Brechfa himself?”

“Yes,” Gaius nodded. “He requested the best servant for his family.”

“I’m hardly the best, Gaius.”

“Gwen, it’s not the time to be shy. You’ve served the king’s ward.”

“Why didn’t he bring his own servants from the castle of Brechfa if he is so demanding?”

“He made them stay in the castle and protect it from Cenred and his army.”

“Is he mad?!?”

“Gwen, my child, you should never call a noble lord mad. But he is rather… devoted to his land, yes. They say he was dragged out of the castle by his sister, otherwise he would have stayed himself. She kept telling him disobeying the king’s order was treason.”

“What a charming man he seems. Do you want me to serve him?”

“It’s for some time, Gwen. Uther asked me see to it.”

Gwen was hesitating. She had always been Morgana’s maid and she had never served any other noble family in the castle. Morgana was seen as capricious, cold and ungrateful by so many people at court, while in fact she was the kind of mistress any servant could dream of. She was always there to help, and she seemed to be genuinely interested in the stories about the small folk Gwen was sharing with her. She was not too much bothered by the high court of Uther, because she felt how every other girl in the castle secretly envied her privileged position of the king’s ward. In fact, she never cared about being Uther’s ward. I’d rather be free than strangled by all those stupid games I have to play at court, Morgana once told her.

“Fine. I’ll do it. But for you, Gaius, not for Uther.”

“Gwen, thank you!”

“Has he arrived yet? This Lord of Brechfa?”

“He’s about to. I think it would be best for us to greet him by the entrance.”

Gwen took Gaius by the elbow and started walking down the stairs, to the main entrance.

“Where is his room?”

“In the chambers of Morgana.”

“What? I thought Uther meant to keep her room…”
“So did I, but we have a great number of nobles who ran away from Cenred’s army and the king can’t be possibly asking them to live in the Lower Town.”

“I think it wouldn’t hurt them, you know? To live in the Lower Town now and then. They’d get a better picture about how their people live.”

“Gwen.”

“Alright. I mustn’t criticize the nobles, I forgot that. So what’s he like? This Gingawaine?”

“He is something you could never expect from Morgana. Lord Gingawaine is a hotheaded old warrior. His age does nothing to cool his temper. He is more passionate than Lord Accolon.”

“Good goddess,” Gwen whispered.

“And as brutally honest with Uther as nobody else in the entire kingdom.”

“Why?”

“He is the lord of the richest land in Camelot. He was the last lord to submit to Uther in his rebellion, and not without a fight.”

“Uther fought him?” Gwen was surprised Uther had spared the life of his enemy. How comes Gingawaine is still alive after all those years? Why didn’t Uther kill him with all those people in the Purge?

“It happened thirty-two years ago, so they both probably don’t remember,” Gaius laughed.

“What happened after Gingawaine lost? I mean, why is he still alive? I’m sorry, Gaius, but our king doesn’t look like somebody who would care for his enemies.”

“Gingawaine could burn the crops after his defeat and condemn the whole kingdom to a starving winter. He didn’t though, in return for a promise from Uther.”

“To spare his life?”

“And to marry his sister Yrien.”

“What??”

“Pacts like this are common when wars are fought.”

“But Uther never married her, right?”

“He never did.”

“So, he broke his promise?”

“Not exactly. You see, Lady Yrien was only eight years old when she was promised to Uther.”

“Gaius,” Gwen felt sick. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“It was common during wars. It was agreed that the marriage would take place when she reached sixteen. But they both had fallen in love by that time. Uther chose Ygraine, and Lady Yrien fell in love with some knight. She now has a son, Rion. He is seven years younger than Arthur.”
“Has he started his training for the knighthood?”

“Not yet. He has to wait one more year until he’s sixteen.”

“Thank you, Gaius. I’ll try my best.”

When they walked out of the castle, they came to stand by the porch with the knights. Their red cloaks set the whole square on fire. There were a lot knights from the castle to meet the arriving knights from Brechfa. There was little order and protocol by the main entrance as Gwen saw men hug each other, slam each other’s backs in the friendly manner and remember all the ways they used to call each other in the days of their youth. Even though they were serving different castles now, they all were the knights of the crown and many of them were trained in the castle of Camelot.

The thickening darkness of the summer night was upon the square while the knights were waiting for the Lord Gingawaine to arrive. The flames of the torches were dancing in the gusts of wind, spraying the tall grey and beige walls with dodgy shadows. The light was still visible in the most windows of the castle, for all the nobles that had arrived from Brechfa were at the moment being shown to their new rooms. Gwen knew that every other lord and lady had entered the castle through the southern bridge; Lord Gingawaine, however, chose to ride with his knights. Many of them were trained together here by Lord Accolon, Sir Leon and later Arthur himself.

Arthur. What takes him so long? Where is he? Arthur and Merlin were still to return from Ascetir. A horseman had arrived earlier that day, with the message that the prince was fine and on his way, but Gwen was still nervous. When war was looming, risks and dangers seemed to be everywhere: in the forests, in the streets of the Lower Town and the fields of Brechfa. When she was a little girl, Bayard of Mercia brought an army of five thousand swords to besiege the castle, and those were some of the saddest days Gwen ever lived. It was during that ugly siege that my mother died when one of the shots fired at the citadel killed her.

Suddenly, another horseman appeared: a thin, grey-haired and ill-looking man who, as it appeared to Gwen, barely had the strength to hold the bridles. The way he was riding a horse could easily make Gwen laugh; the knights, however, grew silent when they noticed him. Moreover, there was a sense of fear quickly spreading through the square. As if the knights could all hear a command in their heads, they all lined up, forming a thin passage between the two legions. Gwen noticed Uther, Sir Leon and Lord Accolon walk down the steps to greet the horseman.

If Gwen had ever met Lord Gingawaine in the Lower Town, she would have easily mistaken him for a nomad. He didn't look noble to her, with his long grey hair and grey beard, his bony fists and the dried face with skin bruised with wrinkles. He only lacked a stick to lean on to take after all the nomads traveling from Mercia through Camelot.

His sister, however, did look beautiful. She was a mature woman with auburn hair and full breasts, she seemed as pretty as a summer evening. Gwen was sure some of the noble ladies in the castle would kill for her gown. She clearly spent a lot of time taking care of her hair, and Gwen couldn’t imagine how many bottles of oriental oils Lady Yrien must have been carrying with her. She had thin lips and big eyes. Yrien displayed the elegance which was unlikely to be troubled by fleeing from war and she didn’t look like she had spent a whole day on a horse.

Riding by the right side of Lord Gingawaine was a boy. Gwen would have thought Lord Rion was younger than fifteen. He took much after his mother in the hair color and the strict, beautiful features of his face, especially big eyes, but he was naturally as thin as his old uncle.

“Why did you stop gossipping, lads?” Lord Gingawaine screamed at the knights, and Gwen was terrified to hear the old man’s voice echo in the square. “Oh, please, do go on. Look at you! That
gossiping! Those happy faces! What are you all so happy about? Have you forgotten that you have left your land behind your backs? That you have left your land to your foe? Do you reckon you'll be having a good time here? Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you won't! There will be no pretty maids to let you under their skirts, I will personally see to that! War must be the first thing on your mind!”

His voice was a thunder. Gwen glanced at Gaius, who was staring at Uther who, in turn, was paralyzed by the arriving speech of Lord Gingawaine. When the horse stopped in the middle of the square, half a dozen knights rushed to help the old man dismount.

“Aren’t servants supposed to do that?” Gwen whispered to Gaius.

“Lord Gingawaine only trusts his knights,” the old physician whispered back.

“Lord Gingawaine,” Uther stepped forward, trying to raise his voice so that it could battle the thunder of the old man. “It’s an honour to welcome you at the castle of Camelot.”

“I wish I could say the same, your majesty. But I won’t lie. I feel ashamed for having to leave my land behind. For taking my sister and my nephew out of the family castle. You know what they say, King Uther. Let the old dog die the way it lived. Let me show Cenred that Brechfa will not welcome that rotten piece of…!”

“Lord Gingawaine, I promise you, the land of Brechfa will not suffer long. You and your family are more precious to the kingdom here than dead at the battlefield.”

“Are you assuming I’m a shitty warrior?” Lord Gingawaine asked, approaching Uther; some of the knights couldn’t resist laughter.

“No,” the king and the old man shook their hands. “I know that Cenred is a coward to attack Camelot without declaring a war. He caught us off-guard and he will pay for this.”

“Thank you, my Lord. I hope he’ll choke with that price. Now, may I present to you my sister. Lady Yrien of House Gingawaine.”

“My Lord,” Lady Yrien, the ever gracious, took a bow, making half of the knights turn their heads.

“My Lady, I wish we met on a more pleasant occasion,” Uther didn’t hesitate to kiss her hand.

“So do I, my Lord. I hope we shall celebrate our victory over Cenred as soon as possible.”

“We shall.”

“And that shaking leaf of a tree is my nephew Rion of House Gingawaine, and heir to the castle of Brechfa.”

“My Lord,” Rion said; of all the people from Brechfa Gwen had seen that day, young Rion seemed like the only scared person, the only confused mind that didn’t try to hide the fact that he was confused and terrified by running from an enemy’s army.

“Ah. Lord Rion,” Uther petted him on the shoulder. “When are you thinking to begin training for the knighthood?”

“Next year, my Lord,” his mother answered hurriedly. “After the war.”

“Good. Arthur will be glad to help you learn the skills of the knight of Camelot.”

“Where is the Prince, by the way?” Lord Gingawaine looked around, as if he was expecting to see
Arthur in a row of knights lined up at the square.

“Arthur is on a royal mission in Ascetir. He is expected to arrive shortly. You do remember Gaius, don’t you?”

“The healer?” Gingawaine inquired, blinking and squinting, as if he was seeing a ghost.

“It’s the physician now, my Lord,” Gaius stepped forward, smiling. Gwen suddenly realized that Gingawaine was much older than Gaius.

“Can’t believe you can still walk!” Gingawaine shouted. “Gaius, another old dog in the castle!”

“Dog, perhaps, but old?”

The men started laughing; Lady Yrien put on an awkward smile.

“My Lord,” Uther cut in. “We shall discuss the position of the kingdom with my Councilor of war and my Commander of the knights. Meanwhile, Gaius…”

“My Lady, this is Gwen,” Gaius encouraged Gwen to step forward with a nod. “She will be your serving girl while you stay here.”

“Thank you, Gaius,” Lady Yrien smiled. “You’re always kind.”

Leon shouted something to the knights, and the whole square started moving.

“My Lady. I will show you to your chambers,” Gwen said.
Chapter Summary

Gwen gets to know her new mistress, and well, there have been far more pleasant experiences in her life. She accidentally learns a secret of the noble family of Brechfa, something Lady Yrien is not very proud of.

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV, where she once again, sadly, gets the chance to learn that Morgana was the best mistress a servant could dream of. Her frustration with the castle life is growing.

When they entered the castle, Gwen was feeling as nervous as on her first day serving Morgana.

“We turn left here and go all the way to the end of the corridor. Then here we turn right. And left again. And up the stairs. Please, be careful, my lady. The second storey has the throne room and the feast hall. The first storey has the council room and the king’s audience room. The room for noble dinners is on the second storey as well, in the western block. Most chambers are on the third storey. Like yours.”

Even though they were still on the second storey, they were standing near the stone staircase that led to Morgana’s room.

“There are two entrances to your chambers. This one is through the staircase. The passage under the stairs leads to the eastern part of the castle. The other entrance is on the third storey.”

When Gwen opened the door, she didn’t recognize the room of her former mistress. There was new furniture and Gingawaine things everywhere, and the fire was already swaying in the fireplace. There was nothing that reminded of the beautiful modesty that Morgana so cherished, little order and less coziness. No sign that suggested Morgana ever lived there.

“We shall require two bath tubs, one for me and one for Lord Rion,” Yrien’s voice was mild, but the way she spoke was ice cold, as if she was talking to a wall rather than to a living person. Gwen turned around. “We bathe twice a day. Lord Gignawaine drinks a glass of water with lemon in the morning, and if he wakes up and doesn’t find it by his bed, then I fear for each and everyone in this castle. Rion prefers milk for breakfast. We only have breakfast in our room, I hope it’s a common practice in the castle. If the weather is fine, Lord Rion goes riding a horse, if it rains or the wind is too strong, he spends his morning studying. I don’t have any special requirements for my breakfast, but I never step out of the room before my hair is properly done. Is that understood?”

“Yes, my lady,” Gwen answered, terrified that she might have missed something.

“And what exactly is understood?”

Gwen was not accustomed to being treated like that. She had been a maidservant for some time and
felt that proving herself in front of some nobles was no longer necessary. However, she swallowed her pride and tried to give Yrien a look that matched the coldness of the woman’s voice.

“It is understood that in the morning I should bring a bath for you and Lord Rion, as well as a glass of water with lemon for Lord Gingawaine and a glass of milk for Lord Rion. The breakfast is to be served in your room only. The horses shall be prepared for Lord Rion if the weather permits; otherwise, he’ll study in the library. While Lord Rion studies or rides a horse, I am supposed to do your hair.”

“And keep it that way,” Lady Yrien said, coming to the fireplace to warm her hands. “Now bring the bath tubs. Quickly!”

“Thank you,” young Rion muttered to Gwen as she was leaving the room.

Rion’s eyes were filled with incomprehensible sorrow; the young man looked as if he was about to burst into tears. When Gwen stepped out of the room, she held her breath, trying to hear the conversation behind the closed door.

“Rion!” Lady Yrien’s voice was filled with anger and irritation. “What did I tell you about talking to servants? Rion? I am very disappointed.”

“I just tried to be nice,” Rion’s voice was trembling, and Gwen could swear he was sobbing. “She was nice to us.”

“It’s her duty. She is a serving girl.”

“How dare you!”

Gwen covered her mouth with her right palm. The sound she heard suggested the awful thing. Lady Yrien must have hit her son.

“Rion! Stop weeping, d’you hear me? If your uncle sees you cry, you will regret the day you were born, d’you hear? Rion, stop crying, I beg you! I didn’t even hit you that hard!”

“I’m not crying because of you!” suddenly, Rion’s voice sounded confident and free, as if the man found some rebellious spirit within himself. “You never hit hard enough to hurt me!”

“Is it because of that wench?”

“She is not a wench! She was my…”

“She was nobody! And she will remain nobody to you! She is a common girl, nothing could ever happen between the two of you!”

“You left her there! You did it on purpose! So that she dies when Cenred’s army…”

“I couldn’t care less about the wench. It was the order of the king. We could only take the knights and the nobles. You’ve read the letter yourself.”

* * *

Silence finally reigned over the castle when Gwen was making her way to the chambers of Gaius. Uther had doubled the guards, who were standing next to the walls, like statues, making her feel uncomfortable, because their looks were following her as if she were an intruder. I am the serving
girl to the king's ward, she wanted to say before she realized she didn’t know if she were to ever speak those words again. The day had been filled with so many cares and there was so much work for the servants that it seemed to Gwen that even the castle walls were physically tired from housing the members of the Brechfa court. Gwen smiled when she remembered the faces of some of the lords and ladies when they were taken around the castle. *Admiration.*

She, too, admired the castle when she was a little girl, and one of the most exciting days of her life was the one when her mother took her to Sir Leon’s chambers and Gwen got to see the castle from the inside: with beautiful statues, crystal windows and ladies in colorful dresses and gowns.

There was light in the physician’s room, so Gwen didn’t feel shy when she knocked on the door. She hoped Gaius wasn’t taking a bath. *What if Gaius is naked?*

“Gaius?”

Gaius was all dressed. In his brown robes, the physician was warming some water in the pot.

“Gwen, my child. You’re supposed to be home already! Has anything happened?”

“No,” Gwen nonetheless couldn’t get rid of the feeling it was rude of her to come at such late an hour. “I hope I’m not bothering you?”

“Not at all. I have just come from the king myself. We drank some wine.”

“Morgana told me the King didn’t favour wine.”

“He had to, so that he sleeps better. The times of unrest often make it hard to sleep, especially for those who wear the crown.”

*Especially for those who fear for the crown, too.*

“Of course. Gaius,” Gwen wasn’t sure how to start talking about Rion and his mother. “This is a very strange family, right?”

“Which one?”

“Lord Gingawaine, his sister and his nephew.”

“I think every family is somewhat strange,” Gaius shrugged his shoulders. “Just in its own way.”

“Young Rion fell in love with a common girl. His heart is broken because he had to leave her in Brechfa. His mother didn’t let him take her with them. Lady Yrien hits him whenever he cries or mentions his girl’s name. And yet they are both afraid of Lord Gingawaine even though his is just an old walking skeleton.”

Gaius raised an eyebrow and kept staring at her, missing the moment when the boiling water started running out of the pot. He nearly cursed and lifted the pot with the help of a kitchen cloth.

"Gwen, my child. First of all, wherever you learned this, I hope these peculiar details of Brechfa supreme court family will not turn up in the kitchen gossips.”

“They won’t,” Gwen promised, and she meant that. “But…”

“What you described is beyond disgusting, but, Gwen, I fear we can't lecture Lady Yrien on how to raise her child. It’s a little too late for that. Rion is fifteen.”
"Of course, we can’t. But Gaius, Rion’s right. About his girl. What’s to happen with all the small folk left in Brechfa?"

Gaius turned around. Gwen knew him too well to understand the physician was trying to escape the question.

"Those who work on the crops will probably be safe,” he assured her. “All the rest have hidden in the castle of Brechfa."

"But the castle can’t be a shelter for all of them? It’s not as big as our castle, right?"

"It’s not as big and, sadly, it can't welcome everybody who needs shelter."

"Why didn't Lord Gingawaine take them here? To a bigger castle? To the castle where they would be safe?"

Gaius paused for some more time; Gwen felt that the truth hurt him as much as it hurt her. **Gaius is a man of kind heart. He isn’t a noble, and he knows too bloody well what is going to happen to all the people left in Brechfa. He is disgusted with Uther, too.**

"So many refugees would have threatened the stability of our castle,” Gaius tried to explain. “With all the refugees to feed, we would run out of food in less than one moon."

"But one moon's more than enough to get rid of Cenred's army."

"And have Cenred burn our crops on the verge of our harvest season?"

"But people are more important than crops!” Gwen protested.

"Gwen, my child. It's dangerous enough to judge Lady Yrien's ways of raising a child. Questioning king's decisions may be treason."

"Of course,” Gwen nodded. **Why to start the conversation if it’s going to lead nowhere other than speaking treason. People in Brechfa are doomed. Uther will risk the lives of thousands to save his throne. “Thank you for listening, Gaius.”**

“I’ve told you. You can drop by any time you have something upsetting you.”

“'You’re so kind, Gaius. Good night.”

"Good night, Gaius. And be careful on your way home! Ask the guards to accompany you, if needed."

As she was walking the deserted main street of Lower Town, alone, she kept wondering. **What happened to me? Where was all the hopefulness that used to fill my heart? Why can’t I see past all the bad things in the castle after Morgana disappeared? Or maybe it is that finally I am able to see? For the first time? Maybe now, with neither Morgana nor father by my side…**

There was nobody who cared for her and nobody to care for, and nothing was distracting her from looking at the world around. At the castle run by a despotic man hungry for power, who had been happy to use magic for quite a while before calling the Purge. At the council where no single woman was allowed to have a say, where even Morgana could not dream to occupy a seat some day. At the nobles that refused to treat her as a living being. At the army chiefs who were ready to blindly follow their king’s orders and leave dozens of thousands to the merciless army of enemies.
If I lived in Brechfa, I would be one of those thousands left to the cruelty of Cenred's army. There can be no doubt.

Maybe it was the way ruling a kingdom always worked? Maybe there was nothing strange about it? Uther cares for the likes and interests of his kin, and now the good lords and ladies are safely behind the walls of Camelot. The commoners became just a price to pay for his standoff with Cenred. All simple and easy to understand.

This is what Morgana hated about them all. The nobles refused to help Merlin's mother when her village pleaded for rescue. They were now refusing to welcome refugees to Camelot because they were afraid they might not be able to enjoy their breakfasts. And those like Rion, those among nobles who questioned such an attitude were repressed. Uther left all the people he has sworn to protect. *Maybe because the only thing he really swore to protect was his power*? At whatever cost, be it the Purge or the war.
Back from Ascetir

Chapter Summary

Merlin and Arthur spend their morning together once back from the royal mission.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV, some smut NSFW warning. Now that things run deeper between Merlin and Arthur, the warlock is worried because the war seems to be coming to their doorstep and Arthur means to play a part in it.

Waking up had never been the worst part of his day. Contrary to Arthur, whom Merlin sometimes had to push to get him out of the bed, Merlin could start his day quickly and easily. He always had the chance to sleep for an hour or two in the middle of the day; when he relied on magic to fulfill all Arthur’s tasks about the household, he saved much time for himself and could sleep in the stables, in the hay, while the prince believed Merlin was mucking out his horses.

That morning was different. When Merlin opened his eyes, there was nothing he wished stronger than for the whole world to stop, to freeze in the moment, to wait while he gathered enough strength to go through the darkest vaults of his mind and through the sunny aspirations of his heart.

Why couldn’t he just have some time with Arthur? Why did there have to be a war with Cenred? Why did there have to be search parties sent for Morgana? *If she is alive, she is safe with Morgause, after all.* Merlin sat down on his bed and started running fingers through his hair. The skies were gloomy, and Merlin could hear the wind howling through the tiny cracks in the walls of the castle. He thought he had heard the rain slanting the window at night.

Now that he had Arthur, or Arthur had him, he wanted to somehow deal with it, to explore what it meant. He had never had anybody to openly love, and he wasn’t sure loving Arthur when half the court couldn’t keep their eyes off the prince would be easy.

They had arrived the previous night, when the castle was fast asleep. Arthur was surprised with the number of the spearmen in the citadel and talked to one of them to learn the news that the lords and ladies of Brechfa had arrived in the evening and that Cenred had invaded the kingdom. That’s what terrified Merlin. No matter how much he wanted to keep Arthur safe, he knew the prince was not the one to hide behind the walls of Camelot while his knights and his people’s blood was shed in the fields of Brechfa. Arthur would go to war, just like so many other knights and noblemen, and there, on the battle field, it only took one arrow.

Merlin started shaking his head, banishing such thoughts from his head. *No, no, no. Arthur has survived griffins, questing beasts, wilddeorens and Goddess only knows what else. Assassins have been sent to kill him, Nimueh herself tried to make him die by the hand of a risen dead. Arthur recovered from the wounds the dragon gave him.* Arthur could have died so many times, yet Merlin always managed to be there and to shield the prince from certain death. But Merlin had never been in the real battle. He had never gone to war.
On the field, Arthur would be surrounded by swords, spears, crossbows, and there would be a threat from every direction. How was he supposed to protect Arthur with so many other men watching? With the chance to expose his magic as high as ever?

Merlin stepped out of his room. The prince’s chambers were shielded from the morning light with the dull cherry curtains. Arthur was sleeping on his stomach, his face pressed into the pillow, his hair was a mess and spit dripping from his mouth. Merlin smiled. A look of the future king. He tried to sneak out of the room without making any noise, knowing how Arthur used to dearly cherish the opportunity to sleep for as long as his schedule permitted.

When he returned to the room with water for the bath and food for prince’s breakfast, Arthur was lying in the same position. Merlin couldn’t fight his desire to smile. In Gedney, Arthur had given one of his horses to a man from Ascetir to carry the message to Uther the night before they departed, and so Arthur and Merlin had to ride back to Camelot sharing a horse. Merlin was in the front, and Arthur would press his lips to Merlin’s neck from time to time. The paths through the forests of Ascetir were now one of the most beautiful places of Camelot for Merlin.

Merlin locked the door and took off his shirt. He climbed into Arthur’s bed, sneaking under the blanket to enjoy the heat of Arthur’s body. He put his hand on Arthur’s back and started caressing the prince, and pressing random kisses to Arthur’s shoulder.

Merlin felt Arthur’s breath rhythm change. The prince turned to the other side to face Merlin. His face was a little swollen, probably because he hadn’t slept enough.

“Why d’you stop?”

Merlin captured Arthur’s lips with his own before he climbed on top of the prince. His kisses were caring and even somewhat protecting; Arthur, still not fully awake, could barely kiss him back, but there were some grunts of pleasure rising in the prince’s chest.

“Merlin,” he said in a hoarse voice. “Even though it’s the best way I’ve ever been woken up… We’re in the castle and you’re half-naked in the prince’s bed.”

“Do you want me to drop my pants, too?”

“I want you to imagine the consequences if anybody were to enter the room, you filthy thing,” Arthur smiled, sliding his finger into Merlin’s mouth.

“I’ve locked the door,” Merlin answered.

Arthur reacted to this with a wild smile. Merlin could feel the prince’s hand pulling his pants down and then Arthur’s finger was making way to his...

“Arthur, what are you doing?”

“Exploring what by rights belongs to me now,” Arthur replied.

“I’m not that… you know… ready for this now. I just wanted to … to fool around with you.”

“Can you feel what your fooling around makes to me?”

“Alright. I’m sorry. I’m hard, too. I guess we better slow down.”

He climbed off Arthur and lay down by the prince’s side. Arthur kissed him on the cheek and grabbed him into an embrace.
“How are you going to bring me breakfast if the doors are closed?”

“The breakfast’s already here, my Lord.”

“Are you actually going to become a decent servant now?”

“That’s too hopeful of you to think, Sire.”

“Merlin,” Arthur was running fingers through Merlin’s hair. “What’s troubling you? Come on, don’t turn away. I can see it on your eyes. Don’t make me tickle the confession out of you.”

“You’ll go to war,” Merlin said with a heavy sigh.

“If Cenred is an idiot enough to press his attack, yes, I will.”

“I’m worried for you.”

“Merlin, this is very … gentle. But it’s my duty. I have sworn an oath. To protect this kingdom and her people. What good is of a prince if he won’t fight for his people?”

There was no way to persuade him to stay. It was in his very nature: the courage to fight the enemies, the determination to protect his land and her people even if it meant mortal danger. Death has always been courting Arthur.

“Can I go to the field of battle with you?” Merlin proposed, having thought of nothing more suitable to do.

“Absolutely not! Merlin, it’s too dangerous there!”

“Yet here you are, ready to join the army,” Merlin hissed.

“Because I’ve been taught to fight! I am one of the best knights in the kingdom! I remember the war with Mercia, even though I was a child, and I know what terrors the war may bring. And I know how to survive those terrors, and, Merlin, you’re not fit for those terrors. Doesn’t mean I think badly of you. Not that I wish you ever were fit for war. Not to mention that I would probably die because of all the anxiety your presence would give me.”

“Anxiety?”

“I’d be so worried over you I wouldn’t hold a sword.”

Merlin tried to bring his lips as close to Arthur’s without initiating a kiss, and whispered.

“I love you.”

Arthur hated to be teased like that. He captured Merlin’s lips with his own, and refused to part for a long time. There was care in his kisses, too, but a different sort of care, the one he always showed with strength and physical dominance. When Merlin bit Arthur’s lower lip and started sucking on it, Arthur breathed heavily and shoved his hands down Merlin’s pants again, grabbing him by the butt cheeks.

“If you want, I can teach you some basic skills you may require while serving me in the patrol,” he whispered between kisses.

“Is it certain that we’re going to a patrol?”
“When we left for Ascetir, there was nothing but rumours about the war. Now Cenred’s army is close to Camelot, and even though father will probably abandon his plans for sending search parties for Morgana, we’ll have to establish a good system of patrols to know if Cenred decides to march on our castle from Brechfa.”

“What will you teach me?” Merlin inquired, playfully, touching Arthur’s hard cock through the breeches.

“It depends on what you wish to learn. How about tonight? In the Western Tower?”

“It’s been closed for more than a week. You know it suffered greatly from the attack of Khi…killer dragon.”

“So what? Are you scared that creature is hiding somewhere in the Western Tower to fry your little bottom?”

“I’m not!”

“Alright. Wait for me there, I’ll come after my dinner with father and Lord Gingawaine.”

“Who’s a Gingawaine?”

“It’s the Lord of Brechfa. Looks like a skeleton with a beard.”

“Great. Western Tower. After dinner. Shall I bring something?”

“Hm. Some blankets? Some oil. And make sure I can play with your little bottom in the evening.”

“Arthur, I swear, sometimes you’re such a spoiled royal…”
First Things First

Chapter Summary

Uther meets Arthur after the prince returns from Ascetir; they discuss the war and something else.

Chapter Notes

Uther POV, where the king is torn between the desire to find Morgana and his duty to respond to Cenred's invasion.

Arthur wasn’t late. Again. Uther heard the knocking and that familiar polite cough of the prince when he himself was not fully dressed.

“I’ll deal with the rest on my own,” he told Kevan, who nodded and mouthed “my Lord” on the way to the door. “Be sure to bring a glass of wine to my chambers by the evening.”

“As you say, my Lord.”

The door opened; Arthur entered the room slowly, with a tired, sleepy, but somewhat happy face. Something was strange about his son, and Uther could sense it from the single eye contact they made.

“I hope I’m not too early, father.”

“Nonsense. You should have woken me up at night when you reached the castle.”

“I feared you were far asleep when we arrived.”

“There was too much fuss with the arrival of Lord Gingawaine and his knights. And Gaius dropped by and we had some wine, so there was a chance I was still awake. Come here, son.”

Arthur stepped into the bear-hug Uther gave him; he petted the prince on the shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re home. With all the unrest this war has brought us before even starting properly, there were the wildest, most terrible thoughts in my head.”

I can’t lose another child to magic. I can’t lose my heir. Ygraine would not forgive me then.

“I understand,” Arthur seemed to be humbled. “I hope we’ll deal with Cenred as soon as possible.”

“And deal we shall. First, tell me. What was there in the forests?”

“It was magic, father. Troll’s magic.”

“Troll’s?” Uther said with a spite and a look of disgust twisted his face when he heard that word
pronounced in his room.

“Indeed. The creature was hiding in the cave deep in the thicket of the wood. It was hiding from somebody or hiding something, and it cast some spell so that the mist would make it even harder to navigate through the forest. Well, we can’t be sure, but the moment the troll died, the mist was gone.”

“Then it was certainly magic,” Uther whispered. “Did you kill it?”

“Actually, father,” Arthur said, and there was something about the hesitation of the prince that made Uther uncomfortable. “It was not me. It was Merlin.”

“Your serving boy?”

“Yes.”

“I thought he rides without a sword.”

“He does. Father. I need to tell you something. When I attacked the creature, it knocked me out with some spell. The next thing I remember is that I woke up in the cave and was saved by Merlin.”

“How?”

“Merlin was told to follow me, keeping a healthy distance. He saw how useless I was against the troll. He waited and watched, and when he saw the creature take me to the cave, he followed us. He didn’t forget to take my sword. When he reached the cave, he tricked the troll by luring it out, and the moment the creature stepped out of the cave, Merlin cut the beast’s head. We brought it with us, to scare the knights.”

This servant again. Maybe Ygraine is watching over Arthur through this servant’s hands.

“The boy continues to show you the most exceptional loyalty.”

“Well, that’s his duty, father.”

“His loyalty is beyond the line of duty.”

“It seems so. That’s why I would like to ask you. Father… Merlin’s proved himself beyond the line of duty so many times. I’ve been thinking about some reward, but he’s too proud to accept it from me.”

“So what? Do you expect the king of Camelot to honour the serving boy in front of the court?”

“I certainly don’t. But maybe Geoffrey or Gaius could just give him this reward in person. That won’t be hard for either of them, they are both quite fond of him.”

“Gaius treats him as his own son.”

“Then it’s settled?”

“The boy shall have his reward, I’ll see to it. We must show that we reward everybody loyal to the kingdom and its fight against magic. Now tell me, Arthur, in that cave. Was there any…”

“No sign of Morgause. Neither anything pointing that Morgana had ever been to that cave.”

“I see,” Uther’s voice was bitter and angry.
A false alarm. My child, where does the witch hold you? Give me a sign, any sign…

“Father, do your orders about training my new knights remain unchanged?”

Would that I could. I would spend every hour of the day on you, I would send every knight and every commoner of this castle to look for you, I would not know sleep until you are found and brought back to me, to the castle where I would shield you from any threat. But I’m the king, too. My child, I will never find you if I have no kingdom to rule and no knights to command.

“I fear we can’t waste our young knights on the parties looking for Morgana when it takes Cenred’s army just two days to reach Camelot. We’ll defeat Cenred first and I’ll make him pay for all he did to our kingdom and to Morgana.”

“You think it’s him and Morgause that took her away?” Arthur inquired, careful to not stir another painful discussion of Morgana and her fate.

“I have every reason to believe so.”

The silence that fell was awkward. There was something mounting in Arthur’s look, something troubling him and making the prince a lot more nervous. It's not like him.

“How are we going to defeat Cenred?”

“I have an army of more than five hundred men in Howden. If Cenred is going to march on the castle, I will give him a fight. If he wins, the castle will be under siege. While Cenred besieges the castle, my army of two thousand men from our western territories will come from behind the White Mountains, through Denaria. They will destroy what is left of Cenred’s army and save our crops in Brechfa.”

“And what if Cenred doesn’t march on Camelot? What if his army remains in Brechfa, threatening to destroy our crops? What if he demands Ascetir while in Brechfa, and when you refuse him, he burns our harvest? And runs away?”

“Then I will raise another army of thousand men from our southern lands. They will join my Western army, my Camelot army and three and a half thousand swords will invade Essetir. King Bayard will invade Essetir, too, and Cenred will rue the day he ordered an assault on Camelot.”

“Right. Why do you think he chose to invade Camelot? Weren’t the results obvious from the very start?”

“I think it’s Morgause who corrupted him with her magic. Now, Arthur, I’ve got matters to discuss with Lord Gingawaine.”

“I, too, have my knights to train.”

“See that you don’t forget about our dinner. Lord Gingawaine has been dying to see you.”

“It’s not hard to believe, considering his age.”

Uther felt proud of his son. Even though Arthur, having come of age, had expressed the desire to disobey him at times, he did it with respect and dignity, as befits the future king. Unlike Morgana, who seemed to be so eager to stage all scales of scandals at the court.

However, he missed her scandals now. He missed her spiteful remarks about his decisions, his policies. Morgana was wild as fire sometimes, but not that wild. She was a dangerous flame burning
comfortably in the fireplace of the house. Without her, the castle was freezing.

She was born out of passion. Vivienne. Vivienne’s daughter was four years old when Gorlois rode to the border with Gwynedd, leaving Vivienne alone. His love with Ygraine had been lasting for eight years, and yet Ygraine could not conceive. I had to know. Maybe the problem was with me. But when Morgana was born, everything became clear.

If Cenred touches you, if he ever hurts you, he will pay the price few people ever imagined. I will hunt him in all the Five Kingdoms and he shall never know rest, he shall never know sleep, he shall never know pleasure because he will always be afraid that the moment he loses his attention, I will reach him. And I will. And he knows it. He will not dare, my daughter.

Uther was sure Morgana was alive. Morgause could have sliced her throat open right in the throne room, and then use the spell to disappear. She didn’t do it. She needed Morgana alive. Morgana is alive.

And I will find you and bring you home, my sweet daughter.
Chapter Summary

Gwen escorts Rion to the hall of records for his morning studies. The young lord proves to be a pleasant, but disturbing surprise to the court.

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV, where she for the second time meets somebody in the castle who thinks Uther's decisions were bad. Is young Rion brave or carelessly dumb?

Being Gaius apprentice was the best job in the castle. Gwen was wondering how Merlin could even think of complaining about the fact that Gaius used to run him down. With Gaius, Gwen had free dinners and tea, a chance to go to the Lower Town and see the way people used to live. She also got the chance to deliver the potions to the noble lords and ladies of the castle and to get glimpses at the court life. Nobody was demanding her to fetch water for the bathtubs, to find colder milk, to find a lemon that was not so sour and to serve breakfast on the special plates. Lady Yrien, for all her beauty, was an awful person who refused to accept the fact that Gwen could have feelings that should be taken into consideration even though she was just a serving girl. First impressions could be deceitful, yet Gwen refused to believe that young Rion belonged with the same family.

The day was gloomy and the wind was rising the whirlwinds of dust in the streets, and the sky was about to burst with rain any moment, so Lady Yrien asked, well, ordered Gwen to accompany Lord Rion to the library in the hall of records. While they were on the way, Rion sounded so happy to talk to Gwen, as if the lad didn’t have anybody else to speak with.

“I’m so glad I didn’t have to go for a horse ride,” he said cheerfully.

“What’s wrong with the horse ride, my lord?”

“We spent all day riding yesterday! It’s tiring. The worst part of it all is that I could have reached Camelot in much less than a day on my own, but we were moving with the knights and the carts, and they were slowing us down."

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Well, it’s nothing. I mean, it’s better here. I like this castle more than ours. It’s bigger. Ours doesn’t have such walls.”

Gwen couldn’t help but smile out of some weird sense of pride. The walls of Camelot meant so much for her. When she was small, she remembered the day when her mother learnt the news of the war with Mercia. She ran to the blacksmith lane to find her husband and tell him. They said Bayard had gathered an army of five thousand men who were marching on the castle. Gwen thought they were doomed, but her family was sheltered behind the castle walls because her father was a valuable man for the wartimes. She once saw the camp of Bayard beneath the castle walls when her mother
held Gwen in her arms to look through the window. The feeling that Bayard, with all his swords, was helpless against the walls of the castle, filled her heart with so much joy she wanted to sing. The castle’s strength was bewildering. *Yet the walls didn’t save my mother.*

They turned left, and a group of serving girls bowed down to young Rion, blushing.

“The only thing I regret are…” he spoke, seemingly distracted by the girls’ whispers.

“What? What do you regret, my lord?”

“There are many good people in Brechfa,” he sighed and looked out of the window as they were passing one with the blue glass, as if he was hoping to see his own land there, not the Lower Town. “Now they are left alone.”

Gwen tried to soothe young lord’s worries.

“My lord, they are not alone. They have themselves,” *but they don’t have anybody to protect them.* *Not a single knight. All the knights are in the castle of Brechfa, ready for the siege.* “And they have an heir who is kind to think of the commoners.”

“I don’t like it,” he hissed, stopping and looking at Gwen as if she had somehow insulted his lordship.

“What? To think of the commoners?”

“No! I don’t like it when people call them commoners. Small folk is better. To me, they are all just like people, like me or… or my mother. But don’t ever tell her that,” he warned her, and judging by what she had seen of Lady Yrien, not without a reason. “She gets mad every time I try to prove that people are people, commoners or not. You think we’re cowards?”

“My lord? Pardon?”

“You think we’re cowards for not taking all those people with us? For leaving them to Cenred?”

*No, I think you’re brutal and merciless and have not compassion for your own people. Well, not you, because you’re too young for that, but your mother is a monster. An Uther in the skirts.*

“My Lord, it was the king’s order. You couldn’t disobey, even if you wanted to.”

“Why couldn’t the kind give a *different* order? A good one? An order that would save all those people?”

*How do I bloody know why Uther wants to save the knights in Brechfa more than he wants to save the small folk and the crops? Maybe he gives these orders because he’s a cold-blooded warlord and he values the castle more than any village, for the castle can matter to him once he leads his army to Brechfa.*

“I guess king Uther thinks that his order was right.”

“Then he is a bad king.”

Gwen looked around, as scared as she had rarely been behind the castle walls. *This boy must guard his tongue else I’ll be serving him his morning glass of milk in the cells.*

“Lord Rion. I know I’m just a serving girl and I apologize for allowing myself to speak on such delicate matters, but the castle of Camelot is not the best place to say that Uther is a bad king.”
“So you think he did the right thing, too?” there was the pain of betrayal in young Rion’s voice and his big eyes were watering. “I thought you were different.”

“It doesn’t matter what I think, Lord Rion…”

“But it does!”

Before she could think of anything to reply, she saw the round-faced Lord Monmouth walking to the corridor, greeting her and young Rion with a smile. He’s always happy when he gets new pupils.

“Lord Rion, this is Lord Geoffrey. He is the keeper of records, the Secretary of Camelot and one of the wisest men in the castle, if not in the kingdom. I’m sure with him you’ll find all the books for your study.”

She turned away and started walking back to Morgana’s chambers; Lady Yrien was expecting her for the hair routine. Lord Rion is simply too young to understand the matter of courtesies. Too young to know that what you speak is not always what you think.

Suddenly, Gwen felt like she was about to vomit. Her own thoughts seemed so horrible she felt ashamed to have thought them. When people don’t say what they think, it’s lies. Or a manner of courtesy, as Morgana used to call it. A bunch of distasteful idiots who admire his every word.

How more a tyrant can Uther be? People in his castle are afraid to be critical of their king. Gwen herself feared that her conversation with Lord Rion could have been overheard by somebody, even though she hadn’t spoken a single bad word about Uther out of care. She hated herself for trying to deny that young Rion was in some ways braver than her. Or more stupid?
The Western Tower

Chapter Summary

Merlin meets Arthur in the Western Tower for some "lesson" the prince has promised.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

The Western Tower reminded him so much of Idirsholas he was fearing he could hear the heavy iron breathing of the knights of Medhir any moment. Young warlock would turn around from time to time to make sure that the deadly figures, with the horror of the darkest art of magic concealed behind their masks, were not standing behind him.

Having survived moments as such, Merlin came to understand how Uther had managed to indulge the whole kingdom in his biased hatred and denial of magic and her deepest roots. However splendorous his own gift seemed when Merlin used it for saving the crown prince, healing people and destroying the beasts that threatened the lives of innocents, magic was also about dead knights rising from their graves to the call of a sorceress, about toying with life and death in the water of the Cup of Life and about dragonflames consuming screaming people in the Lower Town. Light and darkness, good and evil were bonded in magic as they were in the hearts and minds of men. It’s just that the darker parts of sorcery were the parts Merlin tried to ignore; at least he wished to believe that the source of blood magic could not be the same source that blessed him with the golden flame of joy in his chest whenever he could cast a spell or do something beautiful with his gift.

The Western Tower was a sad symbol of how defenseless even the toughest and highest walls proved to be against the force of magic. Merlin was standing in the main hall on the first storey, where the giant room was empty, dusty, dirty and ruined. There were holes and cracks in the wall, and all the glasses in the windows had been destroyed by the flames of Kilgharrah. Merlin had a feeling that parts of the ceiling had been falling down ever since the attack. The noble families that lived in the Western Tower were often considered to be the most powerful houses in Camelot. Before the dragon tried to tear it down, the tower had been home to House Sagramore, and to the oldest family in Camelot, House Dindrane. They had to change their chambers and they removed everything their servants could carry from the rooms.

Children in the Lower Town, as well as in the Southern Village, were telling stories about ghosts of the Western Tower, about the light that was still burning in the windows in the middle of the night. They said it was the dragon himself who hid where nobody would be able to find him. Kilgharrah would have needed to destroy half the tower to just place his fat arse inside these chambers, Merlin smirked.

Merlin turned around when he heard the old wooden door creak. He saw Arthur’s face in the light of the candle flame. The prince was stepping carefully, sheltering the flame from the wind with his palm. There was clearly nothing illegal about being in the Western Tower, but the prince wanted to
“Arthur,” Merlin smiled at how miserably clumsy Arthur seemed when he tried to be secretly romantic.

“Been waiting long?” the prince wondered, moving closer to Merlin.

“No. I’ve just come myself. I’ve brought everything you wanted,” Merlin said, pointing at the bag on the floor. “How was your dinner?”

Arthur didn’t reply. He came closer and gave Merlin an intense look. Candle flame was dancing in the depth of his blue eyes, *the plotting-blue*, and Merlin held his breath. Arthur’s blue looked so familiar, but with the flames dancing in the sea of his eyes, there were the shades of gold, as if it were *magic* flashing in the prince’s eyes.

Arthur’s look could not get any more suggesting: Merlin closed his eyes and reached for the prince’s lips with his own. Arthur’s lips were soft, sweet and sour; the moment the kiss started, Merlin felt lost to the heat of Arthur’s mouth, and the heat of the candle flame was rising to warm them both.

“You’ve been drinking wine,” Merlin noticed when they broke the kiss.

“Yes. But I’ve been thinking about you all evening,” Arthur spoke in a voice that made Merlin ache from desire. “About what we can do tonight.”

“Was there anything special planned? If I’m not mistaken, you were supposed just to teach me something,” Merlin tried to sound surprisingly innocent.

“And I will. Follow me.”

“Follow you where?”

“Upstairs.”


“Careful there. I don’t want you to break your neck on the staircase. Watch your steps and hold me.”

*Hold me.* That was all Merlin wanted to do. With his hand in Arthur’s, he felt so liberating, free and happy that he was afraid magic would start rising in him just out of that sense of pure joy. He had hoped, he had dreamed of this day, but there was always something in the facts of his life that made it hard to dream. And yet here he was, with Arthur holding his hand.

“Have you talked to your father? About Morgana?”

“Yes. He said we can’t be sending search parties during war. We’ll have to wait.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“He means to find her anyway. It’s written on his face.”

“I hope you haven’t told him about her....”

“Merlin, I’m not an idiot. Besides, what you have shared with me in Gedney... You have a point. If I tell him, I will have to reveal the source of such knowledge, and I’m never risking you.”
“Can I tell Gwen?”

They stopped and Arthur, without letting go of Merlin’s hand, turned to his servant. His expression turned to solemn.

“If you think that she will not hate Morgana after she learns… I mean, I think Gwen can be trusted, but you must warn her to never tell anybody if you decide to tell her the truth. Fine?”

“Fine.”

“Now is there anything else troubling you? I just want you to put it all aside. Me going to war and Morgana being lost. Forget it for one evening and let me make it be about ourselves.”

Would that I could, Arthur. This carefree lovesick joy is the last thing I can hope for when you’re threatened from all the possible directions. But not here. Here, we’re safe. You’re safe.

The room on the third storey had suffered the most. There was a whole section of the wall missing, it was like a giant window with a terrifying view over the ruins in the Lower Town.

“Arthur, this doesn’t look safe.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted,” Arthur put the candle on the floor, looking excited.

“What? To jump off the Western Tower?”

“No. To look at the skies.”

“Arthur? I didn’t know you were so…”


Merlin came closer to the cliff, being barely few steps away. Arthur was holding him; the prince’s chin was on Merlin right shoulder. The night, however dark, was blessed with light of stars, the million mysteries twinkling from the depth of the world.

“Now look up there,” Arthur whispered in his ear, trying to cock Merlin’s head. “What d’you see?”

“Stars. Lots of them.”

“Pay attention to the one over there.”

“What one?”

“See the one that’s like… pulsing with light? It has a blinking star to the left of it. It’s blue and white.”

“Oh, I see. It also has four stars to the right?”

“It does. Now remember this star, Merlin. It’s the Guiding Star. It always shows the way North. And if you know which way is the North, you’ll figure out the South, the West and the East.”

“I will,” he said, turning around to face Arthur and to stare in the prince’s eyes, biting his lip.

“So, if something ever happens at night when we are in a patrol, and if you have to ride or to run away, be sure to know where you have to run to, and if the sky is clear, the Guiding Star can help
you find the way,” Arthur sounded loving, but serious and a little puzzled.

“Why you’re telling me this?”

“Our patrol on the border with Cenred was slaughtered the evening we arrived at Gedney.”

“I know. Gaius told me.”

“They attacked in the evening and those who survived had to ride through the night, when the direction is not so easy to find.”

“It’s terrible,” Merlin swallowed from nervousness.

“In case something like this happens... Oh Merlin, don’t look so terrified. I said “in case”. You must know the easiest way to figure out where to ride. Or run.”

“Thank you, Arthur.”

“Now show me again, where this Guiding Star is.”

“Right there,” there Merlin pointed at the night sky.

“Good boy.”

“Arthur?”

“Hm.”

“What are the stars?”

“We can’t know,” Arthur held him stronger, and Merlin could feel Arthur’s teeth and hot breathing on his neck. His knees got weak. “Whatever they are, they must be a part of the mystery that binds this world together or even had it started in the first place.”

“I’ve heard they are the spirits of the dead.”

“Do you think that all the dead had such bright spirits that they keep shining in the darkness of the night?” Arthur smirked.

“Not all of them, but still...”

“Geoffrey told me some people believed the stars were homes to Gods. So, like other worlds. Like the gates to the other worlds, where the gods delve.”

“I’d love to have my own star where I can delve with you after death,” Merlin whispered.

“Merlin,” whatever Merlin said made Arthur’s voice so lustful Merlin could barely stand this lesson.

“Hm?”

“Let’s go to the bedroom on the second storey.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know. We may figure it out.”
Merlin and Arthur enjoying some "poetry" in the abandoned Western Tower.

Merlin POV, very smut and NSFW

The bed and the empty fireplace were the only things left in the bedroom of Lady Dindrane; everything else had been carried to her new chambers by the servants.

“Put the blankets on the bed,” it seemed Arthur’s voice was trembling when he approached the fireplace. “Oh look, there is still some wood here. We can start a fire.”

“And the children will think there are ghosts in the Western Tower,” Merlin laughed.

“They think there are ghosts here?”

“They do. Apparently. They say it’s haunted by a very handsome, fair-haired ghost. You haven’t seen him?”

When Arthur was done with the fire, he turned around. Merlin was already there, waiting, with the happiness that was hammering him from the inside. He still couldn’t believe that this broad-shouldered figure, this man with the most handsome smile and the deepest eyes in the world was his to kiss. They were together, in the castle, and it was all that mattered. His obsession with Arthur was so strong he literally stopped caring about everything else – those patrols, those wars, Morgana, the Great Dragon, they all became a part of a different world.

He put his hands around Arthur’s neck and pulled the prince for the most demanding kiss Merlin could ever dream of. He didn’t press his lips towards Arthur’s, just like he had done in the morning, he opened Arthur’s mouth with his lips, with his tongue, he tried to lick his jawlines, he kept pressing until he tried to grab Arthur by his hair. Arthur, almost instinctively, caught Merlin’ wrist and then took him in the arms, carried him to the bed and threw him onto the blankets. Merlin landed on his back, and when he looked at Arthur, the prince was already taking off his trousers.

“Turn around and stand on your knees,” Arthur commanded, his voice firm and strong, sending impulses of shiver through Merlin’s body.

The warlock obeyed quickly.

“Why do we have to do it here?” he asked. “We can do it in our chambers.”

“We can’t,” Arthur said firmly. “I don’t want the guards to hear you scream my name.”

“Are you that good?”
Arthur pulled Merlin’s pants down to the knees and slapped his ass.

“I am. You’ll learn it soon enough,” Arthur slapped him again, and Merlin felt his own cock go so hard he was afraid he might come just from the sensation of Arthur’s palm hitting his ass. “Why were you hiding this arse from me, Merlin? It’s too good. It’s all mine, right?”

“Yes,” Merlin whispered. “It’s all for you.”

“Have you ever let anyone touch your hole?”

“I’ve told you. Never. Sire.”

“Have you touched yourself down there?”

“No. Well, actually, yes. Today. When I was, you know, getting ready.”

“Good,” Merlin moaned when he felt Arthur smearing spit across his butthole. “You want it, don’t you, Merlin?”

“Can you pull down my pants?” Merlin begged.

“No. I want your pants pulled down to your knees. And I want you to keep your boots on.”

Prat.

“Sire. Look what some prince taught me in a tavern in Ascetir,” Merlin said, turning around, on his knees, to face Arthur’s cock pointing right to his face.

He remembered everything Arthur told him. First, you need to moisten my cock and your lips, so that I slide easily inside your mouth. He didn’t spit. He opened his mouth and let the spit dip from it, right on Arthur’s cock that was pulsing with every drop that landed on its skin. Merlin looked up, catching a glimpse of Arthur’s somewhat proud smile. Then Merlin licked his lips and started swallowing Arthur’s cock slowly, using his lips to spread the spit from the head to the basement. Because of the cold room, Arthur’s cock felt warmer than ever, and his smell was shooting up Merlin’s nose. Arthur’s smell.

He wished he could play with Arthur a little longer, but his desire was so strong he literally forced himself on Arthur, taking him as deep as he could. He tried to swallow Arthur, but rushed and soon began to gag. He never took Arthur’s cock out of his mouth, though, moving his lips back and forth, back and forth. The prince was moaning.

“Merlin, damn it. Stop it.”

“Rlly?” Merlin asked, trying to suck Arthur’s cock behind his cheek.

“Stop else I spill in your mouth,” Arthur had to step back. “Turn around. Yes. What a sight. Now come a little closer to the edge. Good. Now tell me. Do you want to feel what it’s like when I’m inside you?”

Merlin could feel Arthur’s cock knocking on his hole. Arthur’s the biggest tease.

“Please, Arthur.”

“Show me how much you want it. Open yourself with your middle finger.”

Which one’s the middle? Oh, right. Merlin had to arch his back until his shoulders touched the
blanket and press his middle finger into that tightness of his hole, moistened with Arthur’s spit. He opened himself slowly.

“Oh, good boy. Now open yourself. Push your finger as deep as you can. Now hold it there. Where’s that oil you’ve brought?”

“In the bag.” Merlin whispered.


Merlin caught his breath. Fingering himself was one thing, but when Arthur opened him, running his finger deep inside, it was so different. He was not ready for two fingers, and his hole tightened around Arthur’s finger, trying to push it out, but Arthur kept playing with him, causing the freshest sensation Merlin had ever experienced.

“Ready?”

Before Merlin could moan a “yes”, he felt Arthur’s cock open his ass, more like just pressing into his hole. The pain was dull, at first, but when Arthur pressed deeper Merlin felt as if something sharp was tearing his ass apart.

“Arthur! That’s too big.”

“I won’t stop until I’m all the way inside you. That’ll be easier for you, I promise. Just relax a bit.”

“I am already relaxed.”

“You’re so tight. I can’t go deeper without more oil.”

When Arthur pressed again, Merlin felt the sharp pain, but then, when Arthur’s cock was in, he felt his hole tighten and the pain begin to melt away. The sensations that followed were extraordinary: he felt spasms at the basement of his own cock, and the feeling of being stormed by Arthur.

“Now I’m going to pull out,” the prince whispered.

“Don’t.”

“What d’you say?”

“I said please, don’t pull out.”

“But I so love the feeling of opening you. Here. Here, Merlin.”

When Arthur pulled out, Merlin felt empty, as if a part of his feelings was missing. He pressed his middle finger into a slightly loosened hole.

“Arthur, please.”

“What a good boy. You’ve been learning so well, I just have to please you. Now feel me. Oh, fuck, Merlin, you’re so tight.”

Arthur’s cock was filling him, inch by inch, and when he was deep inside, Merlin felt liberatingly comfortable. There was that pleasant pressure inside him, the pressure of Arthur’s cock that was causing his own joy and pleasure mount up, the celebration of new sensation, from feeling himself
stretched and opened by the force that was so strong and so loving. Just like Arthur.


“How does my cock feel?” Arthur was running his fingers up Merlin’s back.

“It feels amazing.”

“I’m going to fuck you now, else I’ll spill soon.”

When Merlin felt Arthur thrusting, he thought he was going lose to himself. When Arthur was pushing in, Merlin’s ass instinctively tried to push Arthur’s cock out, but just when Merlin thought Arthur was about to pull out, the prince pushed back, opening him even wider. The sense of Arthur’s warm cock sliding inside his oiled ass was driving Merlin crazy. He could do little other than moan and scream.


“Damn, Merlin, you’re such a wanton you’ll make me spill too soon.”

“Please, Arthur…”

He grabbed Merlin by the hair and started fucking him harder, his cock moving in Merlin’s ass with wild freedom.

“D’you love my cock, Merlin?”

“Yes, Arthur.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, I love your cock. Sire.”

“Then here you go. Take it. Take my cock. Merlin.”

“Arthur, I think I…”

He should’ve warned the prince earlier, but the sensation erupted so quickly he barely had the time. The pressure building up at the basement of his cock suddenly turned into the wildest relaxation and before long his legs were spasming and his cock was pulsing and shooting seed, his butthole was pulsing and trying to wrap around Arthur’s cock as hard as possible.


Merlin heard his cum gushing out when Arthur pulled his cock out and fell on the blanket. Merlin fell, too, his pants still pulled down to his knees. Arthur pressed his finger into Merlin ass to sense the way he had marked him.

“I barely touched my cock,” Merlin whispered, his heart still racing from the mightiest orgasm he could recall. “I thought I was about to pass out.”

“We’ve got to teach you to hold longer,” Arthur said, smearing the mix of cum and oil on Merlin’s butt cheeks. “Because when you came with my cock in your arse, your butthole wrapped around me so tightly that I felt impossible to hold my seed.”
“Arthur, it felt so good. You can’t imagine.”

“Actually, I was there, too,” Arthur laughed.” So, I sort of can. You were close to perfect. When I think of all the ways I can put your arse to use, I…”

The footsteps. Merlin heard them, loud and clear. Somebody else was in the Western Tower.

“Quickly!” Arthur was putting on his pants. “Dress yourself, Merlin. Hide the blankets back into the bag. Do it! Now!”

Merlin was glad Arthur had insisted that he kept his pants pulled down to his knees and his boots on. Thankfully, it took Merlin a moment to make himself presentable. By the time he had smuggled the blankets and the oil bottle into the bag, the steps were getting louder, and soon a tall shadow appeared on the wall. Somebody is going up the stairs.

“If this is dangerous,” Arthur whispered. “don’t get into this. Let me deal.”

The abandoned room of Lady Dindrane literally had nowhere to hide. Arthur grabbed Merlin by the hand and made him stand behind the prince, as if shielding him from the possible danger.

The figure was carrying a torch and wearing a mail and an armor. It is a knight of Camelot. Fair-haired, wearing a moustache. Sir Leon.

The commander of the knights expected many reasons to explain the burning fireplace in the abandoned Western Tower, but none of the reasons included a Crown Prince and his servant being there in the middle of the night.


“Leon,” they replied simultaneously.

“Is everything alright, my Lord?” Leon’s look suggested he hoped to receive some answers.

Merlin was happy Leon asked Arthur to explain the situation.

“It's perfectly fine,” Arthur began confidently. “We are... Merlin. Tell Leon what we're doing.”

What a prat.

“We're... I'm teaching him some poetry,” Merlin said, looking at Arthur with a vicious smile.

“Poetry?” the surprise in Leon’s voice could only be overpowered by the hidden threat in Arthur’s.

“I... love poetry,” the prince said through clenched teeth.

“I was as surprised as you are. He can't get enough of it,” Merlin went on jesting.

“I'll leave you to your poetry, then, my Lord.” Leon turned around and walked down the stairs.

“Poetry?” Arthur grabbed Merlin and shoved his hand down Merlin’s pants, his finger again exploring Merlin’s wet slobbering hole, the scene of Arthur’s triumph. “That's the best you could come up with?”

“What did you want me to say?” Merlin breathed heavily, the desire still strong.

“I don't know. Something that didn't make me sound like a lovestruck girl,” he said, seizing Merlin’s
lips with the heat of his own mouth.
Gwen and Rion continue to have conversations behind Lady Yrien's back, and the new sides of the young heir to the castle of Brechfa make Gwen believe the world would be a better place eventually.

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV

“Gwen, you’re too kind,” Gaius thanked her as she put a basket with vegetables and bread on the table. “I don’t like troubling you.”

“Nonsense. That’s the least I can do to thank you for giving me the job.”

Gaius was busy. There was the Summer feast planned on the day after tomorrow, and the physician wisely decided to prepare the most demanded remedies and potions in advance. He knew the nature of the feasts too well to guess what would be bothering the lords, the ladies and the knights the morning after the celebration. Headaches, indigestions, hangovers. He was pouring the potion that helped to ease the headache from the large bowl into the dozens small bottles, sealing them with purple caps.

“I hope headaches are the worst consequence of the feast,” he complained. “Last year Lord Sagramore slipped and fell down the stairs.”

“Good goddess! Was he hurt?”

“Hardly ever,” Gaius replied with a smile. “Everybody thought he killed himself, but when I examined him… He didn’t even have a single bruise on his body! They say fate favors the drunk and the lovers.”

“I hope that’s true. For Lord Sagramore’s sake, it better be.”

Gaius counted the bottles and started packing them into a special bag he used to carry over his shoulder.

“Have you seen Arthur or Merlin?” he inquired casually.

Why is he asking about Arthur? Is it because he said that fate favors the lovers?

“Not yet. Have you?”

“Merlin dropped by yesterday. They killed a troll in the forests of Ascetir.”

“I’ve heard that at the market. They even said they brought the troll's head and all the children want
to see it now. Am I right to assume there’s another name for Arthur to add to his Dragonslayer title?”

“I hope the small folk won’t give Arthur a new name every time he kills some creature of magic, for he’ll go by too many names then.”

“What did Merlin have to say about it? I’m sure he loves hunting trolls in the forests,” Gwen said with a light shade of sarcasm.

“I think Merlin actually enjoys Arthur’s adventures more than he loves to work in the castle. I have only seen him twice this week. He spends most of his time with Arthur.”

“Do you miss him?” Gwen asked abruptly, not sure if she could actually pose such a personal question to Gaius.

Gaius, who was known for hiding his personal affections and being the servant who always put his duty to Camelot at the frontier of his own interests, stopped counting the bottles. The honey-mint mildness of his voice made Gwen believe he was speaking from his heart.

“I’m happy he is finally growing up. He is just like a son to me and I knew the time would come when he’d be acting more on his own. I can’t blame him, running around on my errands is never as exciting as being by Arthur’s side and…”

“But there is danger to all the excitement which Arthur brings.”

“Of course. Merlin somehow defies the odds against him. He’s much better at being the prince’s servant than being my apprentice, I have to add. I still can’t forget the day when he accidentally gave the laxative to Lady Dindrane,” Gaius made a wry face, probably because he recalled the conversation with Lady Dindrane that followed.

Gwen started laughing – she couldn’t stop for a long time, and Gaius, soon, burst with laughter as well.

“I’m glad he didn’t give the potion to the king himself,” he said with much relief. “Now, Gwen, my child. See that you deliver this to the rooms of all the great houses of Camelot. And to the noble lords and ladies of Brechfa as well.”

“I will.”

“And there’s a bottle with the oil for Lady Yrien’s hair which she demanded yesterday. I spent roughly all morning trying to follow her recipe. I hope she likes it. I must admit, she arrived the day before yesterday and she is already bothering me more than some of the ladies from the great houses. I hope she treats you nicely today.”

“I think we both know it’s unlikely. Unless it snows in summer, of course,” Gwen said, taking the bag and heading to the door.

The castle life was becoming increasingly exciting for nobles. With the Brechfa court in Camelot, there were new faces, new gossips, new allies, new enemies and new lovers. Gwen couldn’t remember the last time the routine had disappeared out of the castle life due to non-magical reason. *Probably when the King of Mercia arrived to sign a treaty. Every servant and every master were on their feet. Or when those five kings arrived and Arthur fell in love with that horrible princess.*

Now it was almost the same. Brechfa court brought new opportunities. The lords and ladies could meet new, exciting and fresh people, love affairs were expected, as well as the jousts for the honour of the ladies. There were new people to ride horses with, new people to take to the clothing shops,
new people to invite for dinner. New people to love and new people to hate.

For the nobles, of course. For servants, thus far, the noble refugees of Brechfa meant the number of the servants’ duties had doubled or tripled. Brechfa men fled to Camelot without their servants; some said, because they had to move as quickly as possible to escape Cenred’s army; others suggested that Lord Gingawaine, possessed by the feeling of pride for his land, intentionally made all the servants stay in the castle, as a gesture of their loyalty to Brechfa.

Gwen thought that it was Uther’s order: the castle of Camelot was running out of food, the prices at the market were slowly rising and the king didn’t need to feed all the servants who could have arrived from the invaded territory.

Gwen had to deliver Gaius’s potions to eighteen rooms, then she had to go to the Lower Town to visit the three houses to check if Gaius’s patients were recovering as quickly as Gaius thought, then she had to go to the clothing shop and take Lady Yrien’s new dress for the Summer Feast, and then she had to bring Gaius something he had ordered in the apothecary. She had a long day ahead.

Gwen knocked on the door of Morgana’s chambers. The voice that rang behind the door belonged to Lord Rion. When Gwen entered, young Rion was standing by the table, drinking water eagerly. He looked hilarious, wearing a loose red tunic that was definitely much bigger than his size, and his brown hair was in a state that would make Lady Yrien faint.

“How was your horse ride, my Lord?” Gwen inquired.

“It’s the best! The stables here have the best horses! Lord Cynric has the best ones I have ever ridden!”

“Lord Cynric’s horses are the most expensive in the kingdom, they say,” Gwen remembered the white ones she had seen by the gates. They were the most beautiful.

“A pity your king only keeps them so that they are used during the tourneys. You could have held races.”

“Racing bets are against the laws in Camelot,” Gwen reminded him.

“Of course,” Rion blushed. “In Brechfa, we don’t have them. Never.”

“I have brought the new hair oil for Lady Yrien. She asked for it yesterday.”

“I bet she did,” Rion said, picking an apple from the table. “She cares about her hair more than she does about her children.”

Gwen was shocked with how careless young Rion had grown up to be. Saying something disrespectful about his mother in front of a servant was not only an assault on all the protocols known to the castle; it also put Gwen in a tremulous position when she could neither agree nor disagree with what he said, for the servants were never to discuss the private matters of their masters. Gwen remembered Rion talk about the stupidity of Uther’s and Gingawaine’s decision on the small folk of Brechfa in the corridor the day before.

I have to explain it to him somehow, otherwise he’ll get himself into bigger trouble. What if he suddenly speaks these thoughts at the royal dinner?

“Lord Rion, I…”

“I wanted to apologize, Gwen,” Rion didn’t let her start. He opened the window and threw the apple
out. “My behavior was silly. I understood it when I was at the dinner yesterday. My mother, my uncle and his majesty were joined by prince Arthur. I saw it all.”

“You saw what?” Gwen asked, fearing some new puzzling revelations of the young lord.

“I saw the way all the nobles talk to each other. How they pretend. How they have certain rules they can’t disobey. How they must follow these rules even though all they want is to turn the table and scream at everybody in the room. Nobody is free in the castle. Even the prince talks to Uther as if Uther were not just his father.”

“Because King Uther is not just his father, Lord Rion. He is also the king of Camelot.”

“I know,” Rion shrugged with a look on his face that suggested he wanted to spit the moment Gwen mentioned Uther’s name. “So, I shouldn’t have made you listen to my remarks yesterday. You could have lost your position. Or even your head. I am sorry, Gwen.”

_It’s not him speaking. He doesn’t apologize because he understands. He apologizes because he must._ Rion was fifteen and his lack of understanding the matters of court was easily explainable. He had just been forced to party with his first love and the impulses of his odd behavior were not that scary. _People had committed far greater things when they were deprived of their beloved ones. He’s just a boy._

“Lord Rion, I’m afraid there is nothing to be sorry about. Most of what you said yesterday is something I would say, too. I agree with you. Leaving all those people to Cenred’s butchery, knowing what he has done to our patrol on the border, it’s… it’s merciless. If I had the power, I would do everything to save those people. The longer those people remain under Cenred’s army, the more they suffer. It’s cruel and such decision is not worthy of a king who swore to protect all his people.”

Gwen could hardly recall seeing somebody as happy as Rion. He was shining. There was everything about his smile: the joy, the happiness, the relief, the pride of being understood and accepted.

“Do you really believe it?”

“Every word of it,” Gwen replied firmly. “It’s just that yesterday we were talking where some people could hear us. As a serving girl, I’m not supposed to speak such words, you must understand.”

“Which I hate,” Rion began walking across the room, his nervousness making him twist his fingers. “People have the right to speak whatever they want. No matter who. Lords or physicians, princes or servants. Right?”

“That’s a world we may see some day.”

“When Arthur is king?”

“Arthur?”

“He seems a lot better than his father!”

“He actually is very loyal to Uther in the questions of politics,” Gwen noted with sadness. “It’s on some personal matters that they disagree.”

“He’s a good lad. I remember him from the journey we made when I was a child. He let me play with a wooden sword. I hit him on the face, accidentally, but he told the king the bruise was from falling down.”
“That’s sounds like something Arthur would do,” Gwen nodded, amused with the image of little Arthur running around the castle with a wooden sword, “Arthur’s brave and strong. He may be different from Uther, but we’ve got to wait long before we can see.”

“When I come of age and when my uncle dies, I will become the Lord of Brechfa and I will change everything.” Rion told her in a voice that promised hope.

“I’m sure you will.”

There was something about Rion's raw honesty and silly bravery that gave Gwen hope, hope for Camelot and for them all.
Gwen meets Merlin for the first time in a week, and the prince's servant has something to tell her.

Her spirit was lifted by what Rion had told her. She obviously understood too well that the promises of a fifteen-year-old lad from Brechfa were not the most certain assurance, but it still proved that even the corrupt world of Uther’s court could defy the King at some moment.

There are a lot of odds against Lord Rion, though. His mother can find a way to crack down all his young and bright aspirations. His uncle is also a man who, despite being defeated by Uther so many years ago, did nothing to change the usurper’s ways. Was Uther really a usurper? Who ruled Camelot before him?

“Gwen! Gwen!”

Gwen knew only one man in the whole castle who was frivolous enough to shout her name so loudly. If I had grown up in a village, I would probably disregard some manners, too. She turned around and saw him, running as if he were on a training field. A tall and thin figure in a brown worn-off jacket, with his neck covered by a red chief and the blackness of his hair so contrast to his pale skin. He looked better: it was about both, his face and his eyes. Maybe being away with Arthur really helped him? Gaius told me Merlin locked himself in his room after the Dragon’s attack, he needed to go somewhere.

“Merlin! I haven’t seen you for decades!” she gave him a hug. How long haven’t we seen each other? “Where have you been?”

“Er… going to Ascatir with Arthur and killing a troll. Like usual. Nothing special,” Merlin’s smile was a little proud.

“What did the poor troll do to you?”

“Oh, nothing. Trolls are innocent. They never do anybody any harm.”

“And they never marry,” Gwen parried.

They both burst out laughing, the memories of Lady Katrina's disastrous marriage to Uther still fresh in their mind.

“The creature was the cause of the heavy mists that were scaring people in the village. We found the
troll and killed it,” Merlin boasted, straightening his back and acting like a knight that had just won the tourney and was out to greet the crowd.

Gwen laughed again.

“Oh, Merlin. I bet you adore being Arthur’s servant, don’t you? Killing trolls and dragons, right?”

“Oh, it’s always a pleasure. The troll smelled so awful I was afraid the stink alone could kill us both. Are you busy now? I hoped to see you at Gaius’s chambers, but you were not there. Neither was he.”

“He must have gone to see the king.”

“Oh.”

“Merlin, may I ask you? Since when does the Crown Prince himself go to Ascetir to slaughter a troll?” Gwen wondered, knowing there was certainly more to that story than the tale from the market suggested.

Merlin pointed to the corner of the small hall with his eyes. Gwen followed him and pricked her ears as the servant was talking in whisper.

“Uther thought it might be Morgause. He thought she might be the source of magic. He hoped we would find Morgana, too.”

“Sadly, you didn’t.”

“No. But Gwen, I promise you, one day we will find her. If she is… you know.”

Suddenly, all the hopefulness she had earned in a conversation with Rion was gone. It vanished. She was there again, again so close to the chambers of her mistress, again being persuaded by somebody that Morgana was alive.

“Merlin, she is alive. What was the whole point of capturing her? They could have killed right away.”

What if they wanted to give her a slow death? What if Morgause wants to torture her? To cause her as much pain and suffering as Uther caused all those with magic powers? When Gwen imagined what Morgause could do to hurt Morgana, she started crying. Gather yourself, she thought, but to think was easy. The tears wouldn’t listen. Why could such an evil thing happen to one of the best people of Camelot?

“Gwen, I’m sorry,” Merlin tried to hug her, but she escaped his touch as she was about to gain control over herself. I promised not to cry.

“Merlin, don’t. It’s me. Everybody seems fine already, they all have managed to live knowing that she is gone… I don’t know, I just don’t know what’s wrong with me. Every time I realize that she’s been gone for so long… I mean, she has been absent for more than two weeks now. And there is no news, absolutely no…”

“Gwen, there is nothing wrong with you. It’s just that she was your friend. She was good to you.”

“She was. She never threw me in the stocks. Or poured a bucket of water over my head,” she tried to jape through the tears.
“Well, Arthur doesn’t do it every day,” Merlin smiled.

“Thank Goddess.”

She breathed. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Why am I so hysterical? Bursting out crying in the middle of the day when somebody mentions the fact Morgana’s gone? Maybe I need to kill a troll in Ascetir, too?

She was a little confused about the fact that Merlin kept staring at her with a gloomy expression on his pale, strained face. Where does this tiredness has come from? He seemed so cheerful when we met.

“Gwen, what if… what if there was, you know, something about Morgana that she didn’t have the chance to tell you?”

“What do you mean?” Gwen noticed the strange look in Merlin’s eyes. Fear. Melancholy of the greatest extent. The heaviness of an unknow burden. The same look Morgana had.

“What if she had a secret, and you had the chance to learn it now?” Merlin continued, and Gwen could swear he had never before sounded so open and sincere. “Would it be er… appropriate?”

“Merlin, what are you up to?”

“Would you like to learn her secret?”

“Merlin, you’re scaring me,” she switched to whispering. “Do you know something about where she is?”

“I have no idea. But I know something else. She asked me to never tell it. But I guess that never telling anybody was a mistake.”

Everything stopped mattering. Gwen could never believe Merlin knew something about Morgana which Gwen did not. It’s impossible. Morgana was kind and helpful, yes, and she was there in Ealdor with Merlin, and she helped Merlin save the druid boy, but the two of them never passed much time together. Arthur made a clear statement about that. He told me himself that he suspected Merlin was secretly fond of Morgana.

“Merlin! Say it already!” she grabbed him by the wrist.

“Gwen, you must understand,” he cleared his throat and looked her into the eyes. “I can tell you, because I… because I trust you and because you were her friend. Because you are her friend. Because you have a good heart and you’re good to people, and I hope you’ll be good to Morgana as well. Morgana had magic.”

His words didn’t make any sense. Is he on a cider? Magic? Who had magic?

“Merlin? Are you an idiot?”

“I’m not.”

“Then why are you making this up?!”

“She told me herself,” Merlin told her, carefully freeing his wrist off Gwen’s hand.

Gwen didn’t have any tears left to cry. What Merlin had just said was absurd. There was no way it could be true.
“Merlin, you’re… I can’t begin to… She couldn’t! I would have noticed.”

“Remember when the window in her room was mysteriously broken, and when the curtain was set on fire? When you said that you were sure that you had put the candle out?”

Gwen remembered. As the memories swallowed her, as she raced months back, she remembered there was something about that nightmare that was different from all the other nights when the king’s ward struggled with her sleep. That nightmare happened for real. Her room was on fire, and Morgana was no longer scared – she was terrified to the core of her being, as if she saw something or discovered something… Discovered something… She discovered…

“No, please, no!” Gwen nearly screamed.

“She was seeking Gaius,” Merlin was speaking so fast it seemed he was afraid somebody would stop their conversation any moment. “He wasn’t there, so she told me. She was alone and frightened to death. You know how Uther deals with those who have magic.”

“Merlin, I beg you, please, tell me none of this happened!” Gwen was looking into his eyes with denial, but Merlin seemed so sorrowfully honest.

“She went to the forests to find the druids. She hoped to learn from them. She wanted to know what magic meant. But Uther sent a search party for her because he thought she was kidnapped. She had to come back to the castle because the druid camp was destroyed.”

“Oh, Goddess!” Gwen covered her mouth with her palm.

“When she came back, she went on living in Camelot with a secret.”

“That’s why she was so terrified by the Witchfinder,” Gwen was quickly figuring everything out.

“Probably.”

Gwen was angry. She was angry with Merlin for keeping this secret on his own. She was angry with Morgana, who chose to consult Merlin, whom she barely knew, rather than her long-time maidservant who cared about her. She felt offended, she felt that Morgana didn’t trust her enough to share this secret with her. Merlin did little to ease her sufferings in the castle. Suddenly, she couldn’t stand being in Merlin’s presence.

“I know it’s tough, but I had to tell you,” he continued in a tearful voice. “You are her closest friend and you deserve to know the truth. Gwen, I just beg you. This doesn’t make her a bad person. Having magic doesn’t make her evil.”

She wanted to slap his cheek for such words.

“How dare you think I can believe that Morgana was evil? She was the best person in this entirely rotten castle! And she still is, with magic or not!”

Chapter End Notes
So now both, Arthur and Gwen, know about Morgana and her secret gift. That's like the middle ground of the work for me.

Gwen is observant and cautious enough to guess some ugly plots behind Morgana's nightmares, and we'll see her confronting Gaius who seemed so good to Gwen after the Dragon attack. Will Gwen have any friends in the castle at all, now that she suspects Gaius of the violent wrong?

The slow-build is slowly coming to its end. There are a lot of things happening at the Summer feast, and some of them will change the shape of Albion's future. The price for Arthur's safety is rising, and Merlin might find it impossible to keep his secret any longer.

Also: major character death incoming in the next ten chapters. I want to finish this fic by Dec. 22, to sort of commemorate the fifth anniversary of "Diamond of the Day" episode. Since there're just 10 weeks left before Christmas, I'll be posting three chapters a week since today: a chapter on Tuesday and two chapters on Friday.

Thank you for the kudos! ^^
Now that Morgana’s secret is in her hands, Gwen can enjoy the clarity of her own sight. And in the new light, old friends begin to look like monsters.

She had spent the night staring into the flames. She noticed she could look into the fire for as long as she wanted. She even thought she had stopped blinking at some point. There was some great mystery about fire waves dancing, playing, as if trying to jump out of the fireplace, but still restrained by some bigger force that wouldn’t let it happen.

In the red flames, she wished to learn the answers. She wished to know everything. Sometimes it appeared to her she could see Morgana’s face in the flames, screaming from pain. Gwen had been crying all night.

Gwen had left the castle immediately after her conversation with Merlin, even though there remained still much work to be done. To hell with them, with the castle and with all those hypocrites inhabiting its rooms. The only thing that mattered was Morgana’s secret.

Poor girl. She must have felt terrified to her bones when she discovered she had the gift. It was neither a blessing nor a curse. It was just magic. She didn’t choose it, Gwen was sure. She must have been born with it. She must have inherited it from her mother or her father. She didn’t choose to be born with magic, just like I didn’t choose to be born to a serving girl mother and a blacksmith father. It’s something we don’t decide upon.

Merlin knew. He knew and did nothing. Or close to nothing. Judging by the look of Morgana in the end of spring, by her struggles and her verbal battles with Uther, she felt little to no support at all. Fear was ever the only thing that truly welcomed Morgana in this castle. Even though she revealed her secret to Merlin, she got no support from him.

At least he had the wits to keep it from Uther and Arthur. Uther would have killed her. The King nearly killed me, Merlin and Gaius. He would see her at the stake, too.

There was just one thing left to learn, and when the sun rose, touching the pale-grey roofs of the Lower Town with the shy pink light, Gwen left for the castle. She didn’t care if Gaius was asleep or not.

* * *

Gaius was about to have breakfast when Gwen opened the door of his chambers. He didn’t look any sleepy, but he was surely in a less formal mood than his usual self. He was wearing his sleeping
robes and humming some tune, and there was a mouth-watering smell of fresh bread in the room. Gaius was not the one to be easily startled, but when the door opened so suddenly and so rudely in the hour when he probably never expected any guests, the old physician jumped back.

“Gaius. I need to talk,” Gwen declared, slamming the door.

“Gwen! What’s the matter now?”

“The sleeping draughts. You gave them to Morgana,” she couldn’t care any less about sounding polite or decent, all she wanted was to learn the truth.

“What? What sleeping draughts?”

“Those sleeping draughts that you made me bring to her room every night Morgana had a bad dream!”

“What’s wrong with them? Why now?” Gaius seemed to understand so little about what was going on.

“I’m sure you remember them well! Now tell me, why you used them?”

“Gwen, what’s the meaning of this?” Gaius gathered himself and switched to the defensive voice. “What’s with your tone? You could use a little more respect!”

“Did you use some respect when you gave her the sleeping draughts?”

“She needed them!”

“Because of her bad dreams? Or because of her magic?”

His heart sank, Gwen could see. The way his wrinkles started to twitch, the way all the sense was gone from his empty, paralyzed expression, the way his lips were desperately trying to pronounce some explanation. He is caught.

“Gwen, we need…” he mumbled, pointing at the door.

“So, you’re afraid to talk about it, ha? But you’re not afraid to keep poisoning the innocent girl to repress her magic?!”

“I didn’t poison her, silly child!” the physician screamed so loudly Gwen was afraid he would crack the windows down. “Where did you learn this?!”

“Then what were you doing?!”

“Merlin told you about her?! Of course! Who else could have?!”

“Yes, it was Merlin! Merlin told me! I’m glad he did!”

“And you think suddenly you understand everything?!” the physician walked closer to Gwen and started looking at her from above. “You think that now you’re the smartest person in the kingdom?! You both are nothing but irresponsible children, thinking that you know how to do everything in a right way! You know nothing! Nothing! Do you think it was an easy thing for me to do?!”

Gaius was frowning and radiating fury, his shoulders were rising from the heavy breathing.

“Then why did you keep doing it?!” Gwen let out a scream mixed with tears. “Why you made her
“Because she was growing up right under the king’s nose!” Gaius, who must have left most of the fury out, lowered his voice. “Have you seen the Purge, Gwen? No, you haven’t, but I did, and I can tell you: Uther never cared. He slaughtered men, women, children, old men and old women. Nothing mattered to him except for the fact that a person was accused of magic practice. I thought his hatred would wear off with time, but it only seemed to strengthen! There were no reasons to believe he would show mercy to Morgana! He killed her parents!”

“What?!”

Gwen closed her eyes. No, no, no. We have a cold-hearted murderer on the throne.

“How do you think Vivienne died? Why do you think Gorlois was sent to battle? Gorlois was the only person Uther didn’t have the courage to sentence to death. But he found another way to murder him.”

Gwen started walking around the chambers. Maybe he was right? The Purge took the lives of many children. Some great houses were executed, even two oldest families. Why would Uther not kill Gorlois daughter?

“Then why didn’t you smuggle her out?”

“Where to, Gwen?! The Isle of the Blessed had been burnt. The last priestesses I knew had appeared at Camelot fourteen years before Morgana’s father died and there were no signs of them anywhere after the fall of the Isle of the Blessed. Magic was persecuted across the kingdom, where could I smuggle her to?”

“You could have given her to some commoners to raise!”

“Commoners? And what do you think those commoners would have done when they had found out she had magic?”

Gwen knew the answer. They probably would have reported her affliction to the knights and Morgana would have been taken to the castle. She would have been found guilty of using magic and would have been burnt at the stake.

“Gwen, I know how it seems. But it was the only way to keep her alive. That’s how I believed.”

“But she grew up with her inner self totally repressed! She was never able to learn who she really was! She never had the chance to understand! Nobody to rely on! Nobody to ask advice! Nobody at all…”

“And yet she was alive.”

“Is she now?! Is she?! If she knew her true power, maybe she could have saved herself from Morgause!”

“Gwen. Morgause will never kill her.”

“How can you be so sure?!”

“Because she is her sister. She has rescued her. She has taken Morgana from the castle to keep her out of Uther’s sight.”
Gwen’s world was coming to an end. *Morgana didn’t disappear? She wasn’t kidnapped? She escaped?*

“Oh, Goddess, no. No.”

“Morgause presented her a with healing bracelet the day she visited the castle to challenge Arthur. I think it’s what kept Morgana awake when the castle fell asleep. Morgause came to kill Uther and to free the dragon, but Arthur and Merlin managed to save the King. Her spell must have been running out of time, and she escaped with Morgana.”

“So, she’ll never come back…”

“I’m afraid she won’t. Not unless Uther changes his views on magic or he’s no longer our king.”
Chapter Summary

This time, it seems Merlin will not get away with what he has done as easily as usually. Gaius seems too angry with the young warlock.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

Merlin remembered a couple of times when Gaius was seriously angry with him, but the physician never crossed the personal line. He was more disappointed in Merlin’s careless attitude, in his crazy plans, in the decisions that risked exposing his abilities to Uther and earning young warlock a certain death. After the quarrel, Gaius would always apologize and would usually cook something nice for dinner, where he would try to clarify his intentions.

He was only angry because he was worried, Gaius used to say. Uther’s heart had long ago turned into a cold stone; the man showed no mercy to anybody that had anything to do with magic, and Gaius’s heart would not bear seeing Merlin at the stakes.

But this time it was different. Gaius seemed to have lost his temper, finally. Maybe he was getting too old for all the tension and all the adventures Merlin had with Arthur, or maybe he was too tired because of the bigger amount of work on his shoulders. He was, after all, the court’s physician, and the court had grown bigger since the arrival of the noble refugees from Brechfa.

“What has got into your thick skull that you decided to tell Gwen?!” Gaius was barking at him like a mad hound.

“She was her friend. I thought she deserved to know,” Merlin’s explanation seemed as clear as the summer sky to him.

“Merlin! Do you understand what you have done?! You have exposed us both to the greater risk! As if there are not enough risks already!”

“Gwen wouldn’t tell anybody,” Merlin hoped Gwen wouldn’t break into the throne room and accuse the king of being a hypocrite. Then Goddess have mercy on us all. I’ve promised Arthur that I would instruct her properly. “I trust her.”

“This isn’t about trust, silly boy! There was no need in telling her!”

“I wanted to be honest,” Merlin said, recalling the liberating sensation born in his chest when he shared the burden of that secret, first with Arthur, and then with Gwen. “For the first time since I arrived here, Gaius, I had a chance to be honest!”

“Then why didn’t you tell Gwen that you had to give the king’s ward a drink with hemlock to save
us all from the brutal death by the hand of the knights of Medhihr? Why are you so selectively honest, Merlin?”

_He’s accusing me of hypocrisy._ There was venom in Gaius’s words, a dark substance of hatred, irritation and anger mixed with fear. Gaius had grown accustomed to playing the double game at court, but when the Witchfinder tried to set him up, he experienced the greatest of all his failures. Gaius knew that even though Uther acted as if he had forgiven him (for the crime Gaius never committed), the king’s paranoia suggested Gaius would need to play his double game with stricter rules now.

“I will let them all learn it in due time,” Merlin tried to summon all the bravery he had with his voice. _Damn it, slaughtering the high priestess isn’t as terrifying as imagining how Arthur would react._ “Someday. Eventually. I can’t tell everything now, she’ll be asking too many questions. Like… how did I know Morgana was the source of the enchantment?”

“Merlin,” Gaius emitted a sorrowful sigh, and Merlin feared that sigh alone would draw all the powers out of Gaius. “You’ve presented me in the most awful way. Gwen thinks I’ve been poisoning Morgana for fourteen years…”

“I didn’t tell her anything about you! Not a single word, Gaius, I swear! I swear with my mother’s life!”

Even in the moment of such a heated debate, Gaius knew that Merlin would never give such a word in vain. The physician closed his eyes, and for a moment Merlin was sure the old man would begin to cry, to cry from the feeling of never being appreciated, for not acting bravely enough, for failing Morgana. _Still, he saved our lives so many times. What did she think Gaius was supposed to do? To put on armor and to lead an open magic rebellion against Uther?_

“Well, then Gwen must have figured the rest herself. It’s not that difficult, after all. She guessed that the sleeping draughts were not just sleeping draughts,” Gaius concluded. “And she thinks I was poisoning Morgana for fourteen years…”

“You didn’t. You were trying to keep her safe from Uther, I know. But it must seem a brutal way for Gwen. Like locking Morgana up here and trying to silence her magic...”

“I couldn’t see a better way, Merlin,” Gaius was hardly coming up with an excuse; it was more of a painful experience of reflecting on the days of the Purge. “She had nobody outside these walls. I hoped that one day the king would marry her off to some prince and she would go to the land where magic was not viewed as something evil. But Uther, strangely, refused to discuss the proposition of Morgana’s betrothal. Even though Arthur’s was figured out long ago.”

“What?!” Merlin screamed. “Arthur is betrothed?”

“Of course. To princess Elena of Gawant.”

“Princess who? Why? Why is he betrothed to her? Is she so pretty or something?”

“She is a lovely girl. Somewhat strange and odd at times, but… she is honest and kind, and very natural and I suppose she’d be a good wife and a good queen. Merlin, what’s the matter?”

“I didn’t know Arthur was betrothed,” Merlin didn’t know what was happening to him. It was like his blood was boiling and he wanted to run, run and chase Arthur through the entire castle and then demand the answer. _Why hasn’t he told me he has a bride?_

“Why are we even discussing Arthur’s future marriage when we must be talking about something
you have done?"

Right. Gaius mustn’t know I’m in love with Arthur. If he learns Arthur and me are… He’ll go on his most massive rant ever. You must not be sucking Arthur’s cock, Merlin. You’re risking to expose your magic, Merlin.

“Gaius, I’m sorry I didn’t warn you… And I’m sorry Gwen was rude to you. She shouldn’t have been.”

“She wasn’t just rude. She was accusing me of ruining Morgana’s mind with magic-repressing draughts!”

“I’m sorry she didn’t er… choose words. I promise I’ll explain everything to Gwen, I promise. I’ll handle it. I’ll tell her she must share this knowledge with nobody. If she wants to ever see Morgana again.”

“See that you do.” Gaius turned around and went to sit by the table; he was probably expecting Merlin to leave and was still rather frustrated.

“Gaius?” Merlin hesitated.

“What is it now?”

“Since you’ve mentioned… I was going to talk about it anyway…”

“Is this the right time?”

“I have long been postponing this talk. Can you tell me more about the Purge?”

“Is there anything you don’t know about it?”

“I mean… How exactly did it happen?”

Gaius had never expressed enthusiasm about discussing the details of the Purge. Uther’s retribution to the magic world had always been covered with mystery; it was like the silhouette of doom in the distant past of the kingdom. Merlin had been in the castle for more than two years, and he had gathered the bigger pieces of the tragedy, which allowed some basic understanding but spared the most curious details. How could Uther alone defeat Nimueh, Balinor, Kilgharrah and all the magic world?

“It didn’t happen overnight, of course,” Gaius, too, felt that they needed to talk to wear off the tension from the recent conflict. “Uther and Ygraine couldn’t conceive for nine years. The King hesitated to ask Nimueh for help.”

“Was Nimueh always at court?” Merlin wondered, cringing from the image of the priestess parading through the castle freely.

“She was a court sorceress. She would travel to the Isle of the Blessed from time to time, but she was often seen in the castle.”

“And what exactly did she do?”

“Everything. She was the king’s right hand and a wise lady,” Gaius seemed to be speaking too fondly of someone who tried to kill him. “She was most of all interested in the matters of justice, of course. She often used magic to punish people for severe crimes. But there seemed to be nothing she
couldn’t do. And when the ten-year anniversary of the king’s reign was approaching, Uther felt that he needed an heir by whatever the cost, so that his family’s claim to the throne was valid. And when Morgana was born to the house of Gorlois, he started thinking about having an heir even more.”

“Why?”

“Gorlois was the second most powerful family in the castle. If Uther were to die childless, Gorlois would have assumed the throne. After that, Uther asked Nimueh for help.”

“And she helped him,” Merlin recalled the meeting with Nimueh at the Isle of the Blessed. She didn’t seem to hate Arthur. She wanted to rule the world together.

“She did. She never warned him about the consequences, though.”

“That Ygraine would die?” Merlin nearly stopped breathing. The story of Ygraine caused Arthur as much pain as no blade ever could.

“She couldn’t be sure. Of course, she knew that there was a price to be paid. But I doubt she could command the force of life and death so easily that she could give some stranger’s life for Arthur’s birth. I think choosing who shall die for Arthur was something beyond her power.”

“And when Arthur was born…”

“His mother died,” Gaius voice turned soft. “Uther’s heart was broken. Nimueh tried to comfort him. She let him mourn, but then she urged him to be back to the matters of state. But Uther simply could not do it, he was consumed by his grief for Ygraine. And one night, Nimueh told him that he was not to blame. She told him that he had to go on, to be the king which Camelot needed. She said that the Old Religion doesn’t care who lives and who dies, only that the balance of the world is repaid. She said that to create a life, death must happen.”

“Why did she even think telling Uther about the laws of Old Religion was a good idea? Didn’t she know…”

“Merlin, Uther indeed was always wary of magic, but he had nothing against Nimueh back in the days, however hard to believe. He trusted her. She helped him conquer Camelot. But when he heard about that rule, about that law of the Old Religion, he thought that Nimueh could foresee the consequences of using magic to help Ygraine conceive… And he began to think that Nimueh did it on purpose. Ygraine was his heart and his soul,” Gaius said in a voice that made it impossible to question Uther’s ability to love. “The suspicion drove him mad. It let him have somebody to blame for his wife’s death. Somebody and something to unleash his rage at. So, during the feast on Arthur’s naming day, he poisoned her cup. She fell asleep the instant she tasted the wine, and he threw her off the court, right into the dungeons.”

“She was the priestess of the Old Religion! How could she be stopped by some dungeons?”

“The chains of Belisama,” Gaius explained.

“The chains of Belisama?” Merlin repeated, mindlessly.

“Yes. The chains so ancient they say they come from the times of Avalon. They strip anybody who wears them off the magic power.”

“Was Kilgharrah chained by them, too?”

“Yes. Before Morgause broke the chains with a blade of Medihr.”
“So Uther put Nimueh in those chains?”

“Yes. And called for your father.”

Father. The day when Merlin met Balinor in the caves in Essetir, he couldn’t be more confused about the man who stood before his eyes. A paranoid, suspicious, cold and repulsive soul. When he used the enchantment, Merlin felt so happy he was about to burst into tears. *Magic is in my blood.*

“Why did my father come to Uther?”

“Uther was not a terrible king, Merlin. I’m tired of repeating that, but during the first ten years magic was tolerated in the kingdom.”

“What Uther asked him to do?”

“He asked him to burn the Isle of the Blessed,” Gaius whispered.

The news clawed around Merlin’s chest in an iron embrace. *To burn the Isle of the Blessed? Is my father responsible for the fall of the old ways?*

“No way my father would have agreed to that! Gaius? Gaius?!”

Gaius always felt the weight of guilt when they spoke of Merlin’s father, and this time, the old man, too, hesitated and tried to pick his words as carefully as on no other occasion.

“Merlin, the dragonlords and the priestesses are no friends. In the days of Daobeth Kingdom, a priestess of the Old Religion killed two Great Dragons. Nimueh had killed another three Great Dragons before Uther marched on Camelot. The magic of the dragons doesn’t originate in the lake of Avalon, unlike the cult of the Isle of the Blessed. Great Dragons never trusted the priestesses.”

“So, my father, he… he…”

“He accepted Uther’s offer to avenge the Isle of the Blessed. After all, five out of the seven great dragons have fallen by the hands of the priestesses.”

“What did Uther promise in return?”

“He promised your father a peaceful life.”

“He never kept that promise!”

“It’s not so simple, Merlin. Uther didn’t just break his promise. When the Isle of the Blessed burnt, the Old Religion suffered great damage. I knew Uther had some reasons to be vengeful, but I also saw that murdering Nimueh could have the grave consequences for the magic itself. So, I freed her.”

“Gaius?” Merlin hoped Gaius was glad to notice inspiration in his voice.

“I did what I thought was right. When Nimueh learnt the news about the Isle and all her sisters that burnt in the dragon flames, she… She changed her form to your father.”

“What?!?”

“She had the rare power to change appearance. She turned into your father with the help of magic. While Balinor was having some rest in the castle, she went to the caves where Kilgharrah was resting and used the Belisama chains to imprison him. Afterwards, still disguised as your father, she attempted to kill the infant Arthur.”
“Oh, Goddess…”

“Uther saw that. I was there fast enough to stop her, using magic. She ran away. Uther thought that it was your father who tried to kill Arthur. The guards were after him immediately.”

“My father was innocent!”

“Your father never attempted to kill Arthur. But when I saw Nimueh in Arthur’s chambers, I, too, saw what everyone else saw. Balinor trying to kill the infant. I suspected it wasn’t him, but Uther didn’t listen.”

“And with the last Great Dragon trapped and no more priestesses of the Old Religion, Uther was free to start the Purge.”

“Which he did soon enough. Morgause was six years old when the Purge began. Vivienne and I, we had given her to the priestesses shortly before the birth of Arthur. I didn’t know anything about her when the Purge started. Luckily, she escaped the fall of the Isle, and the cult still lives through her.”
Merlin was not fond of the feasts. The first one he attended had been a disaster, where Lady Helen turned out to be a witch and tried to kill Arthur. For his next feast, Arthur made him put on the official outfit of the Camelot’s servant, and nothing had ever made Merlin feel more humiliated than that awful hat which made him look like some royal peacock. Besides, feasts were destined for nobles, not for servants. For servants, the celebration involved seeing that their masters’ cups and plates were always at least half-full. Servants were also supposed to accompany their masters to the privy or outside if they were about to vomit. When the feast was over, they had to help their masters reach the bedrooms, which was often a challenge, considering how many steps there were in various stairways of the castle.

The Summer feast was not very different. Music was ringing in the hall, but the nobles had not drunk enough to start dancing. The lords and ladies were seated so that there was no visible separation between the courts of Camelot and the courts of Brechfa. Uther wants to show unity in the face of war. Even at the feasts, he uses the chairs as a tool to manipulate and gain advantage. Merlin noticed Lord Sagramore in his ceremonial robe and a giant medallion over his neck, and horror seized Merlin’s heart when he imagined that giant bear of a man jumping in the middle of the hall to the tunes of the musicians. He can kill someone just by accident. Lord Accolon was trying to sing some random song over the melody of the musicians, but thankfully even his ringing voice couldn’t outdo the roar of the hall. The grey-haired Lady Dindrane was too old for dancing, but she enjoyed watching her young granddaughters flirt with knights.

Arthur’s new knights were at the feast as well. Owaine was seated with his mother, who was as fair-haired as her son; she had come from Gedref out of security reasons, and Owaine was whispering into her ear, trying to tell her who was who at the court. Modron and his father, the Lord of Nemeton, the most southern land of Camelot, were talking with Sir Leon; it looked like Lord Pellinore was proud to listen to the stories of his son’s training progress. Merlin couldn’t see Aglovale and Evaine, but their mother, the Lady of Ascetir, was chatting with Lord Lamorak and seemed to enjoy the wine.

Arthur was seated next to his father, close to the throne. He was meant to play the prince’s part the whole evening: when he was greeting the guests with a welcome speech, when he was listening to this father giving a speech with a proud look on his face. There were many speeches, many words and many promises. No matter how hard Uther tried to cheer his lords, Cenred’s invasion had cast a shadow upon the usually merry holiday of the Summer Day. The rumours of what was happening to the small folk of Brechfa were slowly reaching Camelot, and Merlin hoped the rumours were
exaggerated.

Merlin hated that Arthur seemed to ignore him during the feast. He couldn’t show any special affection for his servant in the presence of the king, and even though Merlin understood it all too well, he was slightly angry. The music was making his head heavy. He hated the music of the instruments. The best music was to be found in the forest. Everything there was so full of life: every tree, every leaf, every insect. It was as if the world was vibrating. As if everything was much more than itself.

Merlin felt like he didn’t belong at the feast. His sorrow and anxiety were growing physically cautious; they were separating him from other cheering people. Merlin knew that Arthur would take his young knights to the patrols alongside the forests of Brechfa. He had turned to Gaius for help, like he always did, for he needed to be sure there would be a way to protect Arthur if the prince were heavily wounded; the old physician listened attentively to all the reasons Merlin tried to line out.

Protecting Arthur in the battle was nearly impossible: even if Merlin revealed his magic nature, all his powers could be useless against one single arrow of a skilled bowman. The solution Gaius had offered shocked Merlin, and he hoped he would never use what Gaius suggested.

“Merlin,” he heard a somewhat familiar voice from behind his back.

The commander of the knights left the company of Modron and his father to stand next to Merlin. Merlin remembered how Leon had nearly caught him and Arthur fucking in the Western Tower the day before yesterday and tried not to smile.

“Sir Leon,” he bowed down to the nobleman.

“How was your poetry with the prince?” Leon asked, as if reading Merlin’s thoughts.

“Er… not so easy, I guess. The prince… he’s too afraid people will misunderstand him if they were to find out.”

“Oh, there’s nothing wrong about it,” Leon said, and his voice sent goosebumps across Merlin’s skin. Leon was speaking as though he understood what all the poetry was about. “Some other knights love poetry, too. Not always though, more like from time to time. Including myself.”

“You do?” Merlin tried to flirt with Leon.

“Yes. Maybe you could teach me some?”

“Er… Sir Leon, I’m afraid I only study poetry with Arthur.”

“Oh. So. I understand,” the drunk Sir Leon was quick to retreat. “Then I won’t be troubling you any longer.”

When he left, Merlin noticed Arthur glance. The prince was watching him with cautiousness. Merlin looked around and when he made sure everybody was too busy with their business, he stuck his tongue out and licked his lips, sending the most lustful look Arthur’s way. The prince straightened up in his chair. The next thing Merlin did was lick his finger while not daring to take his look off Arthur’s eyes. He couldn’t take it any longer. He grabbed the goblet of wine and approached the prince. Uther was talking to Lord Cynric when Merlin poured some wine into prince’s cup.

“Is there any way I can please my prince tonight? Maybe some wine?”

“No, thank you,” Arthur looked his way and licked his lips. Merlin was so close to his touch, but they had to pretend nothing was between them.
Merlin leaned closer to Arthur and whispered right into his ear, making sure Arthur could feel his warm breath.

“How about my lips wrapped around your cock, Sire?”

“Merlin,” Arthur hissed back.

“Don’t worry, Sire. The music’s too loud and most people are too drunk to hear us. So? What would my lord say?”

“Merlin…”

“But you’ve promised, my Lord. In Gedney, remember? You told me you’d put me on my knees and you’d have my mouth wide open and you’d let me taste as much seed as you want. Are you getting hard, Sire?”

“Merlin.”

“You know, I went to the armory tonight and I took you mace. And I opened my arse with the hilt of your mace,” Merlin knew it was savage to tease Arthur like that, but he could do nothing about himself. He wanted them together, away from this stupid feast, away from everybody. Alone in Arthur’s room, safe between the sheets, with no wars and no patrols to spoil their future.

When Merlin stepped back to the wall, he saw Arthur say something to Uther and then the king himself approached him.

“You must escort the prince to his chambers,” Uther said. “He is feeling unwell.”

“Of course, your majesty.”

Arthur came to Merlin and there was nothing Merlin could dream of more than to take Arthur by the hand and kiss him. But they were surrounded by nearly seventy people, and he needed patience.

He followed Arthur, out of the music-torn hall to the deafening silence of the corridor. Most of the spearmen were away, too. They were walking without saying a single word to each other. Arthur flew up the stairs to the second storey, and when they turned left to the corridor that led to the prince’s chambers, Arthur turned around. In the royal ceremonial cloak, with the prince’s crown on his head and the wine-warmed smile on his face, Arthur was looking like the king Merlin had always dreamed of.

“Stop right here, you, wanton,” he commanded merrily.

“Sire,” Merlin whispered.

Arthur slammed Merlin against the wall and shoved his hand down Merlin’s pants, his finger trying to open his servant’s ass.

“You little filthy-filthy thing, stealing my mace to loosen your tight hole? I can feel that.”

He pulled Merlin’s pants down, and Merlin felt strangely cold and vulnerable with his private parts exposed in the middle of the castle corridor.

“Arthur, for the love of Camelot, let’s make it to the chambers!”

Arthur’s slap on his ass rang and echoed loud.
“How did you call me?”

“How, Arthur.”

Another slap. Merlin could feel Arthur’s warm hands on his left butt cheek that was burning with pleasure and pain from Arthur’s touch.

“I’m sorry. Sire. But they may…”

“Shut your mouth,” Merlin felt Arthur’s finger slide between his lips. “I’m gonna fuck you in every corner of the castle if I want. And when I want. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes who?”

“Yes Sire.”

“Now spread your butt cheeks with your hands. You want a prince’s cock inside you?”

“Sire, I…”

There was no oil. Merlin could only feel Arthur’s spit land on his butt cheeks before Arthur smeared it all over his hole. Arthur didn’t even try to push his finger in first; he pressed the head of his cock inside Merlin. It was more painful than in the Western Tower; Merlin felt the ring of his hole burn when Arthur opened him so rudely. Arthur didn’t care. He started fucking him. Raw and fast. Merlin tried to cover his mouth with his hands.

“Oh, no, don’t do that. Here. Let me,” Arthur grabbed Merlin’s wrists to hold them behind his back. “Can’t keep yourself quiet when I’m fucking you, ha?”

Merlin’s ass had adjusted to Arthur’s cock, and that sensation came again, when Merlin felt the circle of his ass stretched by Arthur’s cock. He was filled by Arthur, controlled by Arthur and protected by Arthur. He was naked down his bottom, Arthur’s cock sliding in his ass, the relaxation from helpless pleasure and the absolute faith and trust in Arthur. Moans began to escape his mouth.

“Arthur… Sire, they… may… hear… us.”

“Let them hear. Let the whole castle hear how you scream from pleasure when I move inside you. What did Leon say to you?”

“Sire, don’t stop, please….”

“What did he tell you?”

“He asked… how… our… poetry… was… going… on.”

“And?”

“He said… he wanted… to have… some… poetry… with me… too.”

“And you?”

“I said I only do poetry with my prince.”

Arthur’s thrusts grew harder.

Merlin got on his knees and did as the prince commanded. There were strange sensations in his ass: with Arthur’s cock pulled out so suddenly, he felt empty. Arthur was shooting his seed all over his face, but not a single drop reached his mouth. The prince’s orgasm left Merlin standing on his knees with Arthur’s seed covering his right eye, his hair, his nose, his cheek and his chin.

“Arthur, I can’t open my eyes,” he laughed, feeling so foolishly happy and silly.

“Sorry about that,” Arthur laughed, too, and the next thing Merlin felt were Arthur’s arms around his waist pulling him into the air. “Let me carry you to my room. My little star.”
Chapter Summary

While everybody seems busy enjoying the summer feast, Gwen feels like the only heartbroken soul in the castle. Nothing could be done to make things better, or is there still a way?

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She was alone in the small hall. Not only alone, but lonely, too. Her loneliness, however, didn’t matter at that moment. She had spent her afternoon in the castle, among the hive of busy servants running from kitchen to the feast hall, from the feast hall to their lords’ and ladies’ rooms, to the physician and back. Gwen had played her part in preparing everything for the Summer feast, but she wished to be left alone the instant the music started playing. There was no music for celebration in her heart.

Gwen was so confused with her feelings. She sometimes began to think that she was overreacting and making everything worse with the impulses she didn’t try to either limit or control. What was so bad about her position? Had she been killed in the dragon flames? No. Had she been wounded by the dragon? No. Had her house been destroyed by the fire? No. Had she lost her job? Yes, but, in fact, she instantly managed to find a new one.

But it was not something about the comfort of her castle life and her relatively safe position, especially when compared to all those misplaced by the Dragon attack or all the small folk left in Brechfa for Cenred to murder and torture. It was about Camelot. She had spent her whole life in Camelot, it was all she knew. Everybody she used to care about were there. Are they still here?

Her father had been killed by Uther’s order the previous year.

Her brother Elyan had left three years ago and she had got not so much as a word from him. Elyan could be dead for all she knew.

Gwen believed Morgana had been kidnapped by Morgause, but after the recent confession from Merlin everything changed: Morgana must have left the castle with Morgause sixteen days ago, and was unlikely to return because she had magic, and Uther hated her and everybody like her.

Gwen felt angry with Merlin for not telling her sooner. She had spent more than two weeks thinking Morgana was in the possession of some hostile force, thinking of all the cruel ways Morgause could come up with to break Morgana’s spirit. It turned out that Morgana had already planned to escape Camelot and had already tried leaving for a druid village. Merlin could have told me. He knew her secret would be safe with me.
Gaius turned out to be a man who, among all his duties, would also find time to give magic-repressing potions to Morgana to silence her true nature. He did it out of fear for her life, he claimed, but that didn’t make the act any less treacherous and disgusting.

To make the matters worse, she wasn’t sure Arthur wouldn’t side with his father if he learned the secret of Morgana.

*Who is there left for me to care now? And who cares about me?*

“Why you’re here? Everyone’s at the feast,” Rion’s voice was bright and cheerful this time.

Young Rion has climbed the staircase and was clearly heading to his chambers. He was not wearing his ceremonial outfit, which meant he didn’t fancy the idea of being at the feast either. Gwen didn’t care why.

“I don’t feel like celebrating,” she answered, sparing words for courtesies.

“Has something happened?”

“Lord Rion, leave me alone,” she asked in a polite tone. “I am here because I want to be alone.”

“Something has happened.”

“What if it has?”

“Maybe you need some help then?”

“There is no way you can fix it. Nobody can. Not now. It’s too late.”

“I am an heir to the castle of Brechfa. There must be something I can do.”

Gwen smiled. *How easy everything must be looking to this boy. The very idea that he is someday to inherit a castle means that he possesses some power; yet he is blind to the fact that some things in the world are beyond what those nobles view as power. Not everything could be set right with a sword.*

“Rion, it’s very kind of you, but…I’ve lost a friend.”

“Lady Morgana?”

“Yes.”

“How can a mistress be a friend?”

“She was no ordinary mistress.”

“And you’re no ordinary serving girl. Don’t worry, the knights are looking for her.”

“The knights will never find her,” Gwen snorted.

“Gwen, you must hope for the best.”

“It’s not about me losing hope! She will not return to Camelot while Uther is king. It doesn’t matter how many knights will be freezing in the woods while looking for her. She will not be back.”

Rion hesitated to ask more. *Is he afraid? Did my tone worry him? Has he finally learned the rules of*
the court life and is he treating the sudden knowledge about the king’s ward with fear?

“How do you know?”

“I just know, Rion.”

“Has Uther wronged Morgana in some way?”

“He has wronged so many people. He has murdered her parents,” Gwen regretted it the moment she said it, but she couldn’t reverse the time and swallow those words back. She was staring at Rion; his wide eyes seemed to become even wider.

“Gwen, how do you know it?”

“I just know, Rion.”

“You couldn’t know it. There are just three people that know. My uncle and my mother among them.”

“And how do they know?”

“Vivienne was my mother’s friend.”

“Morgana’s mother was Lady Yrien’s friend? And yet she does everything now to make a good impression on the king and his blood-stained court?” Gwen was furious to meet another hypocrite, but when she remembered she was Lady Yrien’s maid, she tried to calm herself. “Rion, please, I’ve already spoken so many treasons that…”

“Will Morgana be back if Uther is no longer king?” the boy inquired in a mysterious whisper.

“Rion, Uther is the king. Nothing else matters.”

“We do matter, Gwen. We can change it. You and me.”

“Change what?”

“We can make Arthur king.”

Gwen looked around. There were no spearmen in the small hall, and the music was playing so loud she could hear it rising through the walls, but Rion was proposing the impossible.

“Are you mad, Rion?”

“You told me herself that Arthur is a better person.”

“Because there’s nobody worse than Uther.”

“What if we help Arthur gain the throne faster?”

“Rion, are you suggesting that the two of us murder Uther?”

“No. I suggest we help him die.”

“You’re mad. He’ll have our heads. He will kill us.”

“Gwen, there are ways.”
“What ways? Rion, I must go,” she stood up, afraid to see where the conversation could lead her.

“My mother has been poisoning my uncle for a while,” Rion blurted out.

“What?!”

“You’ve seen him. Old Gingawaine is as good as a skeleton. Why do you think he looks that way?”

“Because he’s old?”

“Because mother has been giving him this poison that is slowly killing him. It’s weakening his heart and making him age faster. He can die any minute now.”

There was neither remorse nor compassion to fill Rion’s voice. Gwen became afraid of this family for the first time.

“But why would she do that?”

“Because he is a war-obsessed freak who wants me to join the knights and go out there and win battles while in fact I’m as good a knight as he’s a maiden.”

“But… Rion…”

“Ever since he lost the Battle of Ashes to Uther thirty two years ago, he has been sinking in madness. Brechfa was one of the Five Kingdoms before Uther’s conquest, and became a part of united single Camelot after the fall of the druid dynasty. Uncle has been trying to restore his famous warlord glory in the battles all over the kingdom. He hopes to die in the battle, but I’m not going to die with him. He will not survive this war. And when we return to our castle, I shall be the Lord of Brechfa. And I shall never join the knights.”

“How do we… how do you…”

“Mother adds the poison to his lemon water every morning. Sometimes to wine. It is a bit sour, this poison. Gwen, they say Uther has been drinking wine every evening since Morgana’s disappearance.”

“I’ve heard it, too.”

“Mother’s buying wine from Lord Cynric. He is like the main merchant or something in your castle.”

“He is the Councillor of Trade.”

“Fine. I’ll ask her to buy the best bottle and to invite Uther for dinner. You’ll pour the poison into his cup.”

“Uther only drinks from his own cup,” Gwen reacted quickly.

“I know. But you’re our servant and you’ll be at the dinner. You’ll manage to pour poison. Uther knows you well. You’ve been his ward’s maid for years. He won’t be suspicious. And I’ll distract them and you’ll do it.”

“What if your mother finds out?” Gwen didn’t know what scared her more: discussing the king’s death in the castle or taking young Rion’s plan into actual consideration.

“She won’t.”
“How would you arrange the dinner?”

“Leave it to me. Gwen, what do you think? His reign has lasted for thirty-two years already. He has become a terrible king. He killed Morgana’s parents. He is more interested in persecuting magic than in saving the small folk of Brechfa from Cenred’s army. He only cares about his nobles, but I’m not one of them! I can change so many things! Can’t we help Uther die a bit earlier? Would it be bad if Arthur were king?”

Chapter End Notes

Ding! Ding! Halfway chapter mark :)


Chapter Summary

If she does what she has to do, why will she want to see Arthur?

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV

Gwen didn’t know what she was looking for. Maybe some subtle feeling, some vague shade of faith the conversation with Arthur would grant her, the faith she needed so much to do what she had to do.

But there was, after all, another thing she would do well to fear. She had already decided Uther’s fate, and, in point of fact, she didn’t require a meeting with Arthur as a moment of truth. She wished to believe violence was not the way. She wished to believe violence was wrong in its essence, but when she looked back at her life, she remembered all the times when she relied or would gladly rely on violence to protect herself and her friends.

The day she rode to Ealdor with Morgana and Merlin to face the bandits, the cruel and merciless creatures who were ready to terrorize innocent people. The day when Hengist brought her to his filthy and shit-stinking castle she would use all the violence she could summon to get free. The many times when she thought of avenging her father’s death, when she was sitting in an empty house, waiting for her father to walk through the door. She couldn’t bear that people were so ready to believe her father was guilty just because he tried to escape. They never troubled themselves, they never went far enough to think. *Uther’s justice was so unfair escape was the only hope for justice.*

*But if you had...you know...the choice, what would you do?* Merlin asked this question once. *If you had the power of life and death over Uther, would you kill him? For what he did?*

She remembered her answer too well. She believed that killing Uther wouldn’t solve a thing, that it would only turn her into a murderer too. But in the light of all the latest revelations and the new steps of King Uther, the questions came back at her. Even when she tried to fall asleep, there was some voice in her head, the howling that didn’t let her rest. *Would killing Hengist be a bad thing? Would killing bandits in Merlin’s village be a bad thing? Is Uther any better than Hengist? After everything he did to Morgana and her parents? After his new war strategy that saw Brechfa nobles safe behind the walls of the castle, while the commoners became the prey for Cenred’s army?*

The day after the feast, Gwen was walking to Arthur’s chambers. The castle was so quiet it seemed it had been abandoned. It was a typical state after the feast, when most of the lords and ladies would not leave their rooms and only send their servants for the remedies to the court physician; only this time, Gaius had wisely sent the remedies in advance.

Arthur was not asleep. She knew he wouldn’t be. Arthur was a lot more responsible than all those lords consuming wine like there were no tomorrow. He had so many tasks he couldn’t allow himself
to spend a day lying in bed and suffering a hangover. He was leaving with his new knights in the evening.

She knocked on the open door. Arthur’s room was a mess, with clothes, weapons and supplies scattered across the floor; Arthur was trying to sort everything in two large bags.

“My Lord?”

“Guinevere!” he seemed happy Gwen was there to distract him from the work somebody else was supposed to do.

“I hope I’m not troubling you, my lord.”

“You’re not. I’m just preparing for my patrol mission. Actually, Merlin must be helping me, but you know, he has this gift.”

“Gift?” Gwen laughed.

“The gift of mysteriously disappearing every time there’s some work to be done.”

“I’m sure that’s just one of his many talents.”

They both laughed. The room was bathed in the sunlight, and Arthur was looking as handsome as ever. She couldn’t help but think of all those moment they have shared the previous year. The good and the bad ones. Their first kiss in her house. The day when Arthur went to rescue her from the Hengist castle to find her in love with Lancelot. She would forever remember the pain in her heart when Lancelot was gone. And the time when Arthur was madly in love with princess Vivian, Olaf’s daughter, but she kissed him in the tent nonetheless. Loving the prince was hard, and being in Camelot was getting even harder.

“Gwen, I’m sorry I haven’t been around for some time. Things… they have changed after Morgana disappeared. And with the war coming, I’m just too…” Arthur was never good at apologies.

“Arthur, you don’t have to explain anything. I’m not here for it.”

“Then why?” Arthur wondered. “Can I do something for you?”

“Arthur, Merlin told me something about your sister.”

Arthur put on a serious face instantly.

"She is not exactly my sister."

"I mean, she's your father's ward and I just don't know who she is to you and how I should address your relation properly..."

“That doesn't matter. I understand what you’re talking about. I know what Merlin has shared with you. I told him to do it.”

Gwen wasn’t surprised. She suspected that Merlin would have told Arthur before her.

“So, you know it, too?”

“Gwen, I beg you, let’s keep it down, alright? It’s not safe to discuss it so loudly.”

The prince marched to the threshold to shut the doors.
“Arthur, you know?”

“Merlin told me in Gedney.”

“And what do you think?”

“It’s a complicated matter.”

“But you surely wouldn’t see her burn at stake?” Gwen asked.

The question mattered to her. The prince’s answer, however, mattered even more. She knew Arthur would never forgive her for doing what she and Rion were thinking of doing, and she needed to be sure Arthur was different from Uther on the issue of magic.

“I don’t wish her dead, of course. And if I were king, I would not wish her dead either. She had magic, maybe she still has, but she had committed no crime against the kingdom. She didn’t try to hurt people. She didn’t try to bring about my father’s fall. But I’m not the king, and so long as my father rules the kingdom, I will do my best to keep Morgana’s secret away from him.”

“Thank Goddess, Arthur!” Gwen jumped into his arms to hug him. “Arthur, one day you will be a greater king than you father could ever be. It’s what keeps me going. You are going to be the man I’ve seen inside you, Arthur. I can see a Camelot that is fair and just. I can see a king that the people will love and be proud to call their sovereign. Thank you for being kind to her, Arthur.”

She pressed a soft, tender kiss on his lips; for some reasons, Arthur’s lips felt oddly cold and unwelcome. When she heard the cough behind her back, she broke the kiss and stepped back from Arthur. What a relief it was to know it was just Merlin.

“Merlin! I was… talking to Arthur. I was… I was about to go,” she said and was surprised to see Merlin give her a sharp look on the way out.
An Old Affair

Chapter Summary

The King is invited to join Lady Yrien and Lord Rion at the dinner.

Chapter Notes

Uther POV

Uther was surprised to receive an invitation for dinner from Lady Yrien. Every lord and lady in the castle had long learned the king’s habit of having dinner in the big hall. He would usually dine with Arthur and Morgana, and would certainly invite the envoys of other kingdoms, if they were in the castle with the diplomatic missions, and the lords and ladies on their birthdays.

There was still no news about Morgana, and Arthur and his training men had left for the border with Brechfa the previous evening, so the unexpected dinner with Lady Yrien was more pleasant than the idea of enjoying the silent supper alone.

He smiled at the thought that there could be something more about the invitation than just a gesture of courtesy. He was, after all, expected to marry Lady Yrien, and even though the agreement had been verbally sealed thirty-two years ago, Lady Yrien still looked gracious and elegant at forty. *Maybe if I had waited for her to come of age I wouldn’t have needed to ask Nimueh for help with an heir.* Age hadn’t affected Yrien the way it had affected Uther, and the king was sure the old Gingawaine could still be hoping to marry his sister to the King.

Uther, of course, could never let it happen. Lady Yrien had a son, and Uther couldn’t marry a woman who already had children: that would create unnecessary tension for his only heir.

He hoped Lord Gingawaine would be at the dinner, too. Or Rion. Sharing a room with a lady for dinner could stir silly gossips in the castle, and when the kingdom was at war, he didn’t want the mind of his people to be puzzled by his nonexistent love affairs.

The war, in the meanwhile, proved to be more irritating than dangerous. The grieve rumours were coming from Brechfa, and several commoners that managed to escape reported violent abuse by Cenred’s soldiers, but that was expected. Cenred had occupied Uther’s most fruitful region and was meant so spare only those whose work was vital for the autumn harvest.

Maybe he needed to address the matter of war publicly. Lord Sagramore, the Councilor of Camelot, had presented a report to him, right before the feast, that the commoners were worried by the preparations for something they didn’t quite understand. There were rumours about the future castle siege, there were rumours about Cenred burning the crops in Brechfa and leaving the kingdom to a hungry winter, as well as rumours about Camelot going to war. Uther, however, thought that giving a speech before his army was fully equipped and ready to march was premature.

The way to Morgana’s chambers provoked the bitter feeling again. He was ready to trade all the land
of Brechfa for his daughter, he was ready to sacrifice all the commoners of Gingawaine’s castle if it meant bringing Morgana back home. And once he had her back, his revenge on Cenred would have no limits. He would not stop before Essetir was cleansed off the face of earth.

Thankfully, Lady Yrien was not alone. He was greeted by her maid, the one he had met in Morgana’s chambers days ago. Her son was there, too, seated beside the table. He rose as Uther entered the room. Lady Yrien was standing, too. She was wearing a crimson dress, and had her hair combed in a fashion that displayed modest beauty.

“My Lord, it’s a joy to see you,” she greeted him. “I’ve heard that you’re not fond of dining at your lords’ and ladies’ chambers, but I hoped you’d make an exception for us.”

“Your majesty,” Rion bowed down.

“Lord Rion, I haven’t noticed you at the feast the day before yesterday,” Uther remarked casually.

“I could barely walk, Sire.”

“What happened?”

“He’s too ashamed to tell,” Lady Yrien blushed a little as she invited Uther to take his place beside the table.

“What is it? You can tell me, there’s no need to be ashamed, Lord Rion.”

“Sire, can you promise that you will not tell Arthur about it?”

“Rion, you can’t demand promises from the king!” Lady Yrien was burning her son with her look.

“It’s fine, my lady,” Uther calmed her. “Whatever has happened will not be reported to the prince, you may have my word. It’ll not be easy to report to him, he left the castle yesterday.”

“I have fallen off the horse,” Rion’s tone suggested it was the most humiliating experience of his life.

“What’s to be ashamed of?” Uther smiled.

“Arthur told me a knight must be excellent at riding horses.”

After a short silence that followed, Uther burst out with laughter.

“It took Arthur two or three years before he could feel comfortable in the saddle,” Uther said when his laughter stopped. “Don’t think that the prince was always the kind of knight he is today. Arthur is talented, no doubt of that, but it took much training and discipline, and I can assure you, the prince has fallen off the horses many times. In fact, more times than I can count.”

“That’s what I told you, Rion,” Lady Yrien was triumphant in her “I was right” tone. “It takes time to learn.”

>Your mother’s right. You must not be so harsh on yourself, although you should always try to test your limits. Courage and cautiousness both make you a great knight.”

“Would my Lord like to taste some wine?” Yrien proposed.

“Which one?”
“The Roman one,” she sounded proud.

“The Roman? Cynric told me there would be no Roman wine for at least a week.”

“He seemed to have one bottle which he had agreed to sell me.”

“Cynric is always full of surprises,” Uther remarked with discontent. “I’ll talk to him about that.”

“Don’t judge him too strictly, my Lord. I bought this bottle and he got his money. He can’t be asking money from you.”

“He can’t. I pay him well enough for his service to be asked to pay for his wine.”

“Gwen, please, pour some wine for me and his majesty,” Lady Yrien ordered. “Rion, you wanted to show something to the king?”

“Oh, yes,” young Rion sounded excited. “Your majesty, I found this in the room yesterday. I think we must show it to you. I think it could belong to Lady Morgana.”

Rion stood up and went to the wardrobe. Morgana? Uther had demanded that Morgrana’s chambers were emptied before Gingawaines moved in. Everything that belonged to Lady Morgana was in the Royal Tower now.

“What is it?” Uther asked, standing up, too.

“Some earrings.”

“Show me.”

The king approached young Rion who was holding a red-stone earring in his hand.

“It doesn’t belong to my mother. Maybe they belong to Lady Morgana?”

Uther couldn’t possibly remember all the jewels he had given to Morgana. There were too many occasions. He turned to Gwen who had just finished pouring the wine.

“What do you say? Do you recognize your mistress’s earrings?”

Gwen stared at the red stone and shook her head.

“My Lord, I’m afraid I don’t recognize them. But maybe Lady Morgana just never showed them to me. She had so many jewels.”

“I will ask the treasurer. Thank you, Lord Rion.”

“Not at all, your majesty.”

When they got back at the table, Lady Yrien raised her goblet with wine.

“We all hope she will be found soon, my Lord. We know how you have treasured her. I propose a toast: for the soonest return of Lady Morgana.”

“For the soonest return of Lady Morgana!”

Uther drank. It was the best wine he had tasted in a long time.
Chapter Summary

Grievous news reach the castle, and more grievous events follow.

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV

People were screaming. The dragon appeared out of nowhere; when he was high in the sky, his silhouette could be mistaken for a strange bird in the paling moonlight, but as the bird was growing bigger and bigger, people realized it was a monster. But when they realized, it was too late. The fire was showering the Lower Town, and all they had to do was scream the life out of their lungs as the fire was swallowing them.

Gwen woke up, shuddering, and was relieved to open her eyes to the familiar sight of her house. The table, the cupboards, the mild chestnut glow of her room from the light of the morning. It smelled of the flowers she had gathered yesterday and put in the vase.

There was no turning back for her now. She was more afraid than ever, and yet she was feeling most confident. We will not kill Uther. We will help him die sooner. But who am I to decide who lives and who dies?

Even though the path back was not an option any longer, Gwen’s conscience was torn apart by the scene of Uther drinking his Roman wine with a smile. She had no moral authority in the matter, she understood that. Who am I to decide the fate of the king?

I am among those whom he swore to protect. Instead, he killed my father, nearly burnt Gaius, refused to save Merlin when Merlin saved his son during the talks with Bayard, killed Morgana’s parents and had condemned whole villages to death during the Great Purge. And refused to save the commoners of Brechfa from Cenred’s army because of his stupid strategy. I have all the rights to judge my king.

The screams were heard again. Gwen sat in her bed. They were real. The screams were real. Something was happening. Her heart nearly stopped when she began to think of the worst reasons. Is it Cenred’s army? Has he managed to catch us off-guard? What’s to be with us all?

She slipped into her servant’s outfit quickly and washed her face with the cold water from the basin. When she stepped out of the house, she noticed her neighbours camping outside, too. Brunhilda with her three children and old Grettha, the grey-haired toothless woman, leaning on a stick.

"What's happening?" Gwen asked fearfully.

"We don't know! Something on the main street," Brunhilda complained. "Gwen, can't you go and
see?"

"It's the war, I tell you!" Grettha cursed, the spits flying from her mouth.

"Stop it, you silly old crow! You're scaring my children," Brunhilda was about to curse, too. "Gwen, I beg you, go and see!"

Gwen started running to the main street. The morning air was soft and chilly, but the gusts of wind were carrying the tender heat of yesterday’s nearly perfect weather. The closer she was to the main street, the more people were there; when she finally reached the corner, the crowd was too dense for her to see anything.

"What's going on?" she asked the first man standing next to her. The man didn't answer. Gwen tried to get through the crowd and ask anybody who had a clue.

"Cenred killed another patrol," finally someone answered. "This time on the border with Brechfa. He’s closer and closer to the castle."

When he said that, the crowd suddenly went silent. A cart appeared, and two knights riding in front of it. There were three pairs of legs covered with the red blood-stained cloaks of Camelot on the carts.

"It’s the prince! The prince!" somebody in the crowd screamed.

"What?! What prince?!" Gwen screamed in denial.

"Are the many princes in Camelot, you, silly girl?" some woman shouted from behind her back. "It’s but prince Arthur!"

"It's the Dragonslayer! The Dragonslayer is dead!"

"Prince Arthur is dead!"

"The prince is dead!"

Gwen's knees were so weak she would have fallen on the ground had the crowd not been so dense that there was actually nowhere to fall. Arthur dead? Are they mad?

“No! This can’t be him! Please, let me through. Please. I’m Gingawaine’s maid,” she was cutting her way through the crowd, shoving people off her way.

"Is it prince Arthur?!" she screamed at Sir Leon who was riding in front of the cart.

"Get out of the way!" he screamed. "We have to deliver the news to the king!"

Gwen started running. Her heels were aching from hitting the ground hard, and when there were stones under her feet, it hurt even worse. There was no way she could keep up with Sir Leon on a horse, but she could reach Gaius. The guards followed her with bewildered looks as she was sprinting for the citadel. She was completely out of breath when she was trying to climb the stairs of the physician's tower.

"Gaius," she blurted out when she opened his door and fell on her knees, trying to recover from running.

"Gwen! What is it now?" Gaius was probably afraid Gwen had learned something about Morgana again and was trying to accuse him of other crimes.
"Gaius, there are bodies there..."

"What bodies, Gwen?!"

"They...say...it's...Arthur."

"Arthur?"

"They say Arthur was killed, Gaius," she started weeping.

Gaius dropped his tea pot and almost ran towards her.

"What do you mean, Gwen? Gwen?" he started shaking her by the shoulders, demanding her to rise to her feet and to give some explanations. "Gwen!"

"There was a cart..."

"Where is Merlin?"

"I don't know... I hope not on that cart… Gaius, oh Goddess!"

The door opened again, and Sir Leon, with a sweating face, ran into the room.

"Gaius, for the love of Camelot!" he shouted.

Four knights stepped into the room, carrying the unconscious body of Uther Pendragon. Gwen jumped out of their way.

"What happened?" Gaius looked terrified.

"Gaius! Help the king!" Sir Leon begged.

"Put him on the table, fast!"

They dumped Uther’s body on the table; his hands and legs bounced off in a manner that would be funny had the circumstances not been so tragic.

"Now tear his shirt, come on, come on! Don’t be standing!"

The knights did what Gaius ordered as the physician was checking Uther’s pulse and breathing. They bared the pale chest and stomach of the king. Something happened to his face features, Gwen was sure. His face looks so different, like it doesn’t belong to Uther.

"What happened?" Gaius asked as he ran to the cupboard with potions and draughts, picking one green bottle.

"I have delivered the news of his son," Leon replied.

"What news?"

"Arthur was slain in the patrol. His body was brought back to Camelot. Together with the bodies of his knights, Hengest and Evaine."

"And Merlin? What’s with Merlin?"

"There is no news about his servant. Neither about Owaine, Modron or Aglovale."
Gaius threw a quick glance at Gwen, and then stared right into Sir Leon’s eyes.

“Sir Leon, come here. You’re the strongest. I need your help. He’s not breathing, and his heart’s not beating. I’m now going to administer the remedy, the one that’s meant to wake people even from the deepest dreams. You’ll have to press your hands to his chest. We need to make sure his heart beats again and pumps the blood through his body, so we’ll have to help him.”

“I’ll do as you say,” Sir Leon nodded.

Gaius opened the bottle and let five drops fall into Uther’s mouth. He then poured some water, tilting the king’s head with his own hands.

“Do it!” Gaius commanded.

Sir Leon started massaging the king’s chest. The four knights that stood in the room seemed to be holding their breaths. Gwen, too, was afraid to make a sound as she was watching Leon try to bring Uther back to life. It is my doing. It was me and Rion. Where’s Rion?

“It’s not helping!” Leon shouted.

“Give him some more of your remedy!” another knight suggested.

Gaius let another ten drops of green potion into Uther’s mouth.

“Try it, Leon!”

Leon kept massaging the king’s chest, but apart from making Uther’s body quiver, it seemed to be producing no effect.

“It’s not working! Gaius, we must do something!”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing to be done,” Gaius stepped back. “The king is dead.”

The knights stared at him in disbelief.

“Why? Gaius, we thought he simply fainted!”

“His heart must have collapsed from the news of Arthur,” Gaius concluded. “It hasn’t been beating for five minutes at least, and he’s not breathing. With all my abilities, Leon, I can’t repair a heart with a potion. You may wish to find Geoffrey and ring the bells.”

The knights kept staring at Uther’s body in disbelief.

Gwen was about to scream. It was not what she wanted, not what she had planned. She hoped Uther just wouldn’t wake up one day, would die in his sleep. Uther’s death was supposed to herald the new age. She wanted to see the mighty tyrant fall, instead she saw a breathless lifeless body dumped on the table, the horribly indifferent feature of Uther’s expression and the sad smile on his lips. Goddess. It felt like she had helped to kill an innocent man.

“I need to see the prince’s body,” the physician demanded.

“He is already dead, Gauis,” Leon’s voice was broken with tears that he didn’t feel ashamed of.

“It doesn’t matter. You will guard the king’s body with your life,” Gaius ordered to the four knights and walked out of the chambers.
Gwen followed Gaius and Leon to the royal stables, where the cart was placed. The horses, as if they were aware of what was hidden beneath the red cloaks, were snorting angrily.

“Show me,” Gaius demanded.

Leon pulled the cloak and bared the dead body. Gwen turned away from the horrifying sight and vomited on the ground. Arthur’s face was crumpled and crushed, his eyes were cut out and it was a mess of blood and pink flesh. His nose was cut off, and his fair hair were washed in blood.

“Whoever did that, they used a hammer,” Leon covered the body with the cloak, not bearing to look at it any longer himself. “He looks like Arthur. He has his sword, his shield and his cloak. His knights were slaughtered, too, although their faces were not so…”

The bells rang. All the bells in the castle, and it was a different tune – not the one to signal the escape of somebody from the dungeons or to warn of the enemy approaching the castle.

“Gaius, I must be there, you know…”

“Of course,” Gaius nodded. “I’ll be after you.”

Leon ran away from the stables.

“Gaius, what’s going on?” Gwen asked through tears.

“Don’t worry, child,” Gaius came to hug her. “This is most definitely not Arthur.”

“What?”

“I fear this lad’s face has been mutilated on purpose, so that it would be harder to determine his identity,” Gaius took her by the hand and started pulling her away from the cart with the dead bodies.

“Why you think it’s not Arthur?”

“There’s no Merlin around.”

“How can you think that Merlin’s absence is some sort of proof?”

“Gwen, we must hope it’s not Arthur.”

“But the other bodies, they are really his knights!”

“Gwen, gather yourself! I know that they are his knights, but why would someone who killed Arthur want to destroy his face when it’s the only thing to prove the prince’s identity? Owaine, Aglovale, Modron, Merlin and Arthur must be alive. Somehow.”

“Gaius,” Gwen started weeping harder. “What have I done, Gaius?”

The physician froze and took a few steps back.

“Gwen? Gwen, what’s the matter? Speak!”

“Young Rion has persuaded me to poison Uther,” Gwen whispered, running out of air from tears and fears. “The day before yesterday…”

Gaius grabbed her by the wrist.
“What poison did you give? Answer!”

“I don’t know, it’s the one Lady Yrien has been giving to Lord Gingawaine! Rion told me this poison makes someone’s heart weaker…”

“Gwen. You’ve helped him with a coup,” Gaius sounded like he wanted to kill her.

“A coup?”

“How could you be so silly? Rion knew the news about dead Arthur could kill Uther’s weakened heart! This pretender’s body was brought on purpose! Now people think that both, the king and the prince, are dead!”

“What are we to do then?”

“Gwen, if you want to stand a chance of survival now, you will do as I say,” although he was trying to instruct her on the ways to stay alive, there was little compassion in his voice. “If you confess that you’ve poisoned the king, you will die. If you accuse Rion of it, you will die because you will have no proof and your word is not valued as much as Lord Gingawaine’s nephew.”

“But if I get the cup, will you determine the poison?”

“I can do that, but I fear the cup has long been gone. Gwen, you must not be a step further from me if you hope to live. You’re the only one who knows Uther was murdered. Rion will be glad to get rid of you.”

“Gaius, if Arthur’s alive, where is he?”

“Somewhere in great danger, I presume.”

The bells kept ringing.

Chapter End Notes

Now that King Uther Pendragon is dead, the major character death warning is lifted.
The Great Danger

Chapter Summary

Uther is dead and the castle believes that Arthur was murdered in the patrol. Since Arthur has no legitimate brothers, sisters or cousins, the new king must be chosen.

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gwen wanted to believe Arthur was alive. What other option do I have? To accept the news that the corpse with the hammered and mutilated face is my prince? That the man I hoped to be the better king for this land died in the patrol? To see the last pieces of hope burn and the ashes spread all over the war-torn kingdom?

Even if Gaius hadn't voiced his concerns about the body's identity, she would have denied it anyway. She was simply not fit to face yet another loss of her dear friend. Someone so close and dear to her as Arthur could not just die. Not after my father, or my brother, or Morgana. Not Arthur. I will not bear.

Gwen did little to dry her eyes, but she wasn't ashamed of tears. The whole land would be weeping soon enough. She knew she had to feel victorious and even proud that Uther was gone, but the fears for Arthur overshadowed whatever joy the king's passing could bring her.

Is it fine that I don't pity someone dead?

Why should I pity the murderer of my own father?

He didn't murder your father.

No, he didn't, but it was because of his order and his stupid laws that my father got into the position when he was accused of practicing magic.

And now what? You thought Arthur would be a great king, but he might as well be dead, lying in the royal stables under the red Camelot cloak, the flesh of his face already attracting the flies from the horseshit.

She tried to exile the deepest fears out of her head, and she noticed she was following Gaius, rather mindlessly, into the castle. But it was not only her. A lot of people were walking to the citadel from the Lower Town, and these people would never be admitted to the castle on any other day, at least not in such numbers. The bells kept ringing.

"Gaius, what's happening?"

"Those who are old enough to know the rules are going to see the new king being elected."
"The new king? But Gaius, if Arthur's alive..."

"How are we going to prove it, Gwen?" for the first time in many years, Gwen was witnessing the nervous breakdown of the court physician. The old man's hands were rising in the air, his eyebrows dancing, his face was red from anger and anxiety. His stronghold of patience and mental stamina was breached. "If we tell them Arthur's alive, they will demand that we send another search party for him. And how can we trust this search party? What if the same men who killed the knights ride to find Arthur and finish what they were supposed to do?"

"We'll send Sir Leon. He would never betray Arthur."

"The Commander of the Knights riding to the lands close to Cenred’s army? At such a gruesome hour, when the war may break up our defense any minute? Have you lost your mind?"

"What must we do then?"

She was so afraid of that moment, but it had come nonetheless. The snake of guilt was biting her and the venom was spreading through her thoughts, from her mind to her very heart. *What have I done? Can I undo this horror? Is it horror?*

Gaius did little and less to inspire safety. The old man’s eyes were filled with fear. Gwen knew he wasn’t afraid for himself as much as he was afraid for Merlin. *He's like a son to him, and always on Arthur’s side. If somebody tried to kill Arthur, Merlin might have suffered the same fate. Goddess, please, help them. Help them both.*

"We must observe," the physician came to the simple, but not an easy conclusion and for the first time he looked at Gwen as at his equal. "Gwen, whatever you've done, you did because you had reasons. Because you thought Uther deserved it or... Uther's death, you see... indeed, can make... it can make life better for some people. But you have been used in a game of far greater scale than you can possibly comprehend. Young Rion is not as simple as he looks or sounds. He is no green lad. He persuaded you to help Uther die, and the next day somebody brings the body of supposedly dead Arthur, and when Uther receives the news, his heart collapses because of poison, but it looks like a natural death. Arthur had no cousins. The kingdom without a king and without a prince must elect a new king."

"You think the one who becomes the king today is the one behind Arthur's dea... Arthur's assassination?"

"I'm certain of it."

"But it's not Rion?"

"Rion is too young for the throne."

"How are they going to elect the king? Are they going to listen to all the small folk?"

"Of course not. It's just that everybody is allowed to witness this process so that the legitimacy of the new king is never questioned. We must be observing everything very attentively. There may be more to the whole plot than just Lord Gingawaine and his nephew. Come with me now."

Gwen followed Gaius through the castle. *Cenred’s army can easily take Camelot know, there would be nobody to stop them,* she thought. *It seems like everybody is here.* The vulnerability of their position seemed terrifying. *Election of the new king? I did it for Arthur. I thought Arthur would be...*
People kept floating in, forming a river of the small folk washing the castle walls. There were tears, screams, shouts and whispers there. The castle and the citadel could house no more than a few thousands of them, but everybody believed there would be place for him or her, too. At least they don’t bring children with them. So many people don’t look safe.

“We shall walk through Lady Morgana’s chambers to the balcony above the hall,” Gaius warned her, as they were making their way up the stairs, with many people seated there and talking about the death of Dragonslayer. Gwen was afraid she could step onto someone’s hand as she was climbing the stairs; the red cloaks of Camelot’s knights were nowhere to be seen.

“I trust you hold the keys from Rion’s chambers?”

“I do,” she fished the keys out and opened the door.

Morgana’s room, although a relief of silence, had its walls trembling from the mummer that had captured the castle. There were clothes on the bed, and food and wine on the table. It seemed that whoever was in the room had to leave it suddenly.

“Gaius? Are we going to look for something here? While we have the chance?”

“No! We are not, but I think we can’t help ourselves.”

When they did, Gaius led the way through a less crowded area of the castle to the unnoticeable ladder that brought them to the balcony – the one usually occupied by the king’s guards, but now – empty, despite providing the best view over the hall.

Gwen couldn’t believe what she saw. The last time she remembered so many people walk the corridors of the citadel was many years ago, when Mercia waged war against Camelot and Uther had to let the small folk in to survive the siege while the army from his western territories was marching to smash Bayard of Mercia.

The hall was a greater disaster now. In the center, a bunch of lords and ladies were surrounded by the knights, who tried to hold off the crowd of all sorts of people. It looked like a revolt.

"Why is everybody in the hall?"

"There is a law about how the new king must be elected if anything happens to Uther and Arthur,” Gaius whispered. “It is, in fact, the same law under which Uther was elected.”

“I thought Uther won the throne by force?”

“Of course he did, but in order to legitimize his claim, he staged the elections. All the other candidates had no chance against him, of course, it was a set-up, but it made the lords of Southern territories recognize him.”

“So what’s the law?"

“Only Uther's children can assume his throne if he dies, and if Arthur dies, then his cousins can assume the throne, and if Arthur has no cousins, the mentions of the other heirs in his will must not be recognized. The king is to be elected by the Great Council. Geoffrey will call it soon."
Gwen noticed Geoffrey’s grey hair in the safe circle of the hall; he was whispering something to Lady Dindrane, and sweating.

"Great Council? Uther's council, you mean?"

"No. There were eight people at Uther's council, including me and Geoffrey. The Great Council has twenty people, each and every one of them can seek the throne. Eleven people from great houses of Camelot and nine lords and ladies of the Camelot territories. Twenty altogether. The election can only take place if three fourth of the Great Council is present."

*Divide twenty by four and multiply by three. Fifteen members must be present. But there are just eleven great houses in Camelot.*

"So there must be all the members of the great houses and at least four lords or ladies from the territories?"

"Indeed."

"Gaius, there are five of them. Lord Gingawaine from Brechfa. The Lady of Ascetir, the Lady of Gedref, the Lord of Nemeton and the Lord of Balor have all arrived as Uther demanded. I saw them before the Summer feast!"

"Which means the election is legitimate even though not a single Lord or Lady from the western territories is here," Gaius nodded.

He was staring at the crowd, as if he had the magic power to see through people and read their thoughts and intentions as easily as he could read his books. *What is he looking for? What will he do now?*

"My lords and ladies, brave knights and common people, all the men, women and children," Geoffrey voice descended upon the hall like thunder from the sky – she could never believe that the old man could speak so loudly. "The king is dead. The prince is dead, too. Their bodies are being moved to the burial vaults as we speak, and the ceremony will be held to bid farewell to the great king Uther and his brave son Arthur. But before that, Camelot must have a king or a queen, for the kingdom must have a monarch just like the living body must have a head. If it pleases my lords and ladies, everybody with the seal of the great house or the seal of the lordship over Camelot territory, come sit down beside the table and place the ring with your house seal for my inspection."

Sixteen people took the seats. Gwen knew most of them, all the members of Uther’s council, and the lords from the great houses she had met at dinners, Uther’s gatherings, jousts and tournaments so many times. She couldn’t help but notice that there were just four women beside the table.

Lady Dindrane from the oldest great house of Camelot, the only woman who didn’t try to wear something red for the occasion. In her simple green dress, with the grey hair which have become a little blueish from too much time under the sun, she was already carrying something regal about her look.

Lady Caelia, a woman young enough to have a child, was in the same red dress she had worn to the Summer feast. Lady Caelia was widowed when her husband, Sir Randon, was killed by bandits who later stole the Crystal of Neahtid, but Gwen heard the gossips that said Lady Caelia was planning to marry again and was considering Lord Cynric, but feared that such marriage would lower her court influence, because Cynric, despite being rich, was probably the least tolerated noble in the castle.

The Lady of Gedref seemed in mourning; the devastating news about Arthur and his knights left her
in the tremulous position, because her son, Owaine, although formally lost, was believed to be dead by many knights. The image that her son’s body was lost in the woods and served as an easy prey for the wolves or the crows was driving her mad, and she was the only one to wear an all-black dress.

The Lady of Ascetir didn’t wear black, even though the heirs of her house died in the attack on Arthur’s patrol and was brought back on the cart; he could be recognized easily. She seemed to be lifted, even inspired; Gwen was thinking it was a mask Lady Meirchion had to put on because of all the small folk in the hall.

"My lords and ladies, brave knights and common people, all the men, women and children," having counted the rings, Geoffrey spoke again. “For the king is dead and his heir is dead, we must bring the new monarch to the throne. There are twenty people in Camelot who are worthy of a throne. It’s the Great Council of Camelot, eleven members of the great houses and nine lords and ladies of Camelot’s territories. Each member of the Great Council has a ring. Today, sixteen rings out of twenty have been presented, the number is enough to proceed. To become the monarch, a member of the Great Council must earn more than half of the rings, which is nine. Anybody who earns nine rings or more in the voting, becomes the king or the queen. Those who wish to earn the throne must declare their names. They can’t vote and their rings shall remain with me. The rest of the Great Council members vote by giving their rings to the one they see most fit to rule. My lords and ladies, brave knights and common people, all the men, women and children. By the power vested in me, I shall declare the election started. Who wants to rule Camelot?"

"I do," Gwen saw a flesh of green dress, and the silence seized the hall as if somebody had cast a spell. Gaius was looking pleased. “Anna of House Dindrane. My lords, my ladies, my good people. I come from the oldest house of Camelot. My family is rich and famous enough, and I don't seek the throne for my own wealth or glory. My whole life was about Camelot, this land is everything I know, and I would wish nothing less than to make it prosper and to make it peaceful. I will take good care of the land, I promise.”

An approving roar rang from the floor to the ceiling; Lady Dindranes’ voice was perfumed with gentle care and sincere love for the land. She was probably the most famous member of the great houses without a seat at Uther’s council. Uther feared the woman’s influence and her legacy too much to let her anywhere near power. The small folk remembered that Lady Dindrane and Morgana were the only nobles to give their food to commoners when the drought fell on the land.

"Who else wants to rule?"

"I do," Lord Gingawaine rose, clanging. He chose to put on his armor and his battle cloak; when he was all dressed for fighting, Gwen realized why the knights seemed to fear him. However decrepit at the feasts, he looked victorious as a knight and as a warrior, and his grey beard which made him look like a nomad sometimes added to the image of a wise warlord. His voice was loud as ever. “People of Camelot! To those of you who don't know me - here stands Ryence of House Gingawaine. Lady Dindrane may be old and wise, and I’m no younger - that I can promise!”

This time, the hall burs out with laughter. Are they mad? Have they forgotten their king is dead? Gwen looked at Gaius to share her indignation, but the old physician was paying no attention to her; he was inspecting every words Gingawaine said, every gesture he made and every breath he took.

“I have been ruling the land of Brechfa for thirty-five years, and my land has become the most prosperous in our kingdom. We’ve often come to your castle’s rescue, like in the war with Mercia or with Caerleon. We tried to help you with food after the attack of the beast, but Cenred invaded our land and now the whole kingdom is in great danger. It's not peace which we need now, people of
Camelot. We need to fight against the foe that threatens to cut us all like sheep. The foe that wants to destroy the fruits of our hard work. The foe that aligns himself with magic creatures and witches. The foe that casts a dark shadow over the castle in this bright summer. People of Camelot, 200 men have I brought with me from Brechfa, 200 soldiers. I promise that as a king I will deal with Cenred with the army that is already in Howden. I will not require a single extra man of Lower Town or Southern Village to join the army and I will free our kingdom of the uninvited guests."

People started cheering for him, the way they used to cheer for the champions at the tourneys. **Was it his plan all along? Is it his revenge on Uther because Uther didn’t come to rescue Brechfa the instant he received the news of the invasion?**

"Who else wants to rule?"

"Hector of House Cynric,” the tradesman introduction was met with laughter in the distant corner of the hall. “My lords. My ladies. People of Camelot. There are those asking you to give them power because of their great houses and their long history, or because they will smash our enemies. I promise to you that I will defeat Cenred's army in two weeks. And if I reign, I will personally see that all of the people of Camelot become as rich as never before. I promise it to every house in this land."

Cynric’s promises seemed to confuse everybody – from Lord Accolon, who was probably trying to figure the strategy Cynric was planning to use to defeat Cenred in two weeks, to Lord Sagramore, who was considering the ways Cynric could follow to make the people of Camelot as rich as never before.

"Who else wants to rule?"

"Deos of House Sagramore,” the giant man stood up, the medallion shaking on his chest. “The good people of our castle know me well. And I have come to know them, and I promise to use that knowledge if I am king."

“Who else wants to rule Camelot?"

Following the moments of silence, Geoffrey looked around the hall, and it seemed to Gwen that his voice was shaking when he announced:

“Let the votes be cast!”

Gwen was watching, Gaius was watching, too, but there was something disturbing about his look; it reminded Gwen of the hunter’s discipline before he chose to shoot his victim.

"Why would Leon vote for Gingawaine?” Gwen asked when she saw Leon present his ring to Old Gingawaine.

"Because he knows our kingdom is at war and he'd rather see a skilled warlord on the throne. I'm sure Accolon will support his claim as well."

"Oh no!” Gwen let out a sigh when she saw Lord Accolon pass his ring to Gingawaine, as well.

"It was expected, child,” the gloom in the voice of the physician was frightening. “Now look."

"All the lords and ladies from the territories!” Gwen whispered. “They are all voting for him! Lady Meirchion! Lord Pellinore! Lord Ragnell! Lady Gedref! Gaius, why?"

"They rule the distant territories of Camelot. They are far from our castle and their territories are close
to the borders. Ascetir borders Essetir. Gedref borders Deorham. Nemeton and Balor border Nemeth. They are afraid of Cenred's army, too, and they seek protection."

"My lords and ladies, brave knights and common people, all the men, women and children. Four people wanted to rule Camelot. The votes were cast! Lord Gingawaine has gathered six rings. Lady Dindrane has gathered three rings. Lord Cynric has gathered one ring. Lord Sagramore has gathered two rings. According to our laws, Lord Cynric can no longer have a claim for the throne. I return your ring to you, Lord Cynric. You can vote now. My lords and ladies, we have to vote again, and this time, there are three people who wish to rule Camelot: Lady Dindrane, Lorg Gingawaine and Lord Sagramore."

"Gaius, Cynric's voting for Gingawaine," Gwen noticed when the second round of voting started.

"That's his revenge. Other lords and ladies have always mistreated Lord Cynric because they were jealous of him. They may regret it now."

"Gaius! Lord Vortimer, he's voting for Gingawaine, too!"

"Interesting..."

Gwen tried to count the number of rings Gingawaine collected during the second round. Is he the new king?

"My lords and ladies, brave knights and common people, all the men, women and children. Three people wanted to rule Camelot. Lady Dindrane has gathered three rings. Lord Gingawaine has gathered eight rings. Lord Sagramore has gathered two rings. According to our laws, Lord Sagramore can no longer claim the throne. I return your ring to you, Lord Sagramore. You can vote now. My lords and ladies, we have to vote again, and this time, there are just two people who wish to rule Camelot: Lady Dindrane and Lorg Gingawaine."

"If he gets another ring, he'll be king of Camelot," Gaius said. "It all depends on those two who voted for Sagramore. Lord Geraint and Lady Caelia. Who will they vote for: Lady Dindrane or for Gingawaine?"

"Gaius, how do we stop him?" Gwen was desperate.

"We can't stop him now. I fear he's to be the new king. Gwen, there's something I must do. I will leave you, but when the election is over, you must meet me in the vaults."

"In the vaults?"

"Yes. Try not to get into Rion's sight."

Gwen saw Gaius go. What is he up to? Why the vaults? She turned back to the hall where Goeffrey spoke.

"My lords and ladies, brave knights and common people, all the men, women and children. Two people wanted to rule Camelot. Lady Dindrane has gathered five rings. Lord Gingawaine has gathered nine rings. According to our laws, Lord Gingawaine is now the king of Camelot. Long live the king!"

"Long live the king! Long live the king! Long live the king!"
Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will take us to the forests of Brechfa, and we'll see what Merlin and Arthur are up to, I promise :)}
Merlin joins Arthur and his five soon-to-be knights in their first patrol mission after Cenred's invasion. Things are a bit complicated because Merlin has witnessed Gwen and Arthur's kiss in the prince's room.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

So I just wanted to remind everybody that the events in the castle have overtaken the Merlin-Arthur storyline, the castle of Camelot is actually three days ahead of Merlin-Arthur in storytime.

When Merlin and Arthur arrive at the forest of Brechfa, Uther's still alive and well and is expected at Lady Yrien's dinner the following day.

VOLUME III

MERLIN AND ARTHUR

Riding away to the border with Brechfa was so much different from leading the scared horses through the forests of Ascetir. The southern road was broad and well-maintained; Modron said it had been built by the Romans hundreds of years ago, but still served the land better than many of the new constructions.

There was a different, free and rebellious wind coming from the south, it was slamming through the open harvest fields and farmlands of southern Camelot and Brechfa. If Merlin could turn into a bird, to him the land would have looked like a giant piece of cloth woven from dozens or even hundreds of smaller pieces. Some fields were rich-black, others were golden-yellow, the grass was vividly-green, and the sky was watery-grey.

It would rain now and then, but Merlin didn't care. There was wind in his hair, he was holding the bridles and smiling to the sky and to the road that lay ahead. He was still angry with Arthur for that scene in his chambers which involved Gwen, but they hadn't talked. Merlin left the room as soon as Gwen was out, and tried to avoid Arthur ever since. In fact, Merlin hadn't said a single word to Arthur since they started riding. Arthur was looking his way, but Merlin never looked back.

He thought there was already nothing between her and Arthur. He thought Arthur meant it when he said it was over. He remembered how heartbroken Arthur was when he found Gwen and Lancelot in the castle of Hengist. He remembered Gwen's tears when she found out Lancelot had left her and
sort of given her to Arthur, as if she was an object, a sword or something. Nobody had ever hurt her feelings the way Lancelot had. Arthur saw her tears, he realized Gwen would have given the whole kingdom up for the chance to find Lancelot and be safely together somehow, and it was a cruel surprise for the prince.

When they'd got back to Camelot after saving Gwen, Arthur had chosen not to speak to anybody for two days. He thought that Gwen was unfaithful even though he himself hadn't promised anything to her. Gwen, in turn, was feeling betrayed by Lancelot who didn't have the courage to fight for their feelings. Merlin thought nothing could come between Arthur and Gwen after the castle of Hengist.

_Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I wasn't._ He didn't want to think about what was the meaning of the kiss which he had witnessed. All he cared about was chasing the horizon, feeling the tension of the horse under his saddle and looking at the other knights, all so excited on their first true mission. Arthur was desperately trying to catch his attention, but there was nothing to discuss when the knights could hear it.

They had stopped twice. Once in the farming village, about four hours ride from Camelot. People were happy to bring them some food and water; there were many children who wanted to ride a horse and shoot from crossbows. Merlin helped a boy and a girl climb the horse and watched them carefully as they were playing the knights of Camelot. The commoners were asking the knights about Cenred. They said almost nobody was traveling up or down the southern road since Brechfa was taken. They were scared Cenred's army could march on Camelot and take their lands unguarded. Arthur promised it would never happen, and people seemed to believe the Dragonslayer.

"You said the Romans built this road?" Aglovale asked Modron when they were enjoying the last minutes of rest before riding further.

"Everybody knows it. Don’t they have teachers and a library in Ascetir or what?" Modron asked jokingly.

"Watch your tongue, Sir."

"Yes, the Romans did. They conquered us many years ago. They built many things here."

"Where did they go?"

"Back to Rome."

"Why?"

"Their Empire was invaded, their forces had to go home."

"Why did they have to come in the first place?"

"I don't know. Write them a letter. Ask them why the wars are fought," Modron went for his horse.

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As the road took them further south, the chain of Camelot patrols began to show itself. The patrols were positioned both, along the road and in the fields and the emerging forests of Brechfa. The knights positioned in the fields were prohibited to start fires; the flames at nights served as a sign to warn the other nearest patrol about the coming of Cenred’s army.

When they were passing the patrol groups, they stopped for moments to exchange a word or two. Men were mostly complaining that staying near the road was too damn boring. _Idiots_, Merlin
thought. They don’t value peace and long for war just because they think having an axe or a blade in your body is something entertaining. They should be celebrating every day when they get the chance to peacefully fool around and play. If they were in Brechfa now, if they experienced what all the commoners were forced to go through, they would abandon or ignore all this foolish thirst for battle. Would they?

"Aglovale, you know we'll have to shove a cloth down your mouth when the night comes?" Owaine shouted from behind Merlin.

"Try to explain why."

"Because if we don’t, your snoring will either expose our location or attract a she-bear from the forest, who will mistake you for one of her kind," the knights burst out laughing, even Arthur permitted a smile to grace his mouth.

*His mouth. Arthur.* Merlin shuddered because he was staring at Arthur’s lips and Arthur caught his gaze, he somehow felt it and captured Merlin’s look with his own, and their eyes met, and Merlin had to break the contact.

"A pity your snoring can only attract a she-bear. She’ll gnaw your cock and..."

"Hey!" Arthur shouted at them, with both, care and anger. “Enough of your foolery, I tell you. We’ve been riding all evening and all I keep hearing is some rubbish, like Aglovale being schooled by the forest birds, or Aglovale fucking a she-bear or Aglvoale snoring like a wildeoreen. Leave the lad be, you hear?"

Arthur’s horse was running close to Merlin’s.

"They are intolerable sometimes," Arthur spoke in a voice that suggested he wanted nobody but Merlin to hear him. "But it happens. Exuberance of youth, they say."

Merlin didn’t respond. In fact, he was afraid to even look at Arthur. *What if there’s something between him and Gwen? What if he’s been doing it behind my back all the time? How will I...*

"Merlin, will you speak to me, please?" Arthur nearly pleaded.

"With the knights so close?" Merlin asked back.

"How many times do I have to tell you that they are not knights yet?"

"Fine. I mean, they are still too close."

Their ride was quick. Having passed the last patrol point, they dismounted and led their horses to the left, to the forest that was as different from the forest of Ascetir as one could imagine. In Ascetir, the trees, although so short, were growing close to each other, thus forming a thicket that, at some spots, wouldn’t welcome a single ray of light on a sunny day. The trees in Brechfa were high and lean, and the air was fresh and didn’t carry the notes of that swampy mustiness like in Ascetir, where the forest smelled of autumn even in the beginning of summer.

As Arthur was leading the way, he was muttering something, probably counting the distance. Merlin tried to feel the energy of the knights. Owaine seemed the most optimistic, ready to give a joke even when woken up in the middle of the night. Modron was more gloomy than the others, and of all the knights in the group, he seemed like the one who found the least pleasure in their first mission, because he couldn’t be careless about the circumstances of their journey. Aglovale was the one to devote most of his time to the training and any physical activity he could think of; when they had
stopped in the village, he tried to cut a tree with his axe and did some arms and hands exercises needed before the crossbow sessions. Hengest and Evaine were the most talkative members of the mission, discussing the ladies at the summer feast and the monsters of magic that were said to haunt the forests of the land.

There was a bleak stain of pink sunset on the edge of the grey, rainy-tearful sky, and that pink stain felt as good as a kiss before the fire flames. The darkness was gathering in the woods, promising a warm night and the wild whispers of the night forest. When they were deep enough in the woods, Arthur pointed at the small hill with an old, withered tree at the top and a hollow at the bottom of the hill.

“There. This will be our camp. Remember, no fires at night. This is patrol. Owaine, Modron, Evaile, you set four tents in the hollow and have some sleep. Aglovale, tie the horses. Hengest, you’re to create a signal fire out of that tree. Merlin and me will be the first on the watch.”

“Yes, Sire,” the knights said, happy and tired.

“Where’s the closest patrol?” Modron inquired.

“There’s one to the west, the group by the road we’ve met. And another one to the east, it’s the last one in the chain,” Arthur responded. “Come on, Merlin, we need to look around. Don’t tell me you’re scared of the woods because of Gaius’s bedtime stories.”

Merlin wanted to whisper a spell that would kick Arthur in the ass. *Bedtime stories. I’m never scared. I’m careful, cautious and sensible.*

Merlin was following Arthur who was clearly trying to take them both out of the knights’ sight. Arthur was as confident as ever, looking back at him from time to time and smiling, and Merlin tried to repress his own smile. He could never imagine that being away from Arthur’s lips for one day could be such a torture. *What’s he going to say?*

They reached a place where the trees were framing a lovely clearing, with blooming yellow and blue flowers and green grass carpet that suggested visitors were rarely in that place. Arthur turned around by the fallen tree and opened his arms, inviting Merlin for an embrace.

"Come here."

"Arthur, please, I’m..." Merlin tried to think of something, but Arthur was quicker. He approached his servant and put his hand on Merlin’s left shoulder, letting it slip, as if unintentionally, until his index finger could be caressing Merlin’s neck. “Arthur, I just...”

Merlin tried to brush Arthur’s hand off.

"You’re sore,” Arthur said in a voice filled with the compassion that was making Merlin’s eyes water; it was as if Arthur was putting Merlin’s pain at full display against his will. “Merlin, stop doing that. You know I’ll have you in my arms anyway. Here.”

Arthur abandoned all the gallant intentions and pulled Merlin into his arms; Merlin fell so eagerly and willingly, thinking that all the jealousy in the world couldn’t pull him a step away from Arthur, with the calm forest evening was washing over them. Arthur was running his hand through Merlin’s hair and looking at Merlin with pompous seriousness until they both broke the silence with laughter.

“‘You’re cold?’ Arthur pulled him closer, trying to share his body heat with Merlin.

"No."

"I can feel that. You're hotter than the fire. Merlin, I know you're sore. But it was Gwen who kissed me, not me who kissed her."

He’s honest. I can feel it. Have I ever felt it when he lied to me, though? Has he ever lied to me?

"Does it make any difference? That she kissed you?"

"Of course, it does! I was as shocked as you were! I didn't expect it!"

"It didn't look so," Merlin said, trying to let out as much anger as he could.

"Merlin. I tell you. She kissed me after I promised that I would never let any harm come to Morgana, even if she has magic."

Oh. Wow. He is not going to kill Morgana. He’s better than me.

"She does have magic."

"Alright. When I said that I would not see her die because of it, Gwen started saying that I was a better king than my father, and that I may be the best king this land will get to have. And then she jumped on me and kissed me."

Sounds like something Gwen would do. Who can blame her, though? How can you not want to jump on him and kiss that prat?

"She wasn't wrong," Merlin cleared his throat.

"About what?"

"About you being the greatest king Camelot will ever know."

"Are you not angry with me any longer?"

Merlin looked around to make sure the knights were not searching for them. He was firmly in Arthur’s hands, they were alone, in yet another beautiful place, away from the castle where they had to always watch their backs and check that they were not in spearmen’s or guards’ sight, and that no court member or knight would suspect an affair between them. Merlin glanced up, at the sky, where the starlight was dawning, and then right into Arthur’s eyes, into the two shining loving blue stars that were radiating the most heartwarming and wild light Merlin could ever hope to stand in.

"I guess I can't be angry with you for too long," he said.

Arthur attacked Merlin’s lips, trying to slow himself down, to stop himself from biting and being too raw. His kisses were lavish and caring, but they displayed the shades of thirst and anger from being away from Merlin for too long, at least for longer than the prince could tolerate.

"Merlin, you've got the sweetest lips," he whispered before opening Merlin’s lips with his tongue.

Merlin couldn’t believe he had been angry with Arthur, he couldn’t believe that anything other than the fire of their kiss mattered in the whole world. Before long he let his own hands around Arthur’s neck in a desperate attempt to be even closer to the prince. I love you.

"Arthur," he tried to break the kiss to see Arthur’s happiest face and the smile that suggested the prince wasn’t about to stop. Arthur started to play, interrupting nearly every Merlin’s word with a kiss. “Arthur…I know …you've got enough… things to care… to care about … I don't want… to make everything…. even more complicated by… you know… being angry with you. But I only…. 
only got angry… because I love you… and I can't stand…. the sight of you… kissing somebody else."

"My little star,” Arthur giggled. “My little jealous star."

"I'm not jealous! Jealous is when you suspect somebody's unfaithful without having any proof. I saw you and Gwen. It’s you who’s always jealous."

"I will never kiss anybody else,” Arthur sealed his promise by grabbing Merlin’s ass. “Only you. I solemnly swear."

"Aren't we supposed to not mess around in the patrol?" Merlin asked, not actually minding tasting Artur’s cock before falling asleep.

"It's not going to work anyway,” Arthur laughed. “With your little bottom in my sight all the time, I will lose control sooner or later. So, how do you want it? Here or in our tent?"

"In our tent?"

"What? Too chaste for that?"

"The knights will hear me. I…I..."

“You what?”

“I, you know, I love it slobbery when I suck your cock.”

“I love it, too,” Arthur tongue burnt Merlin’s earlobe. “So when our watch is over, we’ll go to the camp, wake Agloval and Hengest and we’ll see how slobbery you can be. The others will be asleep. Even if they hear us, I won't be afraid. I want them to know you’re mine. So that they stop looking at you the way…”

“Arthur, nobody’s looking at me the way you do,” Merlin secretly loved that Arthur was jealous, too.

"Owaine called you a treasure..."

"Arthur, that's ridiculous. I'm only yours. My king," Merlin kissed Arthur’s hand and they both looked up, at the top of the trees that seemed to be reaching the sky in the darkness of the night.

“Don’t call me that,” Arthur sounded shy. “It’s going to be a long time before I am king.”

"Have you ever thought about it?"

"About what?"

"About the day when you become the king?"

"I try to avoid thinking about it."

"Why?"

"Because it means the death of my father."

"But if he dies from age and ...

"It'll still mean the death of my father. Merlin, I know that you ... I mean, you can't have any
judgement of the king, because for you, he is the king and you must treat him with respect...”

*Oh, one day I will show you all my judgement and all my respect, and you’ll open your eyes to your father’s ways, too.*

“But to me, he's not only that,” Arthur continued. “We're not just a prince and a king. We're also a father and a son. He had taught me a great deal, he has helped me to become the man I am today. Without him, I don't know who I'd be today.”

"You'd still be you," Merlin pressed an awkward kiss to Arthur’s chin.

"What makes me me?" the prince took him by the hand. “If it's about my character, my features and my inner strengths and weaknesses, my qualities and my skills, then I'd not be the same me without my father. Also, he has been on the throne for thirty-two years. His reign is already considered to be the greatest era of peace in Camelot."

"Apart from the Great Purge, the Mercian War, the Gwynedd War and now, the war with Essetir," Merlin hated to rain on Arthur’s parade, but he wanted to leave as little glory to Uther as possible.

"Father had no intention of waging war against Bayard or Caerleon. They tried to test him."

"Why didn't anybody want to test him before the Purge?" Merlin whispered.

"Ask them. I don't know."
Magic Reveal

Chapter Summary

An incident in the forest of Brechfa makes Merlin use magic openly, exposing his gift in front of the knights of Arthur's team.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Merlin woke up from Arthur’s touch; the prince was running his fingers through Merlin’s greasy hair and stroking his cheek. Their tent was stuffed with herbs’ scents, Arthur’s sweaty smell and the shades echoing their quick love-making before sleep.

“Time to wake up, lazy daisy,” Merlin didn’t open his eyes, but he could bet Arthur was wearing a naughty smile.

“Stop calling me that. That’s my word.”

“And it suits you perfectly. Need to wake up anyway.”

“Why?”

Merlin opened his eyes; Arthur’s face was above him and the prince looked as fresh as the morning dew. Where does he get all this energy from? Merlin felt squashed from being woken up so early, his eyelids seemed as heavy as all the matters pressing his mind. The night was fun, though, and when he heard the playful tunes of forest birds, he closed his eyes again, but this time – to feel the unity with the energy of the forest, with every tree, every leaf, every insect. He disappeared in the vibration of the place to come back stronger than ever, and when he opened his eyes again, he felt so overflown with magic he wanted to make flowers bloom just for Arthur.

“It’s about to dawn,” the prince said, moving his fingers from Merlin’s chest to Merlin’s neck, further to his chin and a little further to start caressing his lips. “We have to gather some wood because daytime is our only chance to have fire and to warm ourselves and to cook. We also need to hunt something down for our dinner.”

“How about breakfast?” Merlin yawned with enthusiasm.

“Still have enough supplies for breakfast. And we need to wash, too.”

“I hate bathing in the cold streams,” Merlin said, trying to capture Arthur’s fingers with his lips, but the prince was playing with him, escaping his kiss every time Merlin was about to close on him.

“I remember. That’s why I’ll help you. And Merlin, before you go out, there’s, you know...”
“What?”

“You’ve got my seed at the corner of your mouth.”

* * *

Merlin’s back was aching from a day of horse riding and from just a couple hours of sleep he had had after the watch and after he had shown the prince how good he could be at polishing something other than Arthur’s sword. He crawled out of the tent to meet the knights who were sharpening their blades already. Merlin realized Arthur had let him sleep some extra time and this tiny gesture of his affection turned the forest into the best place in the whole kingdom. The knights looked tired, too, and more wrinkled than ever, and there was something uplifting about sharing the burdens of the wildlife with other men who had been so accustomed to the privilege and comforts of the noble life. *Patrols are the way for them to learn that being a knight is not only about having some rights and privileges, but also about having some duties.*

“Merlin will gather some wood and start the fire, and he’ll feed the horses,” Arthur announced. "Aglovale, Modron and me will go hunting. Owaine, Evaine and Hengest will go wash themselves, but do take turns, and have somebody to watch the camp. Somebody other than Merlin. Merlin, make sure the fire’s ready by the time they return.”

Merlin didn’t mind the fact that he was given the simple tasks of gathering firewood and watering and feeding the horses. Arthur’s new knights were rather kind; probably they were too young to be spoiled by the court life, and the presence of Arthur by their side meant a great deal to them. The crown prince himself was with them in the forest, sharing the so-called burdens and discomforts of the forest patrol, including shitting in the woods and being eaten by the blood-soaking insects, and sleeping on the cool ground. It could inspire as much faith in the monarchy and respect of Arthur as the heir to the throne of Camelot as Arthur’s valor in any battle.

Merlin adored the morning arousal of the forest, when birds would serenade the sunlight raining through the leaves and the last shadows of the night would be thinning. Being close to nature didn’t mean any mental test to him; unlike the knights, he had grown up in the village, where nature was like the essential surrounding, something people always greatly depended on. Merlin had spent many an hour in the forest, fishing on the lake shore, and playing in the fields.

When he got back to the camp after spending some time talking to the horses (his weird habit, the one he hoped Arthur would never learn), he saw the fair-haired Owaine seated beside the soon-to-be fireplace eating a juicy apple. Even when just eating an apple, Owaine was bringing the most youthful joy and excitement to the party.

“So, Merlin, have you been in a patrol before?” he inquired casually.

“Never in a proper patrol, Sir,” Merlin responded humbly.

“Oh, please,” the young knight put on a warming smile. “You don’t have to call me that.”

“I must, Sir.”

“You don’t address the prince properly, do you think we expect you to call us Sirs?”

*I’m curious to know how many more improper moments between me and Arthur they have noticed.*

Merlin dropped the wood at the fireplace and began placing it so that the fire could be started easily; in fact, he was waiting for that moment when Owaine would lose his attention and Merlin would be able to cast a spell. *Can I whisper a spell in my mind without pronouncing it and still gain the effect?*
"I'll need to talk to Gaius about it."

"If you wish, Owaine. No, I’ve never been to the patrol."

"You like it so far?"

"It’s actually nice for a change. The castle hasn’t been the greatest place in the last two weeks."

"Why?" Owaine smiled.

"There are too many people at court now. As a servant, that means more work for me. And I also had to go to the destroyed part of the Lower Town, which wasn’t very nice."

"Aye, that was terrible. But Arthur killed the beast, after all."

"Yes, Arthur was brave."

"You rode to fight the dragon with him?" there was nothing doubting about his tone, nothing that suggested surprise and disbelief. Merlin could be wrong, but it seemed to him there was a notion of respect about the way Owaine was asking the question.

"I did."

"Why? Most servants, they…"

"I care a great deal about Arthur," Merlin cut him rather abruptly, not willing to know the popular opinions about the servants.

"And you saw the dragon?"

"He was as close to me as you are now," it was Merlin's turn to smile.

"What was he like?"

"He was… giant. And horrifying. But there was something odd about his eyes, they were the strangest thing!"

"Why?"

"Because he has the eyes of a thinking being," Merlin tried to imagine the way Kilgharrah would react if he knew that he, the last Great Dragon, the wisest creature in Albion, the one who had seen civilizations rise and fall, was named a thinking being. "He looks, I mean, looked like he was actually wise, and yet he was doing all those horrible things…"

"You’re really brave, Merlin. I would have shitted my pants if I were to stand so close to the dragon. I think you could have become a great knight had the code not been…"

"MERLIN! OWAIN!"

Somebody is in trouble. Something happened. It’s a plea for help. Merlin jumped away from the fireplace, rising to his feet and turning around to see the greatest horror sprout from his nightmare right into the daytime life. Aglovale was carrying the lithe puppet toy, the bag of bones which turned out to be Arthur. Merlin swallowed and started running down the hill. He has a dagger in his chest. No, a sword hilt. No, an arrow. Three arrows. Three bloody arrows.

Merlin grabbed Arthur by the armpits and started dragging him up the hill; three arrows were
dangling from the prince’s body: two from the chest (one close to his heart) and one from the stomach. *I didn’t have a good feeling about it from the very start. Cenred be damned, all these bloody kings are stupid. Arthur, hold on, I won’t let you die that easily.*

Modron was following Arthur and Aglovale, but he was walking with his back forward, aiming his crossbow at the empty and deceitfully peaceful gleam of the forest space. Modron was turning his crossbow at every source of noise that would attract his attention. Owaine grabbed his crossbow, too, and ran to help Aglovale.

“Aglovale, goddess, what happened?!”

“They appeared out of nowhere, I swear…”

“Aglovale, you’re bleeding!”

Merlin didn’t have the time to look at Aglovale. *If he’s hurt badly, I won’t be able to help him. I can save only one of them.* He let Arthur lay on his right side; he dared not look at the prince’s face, dared not allow even a glimpse at the pale grimace that had been so loving and so caring in the morning. Merlin rushed to his tent to grab what Gaius had given him, the only solution, Arthur’s salvation with a terrible price.

“I’m not bleeding,” he heard Aglovale say with some irritation. “Just a scratch on a leg!”

“Aglovale, what…”

“They’re coming for us, now, they were looking for us! They were not there by chance, they were there by design!” there was another voice, angry, cold and calculated. *Modron.* “We need to find a safer place.”

“Who’s looking?! Who’s coming?! What the hell happened?!?” Owaine was hysterical. “Is it Cenred?! We have to notify the others!!!”

Merlin put a chain with a gemmed medallion on, tried to cover it with his handkerchief and crawled out of the bed. The knights have surrounded Arthur; Owaine and Modron were on their feet, while Aglovale was lying close to Arthur, his leg was jerking.

“They shot the prince first, right into his chest,” there was some fever in his voice; his dark hair were glossing from the sweat. “I think they missed his heart by inches. I covered Arthur with my body, and I started shooting back. I guess those archery sessions were on point, ha? I think I got two of them, but another two appeared and... I had to pull the prince behind the tree, I tried to shoot back, and Modron was shooting back, he was really brave, but they still found two more arrows for the prince. I think he’s bleeding badly. Where are the others?!”

*Bleeding badly.* Merlin couldn’t force himself to inspect the wounds. He had to somehow make them all go and leave him alone with Arthur, else…

When he thought of speaking, an arrow hit Aglovale right in the eye. Owaine screamed and Modron cursed, pointing at the man hiding behind the tree, and then Merlin saw them: behind the distant trees, they were emerging like some dark ghosts at the graveyard, the silhouettes that came to seal their doom. Merlin didn’t have a choice.

He cried the spell out loud and slammed his hand against the ground to summon the magic of a troll barrier, the one he had learnt after the journey to Ascetir. The barrier appeared just in time to reflect the arrows that bounced back, as if fired at the stone wall.
“Shit, how did you do that?” Owaine dropped his crossbow.

“He is a sorcerer, Owaine!” Modron shouted, caught between the desire to shoot the intruders and to shoot Merlin.

“Stay close to me if you both want to survive,” Merlin said, putting the second chain with gemmed medallion on Arthur. “Their arrows won’t make it past the barrier!”

“HE IS A SORCERER!” Modron yelled, stomping around in an outburst of anger and horror.

“I can see that, you dumb ass!” Owaine shut him up, pulling him closer. “Come here, behind this barrier or…”

“STAND UP!” Modron made his choice, pointing a crossbow right at Merlin. His curly dark hair was falling over his face, and he was trying to blow them off with maniacal nervousness. However loud, his hands were shaking, betraying the fear in those night-black eyes. “You, I said, stand up! Get away from the prince!”

Don’t make me take you down. Merlin could feel his gem turn ice-cold against his skin when he put the chain on the prince.

“Modron, please. Arthur’s bleeding, I must help him else…”

“Modron, put down the crossbow!” Owaine urged, grabbing his own from the ground.

“Owaine, HE IS A SORCERER!” Modron resisted. “A BLOODY SORCERER!”

“The arrows can’t reach them! The arrows are useless!” Merlin could hear the screams getting louder and closer.

“Listen, both of you! You grab the crossbows and shoot at them. The barrier works one way only. They can’t shoot us, but we can shoot them. Do it, quickly!”

“What are you going to do with the prince?” Modron spitted.

“I’ll try to save him, like I always did.”

“You can’t heal such wounds!”

“For the love of Camelot, protect us!”

“I’M WATCHING YOU!” Modron warned him, aiming at the black figure that got the closest to them.

Merlin put his hand on Arthur’s body and whispered a spell that drove the arrows out of prince. Each one seemed to have left a pool of blood when it slid out of Arthur’s body. He then turned Arthur to lay on his back, and for the first time Merlin let himself look at Arthur’s face: the sad, broken and humiliated expression which made the tears rain down Merlin’s cheeks. He doesn’t deserve this. Why is it always Arthur. Why. He took Arthur by the lifeless, motionless hand and tried to gather himself, but his voice was still hoarse and raw:

“Come on, dollophead. I need you to recover. Listen to me, I don't care if you die. There are plenty of other princes. You’re not the only pompous, supercilious...condescending, royal...imbecile I could work for. The world is full of them. But I’m gonna give you one more chance because I love you more than... I never thought I could love somebody that much, see. I love you.”
The gem on Arthur’s chain shone weakly, but then began to radiate the deepest blue light. Merlin looked at his stone: it was sun-yellow. *It worked! It bloody worked! Arthur lives, but at what cost...*

“Arthur, please, stay with me. I love you,” he kissed him on the cheek.

*Now they will pay. They will all pay.*

Merlin stood up when a dozen of black-cloaked men surrounded them with blades glistening in their hands. He raised his arms in the air and let all the anger of the forest rain at the invaders; the arrows rose from the ground and started flying at the enemies with the speed no crossbow could ever achieve, slaying them in a blink of an eye. Modron and Owaine, who both have run out of arrows and were ready for the swordfight, were looking at Merlin with shock and fright.

“What’s with the prince?” Owaine asked, when he got sure that no enemy was about to rise to his feet.

“I need bandages,” Merlin commanded. “Get whatever you can. Tear the clothes off the dead men, if you must. Bandages and water, please.”

Owaine obeyed, and started tearing the cloaks off the dead intruders.

“Owaine, what are you doing?” Merlin could hear Modron’s whisper as he was taking the clothes off Arthur to wash the wounds.

“Do you want the prince to live or what?”

“Owaine, are you bloody blind? He is a sorcerer.”

“I can see that. And yet he killed all these men who tried to harm us and Arthur.”

“Owaine, he is a liar. He can’t be trusted.”

“And what do you suggest? Can you save the prince without sorcery here, in the middle of the woods? How? Maybe we should seek for a squirrel-physician?”

“We can’t, but if we take Arthur to Camelot, Gaius...”

“You’re an idiot. Have you seen his wounds? He won’t survive mounting the horse. He’s bleeding like a water skin. He has hours at best. If something can be done, it’s by Merlin only. Now go fetch some water, will you?”

While Modron was filling his water skin with the water from the bowl, Owaine sat down next to Merlin, who was caressing Arthur’s hand.

“So, Merlin. You’re more than just a servant, it turns out, ha?”

*He is in shock. He is still blinded by the attack. Arthur called it a battle fever, when the person gets into a fighting mindset and struggles to go back into the normal state for some time.*

“Owaine, I know you’re afraid...”

“I’m not. I might be afraid of a dragon, but I’m not a coward. I’m not a coward.”

“Alright then. I’m sorry for assuming that you were afraid. I know you don’t trust me now.”
“I don’t. I can’t,” even when he spoke, Owaine didn’t try to hide anxiety in his voice. “Because you’ve been lying to Arthur. There is no way the prince could have known of your magic.”

“He didn’t know. But I was going to tell him one day,” Merlin didn’t know if he himself believed it.

“When?”

“When Uther’s not king.”

“You think Arthur wouldn't see you hanged for being a sorcerer?” Modron, who brought their water bowl, asked, hesitating to approach Merlin.

“Would it be fair if you were hanged for being a noble?” Merlin hissed back at the dark-haired boy.

“Why should I be hanged for being a noble?”

“Why should I be hanged for being a sorcerer?”

“You can’t compare nobles and sorcerers,” Modron spat.

“I can. You didn’t choose to be a noble just like I didn’t choose to be a sorcerer.”

“Nobles are not evil.”

“How exactly am I evil, Modron? How evil am I for protecting the prince? For saving him from the witch? For saving him from the poisoned cup of the high priestess? For saving him from the griffin or the questing beast? I have saved him so many times I’ve lost count! And I’ll save him all the times I need!”

“Maybe you are not evil,” Owaine tried to engage everybody in a less heated conversation. “But you’ve been saving the prince from magic, Merlin, and that’s why we’re… careful…”

“I’ve been saving the prince from magic because his father had slaughtered so many sorcerers and sorceresses during the Great Purge that almost all the magic people want him dead! They want revenge! You, too, would seek revenge if someone killed your parents! But there are people like me, too. You don’t know much about us, because the moment we reveal our true nature we are doomed. So we are hiding behind the veil of our secret, but we don’t want to avenge Uther. We're not blinded by hate like Uther. We’re looking to the future, looking forward to the day when Camelot has the king that cares about all his people. Owaine, Modron, I’m as much a Camelot's man as you are.”

Merlin heard Modron’s pshaw and saw the boy bend over Aglovale’s dead body to drag it away from the fireplace. We need to give him a proper burial. He was so young. Where are Evaine and Hengest? Goddess, Goddess…

Stop panicking. You don’t know what lies ahead. This may just be the beginning.

“Now listen to me, Owaine,” Merlin tried to grab Owaine by the hand, but the fair-haired boy jumped back as if Merlin’s fingers were a touch of heated steel. “I know Modron distrusts me. I have heard. He is either more scared than you are, or more full of Uther’s hate. I’m gonna tell you something and you must promise to keep it secret.”

“I won’t swear an oath to you,” Owaine shook his head.

“Fine. Here. See?” Merlin pointed at Arthur’s chest. “It’s moonstone. Arthur’s wearing a moonstone. And this is the sunstone, at my chest. I’m wearing the sunstone.”
“What are these stones?”

“The one who’s wearing a moonstone draws the life force out of the one wearing sunstone. The healing magic is not an easy thing. You can’t create much health with spells. To restore someone’s health with magic, you must sacrifice some health in return.”

“What you’re saying?”

“As Arthur will be recovering, I will be slowly fading away,” Merlin thought that speaking the truth was the first step towards acknowledging it. “The more health Arthur needs to recover, the more health I will lose. His wounds are very bad, so I think eventually I may… Well… Let’s not think of that. What’s more worrying is that my powers will be leaving me, too, and I may not be able to protect us.”

“But you still can?”

“At the moment, yes, I can. But, Owaine, if something happens to us, if by any chance we get separated and you are to stay with Arthur, you must tell him that he shouldn’t take the moonstone off. Under no bloody circumstances. The moment he does, all the healing effect of the magic will be lost.”

“How comes you’re so eager to die for Arthur? You do realize he would have killed you if he had found out?”

“Our plan now is the following,” Merlin let the young knight’s words pass his ears. “We must let Arthur heal. Let him gain some strength. We mustn’t leave this camp now, it’s the safest place because of the spell, but we’ll eventually have to find a shelter elsewhere. I will help us hide by casting a spell.”

“What spell?”

“I’ll ask for some mists. It’ll be harder to find us in the mist. And Owaine, don’t tell Arthur. I beg you. When he is conscious, I beg you, don’t tell him. I will tell him before we go back to Camelot, I swear. I’ll tell him myself and let him kill me if he wants.”

“Fine.”

“And Owaine, see that Modron doesn’t kill me first.”

Chapter End Notes

Arthur’s wounds are really bad, but Merlin uses the most radical remedy, the solution suggested by Gaius for the worst scenario (Merlin mentions it in chapter 28 (Summer feast)). The prince's life is again out of danger, providing he keeps wearing the moonstone. But this time, the price for keeping Arthur alive is too much to bear, and Merlin needs to fix everything before it's too late.

P.S. I've enabled the comments for non-login users of ao3, too! ^^

New chapter (definitely) or two chapters (maybe) coming on Tuesday, Nov. 7, 2017 ;)
His sister was as pretentious as ever. To listen to her, one could believe she had been born to be a queen. *She could have been a queen, if Uther had kept his promise and had taken Yrien as his wife. Maybe it was, in the end, better for the kingdom that Uther chose Ygraine? If Yrien were a queen… The Triple Goddess, save us all, then.*

“You can’t go outside in mail and armor,” Yrien’s tone was cold and dictating. “Have you lost your wits in the burial vaults? Have you ever seen Uther wearing an armor when he was addressing his people?”

Ryence was genuinely intrigued to remember the last time he had seen Uther wearing his mail and his armor. *Was it the Gwynedd war? Goddess, the time must fly.*

“Truth be told, I haven’t,” Ryence said, checking his glorious reflection in the mirror and trying to find a single unpolished spot on his armor. In this silver light he looked so much different form his own morning self, when the aching back and the trembling knees wouldn’t allow him to straighten up after the night of troubled sleep. *Why can’t my body be as strong as my armor? Why can’t my armor become a part of my body?* “But the last time I saw Uther, beloved sister, he was in his grave, resting peacefully under the cold stone. It’s me who’s standing here, wearing his crown, so I’d piss all over Uther, all over his bloody dressing rules. I need my armor and my sword, they go well with that crown.”

“Remember, I warned you,” Yrien let her index finger touch the crown gently, so gently as if the crown were a living being. “I need to talk to Rion before the council. Will you… will you talk to him before the council, too?”

“I will. We’ll meet in my room where nobody will spy on us.”

“Good,” Yrien kissed his hand. “I’m sure there’re people spying on us outside the Royal Tower. The old wench is dangerous.”

“Lady Dindrane?”
His sister nodded and turned around, crossing her hands and looking out of the window. She was wearing the pale-blue gown which made her look delightfully elegant, and the ruby earrings to bring out the shining brown highlights in her long hair. With the sun still just a little above the horizon, the Lower Town turned into a labyrinth of light and shadow, with dozens of crossroads on the edge between the swollen morning light and the paling night shadows. Hundreds of milk-white clouds were scrambling up the steep blue sky, and the whirlwinds of dust would rush through the streets now and then.

“She wants to look all charming, all sweet, all innocent, a butterfly, one would think, but we know she’s a snake, and she surely saved some venom for us all,” Yrien said, hypnotized by the morning idyll.

“Old snakes don’t bite, they say.”

“This particular old snake has gathered five rings, may I remind you. Lord Lamorak, Lord Blanchefleur, Lord Sagramore, to begin with,” Yrien turned back and started counting her fingers. “The good part of Uther’s council favored her, Ryence, they chose her, not you. In fact, everybody from Uther’s council, except for Accolon, Leon and Cynric, preferred the wench. Lord Geraint and Lord Gornemant chose her, too. She has the support of six great houses. Six out of eleven, she is dangerous.”

Not as dangerous as you, beloved sister. Knowing you, Lady Dindrane will soon rue the day she stood up to seek the crown. Ryence loved his sister’s relentless pursuit of safety, but she was way too single-handed, that’s what warriors would say. At the battle field, you must always wield your sword with both hands, if needed. Yrien uses one hand only. She always thinks that the threat comes from the fact that every damn person is plotting against us. The game has far more complicated rules, beloved sister.

“So sweet of you to remind me that I’ve failed to win the majority of the great houses votes,” it was, after all, the day of his first speech in front of the small folk, and he was irritated that Yrien chose to rain on his parade. “You may also tell me that I’ve failed to win the majority of my territories’ votes. Why, in fact, I have received a peculiar letter from them this very morning.”

“A letter?” Yrien’s expression would lead anybody to believe she’d come across a fatal flaw in their strategy; her right hand was on her left breast, soothing her heartbeat. “What letter?!”

“A letter signed by Lady Dindrane of Denaria, Lord Lucan of Landshire, Lord Catigern of Asgorath and Lady Gaheris of Daobeth.”

“Gaheris,” the sound of her name made Yrien wry her face as if she were served a pile of horseshit for breakfast. “She’s Uther’s aunt.”

“She’s not his natural aunt. She was his uncle’s wife.”

“She’s his aunt nonetheless,” Yrien started squeezing her hands and walking around the room. “She has children. Uther’s cousins.”

“They have no right for the throne according to the succession rules,” Ryence said with indifference.

“She is behind it all, I tell you. It’s her and her alone. The others, these savage westerners, they would never dare... What are they writing?”

“They offer their deepest condolences.”

“They can shove it up their throat and choke on it!”
“They also express some sort of bewilderment.”

“Because of what?”

“Because of the election being held so quickly."

"Don't they know there's a war going on?"

"They do. Yet they want us to invite them to the castle of Camelot and to hold another election, this
time with all the lords and all the ladies of the territories present.”

Yrien looked as if a commoner had just slapped her on her cheek and spat in her face. Her chest was
rising and her nostrils were widening. The dance of morning light in her rubies was mirrored in her
eyes, the flames of wrath that threatened to engulf her.

“Traitors! Bloody traitors! What are they thinking to achieve with this stupid paper? It’s not us who
invented the bloody rules! We needed fifteen people in the room to choose the legitimate king, we
had sixteen! Those savage westerners, I tell you, we must deal with them! At once, we must…”

Aye, a bloody civil war is something I dreamed of when I’ve made this plan. It's why I wanted to
become king – to slaughter another half of my own kingdom.

“One third the people in this kingdom live to the west of the White Mountains, beloved sister,”
Ryence meant to sting her with his voice, to inspire some sobriety in her heated mind. “Asgorath
may not have as much land and wheat as Brechfa, but this territory has thrice as many coins, all
because of trade with Godwin, the king of Gawant and Uther's dear friend. They’ve agreed to marry
Arthur to Godwin’s daughter, remember?”

His words did the opposite; Yrien was on the verge of losing her last nerves, of stepping over the
threshold of insanity.

“What is your suggestion, Ryence? To sit the throne with half the kingdom disobeying you?”

“Nobody spoke of disobedience. Not yet. The text is carefully written and contains not a single word
whatsoever to let me blame them for treachery. And, beloved sister, don’t forget that Uther ordered
the West to raise a larger army, two thousand swords, when he received the news of Cenred’s
invasion. So these savage westerners, as you say, have, thus far, the biggest army in the land.”

“Are we doomed?” Yrien was as hopeless as Ryence was confident.

“No. Luckily, I’m too cunning for them, and I know where the wind is blowing from.”

* * *

The day was ripe for his first move. To steal his predecessor’s plan and his legacy was not that
difficult. Uther, or Uther The Great, as people had recently started calling him, had ordered all the
most important preparations for the reconstruction of the destroyed part of the Lower Town, he had
even collected the donations from the great houses. Ryence didn’t have much left to do – to appoint
the builders and to sanction the spending of the royal gold on the commoners’ houses, an
unprecedented move in the history of the castle.

Ryence insisted on walking all the way to the Lower Town, accompanied by Lord Blanchefleur and
Lord Sagramore and the royal guards, six of them – which was more than enough. Ryence had
nothing to fear in his own castle, and he wanted to be as close to the commoners as possible –
something Uther had failed to achieve through his reign. In fact, some people were so greatly afraid
of Uther they refused to bring petitions to his court. A bloody idiot. But a decent warrior, although with little sense of honor.

Ryence invited Blanchefleur and Sagramore because they were formally still the royal Treasurer and the Councilor of Camelot, but also because they both voted for Lady Dindrane during the election. A wench or not, the Dindranes are the force to be reckoned with. Old Anna is the widow of Demeth Dindrane, while late Demeth’s sister, Galla, is the Lady of Denaria. Does Galla think she can seek the throne because she has the Valley of the Fallen Kings in Denaria? Ha!

Lord Blanchefleur was wearing a yellow cloak, as if to serenade the favourite colour of Ryence and the colour of the Gingawaine banner. He was walking in a relaxed manner, with his arms safely and comfortably behind his back and his long fingers intertwined. They say Blanchefleur became the Treasurer because with his fingers he’s the best at counting coins. I remember another joke among the knights: Blanchefleur doesn’t need a cock because he can pleasure his wife with his fingers alone. Ha!

Lord Sagramore was the one to draw the least pleasure from their morning trip. Walking was not easy for him; it took him so much effort that his round face was all red, red enough to fear the Councilor of Camelot was suffocating. The clanging of his medallion was the only thing for Ryence to judge that the Councilor was still walking.

I don’t trust Blanchefleur, but Sagramore can be of use, still. Blanchefleur was just Uther's purse.

People were lining up along the Main Street, some of them throwing flowers to greet the new king. Ryence would raise his arm from time to time, to greet his people, to wave at them and to thank them, for some reason. Uther’s tyranny is dead, rejoice. He was glad to see so many children, happy and laughing. The future of this land.

The guards turned left and started leading the way to the destroyed part of the Lower Town. Ryence could hear the sounds of construction work. Good.

“So, what do you say, Lord Sagramore?” Ryence inquired with poor-hidden pride in his voice. “Shall we finish the reconstruction in just a moon?”

“If we work hard, my lord. The beast’s fury was devastating.”

“The beast is dead, and we are alive. It’s in the crown’s best interests to offer help to all the people who were victims of the attack.”

“Of course, my lord,” Sagramore said fearfully.

“I shall make you personally responsible for this task, Lord Sagramore. There is no other person in the castle who knows the life of Camelot as good as you. People are quite fond of you, I’ve heard.”

“My lord is too king,” Sagramore sighed, not too happy about Ryence’s enthusiasm.

“It’s a costly affair, my Lord,” Blanchefleur reminded him.

Ryence didn’t respond. Blanchefleur is only busy about counting the spendings and incomes. He doesn’t know there’re things which can’t be measured. How can I measure all the gains I’ll win from reconstruction? How can I measure my people’s love, their admiration and their loyalty to me?

When they arrived at the reconstruction field, Ryence looked around to watch his first crowd gather. There were so many happy and loving faces, in fact, too many for a place that had suffered such a tragedy. Ryence cleared his throat and let his voice tear the silence of the summer morning.
“People of Camelot! I know of your troubles! I know of the nightmare that descended from the sky upon this innocent city, her true men and honest women, her innocent children! The sad songs about the dragonflames swallowing families are more than just songs! This great wrong befell you, but make sure that your new king will never forget the misfortunes of the small folk! To mark the beginning of my reign, I shall personally see to the beginning of the work here, in Lower Town. May these houses be as strong as our land, may the small folk always find help in the face of their king! In a moon you will be spending nights under the new roofs, I promise!”

“LONG LIVE THE KING! LOVE LIVE THE KING! LONG LIVE THE KING!”

***

There was nothing sinister about the burial vaults. The hall was a peaceful place where darkness was paired with the flame lights in some sort of trance. The silence in the vaults seemed turbid at times, especially when Ryence would prick his ears as if he hoped to hear something in the resting place of Camelot’s greatest kings and nobles.

Uther’s grave was just a stone plate, cold, dusty and dark-grey. The masters were working on his statue, and once the statue was placed atop the plate, the visitors would be permitted to enter the vaults to pay homage to their adored king. *Uther the Great. Ha. I bet you thought you’d seen the last of me when you defeated me at the Battle of Ashes? I bet you thought you’d ruined my house when you refused to recognize my sister’s marriage and when you made her send her bastard son to Daobeth, for your stupid aunt to foster? I bet you thought you’d ruined the druids and their legacy when you gave orders to brutally wipe their camps off the face of this land? I bet you’re surprised now, aren’t you?*

When Ryence was growing up, his friends, nobles and commoners alike, would gather at the castle for the feast of Salman, and before bed, Ryence’s grandmother would tell them stories about the cruel Priestess of the Old Religion and the Isle of the Blessed. *The gloomy fortress is towering in the middle of the lake, washed by the dark waves and dark powers. At midnight, the boat is sailing through the lake, with a pale faced dead man, his eyes - the holes for worms and his tongueless mouth would curse whatever name he speaks. When the full moon is in the sky, the Priestess appears. She calls for children - she sings a song, the song which corrupts their mind and makes them see her in a different light: they think it's their mother calling them. As the children walk towards the Priestess, the wyverns are circling in the skies. Then the Priestess...*

“Your majesty.”

He appeared as if out of the dark, as silent as the flames that were dancing in the candlesticks. With visibly uneven shoulders (the left somewhat taller), a teenage goatee on his face and the short dark hair, Lord Cynric’s look inspired more fright than anything else in the vaults.

“Ah, Cynric. Come. I’ve been expecting you. We should’ve met earlier. You’re like a crow that’s flying over the battlefield: eager but too hesitant to land and feast on the flesh.”

“His majesty is too kind,” Cynric had both, the gift and stamina to turn every mockery into a compliment. “I’m nowhere as brave as a crow.”

“Crows are not brave.”

“Yet they survive the battlefields when soldiers don’t.”

*He’s witty. Too witty for someone so close to the throne.*
“There have been enough words, my lord,” Ryence cleared his throat, but not too loudly, as if afraid to disturb the spirits resting under the castle. “I’m better with swords, but we’re not at the battlefield.”

“We’re not.”

Cynric approached Ryence and put his hands on the plate of Uther’s stone coffin.

“I must thank you for your help, Lord Cynric. You’re the best pretender in the kingdom.”

“Your nephew would question such judgement.”

“Rion’s but a green lad.”

“How many green lads have slain the kings?”

“Stupid kings,” Ryence was curious to know if Uther could hear them. “Of that he can be proud, aye. You’ve done everything we’ve agreed upon, Lord Cynric, except for one thing. I have received a letter today.”

“What letter, your majesty?”

“The letter from our Western territories. Signed by the lords and ladies of Asgorath, Denaria, Daobeth and Landshire.”

“And what does their letter say?”

“It says that the lords and ladies of Western territories did not have time to travel to Camelot for the election. They thus refuse to recognize me as their king until the vote is cast again.”

“How gruesome, your majesty,” for a moment, Ryence thought he could believe the news meant as much sadness and trouble to Cynric as it meant to him. But only for a moment.

“I believe you’ve played a part in it as well Lord Cynric. It’s you who persuaded them to compose the letter, right?”

“Your majesty, I…”

“Lord Cynric, we don’t have to pretend here. Let’s speak honestly, else I shall teach you the song of swords. What are you trying to achieve by that? By keeping nearly third of my kingdom from recognizing me as the rightful king?”

For some weird reason, Cynric kept smiling - a frivolous gesture that could easily earn him a night in the cells on any other day.

“I’m just a small man, your majesty. I’ve helped you with the murder of Uther. And I don’t see what stops you from murdering me now, or from, blaming Uther’s death on me and on that serving girl.”

“My word. My honor.”

“I don’t trust words, your majesty. Much as I wanted to trust in oaths, honors, promises, I remember too well that all the words, promises, agreements and oaths are easily redefined by swords.”

“What’s left for you to trust in, then?”

“Motivation, reasoning and gold. We have an agreement, remember? You must renounce the Treaty of the Five Kings, as we have discussed. It’s a disaster. I don’t need equal trade duties and taxes for
Deorham and for Camelot. I need them lower in Deorham, and his majesty King Alined needs it, too. When trading taxes and duties are lower in Deorham, I can earn a good profit by smuggling the overseas goods from Deorham into Camelot.”

“I remember it well. You must also thank King Alined for his formidable part. Nobody would suspect that his soldiers are impersonating Cenred’s army.”

“King Alined does as he is told. He needs the Treaty of Five Kings to be called off as much as I do. He was supposed to sabotage the treaty during the negotiations, but something went wrong, and Olaf forgave Arthur for having Vivian in his bed. Normally, Olaf would have torn him apart.”

“Maybe Olaf finally realized that half the kingdom wants Vivian in their bed?”

“Trust me, she’s the last bitch in all the five kingdoms,” Cynric laughed. "She'd make an awful wife. However, King Alined has done well, he’s employed less than five hundred soldiers to isolate Brechfa and create the illusion of war, so that you were summoned to Camelot and your sister could establish a trusting relationship with Uther. I’ve kept my word. So now you must keep yours and you must renounce the treaty.”

“I will do it soon.”

“Good. You will also name me the Treasurer at your first council meeting. And I shall remain the Treasurer until you give me the Castle of Gedref. Once you give me that castle and the lordship rights, the Western territories will send their seals to you and bend the knee. After that, I will leave Camelot and I will do as little to trouble your majesty as I can, providing Lady Caelia is the Councilor of Trade.”

“If I do as you say, the Western lords and ladies will bend the knee?”

“They will, your majesty.”

“What magic have you worked on them that they have the guts to oppose their king? What have you promised them?”

“I work no magic, your majesty," Cynric's smile was wickedly enchanting. "I am but a small man.”

“And what does a small man like you hope to find in Gedref?”

“Why, the only castle in Camelot that faces the sea. A port to flourish.”

“Uther meant to turn it into a port,” Ryence remembered. “That’s why he signed the treaty of the Five Kings. So that the trading taxes in Deorham and Camelot were equal, and the ships stoped ignoring Gedref for the sake of numberless Deorham ports.”

“He did it, make no doubt of it, your majesty. But Uther’s gentle actions have often led to harsh results. The new taxes and duties imposed by the treaty were more expensive than the previously existing scheme of shipping the goods to Deorham and smuggling them to Camelot by land. The treaty of Five Kings was a disaster for trade volumes because it resulted in the price growth. King Alined would have lost more gold than he could count. And the coin Uther was expecting to gain would not have gone into our land, it would have gone into a preparation of the war with Cenred. I say that it’s sheer treason: spending your kingdom’s gold to erase magic from the lands of your neighbor.”

“And once in Gedref, Lord Cynric, if you ever suspect that I want to put your head on a spike, you’ll always have your ships ready to take you to Deorham, to Alined, the coward king.”
“Might I remind my lord that calling our dear friend Alined a coward is impolite, to say the least? His forces are now pretending to be a host of Cenred’s army.”

“I remember it bloody well. Fine. Cynric. I shall hold my first council today. I will renounce the treaty, but we have to make it formal. I shall send envoys and write letters. The day after tomorrow, I shall start the trial of Lady Gedref.”

“Very good,” Cynric nodded. “We don’t need her dead, my lord. I just need her castle. She may be offered to join one of the eleven great houses.”

“Cynric, there is one last thing, but of no less importance,” Ryence lied; this thing was the cause of his greatest fears and the nightmares to come.

“What is it?”

“Gaius claims the boy we buried was not Arthur. He thinks that Arthur may still be alive.”

“Which is obviously false?” Cynric’s tone was unconcerned before he stumbled upon the burden in Ryence’s look. "My lord? What do I see? Did the prince survive?!"

“We don’t know.”

“This is the news I can’t stand! We had an agreement! I helped you by staging the invasion, by providing poison and by giving you a serving girl to deliver this poison! How could you and your people let Arthur live?!”

“They are dead, Cynric. Half the people I’ve sent to kill Arthur are dead.”

“Dead?! Half of them?! How?! Your majesty, Arthur was with a small group of soon-to-be-knights. He could do nothing against a dozen of supreme archers armed with crossbows!”

“And yet half the assassins were killed. With their own arrows out of their bodies. It’s as if they all killed each other.”

“Impossible!”

“Neither can I picture green boys, the soon-to-be knights slaying a dozen of skilled archers. So, Lord Cynric, are you sure there’s nothing about Arthur you've forgotten to tell me?”

Chapter End Notes

So, all the Gingawaines - Ryence, Yrien and Rion - obviously cooperated on murdering Uther, but did Yrien and Rion know about Cynric's part? Did Yrien and Rion know that Ryence was planning to kill Arthur? I guess we'll find out soo enough.
Chapter Summary

Rion seemed so different from all the other cold-hearted and hypocrite nobles of the castle. He inspired so much hope for the future change - but the recent events in the castle changed it all. Gwen can no longer trust Rion, for she fears the worst - that Rion could have played a part in Arthur's failed assassination.

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV

Every moment she spent in the room of Yrien and Rion was filled with fear for her life. She thought the room doors could open any moment, and guards – the very same guards that had once mercilessly killed her father – would march into the room, and kill her and dump her body somewhere, somewhere where nobody would even care to look for her.

*What am I even doing here? Gaius made an offer. Why did I refuse? He said he could help me run away to the castle of Denaria, where Lady Dindrane’s distant relative is in charge. Why have I chosen to stay?*

*To reverse the wrongs you’ve done.*

*How can I reverse it? Can I bring Uther back from the dead? Can I turn back time? In fact, what can I do? It seems all I can do is shiver like the leaf that’s about to be torn from the tree by the gust of wind. What a good life. What even makes Gaius believe Rion will not kill me the moment he has the chance?*

The Gingawaine’s room changed; Uther had done everything to preserve what had been left of Morgana’s interior, and the room had looked uninhabited, impersonal and coldly-unwelcome when it got ripped off its furniture, bedsheets and Morgana’s desk. Lady Yrien ordered the room to be furnished in a different style following her brother’s coronation; they’ve brought a lot of yellow towels, bedsheets, blankets, and even the expensive oriental carpet with some bright orange stripes. *Yellow is their favourite colour. Their banner is yellow, it has the bear on it.*

Lady Yrien bought goblets, plates, forks, new chairs, tables and mirrors, and Gwen couldn’t recognize herself among the splendor of Morgana’s room. *This is so unlike Morgana. Uther would persuade her to buy more things from time to time, but Morgana used to say she would play no part in the surfeit of furniture and trinkets at court.*

Rion entered the chambers through the eastern door. She heard the creak and she recognized him by the fast, easy footsteps. Rion, too, was wearing the yellow tunic, finally of his size, and looked gallant and handsome. *If only he had the inner beauty to match his look. But who am I to judge now? What inner beauty do I possess?*
Their eyes met, and a fierce stand-off of their looks accompanied the silence none of them dared to break. She remembered Rion on the day of Summer Feast. He was carrying that mischievous, boyish charm, the long-legged, lean and slim figure wandering around the castle and eating his apple while all the noble boys seemed to wish no other place to be than at the feast, where they could flirt with girls. Rion was the one to talk to her, the one to listen to her. He seemed the only noble that was swimming against the current, the boy that was suffering as much she was. She thought he was a hopeful and kind soul trapped between the family abuse and the uncompromising court that dictated the rules. Gwen knew Rion was probably a part of the coup, she knew Rion had probably used her, but the splinters of hope kept lingering on in her heart, in that light-filled, faithful and unharmed part of her heart where kindness still reigned, the kindness that tried to seek kindness in other people.

What if he didn’t know about Arthur? What if he only knew about Uther? Is it bad that I’m hoping for the best? Oh, Goddess, it’s just the way I feel, I can’t help it. Rion, why?

“You look so sad,” he finally mumbled out. “I thought... I thought the news would mean a feast for you.”

“Feasting on the news of dead prince? Thank you kindly, my lord.”

Rion looked away, as if he was, too, falling to pieces. He went to the table and grabbed the jug with wine and poured the cherry-red liquid into his cup.

“That part is devastating,” he didn’t speak before finishing his drink, and tried not to look Gwen’s way. In fact, it seemed like he was speaking to someone else, except for there was nobody else in the room. “I grieve, my mother grieves and even my uncle had that special voice when he spoke of Arthur at the burial ceremony. I think I saw Sir Leon crying. With Arthur’s death, a part of this kingdom died. He was everything.”

Gwen crossed her arms. Tears came without invitation.

“How terrible that his death comes in time when the king’s heart was weakened by the poison, Rion. It was almost certain the news about the death of his only heir would finish him, right?”

Rion let out a heavy sorrowful sigh and pressed his lips together.

To think that I’ve shared my thoughts, my beliefs with him. Goddess.

“Gwen, are you suggesting that somebody killed Arthur because they knew the king had a weak heart? Because they knew the news of the loss would lead Uther right to his grave?”

“But who could possibly know it except for you and me?” Gwen decided to launch a full-force attack; she couldn’t bear walking out the room with suspicions and half-truths in her pockets, she needed to know it all.

“So what are you saying, Gwen? You think I killed Arthur?”

“I would never dare to suspect you, my lord. Somebody else must know. Are you sure you haven’t told your mother? Or your uncle?”

Rion smashed his cup against the wall and closed on her so quickly that Gwen wouldn’t have done anything to stop him even if she had been trained as a warrior. His right hand was inhumanly, steel-strong when his fingers squeezed the life out of her neck. She tried to fight him off, but her hits didn’t seem to cause Rion any pain at all, and he started pushing her until her head hit the wall, and his fingers seemed to be pressing into her flesh.

“Listen, wench,” his voice was low and leisurely confident. “If this head on your shoulders is of any
value to you, you will zip your bloody lips and never speak of my mother and my uncle again. If you think that I had known that somebody was about to run a hammer against the prince’s face and make a bloody porridge out of his head, you’re wrong. Your suspicions make your life worthless. Whoever killed Arthur was from Cenred’s army. If you think of telling anybody that… Well, nobody would care if you disappeared on a chilly summer night. Now piss off, piss off before I throw you in the cells!”

He let her go, and Gwen’s inhale left her wheezing and whispering the plea for help. The door opened all of a sudden, and Gaius entered the chambers. He threw a quick glance at Gwen and at Lord Rion, and spoke quickly.

“My lord, the king demands your presence the very moment. It’s a matter of urgency, he says.”

Everything Rion wanted to tell her froze in his look: *keep your worthless mouth shut*, Gwen read in his glowing eyes.

“Gwen, what did he want?” Gaius rushed to hold her in his arms. “Did he hurt you, child?”

Gwen nodded, crying on Gaius’s shoulder. *He will kill me. Or his mother will. Or his uncle. Maybe it’s best that I go to Denaria, maybe I can be of no use here. I’ve already tried to fix the things once, and I... Goddess, why...*

“He says my life’s worth nothing in this castle. He says if I share my suspicions with anybody, I may...”

“Leave that to me, child,” Gaius, for once, was more bothered by letting Gwen feel no harm would come to her easily. *He’s not lecturing me. Does he still think I’m a murderer?* “Gwen, you must not talk to him before I tell you to. Do you hear me?”

“He said he didn’t know, Gaius. About Arthur,” she said, pressing her fingers to her neck to feel the burning scratches of Rion’s fingers.

“Did you expect him to make a confession to you?” Gaius shook his head. “Gwen, he’s a monster with power and sword in his hands, which makes him twice as dangerous. It’s a lesson you will do your best to learn, my child. If you kill one monster, a new one may come, with sharper teeth and stronger claws. Patience is a virtue, my child.”

The door opened to let Lady Yrien in. She was wearing the most beautiful gown Gwen had seen her in, the pale-blue elegant dress that made her look like a queen. *It’s because of her brother’s first council. She’s wearing the red earrings. The earrings Rion had shown to Uther at the dinner! She knows they don’t belong to Morgana. She knew back then it was a trick to lure Uther away from the table. Oh, Goddess! Lady Yrien knew about poisoning Uther. Did she know about the assassination on the prince, too?*

“Gaius?” Lady Yrien exclaimed in surprise, ignoring Gwen’s presence “I was looking for you! I’ve sent a maid for you. You’ve forgotten to send my new oil for my hair.”

“I beg your pardon, my lady,” Gaius bowed down. “I have been consumed by grief, and I’ve nearly forgotten my duties.”

“We all are consumed by grief, Gaius,” Yrien responded with discontent. “That doesn’t mean I have to walk around the castle as ugly as a dead witch, right?”

“How can a lady of such natural beauty say such things about herself?”
“Words can trick a woman’s ear, Gaius, but they can’t trick time, sadly. I am not getting any younger, and neither are my hair.”

“My lady, may I have a word with you?”

“Of course,” Yrien nodded and made a gesture at Gwen. What, am I supposed to be gestured only? Can’t you ask me to get out?

She walked out of the room, hoping Lady Yrien would notice neither tears on her cheeks nor the marks of Rion’s fury on her neck. The hall was deserted; most of castle residents were expected to gather at the first council of King Ryence, the only public council the king was demanded to hold. Gwen started listening through the door.

“If it’s about your new position at court, I’m afraid to disappoint you, I have no influence on my brother,” Lady Yrien’s voice was merry and carefree. “He is a man with a storm in his mind. He always sails wherever the wind blows.”

“It’s not his majesty’s ship I’m trying to sail. I thought I could ask you to do me a favor, my lady.”

“A favor? What sort of favor? Gaius, I’m intrigued. You’re a freeman of Camelot, you’re not bowed by my will.”

“That’s why I’m humbly asking you to give Gwen the position of your maid.”

“Impossible. She is slow like a cow on a meadow, she’s struggling to remember, she doesn’t know much about beauty and she is shallow. I don’t want her any longer. It was a nice act of Uther’s hospitality – may he find peace in the spirit world –but I dream of finding new servants. And the prince will soon need a squire, so I would advise this Gwen to find a job elsewhere.”

“Maybe you will allow me to keep her as my assistant? As my apprentice.”

“I think the Councilor of Camelot will be responsible for her new position, Gaius.”

“I would strongly advise the Councilor of Camelot to leave Gwen by my side. Else I’ll insist on examining prince Arthur’s body because I have too many reasons to believe that slain man is not our prince.”

“What is the meaning of this?”

Gone was the merriness of Lady Yrien’s voice. Gaius, what are you doing?

“I’m just sharing my thoughts about the identity of the body, my lady.”


“Well, even if it were not the prince, why would my lady be so angry? Why would my lady sound so troubled? Why would my lady act like she didn’t want the truth about the body’s identity be known to people of Camelot?”

Gwen had never spotted so much artifice in Gaius’ voice. He was tricking Lady Yrien, trying to anger her, to wound her confidence and to provoke her most obvious reactions.

“I… How could I… I… leave me, now. I will hear no more of this. You will deal with my brother!”

“And deal I shall. Time will come for that, make sure. Lady Yrien, I don’t want to offend you, but we are both old enough to drop the masks and talk to each other as equals.”
“Equals? I’m the heir to the second biggest castle in the land! You’re but a dodderly old goat who thinks he’s a what? A wolf?”

“A wolf in the skin of a sheep is no better, my lady.”

“I CAN HAVE YOUR TONGUE!”

“You may have my life. I’m an old man who has lived long enough. But an old man with enough friends in the castle. Some of them even in the greatest houses. Some of them have learnt of my fears about the truth of Arthur’s identity, but they are wiser than me, my lady. They will not voice their concerns, unless something happens to their beloved court physician.”

“And what will they do with their concerns?”

“Why, share it! Share it with the Westerners, my lady. I have heard misleading rumors, my lady. The rumors that say the territories to the West of the White Mountains refuse to bend the knee. I’m sure the rumors are obviously false, they are spread by your enemies. But if the rumors were true, wouldn’t the things go even more complicated for the kingdom if the Western territories found out Arthur survived the assassination?”

“You’re no goat, Gaius. I take my words back. But the Westerners will rise for Arthur, if what you say is true. They will not save you.”

“Of course, my lady. And you will easily find a new physician. And I’m sure you’ll also easily find somebody to save you from a very special sort of threats to our castle and our kingdom when I’m gone. May I remind you that our kingdom in the past year alone has been attacked by the spirit of Sigan, by the troll, by the beast, by the witch, by the dead knights of Medihr, and you’d be good to ask your brother a simple question: how has Uther managed to fight the magic threats? Of course, you can bring somebody more knowledgeable from your precious Brechfa… Or, but how could I forget? You were afraid to keep anybody competent in magic close to your castle, because if Uther had ever found out…”

“Leave me now.”

Chapter End Notes

There is no Gaius POV in this work, because he is such a complicated character: a traitor of magic, some would say, and a savior, the others would parry. However, Gaius has chosen his path in the new kingdom and we should not underestimate his importance. He was the one to give th sunstone and moonstone to Merlin, risking with his own life when he stole the magic artefacts from Uther's vaults. He is probably the only one who knows something about the ways to solve the stone-magic problem. I can imagine him losing sleep because he's got no news from Merlin, but the uncertainty about Merlin and Arthur don't stop him from acting. As you could notice from the offer Gaius made Gwen, the physician is friends with Galla Dindrane, the Lady of Denaria. Galla is the sister of Anna Dindrane's late husband, which leads us to believe Gaius is a part of the great houses' coallition led by Anna Dinrane.
King Ryence and his Council

Chapter Summary

It's been three days since Uther's death, and it's time for king Ryence to hold his first council meeting, the only public meeting the law of Camelot requires.

Chapter Notes

King Ryence POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ryence had decided to take his mail and armor off for the council meeting. There were enough matters on his shoulders without the iron pressing into his skin. He was wearing the crown, but the crown seemed to be ready to fall off his head any moment. Most of Uther’s council hadn’t supported him during the election; he had predictably managed to win the votes of two army men and Cynric. He had every reason to believe Lady Dindrane was refusing to accept her loss gracefully and was about to unleash all the influence of the Camelot’s oldest house on him. Anna of House Dindrane had many friends at court, and her late husband’s sister was the Lady of Denaria, meaning that Lady Dindrane could have played her part in composing the letter of westerners. To make all the matters worse, gravely worse, Arthur may be alive, although they claimed the prince was shot three times in the chest.

Is Cynric working with Dindranes, too? Is it through Anna and Galla that he is controlling the Westerners? Or is he counting on the support of Gaheris, Uther’s aunt? Is Gaius involved in it, too? Is there a single man or woman in this castle who’s not working with Cynric?

Yrien had rushed into his chambers moments before he was about to leave for the council, and she started speaking so loudly he had to slap her to remind her to tone her voice down. It’s Gaius, I tell you, he’s with this Dindrane bitch, and I tell you, it’s him… We need to kill him at once, we must, she said, running out of breath. If Yrien were a queen, the hangmen would need not worry for their coins, that’s for sure. As if hanging Gaius can really solve anything. It’s not Gaius we must be wary of. But I can’t tell her about Cynric. He’s too precious to me now. He is the heart of all the plan.

“My lords, please forgive me for making you wait,” Ryence apologized with a staged courtesy in his voice. There were a lot more people in the hall than he expected; everybody rose. “Old bones don’t move around the castle as fast as I want them to.”

“And where them old bones here?” the giant, ginger-haired Lord Accolon shrugged his shoulders.

“This council is as young as a maiden’s….”

“Your majesty hoped to announce his Council today, in accordance with the law of Camelot,” Ryence was grateful for Monmouth to speak before the nobles could learn Accolon’s intriguing comparison.

“Indeed,” Ryence sat down and looked around the room. A council. What a joke for the land and its
ancient ruling traditions. Let me finish the reconstruction of the Lower Town and let me finish the “war”, and I’ll have all the support of the small folk to bring back the real council. “Let me begin with Lord Accolon. My lord, you have served the kingdom of Camelot for many years. Your glory is matchless, and we would have never won the war against Gwynedd without your strong command.”

“Wars, not war. Caerleon was a restless foe. Some say he still raids our lands, although in disguise, to pretend he keeps our treaty. What a piece of…”

It was good that Lord Accolon’s description of King Caerleon was overshadowed by the noise his fist made when he slammed it against the table, making some of the ladies in the room jump a little.

“Which makes you the greatest warrior Camelot has ever known, except for maybe the dead king,” Ryence concluded.

“I would rather marry a wildeoren than face Uther in the battle, ha!” Lord Accolon said.

“I’ve done both, and I say you’d make a right choice,” Ryence joked, sending a roar of laughter across the hall. “Lord Accolon, we need you to break Cenred’s neck. As I have been informed, Uther has ordered an army of two thousand swords to be raised in Western territories?”

“He did.”

“Go to Asgorath, my lord. You will have my order to command the Western army and bring it to Camelot if needed,” Ryence caught Cynric’s displeased look. And what did you expect of me? To be a puppet king that you wanted to have? We’ll see who’s smarter at this game, dear Cynric. “Before that, see that they are trained well. If Cenred attempts the siege, we will weaken him with the army which we have in Howden, but it’s the Western army that will be the fist to free us if the siege is laid. After the Essetir War, I will make you the Councilor of Camelot.”

“Your majesty’s too kind,” Lord Accolon stood up to take a bow.

“Your majesty simply loves loyal service to the kingdom,” Ryence parried. “Now, lord Monmouth.”

“My Lord?” the stately old man that made the impression of the wisest person at court stood up.

“You have served the castle and the king for longer than anybody can remember.”

“It is true, my Lord.”

“Yet you’re but a free man of Camelot.”

“Indeed, my Lord.”

“I free you of your duties today. And I hereby grant lordship to the family of Monmouth. You will become the twelfth great house of Camelot.”

“My Lord. I couldn’t expect… I…” Geoffrey couldn’t express any displeasure, for he was watched by nearly five dozen men and women who thought lordship was the greatest honor in the kingdom.

“I’m sure your wife, your daughter and grandsons will be more than happy. Who knows, maybe one of them is destined to become the new commander of the knights.”

“And what’s to happen to me, your majesty?” Sir Leon sounded worried when his current position was brought up.
“You will remain the Commander of the Knights, Sir Leon, and you will keep this position until the end of Essetir War. After that, you will replace Lord Accolon as the Councilor of War.”

_You’re the most loved Commander of Knights I can remember, Leon. You’ve got too much influence among the men with swords, arches and spears in their hands, so I can’t allow you to be too far from me. My friends are close, but my foes are closer._

“My Lord,” Sir Leon took a deep bow.

“Lord Cynric, step forward. A great deal of people in the castle seem to hate you, I’ve learned.”

“I hope your majesty doesn’t belong to them?” Cynric’s voice was as poisonous as it was complaisant.

“No. Your majesty was not loved in Brechfa either! Respected, maybe, feared, thanked, and sometimes envied, but never loved. You will be the new Treasurer of the kingdom, my lord.”

_I’ve given you three promises, Cynric. Denounce the treaty, make you the Treasurer and give you the Castle of Gedref. You have two promises left._

“Your majesty! Lord Cynric isn’t fit! He is too young…” Lord Blanchefleur’s expression suggested he had been challenged to a single combat.

“A perfect match for the bloody old king, I say?” Ryence caused another outburst with his remark. _They are laughing just to please me._ “You can’t expect me to keep the grey-haired men all around. You’re freed of your duties, Lord Blanchefleur.”

“I… your majesty, I have served the kingdom for twenty-two years!”

“You couldn’t hope to serve for another twenty years, right?” people started laughing again. “You’d outlive me then. It’s the king’s order, Lord Blanchefleur.”

Suddenly, the laughter was swallowed by the uncomfortable silence. Blanchefleur wasn’t doing anything. _Is he trying to test me at my first council?_

“As your majesty commands,” Lord Blanchefleur finally bowed down, and sighs of relief were heard in the crowd.

“Now, Lord Sagramore.”

“Your majesty?” the fat man rose to produce that clang of his medallion and chains.

“You will be the new Secretary of the kingdom. My right hand in everything.”

Lord Sagramore certainly was not expecting it. Judging by the sweat all over his foreheard, he was fearing he’d lose his chambers and be dismissed. _I’m not done with you yet_, Ryence thought. _If what Yrien’s fearing is true, you may be one of Dindrane’s closest allies. I’ll find it very quickly._

“I’m honoured, your majesty. I will serve you well,” Sagamore fell back into his chair.

“See that you do. Don’t forget that I drink a glass of water with lemon every morning, and you won’t find half the other duties as difficult as they seem. Now, Lord Geraint is the new Councilor of Provision. Lady Caelia is welcome to be the new Councilor of Trade. Lord Sagamore, you may start our first Council.”

“I hereby declare the assemble of the Council of King Ryence Gingawaine: his Treasurer, Lord
Cynric, his Secretary, Lord Sagramore, his Commander of Knights, Sir Leon, his Councilor of War, Lord Accolon, his Councilor of Trade, Lady Caelia, his Councilor of Provision, Lord Geraint, His Councilor of Camelot, Lady Gingawaine.”

Ryence was listening attentively to make sure the fat man wasn’t making any mistakes.

“Aye. Sir Leon will replace Lord Accolon and Lord Accolon will replace Lady Yrien once the Essetir War is over.”

“And who will replace Sir Leon?” Lord Cynric asked.

“Not you, of that we can be sure!” Lord Accolon barked at the newmade Treasurer. “We need somebody who can actually lift a sword.”

“My Lords, what pressing matters do we have to discuss today?” Ryence was trying to finish it as quickly as possible. The talks about Dindrane plotting to overthrow him have caused his head to ache.

“Brechfa has been cut from our land,” Accolon spoke. “No folk travels the Southern Road. The castle of Chemary is locked, and no folk is seen up the Woodspeak road either. We were hesitant to send spy knights into the territory in the aftermath of Uther’s death. We’ve had three patrols slain and we don’t want to lose another one.”

“A wise decision. How is our army in Howden faring?”

“They have been training for more than ten days. I’d say you can teach a man to cut another man faster than that, but they better slice Cenred’s soldiers really good, so good that those scum of men forget the way back to Camelot and never remember it.”

“Let them train for another three days,” Ryence decided. “I will personally lead them to Brechfa.”

“You’re very brave, your majesty. But can’t we trust this mission to Sir Leon? He is a brave knight.”

“Brechfa was my land. I will free it myself. What else? What’s with the Lower Town?”

“We’re building it as fast as we can, my Lord,” Yrien assured him. “The small folk praise you at every corner in the streets.”

“See that you keep up with the schedule. Lord Cynric, I expect you to prepare a report about the kingdom’s gold on the morrow.”

“As you say, your majesty.”

“Lady Caelia. I expect you to write a letter to King Alined.”

“A letter, my lord?” Lady Caelia exchanged a worried look with Cynric.

“Yes. Tell King Alined that his multiple violations of the treaty of five kings casts a shadow on this agreement. If he doesn’t show some respect to his own signature and his own word, Camelot will abandon the treaty as well.”

“But your majesty, the treaty is crucially important for the future of Gedref and…” Lord Accolon tried to interrupt him.

“And what do I do? Do you expect me to send an army to make King Alined stick to our treaty? While my richest territory is occupied by Cenred?”
“King Olaf can make King Alined stick to the treaty!”

“King Olaf will need a fleet to do that. I doubt he’ll risk his fleet for someone as miserable as Alined. But speaking of Gedref, how fairs Lady of Gedref?”

“She is as pale as the death herself, your majesty,” Yrien replied. “She is widowed and now that her son Owaine is missing she fears for the future of her house.”

“There are no news of Sir Owaine and Sir Modron?”

“No news,” Sir Leon’s voice was over-salted with guilt, as if it were his personal fault. Don’t blame yourself, Sir Leon. You could do nothing to prevent it. “Lord Pellinore is drinking himself through his grief.”

“Modron has not been announced dead yet.”

“He hasn’t. But we have to find their bodies and send them to Gedref and Nemeton,” Leon suggested.

“We can’t be sending knights to the woods to search for two bodies with the war looming,” Ryence was about to end the council. “The world’s a cruel place, I fear, and not only for the commoners, but sometimes for the nobles, too.”

Chapter End Notes

80k words! *celebration*
So, with this chapter, the bigger part of all the forces behind Uther's death has been unmasked.

Lord Cynric, the Councilor of Trade, was benefiting from the smuggling schemes, establishing a chain of illegal import routes from Deorham to Camelot. King Alined was benefiting from this scheme, too, because Cynric shared a part of his income with King Alined.

Uther put an end to this scheme when he signed the Treaty of Five Kings (ep. "Sweet Dreams" from season 2). This treaty made the trade duties and taxes equal in Deorham and in Camelot. The merchant, thus, could start shipping the goods straight to Camelot, to its only port castle: Gedref, since the duties and taxes in Camelot were no longer higher than in Deorham.

Cynric realized that Uther wasn't going to renounce the treaty and that's why he has mastered a plan to replace Uther with a different king. He chose Ryence and his family because of the long story of feud between the Gingawaines and the Pendragons.

Cynric also turned to King Alined, who sent five hundred men to Brechfa to impersonate Cenred's soldiers; the soldiers were moving in smaller groups, using the comfortable disguise of smuggling routs which Cynric knew very well. They attacked Camelot's patrol on the border of Essetir and isolated Brechfa after all the nobles fled to Camelot by Uther's order.

Cynric then offered his maidservant to Gingawaines, but the girl fell sick right before the
arrival of the noble guests, which meant Gaius had to quickly appoint somebody else -
and the physician predictably chose Gwen. Cynric had learnt Gwen's story and knew
that she had all the rights to be angry with Uther. Cynric hoped that Young Rion could
seduce her and persuade her to join the plan. Cynric provided both, the wine and the
poison.

That's so far as we know. The reasons why the Western territories are hesitating to
recognize Ryence may be both, the fruits of Cenred's doing and the fruits of their own
choice. Cynric tells Ryence that he can control the Westerners, but knowing that
Daobeth is under the lordship of Uther's aunt, his words may as well be a bluff.

There are just two "castle" chapters left in this work: one about the trial of Lady Gedref,
Owaine's mother, whose castle Cynric wishes to own, and another chapter about Gwen.

There will be two (maybe three) chapters out on Friday, Nov. 10, 2017, and all the
Friday chapters will be about Merlin and Arthur and the magic reveal. Thank you all for
the comments and the kind words, I love you so much and I really enjoy writing this fic
^^
Three promises

Chapter Summary

Two days after the attack, the surviving members of Arthur’s patrol group decide to change the location. The first night in the new camp brings a guest.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

Just to remind that the forest events lag in time a bit: while Merlin, Arthur, Owaine and Modron change location, Camelot grieves for Uther and Arthur, whom they consider dead. Ryence was elected the new King of Camelot the previous day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two days after the attack, Owaine and Modron decided to bury Aglovale under the withered dry tree on top of the hill. They had argued for some time: Modron insisted that Aglovale’s body ought to be brought to the castle of Ascetir, while Owaine tried to explain that by the time they reached Ascetir, the body of the fellow knight would have suffered great damage.

“Do you want to cause even more pain to Lady Meirchion? She won’t be able to recognize her son! You’d be offering her a piece of rotten flesh!” Owaine screamed, for the stubbornness of Modron had started to irk him. “Besides, they say that if you don’t bury a dead man in three days, he won’t find his way into the spirit world!”

Modron had to agree on that. The spirit world, Merlin thought. They know about the spirit world yet they fear magic beyond what’s reasonable. How idiotic. Merlin stood next to Aglovale’s grave with Owaine and Modron when time came to bid farewell to the fellow knight. Aglovale’s body was pale, as though bathed in the moonlight, and he seemed childishly defenseless and vulnerable, as he lay with his hands crossed at his sword hilt. Because of the hole in his wounded eye, it seemed he was staring at them with his mutilated eyelid - an awful illusion Merlin tried to ignore.

“I want to pay tribute to Sir Aglovale of House Meirchion,” Owaine spoke humbly, tossing a flower in his right hand. “We owe him a great debt. It is not just his deed that we'll never forget. It's also his courage, his compassion. His snoring and his interest in the Roman culture,” Owaine couldn’t suppress a weak laughter, and even Modron had to smile. “Aglovale gave his life for Arthur and for all of us. He hadn’t had the chance to swear an oath, but he was a knight, a true knight, noble by heart, not only by blood. May he find peace into the spirit world.”

Owaine threw a flower into the grave, and Modron threw a handful of earth before they started the burial. Merlin looked at the sky, hoping the tears would stay in his eyes and not slide down his cheeks. The clouds, mournfully grim, had covered the forest of Brechfa, and the stormy wind kept swaying the tops of the trees. People keep dying for Arthur. He’s got a whole army of the dead in the spirit world.
From the top of the hill, Merlin could see the dead bodies of the attackers, some of them ripped of their cloaks, all of them lying with faces down. The crows were there, too, and a cacophony of croaks had started to frighten him. *There’s no way we can bury them all. Or rid of them. We need to move.*

“We need to move soon,” Merlin warned the knights when they were warming up and eating the last provision after the burial. Arthur was lying in the tent; Merlin had once again cleaned his wounds, which looked a lot better. The bleeding had stopped, but the prince was pissing and shitting with blood, and Merlin would pour the chamomile water into Arthur’s mouth while asking Owaine to help tilt the prince’s head.

“How can we carry the prince?” Owaine didn’t fancy staying so close to the bodies of the attacker’s too; chances were high somebody might come looking for them. “Arthur is too weak.”

“We can put him on the tent cloth and carry him.”

“That’s actually… an idea…”

“And where would you have us go?” Modron inquired distrustfully.

“I don’t know. It’s for you to decide, I think. Arthur said that there’s a patrol group to the east, the last in the chain. But I think we must be going west, to the southern road.”

“The southern road, right. There was another patrol group as we passed. However,” Modron’s eyes gleamed mean. “What if Cenred has started his march on Camelot?”

“Then what?”

“He won’t be leading an army host through the forests. He’d be marching up the wide and well-maintained southern road, and if we go back to the southern road, we will bring Arthur right into the hands of Cenred’s army.”

“I won’t be able to protect us against an army,” Merlin glanced at Arthur who was producing sounds that suggested the prince was miserably in pain. “I can’t even use a barrier spell too often. It consumes much of my powers.”

“We must gather the information, firstly,” Owaine rose and threw some more wood to the fire. “One of us must travel to the southern road and try to contact the patrol group, and bring them here.”

“It’s too dangerous a mission for one person,” Merlin protested.

“On the contrary. One man stands more chances of traveling unnoticed. But obviously he can’t use a horse. What you say, Modron? Can we count on you?”

“I’ll be off in moments,” the black-haired young man sounded too eager.

“No need to hurry. First, we must all change the location. Let’s go north, I say. And Modron, you’ll need some black cloaks from the dead men, so that you are not easily seen when the night falls.”

***

It took them a good part of the day to move Arthur to their new shelter. The hill with a hollow had been a more concealing location and had been used for a patrol camp for obvious reasons, but they had no time to wander around the forest, looking for the best hideaway, for time was too precious. Owaine and Merlin had been carrying Arthur, while Modron had been leading two hungry horses,
having set free all the others. When the nightfall gloom started creeping from beneath the trees and bushes, they decided to stop at the best spot they had seen so far: a wide, uprooted thick tree.

“We can hide behind the tree,” Merlin suggested.

“We’d be open at the other side,” Modron protested. “The forest is thinner here.”

“So what? There are no hollows, no hills, no caves and nothing else to shield us. It’s the best of what we have.”

Owaine agreed; once they set the tents, Modron, dressed in the cloaks of the intruders, bid farewell to Owaine and vanished in the misty, night-wrapped forest.

Merlin had to wash Arthur’s wounds again and to take full care of the prince, which included changing Arthur’s shit-stained and blood-stained pants and trying to make the half-conscious prince drink the chamomile water.

Owaine hadn’t gone to sleep before he saw Merlin slam his hand against the ground and whisper in strange language. The emanated spell was so strong that even Owaine felt the earth behind his feet vibrate for some time.

“Er… night, then,” he blurted out and disappeared in his tent.

“Night,” Merlin whispered, not sure that Owaine heard him.

Merlin hoped Owaine also didn’t hear the sniveling in the forest in the middle of the night. Merlin just couldn’t help but cry when he flung himself at Arthur, at his still-too-cold body that lay covered with Camelot red cloak in his tent. He knew the prince was getting better, for the sunstone was warming up against Merlin’s skin and its light was growing stronger, but the wounds still looked terrible to Merlin and the prince hadn’t spoken a single word since the attack.

But most of all, his tears rained because of the fear, the uttermost horror which made his pulse quicken whenever he thought about revealing his secret to Arthur. How do I say it? What do I do? Will I cope if he doesn’t love me any longer after learning that I have magic? What if he tries to harm me, what if he doesn’t understand?

The questions were greatly outweighing the answers in his mind, and Merlin thought he had never had such a simple and such an enormously hard task. Just three words. I have magic. Three simple words, come on, how’s that difficult? You can speak them alright. You can do it. Alright, four words. Arthur, I have magic. Magic. Arthur.

Little though he had liked to think about revealing himself in the past. He had grown so accustomed to using magic surreptitiously, so wary of the mortal danger magic would earn him under Uther’s reign and so tired of Gaius’s constant criticism for being too insubordinate and risk-taking that he had somehow taken the secret as a part of magic’s original nature. In fact, he had never dared to dream of coming out as a warlock before Uther’s death. On the other hand, his whole being was illuminated with the wild triumph when he had chosen to do magic openly in front of the knights, and he had rarely been as satisfied as he was when he rained his fury on the intruders.

Emrys… Emrys… Emrys…

Merlin jumped out of his tent so fast he must have damaged his back muscles. The moonless night made it nearly impossible to see a thing and to tell the real silhouettes of trees and bushes from the dark-twisted game of his own fantasy. But Merlin quickly recognized someone’s presence: somebody was right there, somebody on the wood clearing.
“Glaethan,” he whispered and felt the little heart of a fire pulsing in the air just above his right hand. The creature’s contours came out of the murky air: a winterly, ominous short figure, dressed in rags that looked older than the dust of time. It was leaning on a staff and its face seemed to be the face of the dead, with all the sorrow of the world looking at Merlin from the big round eyes.

Merlin reacted quickly, pointing the pulsing fire in his hand at the earth; the flame jumped at the ground and momentarily encircled the stranger, dancing on the grass. Whoever was in front of him paid no attention to his magic.

“Emrys,” the stranger said with a disdainful and lachrymose voice.

“What are you?” Merlin asked with his hand raised; even though he was supposed to be shielded by the barrier, he didn’t know what danger might come from the unwelcome guest.

“I am the Cailleach, the gatekeeper to the spirit world.”

Merlin’s heart was galloping. *Gatekeeper to the spirit world? What is he looking for here?*

“Why did you call me?”

“I’ve come to take what is mine by rights. Your prince should have entered the spirit world.”

“Arthur’s alive!” Merlin responded, and the flame circle around the Cailleach got swollen up. “He doesn’t belong with the spirit world!”

“It is not for you to decide!” the Cailleach thundered, infuriated. “The prince is mine!”

She slammed her staff against the ground and Merlin heard baleful whispers crawling through the dark of the night forest. He stepped back and was ready to unleash all his power at the Cailleach.

The Cailleach, however, seemed to be at a loss; her deadly, ghost-paled face was frozen in disbelief. She slammed her staff against the ground once more, but nothing happened, except for the whispers growing louder.

“Who is he calling for?”

“The voices of the dead,” she threatened. “And like the dead, they are numberless!”

The next moment, the Cailleach waved her staff and the flames she had been trapped in were gone; the figure made a threatening move Merlin’s way, but the sunstone on his chest started pulsing and shaking, and before the gatekeeper could come any closer, it erupted with some wild magic that cast a shield of golden light which threw the Cailleach away.

“So, Emrys, you choose to challenge me after all? Have you decided to give yourself to the spirits to save your prince?” she asked, pointing at the sunstone on his chest.

“It is my destiny!”

“Mayhaps,” she said with a wicked smile. She waved her staff and suddenly, everything seemed to have stopped: the wind, the swaying leaves, the life and noise of the forest. “But you will rue the day when you defied the Cailleach, Emrys. You have worked the most ancient magic, and you have meddled with tides of destiny themselves. And with three promises I will repay you, Emrys: you, Emrys, will make a brother slaughter his brother. You, Emrys, will make a mighty tigern betray the blood. And as the great horn sounds a cold dawn at Camlann, as they let loose the hounds of war, as the dreadfire of the high priestess will rain down from angry skies, the source of your destiny, Emrys, will meet his end.”
The Cailleach disappeared in a wisp of dark smoke.

“How were you talking to?” Owaine crawled out of his tent with the blade of his sword and his white skin gleaming in the night.

“I…I…thought there was somebody there. I tried to see if…”

“How have you managed to deceive Arthur for so long? You’re the worst liar. I heard you say something about your destiny! Are you often talking about your destiny in the middle of the night?”

What is the point of lying? He knows I have magic anyway.

“I’ve just met the Cailleach.”

Owaine looked around and rushed close to Merlin; he could feel the knight’s hot breath and the unpleasant smell from his mouth.

“What? The Cailleach?”

“Yes. How do you know him?”

“It’s her, you bloody idiot! How don’t you know her? Are you a sorcerer or what?”

“I… I’ve never …”

“She’s said to be the gatekeeper of the spirit world! They say she only comes for the dead, why did she come to you? Is she bloody real?” the answer came to Owaine’s head when he gazed at the yellow shining sunstone on Merlin’s chest. “Oh, damn it, are you dying? Are you dead already?”

“Not yet. The sunstone magic takes a moon to work.”

“Merlin, this is no good. The Cailleach is no good herald. Whoever sees her has bad luck.”

“Owaine, sometimes I think I’ve got bad luck ever since being born,” Merlin replied with sadness as the visions of dead Will, Freya, his father and choking Morgana were racing past him. “Go to sleep. She can’t harm us.”

Chapter End Notes

more chapters incoming tonight!
When Modron returns from his raid, Merlin and the soon-to-be knights learn strange rumours about the land.

The night was a restless trial of his own sanity. He couldn’t fall asleep because of the visit of the Cailleach. Much as he wished to think the gatekeeper was gone, he kept pricking up his ears to try and distinguish those menacing voices in the darkness of the late-night hour.

*Keep calm. She couldn’t make it past the shield of the sunstone. What is this sunstone anyway? Where did Gaius get it? How did Uther find it and why didn’t he destroy it? Funny how the thing that is eventually supposed to take the life out of me has saved Arthur from the Cailleach. What in the wide world is that gatekeeper?*

When the raindrops started slanting the cloth of his and Arthur’s tent, he was halfway in the dream, and the sudden noise frightened him so much he rushed out, ready to defy the Cailleach for the second time.

The downpour was washing his hair and his face, soothing his heated temper and making him so full of life that all the notes of fear got silenced by his sudden burst of energy. When the blackness of the sky cracked with the silver-piercing flash of lightning, Merlin rose his hands up in the air, hoping to disappear, to merge with the blustering force of the night summer and reappear as strong as ever. *I’ll be so strong I’ll tear the gates of the spirit world if the Cailleach dares to step near Arthur again…*

*I will no longer have to hide a part of myself from Arthur. I shall tell.*

He had finally managed to fall sleep before dawn. When he woke up, Arthur was breathing heavily next to him, and his wounds were a lot better. *Maybe it’s because of the magic the sunstone unleashed at the Cailleach?* He had to stick to the routine, though, full of hopes Arthur would finally awake and speak. *It’s been three days since he was wounded already. Come on, dollophead, I need you.*

When Merlin appeared out of the tent, with Arthur piss and blood-stained pants in his right hand and the old bandage, Owaine arranged his face into a sympathetic expression.

“Morning,” he said, in his rain-soaked clothes and the wet fair hair, but keeping that smile of his.

“D’morning,” Merlin replied, slipping on the wet earth and nearly losing his balance.
“Good news: I’ve found a stream two hundred steps away from here, and the rain has left some water in our bowls. I’ve fed the horses with what was left. Bad news: we’ve got nearly nothing left to eat, and the last time we went hunting, somebody killed Aglovale and tried to kill Arthur.”

“We must think of something.”

“Nothing to think of, it seems. Of course, unless the sorcerers can conjure the food out of thin air.”

“I think they can’t. I can try, though, but I’d fear to eat whatever comes of it,” the warlock smiled.

“Care to seat down with me?” Owaine pointed at the flooded fireplace as though he were inviting Merlin to a generous feast.

“Actually… why not, yeah,” he bowed down playfully and sat down. “By the way, how discourteous of me!”

Merlin’s eyes gleamed for a moment, and the wet wood was set on fire. It wasn’t the most awe-inspiring magic he had performed, but it seemed enough to provoke the playful admiration in Owaine’s eyes.

“You know, Merlin, I… I’ve understood so much more about you,” Owaine said, happy to warm himself and to dry his clothes close to the fire. “I remember Arthur’s stories about you. He used to call you his rabbit’s foot, did you know?”

“Not until recently.”

“Rabbit’s foot? Bloody mace, now I see. This forest is not the first time you save the prince’s life, is it?”

“I’ve never done it for glory or something. I just happen to lo… to be loyal to Arthur,” Merlin hated himself for blushing.

“And the prince never suspected you…”

“He thinks I’m quite hopelessly incapable sometimes. When I forget to mend his shirts or when I’m late with his breakfast.”

“And it’s not the first time you’re ready to give your life for his, right?”

Memories engrossed Merlin. There was a day when he thought no other solution could be considered, and was ready to travel to the Isle of the Blessed to seek Nimueh’s help. He was leaning on the wooden creaky door, struggling to gaze at Arthur because he was afraid he’d burst with tears. The prince was drinking wine, his left hand in a bondage after the Questing Beast incident.

“I need to talk to you,” Merlin said in the most informal tone one could hope to address the prince.

“You still haven’t got it yet, have you?” Merlin failed to recognize the joke in Arthur’s voice and froze, expecting Arthur to give him another lecture on “my lord” thing. “I decide when we need to talk.”

“Not today,” Merlin said, the sadness dawning in his eyes.

“I sometimes wonder if you know who I am,” Arthur held his cup in a clumsy gesture that was probably meant to underline his importance.

“Oh, I know who you are. You’re a prat,” Merlin approached the table. “A royal one.”
Arthur’s smile was so gentle and friendly he had to look away, as though uncomfortable about sharing such openness with his servant.

“Are you ever going to change, Merlin?”

“No, you’d get bored.” none of them dared to look at another, both not willing to risk facing what each of them expected and feared in the other one’s look. “But promise me this, if you get another servant, don’t get a bootlicker.”

“If this is you trying to leave your job...”

“No. I’m happy to be your servant. Till the day I die.”

Arthur, who was massaging his left shoulder, gazed at Merlin, at the worriedly watery eyes of his servant.

“Sometimes I think I know you, Merlin. Other times...”

Now you will know me, Arthur, Merlin’s mind sprang back to the present time, because of the odd noise coming from behind his back. Owaine reached for the sword at once, but when Merlin turned around, he recognized the dark-haired figure – Modron.

Except for the dark-haired knight wasn’t alone. He was carrying a heavy bag on his back, and in his left hand, he was holding a rope, a long one that was attached to the other man: a tall man with broad shoulders and rich brown hair. His hands were tied up behind his back, and there was a piece of cloth covering his eyes and another one filling his mouth to prevent the man from screaming. Modron’s attitude towards his captive was not even remotely kind; he didn’t care the tied man couldn’t see they way and would slam into the trees now and then.

“Who’s that?” Owaine asked when Modron was close.

“He was sneaking in the forest. I think he might have something to do with the attackers. We need to question him. And then kill,” Modron said indifferently. “I didn't have time to talk to him. I was hurrying because I knew you didn’t have any food left.”

“Modron, are you mental? What’s with this kill everyone attitude?” Owaine took the rope from Modron’s hands and started tying the captive to the tree.

“Somebody must pay for the lives of our brothers! If this servant...”

“If this servant hadn’t shielded us from the attackers, you and I would have been at the feast for crows already. So cool your spirits, Modron. You will have your revenge.”

“I know him,” Merlin whispered as kept inspecting the captive’s oddly familiar look. Those fun and fresh kisses, so strong and longing. His shoulders and his hair. Gwaine. What are you doing here?

“Why that doesn’t surprise me?” Modron rolled his eyes and dropped the bag on the ground. “Bad news: the patrol to the east and the patrol to the west seem to have been slaughtered, too. I’ve found some arrows in the trees and on the ground, and had it not been for the rain, I’m sure, there would be a lot of blood on the ground. There are bodies in the forest, Owaine. I bet there’re more souls that will never find their way into the spirit world. And I fear Hengest and Evaine are among them. I couldn't find them.”

“It’s not a coincidence. The attackers haven’t come by accident. They were looking for us and they were looking for the prince. They knew where all the patrols were. How?”
“I don’t know,” Modron shrugged, looking tired in the filthy black cloak. “Ask him.”

Merlin wasn’t surprised that Modron’s glum look was aimed at him. *He will never tolerate me.*

“Merlin,” Owaine whispered, sounding a lot more careful than he looked. “Can we talk alone?”

Merlin nodded; they had to march twenty steps away from the camp and from the captive, who was standing, like a statue, next to the tree where his rope was attached. Modron joined them, and they talked in whispering voices.

“Who is this man?” Owaine asked.

“He’s Gwaine, I’m not entirely sure, but I think it’s him. He worked in the inn of Gedney. When Arthur and me came to Ascetir to kill the troll, he was there.”

“What is he doing in Brechfa?”

“I don’t know. But he’s innocent. Mostly.”

“How do you know?”

“He’s a damn inn guard. How can anything be wrong about him?”

“Are you sick with the skull or what?” impatience rang through Modron’s voice. “He was in Gedney and now he is here. He is following Arthur! I’m sure he means to kill the prince.”

“He doesn’t.”

“We’ll see about that. For his own sake, I hope he’s good at lying.”

Modron approached the captive and commanded:

“On your knees. If you dare to move while I take the cloth off your eyes and out of your mouth, my friend will kill you. Is that clear?”

The captive didn’t have to be told twice; he kneeled too eagerly, nearly falling face in the mud. Modron pulled the cloth off his face and out of his mouth.

It took Gwaine a moment to adjust to the bleak-grey air of the forest, the greenery that seemed a little faded under the frowning sky. When he fixed his look on the three men standing in front of him, he exclaimed:

“Merlin?! Merlin, s that you?”

“Gwaine,” Merlin nodded, happily.

“You’ll be talking with my permit only,” Modron’s spit landed on Gwaine’s earlobe. “Is that clear?”

“I’m afraid that cloth you’ve used has hurt my ears or something. But I’m sure I’ll hear you better if you let me hold a sword. Maybe we’ll see who needs whose permits, puppy-boy,” Gwaine added with a delicious smile, pointing at Modron’s curly hair.

“Gwaine, guard your tongue, I beg you!” Merlin blocked Modron’s arm when he tried to raise it. “They don’t mean any harm.”

“Can see that,” the long-haired man had a couple of bruises on his face. *Modron’s mark, I’m sure.*
The boy is savage. “When I don’t mean any harm, Merlin, I always go to forest and threaten people with swords. Everybody does, right?”

“Where did you meet the serving boy?” Modron inquired.

“In Gedney.”

“What were you doing there?”

“I was guarding Mary’s drinks in the tavern at night. Sometimes she’d allow me to guard more than that, if it’s what you’re interested in.”

“Was Merlin alone?”

“No. He claimed to be with Sir Thomas or Sir Rhonas or something. I never knew the prince of Camelot used to have that many names. As if calling your cat a dog will make it bark.”

“You were obviously wiser, ha?” Merlin could feel the vibrations of the most dangerous feeling radiated by Modron’s body; the hate and revenge mixed in a repressed desire.

“When was the last time Uther trusted to handle some magic problem to somebody other than Arthur?” the questioning, however irksome, seemed to be a relief for Gwaine, who was expecting a harsher treatment.

“And why would a drunkard like you be keen on observing the royal habits?”

“His habits don’t need observing. Everybody knows that when Uther the Dog used to smell the stink of magic, he’d send his favorite puppy to deal with the source.”

“I’ll have your tongue!” Modron threatened.

“You may lose yours while trying,” Gwaine laughed back.

“What were you doing in the woods?” Owaine was holding Modron by his shoulder not to let him hit Gwaine and started asking the questions himself.

“Why, trying to get to Camelot. They have a lot of job there.”

“Why didn’t you use the southern road?”

“Have you traveled down the southern road as of late? Have you seen many people there?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“How do I know why people are not allowed to travel the southern road?”

“Not allowed by who?” Modron was losing his patience.

Gwaine’s knees were sinking in the mud, and he was struggling to keep his position in balance with his hands tied up behind his back. He threw a quick glance at Merlin, a quick ask for help, but the hilts of swords in Owaine’s and Modron’s hands gave him the wrong idea about who was in charge.

“I don’t know by who. I didn’t have the chance to tie them up and question them in the forest, puppy-boy. I went to Brechfa like I always do for the Summer Feast. Summer’s meant for love and for working on the crops, I say. This year I had to go earlier because I was thrown out of the tavern.
by an Ascetir host when it was making its way to Camelot. They found some of my remarks… improper, I guess. When I was on the border between Ascetir and Brechfa, some bastards tried to turn me away.”

“What bastards?” Modron was pressing the crucial point.

“They didn’t give their names, smart-arse! I watched them closely and I crossed the border in a different place.”

“So, you got to Brechfa?”

“Aye, but I was not welcome. When I went to the village where I usually go, I saw a small host of armed people there. They started chasing me the instant they figured out I was not a local commoner.”

“Which host was that?” Owaine asked.

“Funny thing: people in the village don’t know. They are dressed in Essetir’s battle cloaks, but they look too damn southerners, and some people claimed they recognized some of Gingawaine’s soldiers among them, too. The problem is with their cloaks. They have sigils, I say, Alined or Odin’s sigils.”

“Alined and Odin? Are you mad?”

“I wish I were. Cenred’s army has no sigils. It never had. These ones had krakens, mermaids, fishnets and many more. These people block all the roads and are gathered in all the main villages. They wear strange clothes, they don’t allow anybody in and out of the land, and I noticed them move when the news about Uther’s death reached Brechfa.”

Gwaine seemed so unfazed about the prospects of his arrest his tone was too casual when he announced the news. All Merlin could do was blink. Blink. Blink. Blink. Dead? Who’s dead?


“Now the old Gingawaine is king.”

“King of what?”

“Why, of Camelot! What have you girls been doing in these woods?”

“Gwaine, Uther is the king of Camelot,” Merlin was forcing the words to pass his lips, he felt he had lost the powers to speak. Is it possible? Has the day finally come? Is Arthur now the King? What’s a Gingawaine?

“Uther is dead. They say the Dragonslayer is dead, too.”

The three of them exchanged the looks, involuntarily. Merlin didn’t like the idea of the whole kingdom in a false mourning because of what had happened. We need to let them know. Let them know the prince is alive. Or is he now a king? If we say the king is alive it’ll confuse them. We need to say Arthur’s...

“Are you mad enough to tell us that Ryence of House Gingawaine, the Lord of Brechfa sits the throne of Camelot?” Modron laughed.

“Why are you angry with me as if I had something to do with it? Merlin, where did you meet those
“Donkeys?”

“Call me a donkey and…”

“Modron! Now,” Owaine gestured. “We have to talk. Be quiet.”

They were thirty steps away from Gwaine again. This time, Gwaine was free to look around; he couldn’t ignore the fact that there were two tents behind the uprooted tree, a camp that didn’t look like something the knights of Camelot would set.

“Owaine, you can’t believe a word of what he is saying, can you?” Modron’s question was reproachful.

“I can’t. And I don’t mean to believe him, I mean to know.”

“Know what?”

“We will go to Brechfa. We have to,” nothing about Owaine’s tone pleased Merlin. “We must see it with our own eyes. If the land is really closed, cut, isolated by some host, and if the host doesn’t belong with Cenred’s army, then we’re stuck in the horseshit.”

“Because that would mean that somebody has faked the invasion,” Merlin figured out. “Most likely somebody who is now king.”

“I will not stand this,” Modron’s fingers clenched into fists. “You are but a stupid serving bastard boy, no matter how many magic tricks you can…”

“Mordron!”

“Have you heard him, Owaine? He’s like… Why would Gingawaine even need a throne? He is a doddery old man, he’s one foot in the grave!”

“His sister is young. His nephew is younger still.”

“Rion? Rion? That… He’s still sucking on his mother’s breasts!”

“Modron, listen to me,” Owaine put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Our patrol has been viciously attacked, and it was not by mistake. It was intentional. Somebody knew where we would be, even though the matter of patrols is highly secretive. Only the king and Sir Leon would know. Somebody tried to kill us and to kill Arthur. We thought it was Cenred, but what if Cenred has nothing to do with it? What if… This man, this Gwaine, he says that Uther is dead – what if he is? How did he die? Arthur was Uther’s only heir and this Gwaine says people think the Dragonslayer is dead. We might be dealing with something far greater than the betrayal. It might be a coup, and a successful one, if old Gingawaine truly wears the crown now. That’s why we must be sure about Brechfa. If we find out the invasion was faked, we must help Arthur restore his legitimate rights. We’ve sworn the oaths to him.”

“We haven’t yet…”

“I will not swear my oaths to anybody but Arthur. You may do as you wish.”

“Owaine, I didn’t mean to… It’s just… We’re going to Brechfa because of the words of a stranger. Even for Merlin, he has seen him like once? Twice?”

“Twice,” Merlin nodded.
“Great! Twice!”

“If he is lying,” Owaine continued to persuade Modron. “If he is lying, there will be no problem for us. But if Cenred’s host is not in Brechfa, then we’ll have to go to Camelot and see everything with our own eyes… Merlin, do you have a place where you can keep Arthur before we find everything out?”


“What is that?”

“A village. My mother lives there. If Gingawaine has killed Uther and has ordered the murder of Arthur, he will never want to look for the prince in Ealdor.”

“Ealdor is in Essetir,” Modron noticed, dragging Merlin’s intentions in the spotlight of doubt again.

“On paper, yes. In fact, Cenred couldn’t care any less about the village.”

“Will you take Arthur to Ealdor?” Owaine asked hopefully.

“Are you seriously letting him stay alone with the prince?” Modron was fuming.

“Modron, he alone has killed more men than all of us here combined.”

“Arthur will be safe with me,” Merlin promised.

“This Gwaine will go with us, too,” Modron demanded. “I don’t trust him yet and I can’t leave him with the prince.”

Merlin glanced at Gwaine over Modron’s shoulder. *It would be good to have some company, but Modron is right. I don’t know him, he’s almost a stranger. He kissed me in the tavern once, alright, but Arthur’s too precious to risk. Especially now, when there may be an usurper and the Cailleach threatening him.*

“Owaine?” Merlin thought it was best to speak his mind before they were too busy packing up (as though there was much to pack).

“Yes?”

“And you, Modron. I was touched by your loyalty to Arthur. I really was. And I want you to know, that if you find out that everything is as we fear… Come back to Ealdor alone. Bring nobody with you. If you go to Camelot to see how the things are, tell nobody about me and Arthur, except for Gaius and Gwen, but try not to mention our location. Gaius and Gwen, they can be trusted.”

“The physician and the serving girl?”

“Yes. And if what we fear is true, if Arthur’s throne has been usurped, then you will have a choice. If you choose to side with Gingawaine, keep in mind that I will kill anybody who tries to kill Arthur. You have seen what I can do.”

“I will expect nothing less from a loyal and a dutiful servant,” Owaine petted him on the back.
With the moment to say goodbye (or farewell) looming on the horizon, Merlin started following the moves of Owaine and Modron with sentimental sadness to his look. He was glad they had both survived the attack, and he got used to their strange relationship, used to the company of the first people who had learnt his secret. The dynamics between Modron and Owaine were fun to watch, too. Merlin failed to grasp why Modron, the boy who always counted on violence, brutal strengths and threats as a mean to achieve some goals, would argue with Owaine half-heartedly, but in the end would never really have the guts to disobey his fair-haired friend. Owaine had to throw just one precise look at Modron - the evanescent twitch of eyebrow seemed to be enough to make Modron nod respectfully.

"If you keep me tied up any longer, one of you will have to pull my pants down and grab my cock to help me piss," Gwaine shouted, making Owaine blush and Modron's teeth clench with anger.

"We can untie him. He has done nothing wrong," Merlin tried to advocate. "Just let me stay near Arthur's tent and if he dares to hurt the prince, he will never understand what killed him."

"As you say, trick-master," Modron agreed, although reluctantly and after some hesitation, and went to untie Gwaine; the freed captive rushed to the bushes. "Tell me something, Merlin..."

Modron approached Merlin with a dagger in his hands, playing with it like some jester who would perform at birthday feasts from time to time. Owaine stopped sorting the provision from the big bag Modron had brought and was watching them cautiously.

"Have you ever killed before, Merlin?"

"I don't think I've killed people before patrol," Merlin was perplexed at how empty his memories seemed when he tried to reach for the murder scenes. With a little more effort, he remembered the witch dying under the chandelier, with her last and fiercest attempt to throw a dagger at Arthur, and Nimueh's silhouette and her deadly shrieking as the lightning was tearing her life apart. "But I've killed other things."

"Like what?"

"Witches. Warlocks that have risen from the dead. And a high priestess of the Old Religion."

*And a friend*, a weak voice broke out in his head, and Morgana's eyes, her deathbed look, emerged
to haut him again.

"If what you say is true," Modron's expression remained chilly unimpressed. "You may find yourself in a new position now."

"Now?"

"Now that you have to kill people. Here, take this dagger," he offered it to Merlin with a little dismay, but a firm decisive move of his hand. "You may know how to kill other magic creatures, but killing people is different. In such situations, Merlin, remember one thing: you won't have a second chance. If you get the chance to kill, do it, otherwise you can die. And if by some cruel twist of fate you lose your powers, keep this dagger hidden somewhere, so that you always have a chance for the last blow. Good luck and keep Arthur safe."

When Modron was away to water the horses, Owaine winked at Merlin with a content smile.

"Knowing Modron, it was... Well, the fact that he started talking to you is almost an apology, and giving you advice on murdering other people... you can consider it a love confession."

***

When the knights and Gwaine left, Merlin went to Arthur's tent, hoping the prince would finally wake up, but Arthur remained seized in his weirdly unconscious state, although his chest was rising higher as he was inhaling. *Arthur has been unconscious for more than three days already.* Merlin went out of the tent to water the fireplace and to greet the late evening. There was a promising, caring and comforting glimmer of sunset-red among the widespread tree tops. Merlin thought he could detect the faint scent of early berries carried by the wind. Summer was his favorite time of the year, the time when he could be outside as long as it pleased him. He would never deny the splendid grandeur of the castle of Camelot, and the vibes of ancient magic inside its walls inspired him no less than its white towers, but it was nothing compared to the magic of a sunset.

*Should I tell Arthur about the rumours? Can't it weaken him? Or is it best to save them for Ealdor? And how do you propose to explain your trip? Taking him to hunt in the places of your youth? Right. Er. I guess I'll have to tell him about Uther. But is it real? Can it be real?*

Despite all his hate for Uther, Merlin had never fancied dreaming of the king’s death. The visions about Uther passing to the spirit world had always been the reason of a dismal mood, and sometimes Merlin found himself shuddering from those visions. He was afraid Uther would die many years from now, an old and respected king who by the time of his death would have managed to poison Arthur’s mind with his prejudice towards magic. Arthur was both, the source of Merlin’s love and fears, the only man in the castle who could both, inspire and dispel his apprehensions.

The warm feeling started to flourish in his chest when he remembered how Arthur was all furious when he found out Halig, the man who captured Freya, tried to prosecute Merlin. *Leave him alone. Merlin is my servant, he has my absolute trust. If you have a problem with him, you come to me. Do you understand?*

But it was overshadowed by Arthur’s defiance which looked like a slap on the face of his father to all the members of the court who could witness it. *Father...let's settle this once and for all. If what Merlin says is wrong, he must bear the consequences. But if there is some truth in what he says...* Uther, who had just shut down Merlin’s attempt to have a fraction of authority in the matter of life and death of the court physician, looked shocked.

*Is Uther really gone now? Has Gingawaine killed him? Why else would the old Gignawaine be*
king? Did Arthur have any relatives on Uther’s line? Gaius told me that Tristan, the Dark Knight summoned by Nimueh from the dead, was Arthur’s uncle. Did this Tristan have any children? Is the land free now? Is Gignawaine as hateful as Uther? Will he prosecute innocent sorcerers, too?

Destiny was on his mind when he was collecting the chamomile flowers to make a new drink for Arthur. When the dusk befell the forest, Merlin put out the fire and casted the barrier spell; this time he felt a scratch of pain running through his body, from his index finger to his toe. The sunstone magic must be having an effect already, he cursed. I need to see Gaius, the sooner the better. If there’s no way to reverse it... How will I tell mother...

The moaning – which Merlin had mistaken for some pleading animal sound of the forest – turned out to be coming from Arthur’s tent. Merlin ran and got in carefully; Arthur seemed to have powers to raise his head only, but his eyes were wide open and when their looks met – Arthur’s, confused and perplexed, and Merlin’s, loving and joyful – some magic happened in the tent, Merlin was sure, for how else could he explain his shivering hands when Arthur’s eyes, gleaming-blue, were finally radiating that look again.

“Merlin,” Arthur whispered before his head dropped back on the improvised pillow made of the cloaks Merlin had torn off the bandits. “I wasn’t dreaming then...”

“Arthur, you have scared the last breath out of me, you silly dollophead,” Merlin crawled closer to Arthur to press a kiss on his cheek; Arthur turned his head thinking Merlin was aiming at his lips and Merlin’s mouth accidentally seized the prince’s nose. “I’m sorry, sorry. Here, a proper one.”

It was more than just a kiss on a cheek, it was his way of saying “I’ve missed you” and “Don’t you ever leave me again”; Merlin’s lips were burningly sweet to Arthur’s skin, and Arthur inhaled heavily when he felt the touch.

“Merlin. You’re safe.”

“Safer than you.”

“I’m so glad you’re,” Arthur’s voice caught off as Merlin was peering into his tear-shedding eyes. “I had all those horrible dreams about you... I thought I’d lost you, I thought you were gone... Kiss me again.”

“Will you say please?”

“Merlin, I’m the prince,” Arthur let out a laugh. “It’s a command. Kiss me.”

Merlin was standing above Arthur, leaning on his knees that were pressing into the ground next to Arthur’s thighs, and on his hands that were pressing the ground next to Arthur’s shoulders. He closed his eyes and didn’t open them before his lips reached Arthur’s, weak and dry, but sensitive to his lovesong.

“I was worried over you, I thought I heard you sniveling, I was afraid you were wounded, I thought...”

“Worried about me?” Merlin’s smile grew wide. Was it me who the Cailleach has come for? “Have you seen yourself, dollophead?”

“No. I must be dying, right?”

“You’re not. You are not dying. Not when I am looking after you.”
“How are the rest?” Arthur’s mind seemed to be gaining more and more clarity. “Where are they? Where are we?”

“Owaine and Mordon are with us. Aglovale was killed,” Merlin hated to deliver the sad news. “Don’t know anything about Hengest and Evaine. They didn’t come back from bathing and we couldn’t find them.”

Arthur swallowed, turned away and pressed his lips; tears were running out of the corners of his eyes. His soon-to-be knights. He had been training them.

“How did this? Is Cenred marching on the castle of Camelot?”

“We don’t know. We can’t be sure they were Cenred’s men, to begin with.”

“How so?” Arthur frowned.

“I don’t know. We are just... slowly moving northward, while Owaine and Modron are out to check some rumors.”

“Rumors about Cenred?”

“No. We’ve got some information we need to check about the enemy’s host in… er… Brechfa.”

“And they left you with me?”

“What’s with this surprised tone?” Merlin smiled, caressing Arthur’s hair.

“Nothing … I just…”

“You just?”

“Merlin,” he smiled. “You know I didn’t mean... I’m happy with you. If I woke up and didn’t find you around, I’d die.”

Merlin didn’t know why he was crying, he was just helplessly wiping tears away with the back of his hand.

“Merlin, don’t be such a…”

Merlin crawled out of the tent to get Arthur’s chamomile drink and bring him some apples. One arrow had hit the prince in the stomach, and although the wounds were visibly so much better than the open flesh and blood Merlin had seen on the day of the battle, rabbit and chicken could still be too hard for the prince’s digestion. Owaine had left some bread for them, but it was half-rotten already.

Arthur is alive, the sunstone and moonstone magic is working perfectly. The Cailleach can’t hurt us, and Uther may be dead. There can be no better day for a confession. Goddess, give me strength, it’s so simple, it’s just four words, but I feel there’s a burden of all the centuries on my tongue when I try to brace myself for finally…

“You’ll have to drink something,” he said, helping Arthur get up a little and pressing a waterskin to his mouth.

“What is this?” Arthur made a wry face.

“It’s a special drink.”
“It tastes awful!”

“It can help stop infection in your wounds.”

“It still tastes awful! Merlin, I am dying, am I not?”

“You’re not. You’re safe with me.”

“But they’ve shot me. Too many times.”

“Your wounds are better. And you’ve stopped shitting and pissing with blood, which I take as a good sign.”

“How is that possible? Without a proper physician or any remedies at hand?”

“Didn’t you know I was overly qualified?”


For the first time Arthur managed to raise his hand and in a moment Merlin was trying to bite Arthur’s index finger which the prince planned to point at his servant in a manner of command.

“Arthur…”

“Merlin, dying or not, I’m still you prince. I command you to give me an explanation.”

“I’ve saved you.”

“How?”

The peering-blue sky of Arthur’s eyes was keen and honest, and Merlin had to soak in a part of that honesty to open his own heart. *This is Arthur. Your Arthur. And you’re his little star and he won’t hurt you.* The whirling blurred images were conjured up all over his mind, the memory lanes that brought him to his first clumsy fight with Arthur in the Southern Village… *there’s something about you, Merlin…* The hissing venomous snakes on the shield of the pretender who came to the tourney to kill Arthur and Merlin’s tearful complaints to Kilgarrah about how Arthur hates him … *A half cannot truly hate that which makes it whole…* The day he rode away to Ealdor to help his mother, and some unexplained, rock-hard sadness and frustration when he bid farewell to his prince… *Well, you’ve been terrible. Really, I mean it. The worst servant I’ve ever had. But good luck, Merlin…* The day he was ready to strike a bargain with Nimueh to wrest Arthur’s life from the grasp of the Questing Beast poison… *Sometimes I think I know you, Merlin. Other times…* He had glanced at the widest terrain of time and at the sunbathed path which he had walked with Arthur, together, from being irritated by a snobbish royal bully to holding hands and dreaming of building their own home in the stars when Arthur was kissing him in the Western Tower. He didn’t quite understand the way things happened, and not that he cared to: Arthur seemed to be everything he needed.

“I’m a sorcerer, Arthur,” the words came as though there indeed was a stone in his throat, blocking his breath. “I have magic, I’ve always had, but I use it for you, Arthur, only for you.”

Arthur was no longer smiling, but he arranged his face into the expression that suggested he couldn’t treat Merlin’s words seriously.

“Merlin, is that a jape Owaine has thought of?”

“No. I speak the truth.”
“The truth about what?”

“I’m a sorcerer, Artur. I have always been.”

“Merlin, sometimes… What’s with your eyes? Merlin, you’re taking it too far. I would know it if the man closest to my heart had magic, thank you.”

Merlin closed his eyes and tried to gather himself for some beautiful magic: he breathed out some substance, neither liquid nor gas, as blue as Arthur’s eyes, and before long it formed itself into a gleaming butterfly.

Arthur’s startled eyes met Merlin’s: Merlin had never thought there could be so much pain and blame in someone’s look. Merlin held his breath, hoping that Arthur’s fear would tremble and be gone, but Arthur’s face was just like it had been in Ascetir, except for less angry.

“Arthur, I can…”

“Leave me,” the calm in Arthur’s tone was way too worrying.

“Arthur, we…”

“No. Just...you heard me! Just... go away. I want you gone.”

I don’t need you as a servant any longer. You will find somewhere to stay, Arthur’s words from their Ascetir fight echoed in his mind. Merlin couldn’t believe what was happening. Losing Arthur when he was just his master was one thing, but losing his Arthur, his love, his…

“Where can I go? We’re in the middle of the woods.”

“Get out of my tent if you value whatever has been between us,” Arthur’s voice had never been so emptied of feelings; he was talking to a complete stranger, it would seem.

Merlin tried to hold Arthur’s hand, but the prince hit him angrily and rather painfully, and accompanied it with a burning and defensive gaze that read: you’re not welcome, get out, I don’t need you.

Has been between us. Does he mean it’s over? Merlin crawled out of the tent, into the dense darkness of the night, and found himself choking because he had stopped breathing. This is so wrong, this is so wrong. People can’t love each other one day and hate each other the other day. Was it real love or was I just?.. Love is real. Love to Arthur is the only thing that’s real. Why am I so afraid now if it is love? No creature of magic has ever scared me as much as the possibility of losing him. Does he expect me to stay out of his tent?

He stopped caring that his sniveling and weeping were probably heard all over the forest. He couldn’t be far from Arthur, he just couldn’t.

“Arthur, we need to leave at first light,” he said, opening the tent and trying to smile through the tears; he was crying so much he couldn’t see a thing.

“I will decide!” Arthur, still aggrieved at the reveal, tried to sound like a redoubtable master, but when he saw Merlin’s eyes a shadow of something other than anger eclipsed his face.

“I can’t let you stay here,” Merlin mumbled out. “It's too dangerous.”

“Dangerous how?”
“Arthur, they say your father is dead. They say old Gingawaine is the king of Camelot now. Owaine and Modron fear that it wasn’t Cenred who attacked us. Might have been Gingawaine’s men. And they went to check the rumors about Brechfa. Some say there has never been Cenred’s invasion at all. It might have been staged.”

Merlin treated Arthur’s silence as a permission to enter. *If his body were in full strength, he would be off to Camelot already,* Merlin thought.

“You will take me to Camelot now!” Arthur demanded, reading Merlin’s thoughts.

“I won’t!” Merlin shook his head.

“Merlin, you will…”

“I care a great deal about you to hand you over to the usurper. I love you, Arthur…”

“Love me so much you’ve lied?” Arthur’s voice was getting louder and lower. “Lied to me all this time? Merlin, I thought I knew you!”

“I’m still the same person, Arthur!” Merlin reached for Arthur’s hand; this time, the prince didn’t hit him, but escaped the touch nonetheless. “I am as clumsy as I was, as awful a servant, I really am, and my sense of humour, Arthur, it’s mine, I mean if one could use magic to conjure jokes, I’d not be so witlessly funny, like you say, right? And I love you, Arthur, no man or woman can ever create love from magic and…”

“My father was made to fall in love…”

“With a troll! And he didn’t love her, she put a spell on him, she made him think she was a beautiful and charming lady, when in fact she was…”

“I remember what she was,” Arthur shuddered. “I trusted you, Merlin.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Arthur said and turned away.

“Do you seriously think I’ll let you sleep?”

“No, but I think you respect me somehow to let me stay on my own for some time.”

“I can’t,” Merlin tried to paint his voice in apologetic tones. *If I’m even two steps far from you, the wait will start killing me slowly, but quicker than the sunstone.* “I need to feed you and to wash you, because, let’s face it: you stink as much as Lady Katrina. And then I’ll have to wash your wounds and to change the bondages on your chest, and I’ll have to dry some of your clothes, but that’ll be done after dawn, the fire in the middle of the night might betray us and…”

“Why are you doing this? Why are you still behaving like you…”

“Like I what? Like I love you? Because I love you. Now that I look back, I think I loved you since the day we met.”

“Did me trying to take your head off with a mace on the day we met was why you fell in love with me?”

“You remember it, too?”
“I’m not called out by many peasants, you know. You were quite an exception. And I couldn’t get you…”

“That’s because I stopped you, using magic,” Merlin turned away to not let Arthur see his smile.

“You cheated!”

“You were going to kill me!”

“Maybe I should have?”

Merlin let his eyes close. *That’s it. Kill me. He thinks he could kill me because of magic.*

“I didn’t mean it,” Arthur whispered, remorseful. “I shouldn’t have killed you.”

“Why?”

“I wouldn’t kill Morgana. And I certainly would never harm you. Or even let anybody harm you. But Morgana’s one thing, I’ve never seen her do magic or… When you let this smoke out of your mouth and it turned into that butterfly, I was just nervous. And hurt, because you lied to me, still.”

“Have I?”

“What?!”

“Have you ever asked me: do you have magic, Merlin? Have I ever said no? In fact, I’ve confessed to your father when I tried to save Gwen!”

“Merlin, don’t try and make it look any easier. You’ve… How can I be certain of anything now?”

Arthur rose a bit, leaning on his elbows, sending a passionately furious look Merlin’s way. “How can I know you’re still… you’re still…”

“Still what?”

“Still my Merlin, see? It’s terrible... I loved you and I thought I knew you…”

“You always thought you don’t know me. You’ve told me lots of times!”

“Like when?”

“Like when I was about to ride to the Isle of the Blessed and I came to say goodbye! You said: sometimes I think I know you, Merlin, and other times... And you shook your head like a poet or a singer and…”

“Where were you about to ride?”

“To the Isle of the Blessed,” Merlin said shamefully. *Damn it, I better pick the words more carefully.*

“And what were you going to do there?”

“I… You remember when… Arthur, I can’t tell you, because you’d think I try to manipulate you and…”

“See? I spoke about trust and you can’t tell me! Can’t tell!”

“Alright. Remember when the beast, the damn Questing Beast wounded you?”
“I remember very little from being wounded.”

“You know that its poison doesn’t have an antidote, right?”

“Turns out Gaius is more talented than we think.”

“No. I rode to the Isle of the Blessed and brought the water from the Cup of Life. Gaius gave it to you, pretending it was one of his potions.”

“Cup of Life?”

“It’s a magic cup that gives life to the person who drinks from it. But it demands life in return.”

Arthur’s eyes caught flames.

“Life in return?”

“I gave my life for yours, but Nimueh – who had the cup, she tricked me. She took my mother’s life, not mine… My mother fell gravely sick and when I saw that, I thought I’d ride there again and offer my life in return for my mother’s, but… Gaius was quicker, that old sly potion warrior, he thought that he’d offer his life for my mother’s…”

“But you’re both alive…”

“I offered Nimueh’s life in the end.”

Arthur kept staring at Merlin.

“You killed her?”

“I had to. She gave me no choice. She thought together we could have ruled the world, but I would never join forces with such cruel and selfish magic. She tried to hurt so many innocent people, she’s no better than…”

He swallowed the end of the phrase before he could mutter Uther’s name.

“Arthur, I’m the same person. I really am. I love you more than ever.”

“Merlin. Maybe you are the same person, because, for you, life has always been this way, double-edged, so to say, but for me… Finding out about your… about you… I can’t treat you the same. I’m sorry, I can’t, I just can’t make myself, and I guess I won’t be able to look your way before... before I learn the other side of you and I make up my mind and judgement,” Arthur emitted a burdensome sigh, and Merlin could feel tears raining down his cheeks. Is it him saying goodbye? “But I remember that I’ve promised you that I’ll never sack you. So you can stay. And I don’t say it because I’m too weak and because without you I wouldn’t last two days here. We were fighting once, in Gedney, and I promised to never sack you. It had happened before we fell in… you know. And I mean to keep my word. You can stay, but if you want to stay my friend, tomorrow you will answer some questions, and if you respect the feeling we had, you will answer them honestly.”

Arthur’s decision reminded Merlin of the Labyrinth of Gedref: it was a cup that contained either poison or pure drinking water, and Merlin wasn’t sure which cup he had been served. Maybe it depends on how honest I am tomorrow? Well, honesty is really the least he can be asking for. But he said the feeling we had, what does that mean? Does he think it’s over?
Merlin woke up because Arthur was holding him in his arms so tightly it seemed he was attempting to strangle him. Luckily, it wasn’t the case: Arthur had just grabbed Merlin into an embrace while asleep, and however tender and caring the embrace was, it couldn’t change what had happened the previous day. Merlin woke up in a different world, a world the promised new cruelties and new hopes.

Arthur grumbled unconsciously as Merlin tried to free himself of his embrace. Merlin’s plan to get out of the tent without waking Arthur backfired, and when the prince opened his eyes, the realization of holding Merlin in his arms stroke him and he was quick to try and get up.

“I’ll help you,” Merlin offered.

“Merlin, let me try first, fine? How will I regain control over my body if you keep helping me all the time? I’m no puppet.”

“Didn’t say you were.”

“I was just… Listen, don’t you have to, you know? Water the horses or something?”

“The horse, you mean. I watered her at night. Twice, actually. And I think Dolly’s rather scared.”

“Who in the wide world is Dolly?”

“The chestnut lady-horse. I asked Owaine to let her stay with us.”

“A lady-horse? You mean to tell me you can…?”

“What? Talk to horses with magic? Of course not! No sorcerer can. You’ve spent too much time listening to Gaius’s bedtime stories, I guess,”

Normally, Arthur would’ve slapped him in a friendly manner for such a joke, but the friendly nature of their partnership was now put under question. We’ve shared our bodies and our minds. Doesn’t it mean anything to him?

Arthur, in the meanwhile, was crawling out of the tent like some creature of magic would crawl out of its nesting cave. Merlin knew it was a bad thing to do, but where was he supposed to hide his
“Were you saying something, my lord?”

“Someday, I’ll have you in the stocks for this,” it seemed that all the strength of Arthur was sprouting from his intention to one day have his revenge on Merlin. “Aren’t you supposed to wrap the tent? So that we can take it?”

“No. Dolly is tired and has scarcely been given anything to eat. We must travel without much to carry. Your sword, a crossbow, just in case, the last apples and the bread that hasn’t rotted… Our waterskins, your seal and half your gold…”

“Where’s the other half?” Arthur eyes widened.

“I gave it to Owaine and Modron. They are on a mission, you know. They might find more ways to spend it than we. How can we spend gold in the woods? I checked out the squirrel-tavern for some fresh bread earlier, but they were closed.”

Arthur, unstrirred by Merlin’s most recent humour endeavours, finally rose to his feet, all by himself, and was raising his hands in the air, serenading the beginning of his recovery.

“How do you feel?” Merlin asked, looking worried. Do I tell him about the sunstone?

“Fine. My stomach muscles, they hurt when I move abruptly or suddenly, and I have the feeling that somebody has driven the sword twenty times through my chest,” Arthur winced. “But I’ll have no more of your apples. I want some real food. And what’s this?”

“DON’T TOUCH IT!” Merlin’s shout sent a couple of birds flying off the neighbouring branch when he saw Arthur’s finger touching the chain of his moonstone.


“This is how I saved you. It’s the moonstone and the spell that have shielded you from certain death. If you take the chain off, you will reverse the effect of the healing magic and die.”

Arthur’s hand let go of the chain immediately.

“How long must I wear this moonstone?”

“Until the light in it fades completely.”

“And when will it happen?”

“I think it takes a moon for the magic to work.”

Suddenly, Merlin caught Arthur’s grateful look that lasted shorter than a moment, but it contained more light than the glaring morning sun that had filled the forest with millions of reflections off the dewdrop-besieged grass and leaves. Arthur was quick to put on a more detached expression, though.

“Why didn’t you use this magic when I was attacked by the Questing Beast?”

“The Questing Beast itself is a creature of magic, with the most dangerous poison. Moonstone couldn’t reverse its effect. Only the Cup of Life could. I’ve tried the moonstone, but it didn’t work,” he lied.

“Merlin?”
“What?”

“I owe you a big thank you.”

“You don’t owe me anything. I’ve never sought any credit for these things. Come on, the nature call spot is in those bushes,” he pointed. “And then you’ve got your chamomile drink waiting for you, and some apples.”

“I hate apples,” Merlin heard Arthur’s discontent voice and smiled.

***

Dolly was tired indeed, and even though Arthur had lost some weight while lying unconscious in the tent, the horse had to still carry twice the load she had been used to. Before they commenced the journey to Ealdor, Merlin had to set their camp on fire and see the tent, the cloaks and the bondages burn. He needed to leave as few traces as he could.

Arthur was sitting behind Merlin’s back, holding him by the waist so that he wouldn’t dismount the horse accidentally. It was just like on their way to Camelot from Ascetir, when they had to share a horse, and Arthur kept whispering naughty suggestions into Merlin’s ear and pressing kisses on his skin.


Arthur’s breath would sting Merlin’s neck from time to time, and the physical closeness to Arthur, the fact that Arthur hands were on his waist and Merlin’s ass was… well, the ride was the most awkward one Merlin had ever experienced.

“Those men, the ones that attacked us,” Arthur tried to pick a topic that would be as distant as possible to lure them away from the tension of bodies. “Who were they? How many of them? I remember two.”

“A dozen of them, I think. Maybe a bit more.”

“Twelve men?!”

“Supposedly.”

“All with crossbows?!”

“Yeah.”

“How did we survive?!”

“Aglovale brought you, Modron was closely behind, he tried to shoot back and prevent them from tracking you down. And then… Aglovale was close to you, on the ground, you were both on the ground… and somebody shot him. They were obviously aiming at you, but Aglovale… And I… I saw no other option… I cast a barrier spell and started doing my magic to save you.”

“A barrier spell?”
“Yes. Remember when we killed a troll in Ascetir? I failed to enter the cave, his barrier blocked me. But he sensed me trying to get through and he went out, giving me the chance to finish him. I promised myself to look for this spell in the books later. And I did. It's just that my spell can't copy troll's magic. I don't sense it when somebody tries to get past my barrier.”

“Where d’you keep your books?”

“In my room.”

“Merlin… You’re a real idiot,” Arthur sighed; Merlin couldn’t see the prince’s face, but he could feel Arthur’s grip on his waist tighten, and there seemed to be something encouraging about his tone, as though Merlin’s ability to remain secretive was laudable.

“Says a dollophead.”

“This word must be banished from the kingdom. So that you invent a new one. Anyway, you made this… barrier spell and then?”

“I killed them. Every intruder.”

“Bloody how?!”

It looked like Dolly was sensing Merlin’s anxiety, being torn between a repentance and a dark confidence. The horse erupted with neighs of nervousness, and Merlin tried to soothe his temper by breathing and by staring at the forget-me-not juicy sky.

“I don’t really remember. I think I haven’t mastered this sort of magic properly. I just saw you, lying on the ground, wounded, in blood and dust, and I let the anger flow through my veins and rain at them. The arrows rose from the ground and hit them all. I’ve never done it before. I killed a griffin with lance once, I…”

“Lancelot killed the griffin!” Arthur protested.

“No. I did it, his lance was imbued. Otherwise the griffin would’ve had Lancelot for dinner.”

“Merlin,” Arthur was speaking right into his ear, and he seemed to rely on a serious tone this time. “I know I can’t see your eyes now, and you’ve turned out to be a better liar than I could fear, but I’m sensing you now. Speak the truth. This griffin is not the first time you’ve helped me with magic? Is that what you meant when you said that you never sought any credit for these things? Things? There have been many things?"

“Actually, the griffin was the first time. I helped to expose Sir Valiant and his stupid shield, but it was you who finished him. Afterwards… well, remember that Sophia and her father? They were really the exiled Sidhe who wanted to sacrifice your soul to reenter Avalon.”

“What in the wide world is a Sidhe?”

“Truth be told, I lack knowledge. They are little vicious masters of enchantment. Sophia enchanted you and tried to drown you in the lake of Avalon, but I killed her and her father.”

“How?”

“With her staff. She left her staff on the shore before she went into the lake. I grabbed it and roasted her father and then I roasted her. It was a terrifying scene, to watch a young beautiful girl's flesh burn and being torn to thousands of pieces, but she wasn’t a girl. She was a Sidhe. I fished you out of the
lake and brought you to Camelot."

“If you’re expecting a reaction to this fish reference, it’s not funny. However, I knew you couldn’t knock me out. This story you and Gaius made up was completely foolish.”

Merlin smiled contently, remembering Arthur's wounded arrogance when the prince was told Merlin had to knock him out.

“You already know about the Questing Beast,” Merlin resumed, so happy the bright butter-yellow meadow was gleaming under the sunbeam ahead. He got tired of the Brechfa forests. “It was the hardest one. The day the workers discovered the tomb of Cornelius Sigan, that idiot Cedric stole his heart-amulet and the spirit of Sigan possessed him. I had to fight Sigan, but what’s worse, I had to persuade you that I wasn’t lying about Cedric…”

“Don’t blame Cedric on me. It’s just that I got a decent servant for the first time in a year and I was easily impressed,” Arthur’s humour seemed to always rest on a mocking value. “And you let my horses raise havoc in the Southern Village.”

“After Sigan, I didn’t know if I could ever trust you again, Arthur, and…”

He felt Arthur's hand climb his ribs in a slow, but threatening manner.

“Arthur, you try to tickle me and we both fall off the horse and Dolly lands on us and kills us, I swear,” Merlin voice was alarmingly high.

“I just wanted to remind you of who’s who in this saddle. We were talking about my trust, not yours.”

“Alright, just will my lord please keep his hands off my ribs? I’m easily aroused when tickled. Thank you kindly. So, after Sigan… Why, but Lady Katrina and her marriage. She wanted you gone because you refused to raise the taxes. And trolls are stupid and all they want is gold. Like half your father's court. So I helped you, but Gaius helped you way more that day. And after that... Well, when your father held negotiations of the Five Kings Treaty, King Alined tried to sabotage it.”

“How?”

“He had a servant who had magic, too. See how different the sorcerers can be? He used some potion which made you become obsessed with that unpleasant lady.”

“Vivian?”

“Yes.”

“Half the knights dream of fucking her.”

“Half the knights may reconsider after spending a day with her. However, I made Gwen kiss you and the kiss broke the charms.”

“How?”

“Your feelings for Vivian were not real, they were a consequence of some potion. Your feelings for Gwen were not conjured by some liquid, they were real, and the real feelings are always more powerful than any magic,” Merlin hoped Arthur could learn a lesson from that story.

“Is it all?”
“No. Sadly…”

“Merlin, look out!”

Merlin noticed them: they were impossible not to notice. Three figures, cleaving the late afternoon peace of the meadow, were riding their way – their black cloaks waving from the fast ride, the same black cloaks that brought death upon Aglovale three days ago. Merlin held Dolly by the bridles: escape was not an option.

“Arthur, you remain in the saddle no matter what and keep your head down. Don’t act foolish.”

“That’s your domain, I wouldn’t dare,” Arthur’s hand, nonetheless, reached for the hilt of his sword aimlessly. *He can’t wield a sword. Not yet.* Arthur grabbed the edge of his red cloak and covered his face. *Red. They will know.* Merlin stepped away from Dolly and looked back, at the forest, raising his hand and making a line of smoke appear in the air. The riders were coming, galloping. They stopped afar, dismounted and started walking Merlin’s way.

“Help!” Merlin shouted, waving his hands. “Help, we were ambushed! You have to help us, please!”

Merlin didn’t find anything remotely pleasant about the appearance of these men; tall and lean, with clean-shaved faces and muscular arms, they looked like assassins even before they started speaking. The tallest was the one to respond:

“Who ambushed you?”

“Three men. Camelot’s knights, by the look of them,” Merlin hadn’t prepared anything in advance, he was just letting whatever crossed his mind pass his lips instantly. “They had a camp, they emptied everything we carried!”

The tallest one looked at the smoke rising through the trees.

“You sure those were the knights of Camelot?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Merlin nodded, but it was too late.

The riders drew their swords, and Modron’s voice reigned in Merlin’s head. *If you get the chance to kill, do it, otherwise you can die.* Merlin jumped back before the blade of the tallest one cut the air in the space where he had just stood, and raised his hand to throw the riders away, all of them, with a flash of his eyes and the pain that stung him in the back. The riders flew at least five yards before they landed on their backs, and Merlin thought he had heard their bones break.

“Merlin,” Arthur’s jaw dropped and his look was uncertainly awed. “You…”

“No time for other stories now,” Merlin was hurrying.

“We can borrow one of their horses!”

“No. I will not leave Dolly, she’s been with us all the time. But we can see if they have any food.”

Merlin found three loafs of bread and onions. He started mounting Dolly, trying not to make Arthur fall off, and grabbed the bridles.

“Come on, Dolly, we need to ride a little quicker so that the bad men don’t chase us. Let’s go, girl!”

***
Merlin was desperate to pass the border of Brechfa and Ascetir as fast as he could. Luckily, they had arrived at the borderline by dusk, and another clouded night seemed a gift of nature, since Merlin could easily conjure the mists which helped to avoid the three patrol groups of black cloaked-men they came across. The third one had nearly spotted them. Merlin, Arthur and Dolly had to hide in a secluded area off the path while three men on horseback came up their way. Arthur was so exhausted after a day’s ride he was leaning on Merlin’s back helplessly, ready to fall off any minute. Merlin was watching the riders from behind a thickly overgrown bush; he had wisely wiped out the traces Dolly had left and created new ones that led in the opposite, western direction.

“Andshyht,” he whispered, casting a small wind to blow and make the bushes rustle, inviting the riders into a false chase.

“Traces,” he heard a sharp voice from the dark. “This way!”

Having met the third hostile patrol, Arthur, Merlin and Dolly had travelled for many more hours before Merlin finally decided it was safe to stop in a small but thick grove that came their way. By that time, Arthur was not holding Merlin’s waist, he was leaning on Merlin, full-force, his hands entwining Merlin tenderly.

Merlin helped Arthur dismount and carried him away from Dolly.

“You lie here, dollophead. I’ll give Dolly some water, and I’ll cook you an onion soup. Don’t fall asleep, hear me?”

“Merlin,” Arthur called him in a weak but confident voice.

“Right?”

“Merlin. There’s… what you’ve told me today. I guess I’d have been long dead had it not been for your jaunty magic arse, right?”

“You owe me nothing, Arthur,” Merlin replied after emotional silence.

“I will decide. You’re maybe, maybe the bravest man I know.”

“Maybe?” Merlin laughed.

“Maybe,” Arthur laughed back. “But I still don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to, but…”

“What?”

The conversation in the darkness of the night was weird. Merlin’s eyes flashed, and a tiny fire heart started pulsing above his right hand; Arthur’s face was arranged into a nervous and anticipating expression.

“I thought you were Camelot’s prince and Camelot’s laws are obvious about magic. I was afraid you’d have chopped my head off. Or seen me burn.”

“I’m not sure what I would’ve done.”
“And I didn’t want to put you in that position where you had to choose between your loyalty to the crown and your worthless toad of a servant. Favors were not on my side, see?”

“They are now. I would never hurt you, you hear me? Oh, Merlin, come on, why are you crying? I’m trying to be nice actually! Come one, come here, you’re such a girl’s petticoat, I wonder how...”

Merlin tied Dolly, who didn’t seem too enthusiastic about the fire pulsing in Merlin’s hand. He put the flame out and threw himself at Arthur, pulling the prince into an embrace.

“Can you just...just hold me? Please...” Arthur sounded soft and peaceful when Merlin put his arms around the prince’s neck and let his cheek touch Arthur’s.

Shivering in each other’s arms in a tiny Ascetir grove, Merlin and Arthur were beneath a dark summer sky coated in clouds, but Merlin knew that somewhere behind those clouds, the guiding star was pulsing, bright and strong.

Chapter End Notes

90k words! *party*

I can't believe it!

The reveal was the hardest thing to write. I think that in the original series, the reveal was such a harsh and emotionally difficult thing because Arthur and Merlin had spent so many years together, and the secret really meant Merlin had been leading a sort of double life behind Arthur's back.

In my story, Merlin and Arthur know each other for a little more than two years, which makes it a bit easier. Secondly, Arthur had been told about Morgana’s magic, and he has agreed that burning Morgana at the stake because of her magic would be a poor choice, in fact, he has told Gwen: “I don’t wish her dead, of course. And if I were king, I would not wish her dead either. She had magic, maybe she still has, but she had committed no crime against the kingdom. She didn’t try to hurt people. She didn’t try to bring about my father’s fall. But I’m not the king, and so long as my father rules the kingdom, I will do my best to keep Morgana’s secret away from him”, which makes him again, a bit more tolerating. Thirdly, Merlin manages to save him in my story, unlike in the series: he uses the barrier spell to protect Arthur and the sunstone magic to heal the prince. Last but not least, they are in love :)

The Tuesday chapters (Nov. 21, 2017) will be about the trial of Lady Gedref and we’ll see what choice Owaine, Modron and Gwaine will make once their spy mission reaches the castle of Camelot. There will be some major events for Gwen, too. These will be the last "castle" chapters for The Great Design.

Because the volumes of the recent chapters were larger than I’ve planned, the number of total chapters for this fic has been reduced, and it may well be that The Great Design will have been finished by next Friday, but who knows? I think I will reveal the sequel title next week, too.

Thank you for kudos and for reading my work, long live the fandom and the amazing fans!
Ryence's Dark Move

Chapter Summary

Soon after his first council, King Ryence, still short of any accurate information on Prince Arthur, discusses the opportunities of new alliances within the court.

Chapter Notes

King Ryence POV

Young Rion, accompanied by Sir Leon and some other senior knights, was on a horseback, looking more confident than ever as he was racing with his squire across the practice field. Rion’s appearance did everything to endear him to the small folk: a tall, elegantly thin boy with big round eyes and dark-auburn hair. What’s more, he started putting on some muscles because of the earlier than expected commence of the training sessions, and Ryence was beginning to fear Rion’d father more bastards than he could count. For once, King Ryence was happy his nephew expressed a lot less defiance about the knighthood than he was expected to. He never wanted to be a knight or a warrior. But that was when he was but a small lord that was to inherit the castle of Brechfa one day. He’s almost a prince now, the future of this crown.

But can there be a hope for the brighter future if the shadows of the ugly past still haunt us? Uther was a curse upon this land, as is his son, and his son may still live. King Ryence and Lady Yrien were accompanying Young Rion, the horse ride being the only place except for the burial vaults and the Royal Tower when they could feel temporarily private and safe enough to discuss the urgent matters.

“I hate it, it’s like I’m detained in my own castle,” Yrien complained, sharing her light anger with the horse that was a bit more disobedient that day. “It’s humiliating. I’m the king’s sister and I’m the Councilor of Camelot, yet in my own castle the spies…”

“Your castle? Sweet sister, be reasonable. The castle of Camelot is as good a house for us as a tomb can be. I’ve got as many foes as though I were at war, yet I can’t put them to swords,” Ryence said fretfully.

“What can we make of all the foes then?”

“We can make friends with some of them.”

“Fiends? What sort of friends? The one that will stab you in a sleep?”

Stab. Did we stab Uther? No. There are other ways to murder people. Poisons, for instance.

The outlines of the Lower Town were poorly visible beyond the moat, and it seemed that not a single leaf, not a single blade of grass stirred the sultry air. The scorching summer of Camelot was interrupted with rainfalls from time to time, and everything spoke of the rich harvest. Ryence noticed,
with an element of moderate surprise, that he could tolerate the humid and hot weather better than most lords and ladies in the castle, who were making it look more dramatic. *As though there’s nothing better to discuss at breakfasts and dinners.*

“Ryence? Ryence, you heard me?”

“‘Course I did. You were talking about us stabbed, again. Nobody will stab us, sweet sister.”

“I bet Uther was thinking the same? Dare I remind you where those thoughts have led him into?”

“It’s best that he remains there. Sweet sister, tell me, do you really respect me that little? Do you think that your dim-witted brother had only thought about winning the throne and forgotten to plan holding it?”

“No,” with one swift look, Yrien directed the horse rightwards, closer to the forest. “But I hate it that you don’t share everything with me. It’s me who’s risking her son.”

“You’re risking your son’s life because you want him to rule this land one day, not because you love me that much.”

“Yet I’m risking him.”

“Yet you are,” Ryence sighed, tired of Yrien’s clumsy attempts to find everything out. *You've been so hungry for the intelligence lately, what do you hope to find? If I tell you it was Cynric who’s helping me and Alined, how are you going to react?* “What exactly is bothering you now?”

“When are we going to do everything we’ve planned? When will we bring back the old rules? The tax changes? The army? The lands status?”

*Any day.* Yrien, in her violet robes with broad sleeves, was pressing the point with an angered and sore look on her face. Ryence had avoided her the previous day and was about to lead the Howden host to Brechfa in two days, meaning they’d stay disconnected for some time.

“Our plans take time. The moment is not ripe now, of course. Camelot is at war with Cenred. It’s a good thing Uther hated magic so much he did his best at shutting down every hope for trade with Essetir, and there’re no merchants to besiege our court, pleading to end this war as soon as possible and spare the commoners of Essetir. However, war is war.” Ryence smiled, proud of his own calculations and the miscalculations of Uther. *Look how your attitude towards magic has proven a folly.* “When I go to Brechfa tomorrow and free the land, the commoners will worship me, and with their absolute support, I will have the power to do what we’ve planned and much more. And I hope Lady Dindrane will help me.”

“That old bat?” Yrien grabbed the bridle so hard at the mention of Dindrane’s name that the horse protested with a wild neighing.

“That old bat is the granddaughter of the last druid queen,” Ryence reminded her, secretly pleased to witness her astonished look.

“She? The granddaughter of the last druid queen? Why have you never told me?”

“You were eight years old when Uther smashed our legion at the Battle of Ashes,” Ryence remembered regretfully. “Might I remind you that the rules changed a bit when he forged himself a crown? We had to become more careful about what we said and what we taught.”

“Queen Andor was Anna Dindrane’s grandmother? But why is Anna still alive?.. I mean, why
didn’t Uther kill her?”

Rion, who was faster than his squire on the third lap, let out a triumphant shriek and tried to show off his skill by riding the horse hands-free. Sir Leon laughed and clapped his hands, glancing back at Lady Yrien and King Ryence, searching for their appreciative expression. Yrien did her best to fake a smile, while Ryence nodded out of sincere content. *The boy might ride out to war earlier than expected. When I was his age…*

“So? Why did Uther let the granddaughter of the last druid queen live? Why has he even made her a member of a great house?”

“What was the need to kill her? Sweet sister, I tell you again, having power is more than just murdering your foes. You would do well to rethink Uther if you believe he was a cold-blooded killer since the day he was born,” Ryence gave her a stern look. “Knowledge is everything. Believing what you want to believe is the first step into the abyss that will swallow you. After Uther had defeated us in the battle of Ashes, he put an end to Eofham, for they didn’t welcome him with open arms, too, and afterwards he led his host to the castle of Camelot. But he couldn’t take all his army with him – a lot of soldiers had to stay in Brechfa and to guard me and my intentions because he was afraid that I, as you like to say, would stab him in the back, despite our pact.”

“Should’ve bloody slit him open when we had the chance,” Yrien sounded as though she was a butcher rather than a court lady.

“Siege of the castle of Camelot was not an option for Uther, he had too few men for that,” Ryence found it was pointless to react to her remarks. “Uther had enough men to defeat his foes in an open field, but the castle siege would break his teeth. And negotiations began. In the end, Queen Andor agreed for an exile, but the terms were demanding. Firstly, everybody who disagreed with Uther’s ways ought to be allowed to live in a special territory, and Uther had to guarantee peace. They called that territory Andor, after the queen herself, and defined it from Greenswood village to the Tunnel Mountains, and from Northern Plains to the plains of Othanden.”

“You mean to tell me Uther kept his promise? That he let the druid queen and her druids go north and live peacefully? That’s unlike him.”

“That’s, on the contrary, sweet sister, is very like him. It’s in every way like him. Uther was a man of his word, he just spoke too many words, and changed his words too bloody often. Besides, don’t forget that druids were numberless back then, and despite their peaceful nature, they had magic,” Ryence noted respectfully, to pay homage to the only thing Uther ever feared. “Even Uther’s scum of a court sorceress, that Numueh wench, didn’t wish for a magic civil war to break out.”

“A civil war? Nimueh had magic, too. Why would the druids fight her?”

“I don’t believe we share a mother sometimes,” Ryence rolled his eyes and straightened up in the saddle. “Magic is not the same. There are different sorts of magic. Druids had been ruled by dragonlords for years if not centuries, while Nimueh was a priestess of the Isle of the Blessed cult. Priestesses and dragonlords have hated each for a long time.”

Rion’s lesson moved on to a different part: Leon was teaching him to bend left or right, so that Rion was sort of hanging from the saddle – a move that would give him better chances of dodging the slams and the lances at the tourneys.

“Uther also promised that he wouldn’t harm the dragonlords’ families. Nimueh killed three out of four dragons and three out of four dragonlords in the Battle of Ashes, including Darian, the only son of Queen Andor. When the castle opened its gates, Uther let Darian’s wife, Elsa, and her children,
Dorin and Gabryss, stay in the castle.”

“Dorin was the son of Darian?”

“He was.”

“Dorin was the son of a dragonlord prince who died in the Battle of Ashes?”

“Indeed.”

“But doesn’t it make Dorin a dragonlord, too?”

“Dorin was a dragonlord,” Ryence nodded approvingly, happy that his sister remembered something from their childhood bedtime stories. “But Dorin was a boy and he had no dragon left to command after the Battle of Ashes.”

“And Uther let Dorin live even though Dorin was a dragonlord and a grandson of the Druid Queen? With legitimate rights for the throne?” Yrien looked as though she suspected what her brother was telling was some ill joke.

“He did. Dorin was left to grow up in the castle, with his mother and his sister.”

“I can’t bring myself to believe it.”

“Was this boy any threat, sweet sister? He wasn’t. Don’t forget that the druids reigned over a small territory from the White Mountains to the Lake of Avalon and the Darkling Woods. Uther’s conquest brought Five Kingdoms to an end, that’s what matters. The Mountain Kingdom, where Uther came from, joined the Northern Lands, the Kingdom of Camelot and the Midlands to form a new kingdom, larger than any that existed before Uther. Dorin was indeed the legitimate heir to the Druid Throne, but the boy couldn’t seriously hope to rule over a new kingdom, the one Uther had united by force, magic and gold. Druids had been hated in the Northern Lands, had been treated with distrust in the Mountain Kingdom, and we, the Midlands, had been indifferent towards them. So Uther was dreading neither Dorin, nor the two daughters of Queen Andor.”

“She had two daughters?”

“Queen Andor had two daughters. The elder, Caerdina, had given birth to two daughters by the time of Uther’s conquest: our dear Anna, who was forced to marry Uther’s warlord, Demeth Dindrane, and Lewissa, who, too, was married off to Uther’s warlord. The younger daughter of Queen Andor, Cadoryll, had been married to Pierce Accolon, and their son, Sewyll Accolon, is our Councilor of War and the second living grandson of Queen Andor. I think it’s the marriage of Anna and Lewissa to Uther’s warlords that saved them from fire during the Purge.”

Yrien closed her eyes when Rion was nearly unhorsed at the attempt to repeat the move Leon had showed him. Ryence couldn’t be more proud. This is the future of the land. Rion has all the makings of a good king.

“Anna Dindrane didn’t escape the Purge because of your kindness, why would she favor you now?”

“She is the only living granddaughter of the last druid queen. Our goals do not lie far apart. I might find a way to persuade her, especially now, that her cousin, Accolon, is traveling to the Western territories.”

“Is that why you sent him away to the Western territories during your first council?”
At least, she quickly figures the things out once allowed a glimpse at a bigger picture. But she must learn to think big herself.

“I didn’t send him away just because he’s Dindrane’s cousin. I want to check his true allegiance. If he is loyal to the throne, he’ll bring the westerners’ army to me. Dindrane isn’t the one we should fear. I’d be more wary of Uther’s aunt.”

“Gaheris?”

“Yes. Vyda Gaheris. We’d do well to treat her cautiously. Not only does she hold Daobeth, but she is also Lord Sagramore’s aunt.”

“How?”

“Vyda’s sister married Sullum Sagramore. Deos Sagramore, who have up to recently been the Councilor of Camelot, is their son. Most of the great houses are interrelated, sweet sister, for there are too few of them left.”

“Is that why you’ve made Sagramore the Secretary of the Kingdom?”

“Of course. Sagramore is Uther’s second cousin, although by marriage. He is another nephew of Vyda Gaheris that rose under Uther’s reign because of Uther’s love for the Western families. I thus need to keep our dear Sagramore as close as possible, and what’s closer than being my Secretary? I want to watch him closely, so that he doesn’t seek the throne himself.”

“He’s too fat for that. So, are you telling me chances are high we can work with Dindrane?”

(Of course. There are no dragonlords left, prince Arthur saw to that when the last dragonlord, Balinor, died on the way to Camelot during the Dragon’s Attack,” Ryence’s joy again originated from his enemy’s miscalculation and incompetence. “We are the only ones who are now interested in disintegrating the kingdom which was united by violence and purge, we must act like we turn to Anna Dindrane for help, we must show some respect for her. It’s just that Arthur… had he survived the assassination… if our fears are true…”

“If the prince somehow escaped death, he would not rest before he avenges us,” Yrien said with unrepentant, remorseless confidence. “If he lacks wits, he will come to Camelot and make it easier for us. If Arthur is smarter than that, he will turn to Uther’s aunt for help and go west to Daobeth.”

“I fear that’s what he will do. But we must act first.”

And it’s about bloody time we started acting. Where are the damn guards? Has my order been carried out?

“How do we fight him without war?”

“By spreading lies about him, about his family, about his house and making the small folk fear Arthur more than anything,” Ryence concluded as though he had already achieved all those things.

Before long, the hurrying, galloping rider appeared, crossing the southern bridge without stopping to present the documents to the guards. Rion, who was lying on the grass, resting with a waterskin in his hand, had to shield his eyes from the glaring sunlight as he tried to distinguish the figure. A Camelot guard.

“Your majesty!” the man shouted, his voice rising and falling as he was struggling to stay calm in the saddle. “Your majesty! There’s… There’s…”
“What is it? What?” Ryence tried to add as much anxiety to his voice as he could; the knights started running towards him and Yrien.

“Arthur’s tomb was broken! Sire, the prince’s body is gone and the guards, the guards, they’re killed, as if by some beast!”

It was the very answer Ryence was expecting. Without waiting for his knights to mount, he kicked his horse, sending her into a gallop. Precisely.
King's Justice

Chapter Summary

King Ryence launches a vicious attack on the legacy of Arthur Pendragon, hoping to blacken Arthur's name through a series of charges.

Chapter Notes

King Ryence POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The throne room looked more like a market place: peopled densely enough to make the unbearable summer heat even worse, and some lords’ and ladies’ robes were drenched in sweat. Nobody could move an inch. King Ryence thought Lady Caelia’s knees were buckling and she was about to fall on the floor. The doors were wide open and the servants were probably trying to overhear every word and retell the rumours at the market. Ryence didn’t think about privacy. *Listen, listen attentively, people, and share the story at the markets and taverns, in the village and in the Lower Town. Let all the people know and add their own cruel and horrible details.* It was just one man whose attitude concerned him a bit: Gaius, in his brown robes, was glaring at him as though it was Gaius who wore the crown.

Leon was standing the closest to the throne.

“So?” Ryence knocked on the throne chair impatiently. “The bloody hell is going on?”

“My lord, the tomb is empty. The prince’s body is gone.”

“I have seen that myself! How?! Who killed the guards?!”

“My lord, it’s… we can’t be certain, my lord.”

“Gaius, you’re the court physician! You’ve inspected the poor lads?”

“I did, my lord,” as Gaius, who looked quite appalled with himself, spoke, all the mutters in the room died.

“So? What is the cause of their death?”

“It appears, they’ve been torn apart by a creature, my lord.”

“A creature? What creature?”

“A creature with teeth large enough to gorge on human flesh,” the physician concluded with a slackened face.

“How could such a creature break a tomb? What powers must this creature possess?” Ryence asked
with incredulous stare at the physician.

Before Gaius could open his mouth, Lady Caelia who was shivering and looked like she was about
to wriggle out of her dress and faint, spoke in a high-pitched voice:

“It’s magic, my lord! Magic, I tell you! We’ve all been blessed to live peacefully ever since the Dark
Witch casted a spell upon this castle that made us all fall asleep, it’s happening again!”

Ryence thought he heard someone howl at the mention of the “Dark Witch”, and all of a sudden,
many women were taking shuddering breaths and men were gazing at him hopelessly.

“Gaius,” King Ryence spoke, enjoying every word. “I was told that you were King Uther’s most
trusted ally in the fight against magic. Because of you, our enemies have never managed to
hoodwink Uther the Great.”

“The praise is too generous, my lord,” Gaius bowed down.

“Has this happened before? In Camelot?”

“What happened, my lord?”

“Have the dead men risen from the tombs to kill people?” Ryence pressed the point.

The room sank into the grave silence as though they suddenly appeared in the burial vaults. Gaius
eyed Ryence balefully for just a moment. *Eye me all you want. You must answer the king’s question
anyway, physician.*

“It sadly has, my lord,” Gaius, a gaunt man suddenly, gave a nod.

“When?"

“More than a year from now, if I recall,” Leon interrupted. “Sir Tristan rose from his grave to… to
challenge Uther…”

A gust of low whispers betrayed fear among the gathered people.

“Was it the only time?”

“The only time I know, my lord,” Gaius spoke again.

“In what relation were Sir Tristan and Prince Arthur?”

The question left people completely nonplussed. They were looking at each other, frightfully, and
nobody dared to give an answer, despite the knowledge about Sir Tristan and Prince Arthur being
common to most of them.

“Lord Sagramore?” Ryence repeated irritably and demandingly. “You’re the kingdom’s Secretary,
am I right?”

Ryence was glad Sagramore didn’t think to step forward, otherwise, he’d make a lot of people fall
while fighting his way closer to the throne.

“My lord, Sir Tristan was Arthur’s uncle.”

“His natural uncle?”
“Yes. Tristan Du Bois was the brother of Queen Ygraine.”

“Can you remind us of the circumstances of their death, Gaius?” Ryence had to resist wearing a delightful smile.

“Queen Ygraine died in childbirth. Sir Tristan blamed Uther and came to the gates of Camelot and challenged him to single combat. Uther won. But in his dying breath, Tristan cursed Camelot to one day suffer his return. We all thought it was the ramblings of a dying man, nothing more,” Gaius did everything to not trespass upon the delicate details of the story.

“Yet men don’t just rise up from the dead, however angry they were,” Ryence said, trying to bring everybody’s attention to the insidious nature of the story. “There’s sorcery involved?”

“There was sorcery involved, my lord. It was not Tristan that rose from the grave, but a wraith.”

“A wraith?” Ryence frowned as the whispers whirléd around the room again.

“The spirit of a dead man conjured from the grave,” Gaius explained, as though forcefully.

“So, Sir Tristan rising from his grave, it was the work of a sorcerer?” Ryence was pressing the point innocently and carelessly.

“Of a sorceress, I believe.”

Lord Cynric was standing in the corner of the room; when he heard the question, his eyes gleamed dark and threateningly.

“Am I right to understand that Prince Arthur had escaped the castle to meet a sorceress Morgause this spring?”

Gaius did little to conceal his infuriated tone:

“Prince Arthur only rode to Morgause because she challenged him to a single combat and he lost, and she spared him because he promised he’d visit her!”

“I was asking, Gaius, whether it’s true that Arthur visited the sorceress this spring.”

“It is,” Gaius said, visibly grinding his teeth.

“And is it true that when Arthur returned to the castle, he tried to kill Uther?”

The king’s question seemed to have heated the air in the room to an unbearable extent. The room quickly turned into a scene of real commotion, with members of the court raising their voices too high for their noble manners. *It’s just the beginning. You watch me, physician.*

“Sir Leon, is it true?” Ryence repeated. “Is it true that Arthur attempted to murder his father, Uther, when he came back?”

*Come on, Leon. This is not your fight. You’ve sworn to speak the truth to your king.*

“It’s true, my lord,” Sir Leon tried to brace his voice. “It’s true!”

“And what stopped him?”

“His servant, my lord.”
“Do you mean that a serving boy disarmed him?”

“No, my lord. He talked him out of it, he dissuaded the prince.”

“Do you mean to tell me a serving boy saw that murdering the king wasn’t good while the prince failed to see it?”

“It appears so, my lord,” Leon agreed hesitantly.

“Is there a chance the prince was under enchantment?”

“I… I don’t know, my lord.”

“Gaius, what are the chances that the sorceress made Arthur rise from his grave?” Ryence’s voice shook the air of the room, and Lady Caelia’s face turned green.

“No, my lord. He talked him out of it, he dissuaded the prince.”

“Is there a chance the prince was under enchantment?”

“I… I don’t know, my lord.”

“Gaius, what are the chances that the sorceress made Arthur rise from his grave?” Ryence’s voice shook the air of the room, and Lady Caelia’s face turned green.

“Impossible,” a sonorous reply from the physician was immediate.

“Why impossible? The fact that Arthur’s uncle, Sir Tristan, has done it, is acknowledged by everybody?”

“It takes more than just magic to raise somebody from the grave, my lord. Even powerful magic needs the grief and rage of a tormented soul to make the dead body walk again and achieve what it came for.”

“Don’t you think the prince experienced quite some rage and some grief when he was murdered? Cenred’s men mutilated him, he didn’t die easily.”

A lot of people put hands to their mouths.

“My sole purpose as the king of this land is to protect my people, from whatever threat that emerges to ruin our peaceful ways. When a foe invades Camelot, I bring swords to make him regret of ever trespassing our border. However, I am as good as useless against magic, for I can’t work spells. But I must give a command to spread the information to every corner of this land. If Arthur was brought from the dead by the sorceress, the undead prince may be walking under the sun, and beware, people of Camelot! For this is not the prince we all loved, however similar he looks, however similar he speaks, however peaceful he seems. It is, like Gaius has said, a dead man conjured from the grave. We must kill him before he kills more people.”

“No mortal weapon can kill what is already dead!” Gaius said warningly.

“But we must try, I reckon?” Ryence eyebrows were dancing, he was sure. “We can’t be helplessly doing nothing about it. It’s the king’s order. Guards, bring the news to the Lower Town the instant! However, what bedazzles me, is how. How? What power must have driven Sir Tristan and Prince Arthur from the dead? Why them? The uncle and the nephew?”

Nobody dared to interrupt the king, and even Gaius was looking differently: his cold, defensive gaze that followed every twitch of Ryence’s mouth, betrayed the change of the physician’s tactics. He must have decided to let Ryence’s rhetoric unfold before making his own move.

“Where does Ygraine and Tristan come from?” Ryence asked another question.

“From Gedref, my lord,” Lord Sagamore said confidently. “Her highness Yrgaine was a member of the royal house of the Seaside Kingdom.”

“Who ruled over the Seaside Kingdom when Uther the Great united the Four Kingdoms into one?”
“King Reginald Gedref, my lord. Ygraine, Tristan and Agravaine were the children of King Reginald’s sister, Nudda, who married Bohort Du Bois.”

“The Seaside Kingdom was the last of the Five Kingdoms to bow down to Uther?”

“Indeed, my lord. Tristan Du Bois overthrew King Reginald and offered his sister to Uther Pendragon, so that she could become the Queen of the Five Kingdoms.”

“What happened to Prince Ollwen Gedref?”

“He was sent to the castle of Camelot, where he married me,” the voice rang from behind the dense crowd, but people somehow managed to part and make way for Lady Gedref.

Lady Gedref was a square-jawed and rather broad woman with fair hair. She dared to wear the black dress on a hot summer day – a sign she was in grief for her only son Owaine, who was thought to be killed in the patrol group.

“My lady,” Ryence raised his hand. “It’s kind of you to be with us.”

“It’s kind of you to remember my late husband,” she returned. “He served Camelot fiercely and loyally until his last breath, protecting this castle from the creatures of Cornelius Sigan.”

“But when King Reginald was overthrown, my lady, his son and your future husband, Ollwen, was a just a lad who was sent away from his family castle. Who was the castle passed to?”

“To Agravaine Du Bois, who became the Lord of Gedref.”

“And how did the castle get back to your husband?”

“When Queen Ygraine died, both of her brothers accused Uther the Great of her death. Tristan was killed by Uther, while Agravaine was banished. The castle returned under the lordship of my husband, the rightful heir of Gedref.”

“Were there any special terms your husband and Uther agreed upon when the king decided to return the castle?”

An evanescent flash of fright crossed Lady Gedref’s face, but she did so well to mask it Ryence would have never noticed it had he not been chaining Lady Gedref with his gaze.

“There was one term, my lord,” she said humbly.

“What was the term?”

“The labyrinth of Gedref had to be destroyed, my lord,” she didn’t have the courage to lift her head.

“And was this labyrinth destroyed, my lady?”

People in the room were looking her way, and in the silence of the hall Ryence could hear his own breath. *Come on, my dear lady, it’s just one word. Yes or no?*

“No.”

“No what?”

“No, my lord. The labyrinth of Gedref has never been destroyed.”
“Gaius,” Ryence was drawing a spectacular close to his council. “Why did Uther wish the labyrinth of Gedref destroyed?”

“Because the maze is thought to be a place of magic. One of the most sacred to the Old Religion, my lord,” Gaius, who seemed to have understood that the situation was inescapable, spared a look at the king.

“And is it possible that the labyrinth of Gedref is the source of the ugly magic of house Du Bois? The magic that made Tristan overthrow King Reginald? To challenge Uther and to rise from the grave twenty years after being killed in a single combat? That made Prince Arthur consult a sorceress Morgause and nearly kill Uther after that? And to rise from the grave?”

“I don’t know, my lord. But I highly doubt it.”

And it’s not about what you know or what you doubt, you silly old goat. The seeds have been sown. I’ve just brought Arthur into obvious peril.

“Lady Gedref, by the power vested in me, I, King Ryence of House Gingawaine, King of Camelot, renounce your lordship of the castle of Gedref and her lands due to the violation of the agreement signed by your husband and the preceding sovereign. The failure to stick to the agreement might have resulted in the dreadful and lethal incident of Sir Tristan Du Bois and his nephew, Prince Arthur, succumbing to the call of the ancient and deadly magic of the Gedref Labyrinth. It grieves me to rule out this verdict less than a week after the disappearance of your son in the forest of Brechfa, but the king’s justice is above everything, especially when the safety of my people is concerned.”

Cynric, looking more than satisfied, turned away and started walking out of the room. Lady Gedref opened her mouth to say something, but her eyes rolled unnaturally and before long, the lady fainted, falling back on the people that stood close to her.

Chapter End Notes

This is our goodbye to King Ryence in The Great Design; we will see no more of him before the end of this fic.

We leave Ryence Gingawaine two days before he is expected to lead the army to Brechfa. The commoners think Brechfa was invaded by Cenred, but the soldiers in Brechfa are in fact King Alined’s men, and Ryence personally sanctioned the invasion and used it as a pretext to flee to the castle of Camelot, to make Uther raise an army, to later poison Uther and to be elected the new king, aided by the war propaganda.

King Ryence's further plans have not been fully unveiled yet, but it's clear that he's not happy about Uther uniting Five Kingdoms in a single state. Ryence has planned some changes, which, according to his sister, include "bringing back the old rules" and "taxes, army and lands' status".

Ryence's sister, Lady Yrien, will remain in the castle of Camelot after Ryence goes to "war", and will probably seek to forge and alliance with Lady Dindrane, member of the great house and the granddaughter of the druid Queen Andor who was overthrown by Uther in the end of his conquest. Yrien will hope to appeal to Anna Dindrane's family history and to try convince the "old bat" that the Gingawaines hate Uther and mean to
reverse the wrongs he had done to the country. Will it work? Will Uther's alleged loyalists, including Lord Sagamore and Lady Gaheris, put up with Uther's legacy being dismantled?

Guess we'll find out in the sequel.

We shall meet Gwen in the Tuesday chapter ^^

<3
Showdown at the Tavern of the Rising Sun

Chapter Summary

It turns out Lady Yrien has not forgotten the impudent conversation Gaius dared to have with her before the first council of King Ryence, and Gwen becomes the witness to another heated scene. When Gwen's last ally in the castle is taken from her, she finds the strength to act, and she gets the chance to meet old and new friends.

Chapter Notes

Gwen POV

A little timeline guide: the events in the castle are now six days ahead of the Merlin-Arthur line. The last time we saw the prince (is he a prince anymore though?) and his servant (or servant-sorcerer or magic servant) was six days ago in the grove in Ascetir where they decided to spend the night before continuing to Ealdor. They must have reached the village already and I can't imagine what they're busy with there, with summer, countryside and star-strewn sky abover their heads, really ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the first time since Uther’s death, Gwen was dealing with the Gaius she’d never thought to see. The frustration had been welling up inside the physician for days since the coup, but it finally broke him that morning. Gaius was a tired old man, too feeble to leave his room and to cook himself a breakfast. He, who had always believed there were no insoluble questions, resigned himself to an early defeat after the trial of Lady Gedref.

Gwen knew she had to take care of him. Who else would? Yrien would gladly see Gaius die from misery. Gwen was afraid Gaius would start yelling at her any moment, or glare at her scornfully or maliciously. It's me after all. It's I who created this horror in the first place. And it must somehow be I who stops it. What exactly is horror, though? King Ryence went to Brechfa with the Howden host yesterday. He is keeping his word and he means to free the commoners from Cenred's grip. Unlike Uther, who meant to sacrifice them to Cenred for the sake of his stupid military strategy.

“There’s been no word from Merlin. Not a sign,” Gaius mumbled, seated comfortably in his chair and staring, blankly, out of the window, where the clouds, ominously gray, were drifting over the sun.

“No. But I’m sure we’ll hear from him soon, Gaius. You’ve told me we must hope…”

“And hope we shall, my child,” his voice, though, was as hopeless as an empty lantern. “Hoping requires more and more efforts each day. The Gingawaines are growing stronger. Their tale about Arthur… I’ve got to admit… He played it out wisely.”

“Oh, Gaius, come on. It was just a load of waffle to me, nobody’s gonna believe it, I’m sure,” Gwen said out of kindness to Gaius. They already believe it, though. It’s been two days, and the rumours
“And there’s no way we can prove him wrong. I can’t be telling my patients Arthur’s not a wraith, because they will more eagerly believe in two murdered guards than in my stories. Ryence gave those guards an almost royal burial ceremony.”

Gwen, who was busy with cooking the porridge, said, rather distractedly.

“But you still have friends? In the castle?”

“I doubt it. Lady Dindrane looks like she’s about to thwart my attempts. I don’t know what Ryence must have done to win her.”

*King Ryence, if he is as strong as he is boastful, will win the war over Cenred. He will be bathed in the love of the small folk once he returns. If Lady Dindrane chooses to side with the Gingawaines, she’ll bring some of her relatives to their side, including Lord Gornemant and Lord Lamorak, who was the Councilor of Provision, Lord Accolon, who is the Councilor of War, and Lord Ragnell of Balor, Lady Dindrane of Denaria and Lord Catigern of Asgorath. What’s worse: how do we persuade the small folk Arthur is a better king if they fall into Gingawaine’s trap and believe Arthur is a wraith?*

Gwen’s loneliness, fear and disappointment with Rion’s possible involvement into the failed murder of Arthur had ceased mattering once she learnt what Ryence did at the trial of Lady Gedref. *He would never try to blacken Arthur’s name if he believed the Prince was slaughtered. Arthur’s alive and Ryence fears him so much he needs to ruin the small folk’s love for the Dragonslayer. But where are you, Arthur?*

The liquid started boiling, and Gwen hurried to stir the porridge with an old spurtle. Gwen knew there was no point in apportioning the blame: was it her, was it Rion, was it Yrien, was it Ryence, was it Uther and his ways that aided the poisoning plot. She had breached the rules, all rules of the kingdom, in fact, when she poured poison into the king’s cup, but Rion had promised that the poison would not kill Uther at once; it was supposed to weaken his heart and help him die a little sooner. *Not so soon.*

She had been used in a wicked game, Gwen knew it, but only because she let Rion feast on her fears, regrets and sorrows, because she let herself believe Rion was serenely interested in her, turning a blind eye on his darker intentions. She would never let anybody use her again. Gwen swore that she would take full responsibility for what had happened and would *think* how to protect Arthur. *If Arthur still lives to be protected.*

She heard the steps ascending the staircase behind the door. *Clang. Clang. Clang. Men in armor.* Gwen turned so fast she cricked her neck, but Gaius was faster to *jump* up and to grab her by the elbow.

“Here,” he said worriedly, dragging her to Merlin’s room. “You’re to stay in the wardrobe no matter what. Don’t make a sound and don’t attempt to get out before I let you out.”

Gwen couldn’t believe a man of Gaius’s age could possess such physical strength. He shoved her into an empty wardrobe, slammed the door and Gwen heard him mutter something in a language she didn’t understand. *What was that?! Who’s he so afraid of?*

“Gaius,” she heard Lady Yrien’s voice in a moment. “You should consider moving chambers. Some of your patients might die while climbing the staircase!”
“My lady,” Gaius’s tone was as polite as the old man could master. “I didn’t expect you. Otherwise, I’d dress more properly and wouldn’t greet you with such a lack of order in my place.”

“Don’t you have a go at your order and your robes. You seriously thought I’d expect the court physician to have a ballroom cleanness in his chambers? What’s that? Some potion, is it?”

“It’s porridge, my lady. I’ve been cooking.”

“Oh. Well. Are we alone, Gaius?”

“Of course, my lady.”

“Guards, search the room. And upstairs, search that one, too.”

Gwen heard their footsteps growing louder and louder. *She’s brought four guards, by the sound of it. Why? To protect her against who? Against Gaius? He’s ancient!*

When the guard’s hand started tearing the door of the wardrobe in a clumsy attempt to open it, Gwen pressed her hand to her mouth; otherwise, she’d shriek from horror. The guard kept slamming through the door, but his tries were fruitless.

“Can’t open that one, m’lady,” he reported in a hoarse voice.

“That one hasn’t opened in years,” Gaius said in a carefree tone. “You could use a hammer or a sword to open it, if you like, but I’ll be grateful if you clean the mess you’ll make yourself… Uther promised to send someone repair it, I’m too old for dragging the wardrobe…”

“To hell with this wardrobe,” Yrien sounded fortified by the fact nobody else had been found in the chambers. “Guard the door. Don’t let anybody in before we finish the talking.”

Gwen heard the guards leave.

“What is the reason, my lady? Am I arrested?”

“Arrested? Oh, such a strict word, Gaius. Stinks of justice, doesn’t it?”

“There’s no other reason for my room to be searched with such fierce devotion, my lady.”

“Oh, you’ve just begun to learn how fierce my devotion can be, Gaius.”

“I am looking forward to it, my lady.”

“Are you? Do you know what this is?”

“A king’s seal, I suppose.”

“You suppose correctly. See, my brother had left a little task for me before he went to war,” Gwen was sure Yrien was smirking unpleasantly. “We’ve got rumours to check. An investigation to carry out, that is.”

“What will you be looking in, my lady?”

“We’ve got reasons to believe King Uther was misinformed about the labyrinth of Gedref.”

“Misinformed how?”
“He was led to believe the labyrinth was destroyed, while it remained safe and unharmed all the while. The question is: who? Who would do such a thing?” Yrien said ostentatiously. “In fact, who was the only person at court that was allowed to discuss the magic matters with Uther?”

“This is one of the best tales you’ve come up with. Better than the tale of the undead prince.”

“Tale or not, the prince’s body has disappeared, and the guards have been slain. I can’t tell you of all the rumours filling the Lower Town and the Southern Village. Some of them more awful than the others…”

“But will those rumours stop him, my lady? Will they keep the lords and ladies of the Western territories from supporting prince Arthur, when he arrives at the homeland of his father, when he presents himself as a man of flesh and blood, rather than as an undead beast? I’ve heard there are two thousand swords raised to the west of the White Mountains. And the seals of Asgorath, Daobeth, Landshire and Denaria are still to be presented to the king.”

“Even if Arthur has really risen from the grave…”

“Stop playing that part,” the rawness in the physician’s voice shocked Gwen; he spoke as though he was addressing a serving girl rather than the king’s sister. “You know too bloody well that your half-witted assassins failed and the prince survived.”

“Yet all the half-witted people of this castle came to bid farewell to his body and saw the murdered prince themselves. The fallen Dragonslayer,” she said in a faked drippy voice. “And even if he is foolish enough to reach Daobeth, here people will still think he’s a walking dead. All the lords and ladies of the Southern territories remain in the castle, that will surely keep Nemeton, Balor and Gedref from rebellion. The trial of Lady of Gedref, by the way, did inspire some obedience among them.”

“Yrien.”

“You shall still call me my lady,” the improper addressing was the only time when Lady Yrien lost her temper during the heated conversation.

“There is one thing King Ryence has to consider, my lady. Arthur has somehow survived witches, magic beasts, fairies, warlocks. For the love you have for you homeland and for your son, I would advise you to think twice before trying to find Arthur.”

***

Detention for Gaius. Gwen was walking home down the busy Main Street. Despite the uncertain weather and the strong wind, there were more people outside than usually. Word had it that the fight against Cenred wouldn’t be long, and merchants were preparing to restart the trade with southern lands, whose main trade passage led through Brechfa and the southern road. The workers from the Lower Town reconstruction were darting across the street, looking for the best tavern where they could have a meal and a drink, and mothers were following their children closely, afraid of all the bizarre rumours about Arthur The Undead.

Gwen couldn’t believe Yrien was putting Gaius under special investigation. Well, in point of fact, she could believe it easily, but the furious thoughts were whirling around in her head, making her insides writhe with anger. She ought to show some respect for him. Gaius may not be the best man in the castle, he might have done horrible things to Morgana, but in the end, isn’t it because of those horrible things Gaius had done that Morgana was able to stay alive until the moment when Morgause saved her from the castle?
A tall, broad-shouldered man was passing by; Gwen saw him snatch a flower from the basket of a
girl in front of her and before long, he blocked Gwen’s way and presented her a flower.

“I believe this belongs to you.”

Gwen glanced at him. Whoever you’re, it’s not the right time. The stranger had dark-brown hair, rich
and thick, a big sharp nose and a slightly pointy chin. His smile can win battles without swords, it
seemed to Gwen.

“I don’t think so,” Gwen shook her head, turning down the gallant gesture. “The flower’s not my
colour.”

“Ah, well…. let us see?”

He put the flower in Gwen's hair. Well. Nice try, lover-boy.

“I bet you've got a whole bunch of those to hand out,” she asserted, calmly.

“No. Yours is the only one.”

The stranger held up his empty hands as proof. Gwen scoffed and tried to move past him, but he
proved stubborn.

“I'm Gwaine, by the way.”

He held out his hand. Alright. Might not be as awful. Gwen shook Gwaine’s hand, and kept
walking, as though she didn’t experience the sensation of intense heat and tremor when his strong
hand grabbed hers. She didn't remember the last time when somebody touched her that way. Gwaine,
all of a sudden, pulled her back.

“You haven't told me your name! You look like a princess to me. So, it's probably something like
Sophia or...or Esmeralda. That's it. Princess Esmeralda.”

Goddess, do some girls really fall for that princess's crap? I’ve seen the life of Lady Morgana, she
was almost like a princess at Uther’s court, and I'd not take princess as a compliment. Before she
could think of an answer, Gwaine bowed down to her.

“Stop it! People are watching!” she hissed, both, ashamed and a bit happy from the attention she
received.

“Not until you tell me your name,” he insisted.

“Alright, alright. It’s Gwen.”

“Gwen? Our names rhyme!”

“No, they don’t.”

“Yes, they do! Gwen’s a good name for princess.

“Unfortunately or fortunately, I’m not a princess.”

“Ah, but you see...you are to me,” his gaze, although as hot as summer heat, drowned in the coldness
of her impenetrable eyes. “This isn't working, is it?”

“No, not really,” and it’s not about you, it's just that you couldn’t have picked a worse time. “But I
like that you tried, and that you know when to give up.”

“Then I better stick to my job,” he suddenly straightened and put on a concerned expression. “Gwen, care to go to a tavern with me?”

“I don’t go to taverns with strangers, and I don’t go to taverns in the middle of the day,” she felt ashamed by such an obvious proposal.

“We need to go to tavern so that I can bring you some news from Merlin. He said you could be trusted.”

Merlin? My friend? She had just heard something she’d been both, dreading and longing.

“Where’s he? Where did you meet him? Is the pri..”

Before she could finish the question, Gwaine pressed his index finger to her lips.

“It’s best we don’t discuss such things here, you agree? Tavern’s a good place, too many new workers now, nobody would care about a new face bringing his girl to have a meal, right?”

Gwen hated the dilemma. She had sworn nobody would ever be able to use her again, but how could this man use her? There were better places to slaughter her than at the tavern. What if he’s Yrien's man? What if he means to find how much I know? I won’t tell him anything before he can prove he really is Merlin’s friend.

“A tavern sounds fine,” she said, pulling the flower out of her hair.

***

Gwen was looking calm and careful, and stayed prudent in her conversation with Gwaine on the way to The Rising Sun. Evoric, the innkeeper, a round faced man with sloppy eyes and fat chin, greeted her happily.

“Gwen! Been ages, ha?”

“Evoric,” she smiled. “The castle has been busy for the last week or so, right?”

“Busy? The bloody maddest place in the wide world! Struggling to scratch a day of quiet life ever since the dragon roasted our arses!”

Gwen felt a lot of gazes thrown her way, most from the men she’d never met – the workers from reconstruction who have come from the neighbouring villages to earn some coin, but when they realized she was with Gwaine, they stared back at their meals.

“Not a word from Elyan still?” Evoric inquired.

That’s why I hate going to the tavern.

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“That silly boy, always with the wind in his head, always, I tell ya.”

“Would you mind?” Gwaine, who somehow sensed the discomfort that seized Gwen, raised his hand. “We don’t have long.”

“And who’s the lucky fellow?” Evoric smiled.
“Just a fellow.”

“A toad,” Gwaine whispered to her as they proceeded to the small squared table, a greased one with a dark-haired boy with filthy hair. “This innkeeper, can’t have his mouth shut for a bloody moment.”

“Evoric’s nice. He just…”

“Sit down, my lady,” Gwaine pointed at the table.

It took some time for Gwen to decide; the silent dark-haired boy looked icily unfriendly. When she took her seat, Gwaine did the same and began the talking at once:

“Gwen, you recognize him? If you do, please, don’t say his name.”

Recognize him? How? I’ve never… Gwen started inspecting the stranger’s face. The awful bruises. Where do they come from? And the hair, does he ever wash? Goddess, what a filthy… Wait. Those eyes. I must have seen him. Where? At the feast? Yes. And earlier than that. Where? In the castle, somewhere in the castle. He has this high forehead, just like... Just like Sir Leon! And... Lord Pellinore! Is that…?

Gwen felt as though somebody held a grip on her throat. The stranger nodded, approvingly.

“You know who I am,” he whispered.

“You’re Modr…”

“I said no names,” Gwaine reminded her. “Dear Gwen, we’ve been told, by your friend, the friend we spoke about in the street, that you can be trusted. Let’s call this friend Dolly, just for the sake of safety. And let’s say that this friend of yours, this Dolly, he used to be a servant for a very high-blood noble, right? Let’s call this noble Molly.”

Dolly and Molly? Merlin and Arthur, he means? Why can’t we speak their names? Is he afraid someone might overhear us?

“Are Dolly and Molly alive?” she braced herself for the most important question.

“They are,” Modron replied at once. “Dolly told us to say this to you, as a prove that Dolly really is our friend. Dolly said he told you the truth about Lady Morgana, whatever that means.”

He bloody did! Merlin! Merlin and Arthur, they are alive! Merlin, Gaius was right to have so much faith in you. I don’t know how you do it, but…

“But that’s the truth! Evoric, how else could Arthur survive the Questing Beast? That poison can’t be cured, they say!” a drunk voice rose from near the entrance.

“They say a lot of gibberish!”

“And when the Dark Witch made everyone fall asleep, the spell couldn’t get Arthur. He saved us. How could he withstand such powerful magic? He must have been a creature of magic himself! That’s why the Dark Witch couldn’t make him sleep. From the very start, Arthur had magic! It’s just that he concealed his true nature from his father, because…”

“You keep talking about magic in my tavern and I throw you out!” Evoric didn’t like to threat in vain, and the conversation seized.

“Gwen,” Modron brought her attention back to their table. “Dolly and Molly are safe, but we need to
bring Molly back on her rightful... chair, you know?"

"Chair? Throne, he means?"

"I think I do," she nodded, unsure. "But why are we talking here? Why not in my..."

"You're being followed, Gwen. All the time. We waited for the ripe moment to contact you."

"Followed? By who?"

"And how d'you think, princess?" Gwaine smiled. "King’s men, we bet. And we bet it’s before long that they appear here and attempt to seize us. That’s why we need to make it quick, however much I hate it."

"What is going on in the castle?"

"Prince Arthur’s tomb was broken. People believe he has risen from the dead just like his uncle Tristan did last year. Fear’s creeping in the Lower Town and the village. Two guards were murdered, torn to pieces, and they think Arthur's some beast or some wraith. They think Arthur and his uncle Tristan both succumbed to the dark sorcery of the labyrinth of Gedref, that’s where Arthur’s mother comes from. They’ve renounced Lady Gedref her lordship rights, but she’s free in the castle. Gaius has been put under detention earlier today, though. He looks hopeless. Ryence marched to Brechfa yesterday."

"We know that. Anything else?"

"They think Molly will go to Daobeth, where Uther’s aunt is the lady of the land. They’ve sent Accolon there, to command the western army Uther had ordered to assemble when he received news of Cenred’s invasion. They fear the unrest of the Westerners. All the southern lords are kept in the castle, too. Molly’s father was poisoned," she felt herself blushing.

"Poisoned?" Modron grinded his teeth. "How do you know?"

"Gaius obtained the information from a reliable source," Gwen replied innocently. "He’s a physician, he knows things. We thought Lady Dindrane was opposing the new king, but it might well be that they found out they have more common interests. That's all I know."

Gwen was out of breath. Modron’s eyes were gleaming as though he was soaking in all the information Gwen had shared.

"There’s no Cenred in Brechfa," Gwaine whispered into her ear. "It’s all a trick. The hosts there are either of Odin or of Alined. The invasion was staged."

Before Gwen could hope to digest his words, the door of the tavern creaked open and six people walked in. They were not guards, but looked sure to be able to put on a fight. Gwen saw Modron change his position.

As the newcomers started moving their way, Gwaine whispered to her:

"When it starts, you hide under the table and don’t do nothing stupid, got it?"

"When what starts?"

Modron’s made a move with his arm and his heavy clay cup was in the air, flying precisely in the face of the first man walking their way; it hit him somewhere between his eyes with staggering
might, and he lost his balance at once, falling on someone’s table, his eyes closed, his nose in blood and his mouth erupting with curses. Gwaine did the same thing with his chair, but the man he was aiming at had a quicker reaction and succeeded in raising his arm to block the flying object, which broke against his arm and fell to wooden pieces on the floor.

The next thing she knew – Modron kicked their table, pushing Gwen to the floor, where she fell with a shriek, and she heard that sound: sword blades pulled out of sheathes. Gwaine, a horrendously tall figure, was jumping from table to table, using the advantage of the height as his sword danced with the swords of two attackers, while Modron kept throwing stones at the newcomers with unimaginable force, the sword calm in his hand. People were on their feet, shouting, and she saw Gwaine turning all the tables he could to block the hostile men’s way. Modron, too, jumped with the slight of a cat, blocked a sword that would’ve surely cut Gwaine with his own blade, and after fierce steel clanging, the two men slammed through the door and were gone, leaving destruction, pain and the screams of fury in the tavern.

Gwen felt somebody put her back to her feet – somebody much too caring for a stranger. When she turned around, she saw Lancelot in a dirty gray tunic, looking at her admirably.

“You just can’t stay out of trouble, can you, Gwen?”

Chapter End Notes

100k words *DANCING*

And this is when we say goodbye to Gwen, for we will not see her before the end of this fic.

I'm really most worried about her, because, unlike Merlin, who has magic, or Arthur, who can hope for Merlin's protection, or Morgana, who is guarded by Morgause, Gwen is alone in the castle full of swords, spears, daggers, high towers and a deep moat. Now that Gaius's been served a detention, Gwen is nearly blinded because she no longer has access to high court.

I know that she has caused a lot of havoc in the castle, but don't judge her too harsh. Uther caused a lot of suffering to her family, and after seeing the dreadful consequences of the Dragon's attack, Gwen was shocked to learn that this wrong befell Camelot because of Uther's hypocritical toying with magic in the past. Thinking that the commoners of Brechfa were left for Cenred to butcher was another part that deepened her hate of Uther and added some mental pressure on her. Lady Yrien was a terrible mistress and was not a pleasant job whatsoever, and when Gwen learnt that Morgana had magic, and that Morgana was hardly missing, but more likely had chosen to leave the castle of Camelot and would not return unless Uther was no longer king, Gwen broke down.

She felt sore for Morgana sharing her secret with Merlin rather than with her trusted maidservant, she felt mad at Merlin for keeping this secret for so long and not doing anything to help Morgana, she thought Gaius had been poisoning Morgana with his sleeping draughts for years, and she felt that the whole castle was filled with the cruelest people ever.

So when Rion – who seemed so open, so natural and so down-to-earth, offered her his
plan to change the king, honestly, I was surprised she didn’t offer hemlock herself.

When she realized she had been used in a wicked game, she felt depressed and miserable, but I love it that she gathered herself and started thinking of somehow staying in the game and trying to do something good. Now that she knows that Arthur and Merlin are (thank goddess!) both alive, I'm sure she is so much relieved, and I still think she doesn't feel very sorry for Uther.

The big test that's coming for her is her attitude towards King Ryence and Prince Rion: will she find them as awful as Uther? And if she thinks Ryence is a decent king, will she support Merlin's intention to bring Arthur on the throne? I guess we'll find out in the sequel.

<3
Brief History of Uther's Conquest

Chapter Summary

As the Great Design fic is drawing to a close, I decided to summarize the bits of information revealed about the history of Camelot and, particularly, about Uther's conquest, and provide family trees of some of the great houses.

Chapter Notes

There's a bit more than just history of Uther's conquest, it also touches upon the recent events. As the story progresses, more details will be revealed about the history of Camelot and the origins of magic!

P.S. Sorry for the low-quality images, I'm a flop at graphics :'(

See the end of the chapter for more notes

UTHER'S BACKGROUND

Uther Pendragon was born in Daobeth, a land in the Mountain Kingdom. His father was Mortir Pendragon and his mother was Usma Pendragon. Uther's maternal grandfather was Edren Gaheris, the King of Mountain Land, while Uther's uncle, Ulwich Gaheris, was the heir to the crown of Mountain Land.
Little has been revealed about Daobeth. It is known, though, that Daobeth had once been a powerful kingdom. In the days of Daobeth Kingdom, a priestess of the Old Religion killed two Great Dragons, but later Daobeth was brought down by other Dragons, in, mayhaps, an act of the remaining dragonlords' revenge - the circumstances of that conflict are so far unknown, and nothing is explained about why the priestess that killed two of the Great Dragons failed to protect the kingdom from the rest of the creatures.

Before Uther's conquest, the territory of Camelot was divided into Five Kingdoms: the Mountain Kingdom (to the South-West of White Mountains), Midlands (the fertile lands of Brechfa, Eofham and Isgaard), Camelot (from the White Mountains to the Lake of Avalon), Northern Lands (the north-eastern territories under the reign of Isle of the Blessed) and the Seaside Kingdom (with a king's seat in the castle of Gedref).

**Uther's Conquest**

Uther's conquest somehow began with a rebellion in his own Mountain Kingdom, which included the lands of Daobeth, Denaria and Asgorath. Uther's known allies were warlords Demeth Dindrane, whose father was Lord of Denaria, and Thorpus Elyan. After gaining power over the Mountain Kingdom, Uther gathered a large army and attacked Midlands.

Lord Ryence Gingawaine was the only lord to give Uther a serious fight. Prior to that, Ryence sent for the help of the Druids Council of Camelot. Queen Andor, the druid queen of Camelot, having received the news about Uther's invasion of Brechfa, dispatched three of the four dragonlords to deal
with the conqueror.

The battle of Uther Pendragon and Ryence Gingawaine was later called the Battle of Ashes. Uther's army suffered severe casualties because of both, the open-field fight and the dragons, but Uther's ally, Nimueh, managed to kill all three dragons and their dragonlords. Ryence Gingawaine had to retreat, but the Lord of Brechfa could still burn the crops after his defeat and condemn the land to a starving winter. He didn’t though, in return for a promise from Uther.

Ryence and Uther made a pact: it was agreed that Uther would marry Ryence's sister, Yrien. The marriage was to take place when Yrien reached the age of sixteen.

Following the Battle of Ashes, Uther destroyed the land of Eofham, whose people were fiercely against him, and then he led the large part of his army to the castle of Camelot.

FALL OF THE DRUID DYNASTY

Queen Andor, the druid queen of Camelot, had lost her son at the Battle of Ashes, together with other two dragonlords. Siege of the castle of Camelot was not an option for Uther, he had too few men for that. Negotiations between Uther and Queen Andor began. Queen Andor agreed to surrender the castle on the following terms:

1. All the people who did not wish to live under Uther's reign were permitted to leave and settle down in the territory to the north of Greenswood village.

2. Uther swore to respect the druids' choice and to never harm them, as well as to guarantee their peace.

3. The dragonlords' families would be pardoned.

It was rumoured that Uther agreed to the terms because Queen Andor threatened to start a bloody magic war if the druids were not guaranteed peace. The castle's gates opened, and Uther became the King of Camelot. In order to legitimize his claim, Uther staged the elections. After that, his warlord Demeth Dindrane married Anna Claudin (Anna Dindrane in marriage) who was the granddaughter of the exiled druid queen. Another warlord of Uther, Thorpus Elyan, married Lewissa Claudin, the other granddaughter of the exiled druid queen.
Elsa Andor, the wife of the Dragonlord Prince, widowed after the Battle of Ashes, was permitted to stay in the castle with two of her children, son Dorin and daughter Gabryss.

**SEASIDE KINGDOM**

The Northern Lands, which had been under the reign of the Isle of the Blessed, joined Uther's kingdom and Nimueh, who had helped Uther kill the three great dragons, became his court sorceress, his right hand and his "wise lady", according to Gaius.

The last of the Five Kingdoms that remained independent was the Seaside Kingdom, ruled by King Reginald Gedref in the castle of Gedref. King Reginald had a son, Prince Ollwen, who was his heir. King Reginald also had a sister, Nudda, who had been married to Bohort Du Bois and had three children with him: Ygraine Du Bois, Tristan Du Bois and Agravaine Du Bois.
When Tristan learnt that Uther Pendragon had conquered the Mountain Kingdom, the Midlands and Camelot, and that the Northern Lands joined him voluntarily, he conjured a plan. He plotted with Uther, offering the following terms: Tristan was to overthrow King Reginald and make his elder brother, Agravaine, the new king. Agravaine would denounce the sovereignty of the Seaside Kingdom and bend the knee for Uther. In return, Uther was to marry Ygraine and make her Queen of the Five Kingdoms.

The plan worked, and Uther Pendragon married Ygraine Du Bois. Prince Ollwen was sent to Camelot, ripped of all his claims for the crown. The Seaside Kingdom was no more. Agravaine became the Lord of Gedref, while Tristan was welcomed at the high court of Camelot.

**BEFORE THE PURGE**

When Uther married Ygraine and united the Five Kingdoms, Camelot had a society where magic was not prosecuted. According to Gaius, there were those who used magic for good and those who used it for evil. There were less bandits and slave traders because they were afraid of the punishments of the Court Sorceress Nimueh, who was most of all interested in the matters of justice. She often used magic to punish people for severe crimes.

For ten years which Uther ruled after he had conquered Camelot, magic was legal, and there were no wars with other kingdoms. It was one of the longest eras of peace.

Gorlois were the second most powerful family in the castle. If Uther were to die childless, Ector Gorlois would have assumed the throne. Uther didn't think much of having an heir at first, but when Morgana was born to the House Gorlois, he, for some reason, started thinking about having an heir. When the ten-year anniversary of the king’s reign was approaching, Uther felt that he needed an heir by whatever the cost, so that his family’s claim to the throne was valid. Uther asked Nimueh for...
Nimueh agreed to help Ygraine conceive, and the Queen became pregnant shortly after Nimueh used her magic. However, Ygraine died in childbirth.

Uther’s heart was broken. Nimueh tried to comfort him. She let him mourn, but then urged him to be back to the matters of state. Uther simply could not do it, he was consumed by his grief for Ygraine. One night, Nimueh told Uther that he was not the one to blame. She told him that he had to go on, to be the king which Camelot needed. She said that the Old Religion doesn’t care who lives and who dies, only that the balance of the world was repaid. She said that to create a life, death must happen.

When Uther heard about that rule, about that law of the Old Religion, he thought that Nimueh could foresee the consequences of using magic to help Ygraine conceive. Furthermore, Uther began to think that Nimueh did it on purpose. Ygraine was his heart and his soul, and the new suspicion drove Uther mad. It clearly let him have somebody to blame for his wife’s death he got somebody and something to unleash his rage at. During the feast on Arthur’s naming day, Uther poisoned Nimueh’s cup. She fell asleep the instant she tasted the wine, and Uther threw her off the court, right into the dungeons.

Uther imprisoned Nimueh, using the chains of Belisama, the magic artifact that left Nimueh, even though a priestess of the Old Religion, powerless. Uther then called for the last dragonlord who had a living dragon, Balinor, and asked him to burn the Isle of the Blessed. The dragonlords and the priestesses were no friends. They had a long (or maybe even longer) feud, dating back to he days of Daobeth Kingdom, when a priestess of the Old Religion killed two Great Dragons. Nimueh had killed another three Great Dragons before Uther marched on Camelot. For this and some other yet unrevealed reasons, Balinor agreed to burn the Isle of the Blessed. When the Isle of the Blessed burnt, the Old Religion suffered great damage.

Gaius, who thought that murdering Nimueh could have the grave consequences for the magic itself, freed her off the Belisama chains. When Nimueh learnt the news about the Isle and all her sisters that burnt in the dragonflames, she, posseSing the rare gift, changed her appearance and turned into Balinor, the last dragonlord. While the real Balinor was having some rest in the castle, Nimueh, disguised as Balinor, went to the caves where Kilgharrah, Balinor's dragon, was resting and used the Belisama chains to imprison the dragon. Afterwards, still disguised as Balinor, she attempted to kill the infant Arthur Pendragon, Uther's son.

Gaius didn't let her do it. He saved Arthur. Uther witnessed that attempt: it appeared to Uther that he saw Gaius stopping Balinor from killing Arthur. Nimueh, still disguised as Balinor, ran away. The guards were after the real Balinor, immediately, for Uther didn't believe it when the real Balinor claimed he was innocent.

With the last Great Dragon trapped and the Isle of the Blessed fallen, Uther was free to start the Great Purge.

Sir Tristan, the brother of Queen Ygraine, blamed Uther for her death and came to the gates of Camelot and challenged King Uther to single combat. Uther killed Sir Tristan in the single combat.

Agravaine, the only surviving brother of the late Queen Ygraine, was banished from Camelot. The
castle of Gedref, thus, returned under the lordship of Ollwen Gedref, who was married to Ursula Gedref and later had a son Owaine. The castle of Gedref was given to Ollwen on one condition: the labyrinth of Gedref had to be destroyed, for Uther thought the maze was a place of magic, one of the most sacred to the Old Religion.

Morgause, the daughter of Ector Gorlois and Vivienne Gorlois, was smuggled out of the castle with the help of Gaius when the Purge began, and thanks to it, the cult of the Old Religion still lives.

Little has been revealed so far about the chronology of the Purge. It is only known that "there were members of great houses slain during the Great Purge", and also that Uther "drowned many druids he suspected of sorcery, including children, killed for the magic they were born with", which means that Uther broke his promise to Queen Andor. It is also believed that Uther "killed Morgana's parents and condemned whole villages to death during the Great Purge".

Gaius was in Camelot for most of the Purge. It is speculated that he had seen many innocent sorcerers die, but he chose to be a part of Uther's court nonetheless.

AFTER THE PURGE

It is known that after the Great Purge, Camelot, having enjoyed ten years of peace, was involved in at least two wars: the Mercian War and the Gwynedd War.

When Gwen was a little girl, Bayard of Mercia brought an army of five thousand swords to besiege the castle, and during that siege mother died when one of the shots fired at the citadel killed her. Uther refused to have an open field battle and let the small folk in the citadel to survive the siege, while the army from Uther's western territories was marching to smash Bayard of Mercia. The peace treaty with Mercia took many years to prepare, and when Uther invited Bayard for negotiations, Nimueh tried to frustrate the negotiations, hoping to involve Camelot and Mercia in the new war. Her attempts were fruitless thanks to Gaius discovering her plan.

Camelot also waged several wars on the kingdom of Gwynedd. King Caerleon was a restless foe, and rumour had it he still attempted raids of Camelot's lands, although in disguise, to pretend he kept the peace treaty. It is known that Lord Accolon played a huge part in winning the Gwynedd wars. It is known that Ryence Gignawaine and Uther Pendragon fought Caerleon, too.

RECENT EVENTS

Lord Cynric, the Councilor of Trade, was benefiting from the smuggling schemes, establishing a chain of illegal import routes from the kingdom of Deorham to the kingdom of Camelot. King Alined, the ruler of Deorham, was benefiting from this scheme, too, because Cynric shared a part of his income with King Alined. Uther put an end to this scheme when he signed the Treaty of Five Kings. This treaty made the trade duties and taxes equal in Deorham and in Camelot. The merchant, thus, could start shipping the goods straight to Camelot, to its only port castle: Gedref, since the duties and taxes in Camelot were no longer higher than in Deorham.

Cynric realized that Uther wasn't going to renounce the treaty and that's why he mastered a plan to replace Uther with a different king. He chose Ryence Gingawaine and his family because of the long story of feud between the Gingawaines and the Pendragons. They agreed to the following terms:

1. Lord Cynric was to organize the fake invasion of Cenred army, bringing, in fact, King Alined's soldiers who were to be disguised as the warriors of Essetir.

2. Lord Cynric was to provide the wine, the poison and the servant who would pour the poison into the king's cup.
3. Lord Gingawaine and his family were to persuade the servant to poison the king.

4. Lord Gingawaine was to kill prince Arthur.

If successful, the plan had the additional terms:

1. Lord Cynric was to be appointed the Royal Treasurer.
2. The Treaty of the Five Kings was to be abandoned
3* Lord Cynric was to become the Lord of Gedref.

* this term was not initially discussed and was introduced by Cynric alone

Cynric turned to King Alined, who sent five hundred men to Brechfa to impersonate Cenred's soldiers; the soldiers were moving in smaller groups, using the comfortable disguise of smuggling routs which Cynric knew very well. They attacked Camelot's patrol on the border of Essetir and isolated Brechfa after all the nobles fled to Camelot by Uther's order.

Cynric then offered his maidservant to Gingawaines, but the girl fell sick right before the arrival of the noble guests, which meant Gaius had to quickly appoint somebody else - and the physician predictably chose Gwen. Cynric had learnt Gwen's story and knew that she had all the rights to be angry with Uther. Cynric hoped that Young Rion could seduce her and persuade her to join the plan that saw Uther poisoned. Cynric provided both, the wine and the poison.

**KING RYENCE GINGAWAINE**

King Ryence hired assassins to murder prince Arthur and bring his body to Camelot. Uther's heart, weakened by poison, was expected to collapse from the news of Arthur's death and from the look of Arthur's mutilated body. The plan didn't work: prince Arthur somehow survived the assassination and Ryence had to bring the body of an imposter. The news of Arthur's death, however, had the effect Ryence was longing: Uther's heart collapsed right in the throne room.

King Ryence was elected King of Camelot in accordance with Camelot's law that saw only the members of the great houses and the lords and ladies of Camelot's territories voting by giving their rings to the preferred candidate. King Ryence succeeded because in the wake of the news of Cenred's invasion (which was faked by Cynric, Ryence and Alined) members of the great houses and lords and ladies of the territories thought that it was most wise to have a skilled warrior and warlord on the throne.

The newly elected King Ryence, afraid that prince Arthur would turn up at Camelot and demand his rightful throne, decided to blacken Arthur's name with yet another staged incident. When the tomb with the imposter's body was broken, the body gone and the guards murdered, King Ryence held a trial, which concluded that Arthur must have rise from the dead in the form of some beast or some wraith, just like Arthur's uncle Tristan did twenty years after murdered by Uther in a single combat. Ryence hopes to destroy Arthur's legacy among the small folk to strip the prince off any support of the commoners.

Chapter End Notes
Just some news on the further updates:

there are six chapters left for The Great Design <3

The chapters will be called: "Ealdor", "Healing", "Star-guarded", "Round Table", "The Crown" and "The Crystal Cave" <3

I've decreased the overall number of chapters for this fic from 58 to 52 just because ever since ch. 32 I've been merging some separate chapters into bigger ones. The plot hasn't been shortened in any way.

There will be new chapters on Friday, Nov. 17, and I'll probably announce the title of the sequel, which has been already mentioned in the text several times :)

<3
Ealdor

Chapter Summary

Merlin and Arthur continue their journey. Young warlock aims to take the weakened princes to a safe place, fearing that the usurper's men may still be searching for the rightful Camelot heir.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Merlin knew Arthur was looking at him. When he turned around, he saw Arthur gazing into the flames of the cookfire; the prince looked fragile, drained and utterly exhausted. When Arthur had asked Merlin to hold him in the darkness of the Ascetir grove the previous night, Merlin’s heart filled with pain at the sound of the prince’s weary voice.

He knows he might’ve lost his father. Now that his health is coming back to him, he will feel more pain as well. Not physical pain, the other pain. Uther was a monster, and yet he was Arthur’s father. Merlin shuddered, remembering his own feelings when Balinor had died in his arms. If Arthur’s feeling the same now…

When the new day dawned, leaden and cool, Merlin thought it was the best way to prepare some onion soup for Arthur. To call that meal a soup was a fat overstatement, of course: Merlin had nothing to cook except for bread and onion. They were so close to Ealdor, he knew it, but Arthur was starving.

“Merlin, how comes we haven’t come across a single village on our way?” Arthur asked grimly.

“I can see our path. Sort of. I can see the path to some places, and I can use this vision to construct the best route.”

“See our path?” Arthur frowned, as though Merlin sounded like some senile nomad.

“Yes. Some places, which I’ve already been to, I can see the path to them. And I can sometimes sense the magic places, too, but I’m not sure.”

“We should have visited some village on our way,” Arthur complained.

“Why?”

“I want to hear what they say of my father.”

“You can hear that in Ealdor, too.”

“People there will have no clue,” Arthur snapped. “They live in Essetir!”
“You know damn well they’re much more tied to the lands of Camelot, Arthur,” Merlin tried his best to avoid picking a row with Arthur, with the morally wounded, physically weak and disoriented prince he had rarely seen before. “They’ll have the same news about Uther like…”

“That’s king Uther to you, Merlin.”

Merlin turned around and blinked, unbothered. Arthur was lying on the ground; the journey of the previous day had weakened him quite more than Merlin expected. The worst thing about it all was that the weaker Arthur felt, the angrier he was with everything and everybody around him: it had been this way since the day one. Arthur had been used to a different position: a dominant force of a court leader, a crown prince that was always on the watch and ready to attack whatever threat Uther pointed at. Defense had never been a strategy Arthur cherished, even when he had come to Ealdor to help its people fight the bandits, he constructed a plan that saw the villagers attacking the armed renegades. Ingenious.

Now he can’t even wield a sword, or mount a horse, or walk properly. It takes him so much effort to stand up he’d gladly collapse had he not been that stubborn. He doesn’t even have rumours about his father, he is completely clueless about what’s going on in Camelot. Not that I know much about it, too.

“Breakfast’s ready,” Merlin announced in a lifted voice, hoping that at least his presence could ensure a bit of cheerfulness for Arthur.

“And what’s that?”

“An onion soup!”

“That’s not really a soup. That’s onion boiled in water and some bread.”

“Well, I beg your forgiveness for not being able to serve a royal breakfast in the forest, your majesty,” Merlin felt hurt for stumbling upon Arthur’s irritated attitude.

Does he think it’s any easier for me? Doesn’t he feel how much it pains me to see him so hurt? Merlin rose to his feet and started walking away, trying to construct a pretext in his head. Must speak to Dolly. She’s as weak as Arthur, probably.

“And how do you think I’ll get up without your help?” Arthur asked softly, making Merlin’s insides reinflate at the sound of his sad voice.

“Right. I forgot, I…”

“Forgot that I’m crippled now?”

“You’re not. You won’t recognize yourself in a week, I think,” Merlin came to tower over Arthur for a moment before the prince clutched his hand, seeking for something to lean on as he was trying to get up and to hold his balance.

Merlin was about to go and check Dolly when he realized Arthur was still clutching his shoulder. Meanwhile, the prince’s hand started descending until their hands met in what at first appeared to be a handshake, before Arthur’s fingers intertwined his in a sweet and gentle touch.

“I know I’ve called you insolent and useless so many times, but I think there’s something you’re quite capable of, you know,” he said, not letting go of Merlin’s hand.

“Which is?”
“Putting up with me.”

Arthur was deliberately not looking at Merlin, trying to gaze at somewhere past his servant’s shoulder, as though it should suffice to hide his tear-besieged eyes. Merlin let his other hand touch Arthur’s chin so that their eyes could finally meet. Arthur’s look bore the heavy weight of guilt and shame, the prince was clearly blaming himself for everything that had happened, and Merlin couldn’t stand it. If there was a kiss to heal somebody’s broken heart, it was surely the one Merlin gifted to Arthur. You’re safe with me, dollophead. We’re going to fix the things somehow.

“Arthur, I know it’s hard for you. But we’re together and we shall be in Ealdor by midday, if Dolly can still carry the two of us. Once there, mum will cook you a great dinner and you’ll stop drinking my awful chamomile drink, I promise. Just… just don’t close yourself, don’t hide from me.”

“Comes from someone who’s been hiding from me for two years,” Arthur noticed in a tone of casual accusation, with a beaming smile to his brightened face.

“You’re such a prat,” Merin kissed him again, this time letting himself run fingers through Arthur’s hair, trying to caress and soothe the prince’s worries, “You’re not meant to bear this alone. I’m with you. You can tell me everything that’s eating you. And after you’re done shouting at me every time, just remember that I love you more than you can comprehend, fine?”

Arthur, wiping the tears quickly, produced a feeble acknowledging nod, and Merlin loved it that the prince hesitated to let go of his hand for quite a bit of time.

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When they reached Ealdor, the weather swayed in their favor, and even Dolly seemed awed by the freshly minted look of the village, nested safely between the rocky ridges of Ascetir and the forested hillsides of Merendra. Merlin let out a heavy sigh. This once used to be my home. A place where I learned that I was different, a place I later wanted to escape. After Will had been killed by Kanen’s bandits, Merlin decided he’d never return to Ealdor again, but would rather invite his mother to visit him in Camelot. Will had been the only one who seemed to treat him as though Merlin was an ordinary boy, ignoring his magic talents and valuing their friendship above anything else. Why was it Will who had to die?

“We’re almost there, Sire. Dolly, I swear I’ll give you the horse dinner of your life, you’re the best girl in the stables!” Merlin said, encouraging the horse for a final gallop.

Merlin was sure Arthur didn’t spare him an eyeroll when the “best girl in the stables” comments reached his ears.

“Merlin?”

“My lord?”

“Do you feel like telling your mother about… you know? About us?”

“What exactly about us do you think she needs to know? That you fucked me outside your chambers during the summer feast like some royal drunkard?”

Arthur’s light-hearted slap landed on the top of Merlin’s head.

“That is something we must tell her later. And it wasn’t my fault. Need I remind you who grabbed my cock in the Gedney tavern?”
“Stop with that cock talk, Arthur. It rouses me, sort of.”

“Really?” Arthur whispered to his ear in a deliberately low and lascivious voice.

Merlin had to send Dolly into full gallop to stop Arthur from playing naughty. Ealdor looked a lot better than the last time Merlin had visited it: the cozy stone shacks with straw roofs looked as though recently cleaned, the neat gardens by the houses were enjoying the generous summer, the green grass glistening under the sun, the red, blue and yellow flowers caressed by the wind. There were few traces of chicken’s shit on the road, some carts piled with old wheat bags here and there and the pompous geese wandering around.

The door of his mother’s house was locked, but Merlin opened it easily with a flash of his eyes. He helped Arthur dismount and invited him to step in.

“It’s not much, you remember, but it’s a house nonetheless.”

“It’s better than any palace to me now,” Arthur murmured, disappearing after the threshold.

“Hey! You! What’s your business there?!” the worried loud voice sprang from behind Merlin’s back.

A crooked figure erupting with threats turned out to be Mathew, the old neighbor Merlin remembered for the most part of his conscious life.

“Merlin!” he exclaimed before Merlin could hope to declare himself. “Is that really you? You look like hell!”

Merlin smiled and locked the door the instant he felt Arthur trying to open it. Stay inside the house, you dollophead, he thought, hoping Arthur could read his mind. They all remember the prince who saved them from Kanen the Bandit, and I don’t want the word about The Dragonslayer in Ealdor spread fast and far enough to reach Camelot.

“You look great, too! Getting younger each day, right?”

“Younger, my arse! I’m the oldest bloody fool in this village. Don’t have no witches, no knights and no bloody bandits to put old Mathew to sword! I’ve outlived them all!” Mathew approached to hug Merlin, eagerly and happily.

“Where’s mother?” Merlin asked, sensing a light odour of cider wrapping him when close to old Mathew.

“In the field. She’s been missing you terribly, Merlin. We’ve heard of the disaster in Camelot.”

“You have?!”

“Who hasn’t! The dragon! The bloody dragon! They say he burnt women and children and feasted on their bones! And they said he covered the whole castle with his crap!”

“He didn’t eat anybody, actually,” Merlin was always taken aback by how greatly people managed to exaggerate the rumours. Does Kilgharrah even er... have nature calls? “But the Dragon did burn down the houses in the Lower Town, unfortunately.”

Because I’ve let him do it. It was partly my fault. Should’ve kept him locked in chains longer.

“Arthur killed him, right? The Dragonslayer, he killed him!” Mathew was waving his hands as though he was preparing to kill another dragon himself.
“Mathew, listen. Can you find my mother and tell her I’ve arrived? Please,” Merlin didn’t go to the field himself not just because he refused to leave Arthur unguarded, but because he, too, was feeling exhausted. *The sunstone has started killing me softly and slowly. How many days do I have? Twenty-three, suppose?*

“Of course! Of course! She’d be happy!” Mathew nodded.

When Merlin walked into the house, Arthur was lying on his mother’s bed, hands behind his head. The colours in the house were not so bright, mostly dull-brown and dusty, but it looked spacious, just like Gaius’s chambers but without all the countless tables, wardrobes, benches, and Goddess only knows what else the physician kept.

“This is heaven,” the prince said with a smile. “For a tiny moment, I want to enjoy this little comfort. Who knows when I’m going to have a bed again?”

“Not tonight, for sure. We’ll sleep on the floor. Mother only has one bed,” Merlin closed his eyes, trying to savor the fresh village air carried by the wind through an open door. “Arthur, I can’t believe we’ve made it! When we were attacked in the forest, I thought everything was lost… Our everything… You know…”

Arthur managed to clumsily and slowly change himself to a sitting position and invited Merlin with a gesture. Merlin sat down next to him, eager to have his head on Arthur’s shoulder.

“But we didn’t lose everything. We did lose Aglovale, Hengest and Evaine. I shall never forget them. But we still have us and… And I don’t know how to put in words what I… what you… your magic did. For me and for Owaine and for Modron. Merlin, I’ve never thought, I never had a chance to see…. to see that magic … magic can….”

“What?” Merlin lifted his head and was struck by Arthur’s hinting look. “Be a force for good?”

“Yeah. A force for good. For saving and healing people. I’ve never had the chance to see it. Not until I had your little magic bottom in my arms, I suppose and…”

“*MERLIN!*”

Hunith was standing by the doorway, and Merlin could swear Arthur was as red as fire flames when she declared herself so suddenly. The warlock, too, hoped his mother had missed Arthur’s comments on Merlin’s little magic bottom.

Chapter End Notes

I suggest we finish this fic with The Great Design weekend <3

I’ll be posting two chapters on Friday (today), Saturday and Sunday <3

The next one, "Healing", is coming later today! <3
Healing

Chapter Summary

Merlin and Arthur are in Ealdor, and things don't run as smoothly as Merlin had hoped. He certainly wanted to have some rest after the tiring events in Brechfa forests, but Hunith is too worried about her son. She fears that if Arthur means to take his throne back, Merlin will have to be involved in a full scale civil war.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hunith didn’t ask too many questions, but her pale-blue eyes swam with tears as she pulled Merlin for a tight embrace.

“It’s so good to have you back, Merlin, we’ve heard so much, everybody in the village has been waiting for a letter from you, I even considered traveling to Camelot myself! I didn’t know what to believe, I was so worried!”

Hunith was draped in some shawl and her brown curls were falling from underneath the typical green Essetir headpiece. She didn’t let go of Merlin, and the warlock was blushing for some reason.

“Mum, there’s no… I don’t want you to worry!”

“I can’t help it! That’s what mothers do! Your majesty,” she bowed down, making Arthur put on a confused expression. “I wasn’t expecting you, otherwise… Your majesty, are you feeling unwell?”

“Mum, Arthur has fallen sick, but he is so hungry he nearly chewed me on our way,” Merlin said, enjoying the widened eyes of Arthur that were emitting all sorts of threats silently. “Can I cook something for him?”

“I’ll do that myself, don’t you dare cook something here. I bet Camelot’s been a tough job lately, I want you to have some rest,” Hunith smiled and kissed him on a cheek. “It’s such a relief to see you! To know that all the rumours are false!”

“What rumours, my lady?” Arthur hurried to ask with uneasiness to his tone.

“Your majesty, you can simply call me Hunith, I’m of no noble birth,” Merlin noticed his mother wince uncomfortable upon hearing my lady. “There are rumours, awful rumours, false, all of them. They said… they said… they said that you’d been slain, your majesty. Rubbish, I told ‘em all, at once, utter rubbish, I knew that…”

Her voice caught off the instant, and she was about to slap her mouth with her own hand for nearly speaking Merlin’s secret. What did she want to say? What did she know? She knew that I wouldn’t
let anybody kill Arthur because I have magic? Merlin glanced back at Arthur, whose stomach started singing a hungry song.

“Mum, it’s fine. Arthur knows.”

Hunith seemed rather flustered.

“Merlin?..” she whispered.

“You’ve raised a good son, Hunith,” Arthur broke in the silence. “He’s brave, loyal, wise and lovable and caring about his friends, regardless of his magic gifts.”

Merlin felt a warm bubble of light and love swelling up in his chest. Has he just called me loyal and loving?

“Your majesty?” for a moment, she did look scared, but Merlin tried to calm her down.

“Arthur knows, mum, and he is almost fine with it. He doesn’t mind me being by his side, does he?”

“He does not,” Arthur smiled. “He does not at all.”

“Oh! Oh!” Hunith put on a beaming smile. “Merlin! Your majesty! That’s wonderful, Merlin, that’s what you’ve dreamed of, right?”

Merlin blushed again, catching Arthur’s offensively smug look.

“We were talking about something to eat, remember?” Merlin tried not to sound rude. “Arthur’s been on apples, chamomile drinks and onion for five days, he…”

“There’s fresh bread and cottage cheese right now, and some pies left from yesterday, and ham, I think, will that be enough for a start? I think I can make a chicken for dinner, I surely can…”

“That,” Arthur said, rising to his feet with great effort, “would be most welcome, Hunith.”

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When Arthur fell asleep after dinner (Hunith tried to make him sleep on the bed, but he insisted on sleeping on the floor), Merlin and Hunith went out for some fresh air to the garden. The day had passed peacefully; Merlin helped Arthur have his first proper bath in a week, using magic to make the water warm right before Arthur’s eyes for the first time. That’s how you’ve been doing it all this time! You sly little… Arthur’s wounds were about to turn into scars, the only traces left by the ugly arrows of the Brechfa attackers, and Merlin had pressed his fingers to Arthur’s skin to touch, to feel that the powerful healing magic of sunstone and moonstone was working. After that, they served hay, some fresh grass and carrots to Dolly, and Arthur had laughed at the way Merlin acted, pretending that Dolly was the lady from the great house that was about to have a royal dinner. He had never seen Arthur eat as eagerly as at Hunith’s table, and it hadn’t taken the prince long to fall asleep.

The late evening was sodden as the raindrops were being sprayed, rather shyly, and the earth-rich smell was up in the air. Dolly was resting by the wooden fence after the tiring and terrifying days in the forest. The candle lights were swaying in many windows.

“Merlin, why are you really here?” Hunith sounded as though she had been waiting the whole day to ask that question.
She’ll be so mad at me.

“She’ll be so mad at me. Mum, there’s something happening in Camelot, and I’m not sure what it is,” he tried to escape his mother’s burning gaze and chose to look at the sky. “And neither is Arthur. Our patrol group was attacked, it was a planned attack. Then we got rumours. Rumours that Uther was dead and that there was a new king in Camelot. If it is true, we fear that whoever killed Uther, meant to kill Arthur in the forest, too.”

“Good goddess,” Hunith clutched his hand, as though afraid the attackers could emerge from the dark. “Those rumours reached us, too! They said Uther ran out of the castle to greet the cart with the prince’s body and that the king died from grief and shock…”

_If this is how Uther died, then I’ve underestimated his heart. He actually could love, turns out. Could love so much the news about Arthur’s death could rip his heart. But these rumours… They may be false, too. I’ve already heard Mathew talk about Kilgharrah’s crap covering Camelot after the attack._

“We’ve sent two knights to find out if the rumours were true, and I hope they arrive soon,” Merlin said, hoping Modron hadn’t slaughtered Gwaine. _Gwaine. If Arthur ever finds out about that kiss…_

“And what will you do then?! Merlin, how can I be _not_ worried about you when something like this happens?”

_Wait before I tell you about my father and the death he met in Essetir. Or before you learn about sunstone and moonstone magic. Oh, mum, how it pains me, it really does, but…_

“I don’t know what I will do, mum. It’s pointless to talk about it before Arthur’s knights arrive.”

"How many knights does he have?"


He hugged her, for there were no words that would prove that there was _nothing_ to worry about. _Anything could happen._

Before long, they were back to the house, and Hunith was wearing visibly more sadness to her tired face. When his mother put out the candles, Merlin crept under Arthur’s blanket. The prince’s body was so hot Merlin feared he had a fever. When Merlin settled down, hoping to fall asleep as soon as possible, he heard Arthur turn to another side, felt Arthur’s hands grab him by the shoulder and a soft whisper into his ear:

“I need you, too.”

***

The comeback of Arthur’s jaunty manner made the following morning blossom. The powerful daylight was permeating the shack when Merlin felt Arthur kicking his ribs playfully. Arthur’s figure was towering above him, his face finally of healthy colour and of a somewhat arrogant smile.

“Wake up, you…”

“You dare to call me lazy daisy and I’m going to put you under enchantment.”

“What sort of enchantment?”
“I can think of something.”

“Maybe you can put a certain part of my body under enchantment?” Arthur giggled.

“Where’s mum?” Merlin rose to his feet, fearfully. *I want to tell her myself. I don’t want her to find out accidentally from overhearing me and Arthur talking about enchanting his cock.*

“You can relax, she’s not home. Must be working in the field, right? When I woke up, she had been gone already.”

The moonstone’s gleaming on Arthur’s chest had changed: the gem was pulsing steadily and calmly, like a tiny heart that helped Arthur’s own heartbeat. Merlin noticed that Arthur was looking a lot thinner. Before feast, Merlin had found out that it was harder for the prince to put the belt over his chainmail, and Merlin thought about making one more hole in that belt. The belt’s one hole short of perfection, Sire, he had wanted to say. Arthur’s jawlines were the sharpest Merlin had remembered.

“You got up all by yourself?” Merlin, still sleepy, was staring at Arthur in disbelief.

“Yes. And I washed my face. And I even walked a little and…”

“Arthur!” Merlin started shaking his head exasperatedly. “You bloody can’t just walk around the village! People remember you, they will recognize you and…”

“I fancied a walk in the backyard, in your garden. You need not be that worried.”

“I’ll decide what to worry about! I haven’t brought you here so that rumours about you could reach Camelot and…”

Arthur grabbed him by the neck, all of a sudden, and Merlin nearly fell into his arms. The prince’s hot, wet kiss was a surprise, and Arthur’s wild tongue and aggressive lips didn’t let a single more word pass Merlin’s mouth. *We haven’t been close for almost a week.*

“I can’t wait to put you in the right place,” the tone of Arthur’s whisper alone made Merlin’s insides flicker with lust.

“Right place?”

“Yes. On your knees, so willing for me,” Arthur was rubbing against Merlin shamelessly, his hands traveling down the warlock’s back, lower and lower. “No, actually, not on your knees. This time, I want to see your eyes. I want to see you shut them because you can’t bear the pleasure. You shut them when I fuck you, don’t you?”

*I used to shut them because I was afraid you’d see them flash with magic.*

“Arthur, you’ve just begun to heal,” Merlin remained undecided, but had no power to break out of Arthur’s arms. “Can’t we?…”

“You’ve told me I wouldn’t recognize myself in a week. The week has passed, hasn’t it?”

Merlin tried to savor every moment of being able to press his lips to Arthur’s naked body, but they were home. *Mum can be back any moment.*

“Listen, Arthur, I mean, my lord. How about we arrange a meeting elsewhere? I don’t fancy my mother walking to see me, you know, closing my eyes because I can’t bear the pleasure,” he giggled.

“A tease, aren’t you?” Arthur’s eyes, hawklike greedy, lingered on Merlin a little longer before he let
“Fine. You’re right, of course. I wouldn’t have fancied somebody enter my chambers with your mouth, you know where. Goddess, Merlin, when I remember how good you can be, how you like to…”

“Stop that, will you?” Merlin, who was still trying to do something about the bulge in his breeches, walked to the table for a cup of water. “You’re no less a tease than me.”

“Merlin, what’s that you’re wearing?” Arthur fixed his eyes on Merlin’s golden medallion with yellow glow. “You’re wearing something too?”

Damn it.

“Er… yeah. That’s a part of my magic, of the magic I’ve summoned to heal you.”

“What part?” the prince’s gaze was shrouded in doubts.

“So that your healing medallion works, I must wear one, too. That’s how the spell gets from me into the moonstone,” Merlin was lying shamelessly, afraid to reveal the grave secret behind Arthur’s survival. *I may need to die so that you can live.*

“Why would you need to wear a stone, too? Why is yours yellow? Why is mine blue?”

“That’s because to enchant your medallion, I must wear a powerful medallion myself. Mine is yellow because it is the sunstone, yours is blue because it is the moonstone.”

“But the moon’s never blue,” Arthur frowned.

“Well, it sort of isn’t, but in magic, we’ve got a lot of complicated things I can’t really explain to you, because I’d need my books. And I’m short of books now. Anyway, maybe I go and see mum in the field?” Merlin’s tongue was racing to change the subject.

“Why is you mum going to the field?” Arthur inquired, looking around the dusty house attentively for probably the first time.

“It’s her job, sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Not that she likes doing it. I mean,” Merlin enjoyed the cool water and the sunlight’s parading through the window. “You’ve noticed how the village is like trapped between the hills and the mountains? We don’t have much land here, the gardens by the houses are too narrow for growing decent harvest, and people have to work in a common field to have the crops and then share them, so that each family has supplies to last through the winter. Obviously, they could be buying food instead of growing it, but you know that Cerned doesn’t care much about this region, and the trade is bad. When I was growing up here, I remember how people tried to establish ties with Ascetir, but Lady Meirchion was always carefully distant. She didn’t want to make Ealdor a part of Ascetir because she was afraid of provoking war with Essetir.”

“I see,” Arthur nodded. “Have your breakfast, we’ve got some work to do.”

“Work?”

“I need training, Merlin. You must help me gain back my strength.”

***
Their training sessions were obviously nothing like in Camelot. First of all, Arthur needed to stand firm on his feet, and walking was the first exercise. Arthur’s legs were a little disobedient, having rested motionless for all those days the prince had been half-dead in the forest of Brechfa. The exercises were simple: one-foot standing, one-foot jumping, jumping on both feet, jumping from seated position, stretching, and chasing Merlin through the garden. However easy, they draw much energy from the prince, who required a break after every quarter of an hour, but refused to stop before Hunith came from the field.

Training Arthur was in no way easy for Merlin. The prince was enjoying the beneficial effects of the moonsone, but only because the sunstone was draining the life force of Merlin. He had woken up later than Arthur, and from the moment he had opened his eyes he thought he had lost a bit of vividness he could never hope to recover unless he could cope with the magic stones. Is there a solution though? Gaius had made it clear that sunstone is a one-way journey.

After Arthur had consumed most of the freshly baked pies Hunith had bought at some house, the prince decided to have some sleep. Hunith was waiting, rather expectantly, for the moment when she would be seated face to face with her son.

“Merlin, I’ve been thinking about what you told me yesterday.”

“Mum, I…”

“Wait and listen. You’ve never been listening to me.”

Merlin nodded curtly, for he didn’t like the road their conversation was about to take.

“When I wrote that letter to Gaius, I hoped you’d become his apprentice…”

“Without figuring my opinion about what I hoped to become,” Merlin reminded in a darker tone than he himself wished.

“But you agreed to it! You were glad to leave!”

“Because there was nothing here left for me! You knew that people were beginning to whisper behind my back, I would have gone anywhere you proposed!”

“Merlin,” it was clear that Hunith was swallowing her tears. “I wanted you to be safe by Gaius’s side, he is a wise mentor and a dear friend, I never for once dreamed of you squiring for the prince!”

“I’m not squireing,” Merlin protested, trying to pay no attention to his mother’s affronted look. “I am his… his servant!”

“And he must care for you a great deal, I can see that, but, Merlin, son, being a prince’s servant is one thing, and what if he’s no longer a prince?”

“Then what? Does it make him any worse? Can it take back all the good things he’s done? Including helping this village last year?”

“It doesn’t make him any worse, but he’ll have to go to war to win his throne back!” Hunith shrieked hysterically, ignoring the fact that their conversation had long stirred the sleeping prince. “That’s how people win the crowns, Merlin! With wars and swords!”

“His crown was taken from him by force, and if there is no other way he can take it back…”

“Then what? You’ll take part in war, Merlin? You’re no warlord, Merlin, you’re not, you’re not,
simply not. You’re my son, I know you. You realize how much blood will be spilled for Arthur to become king? You want to see innocent people killed? You want to make women widowed and children fatherless? Do you, son?”

Merlin jumped to his feet, turning the chair over. Hunith gasped, as though she believed Merlin was about to hit her. He ran out of the house, slamming the door. She doesn’t know. She can’t understand. She will not make me leave him.

But she does know and she does understand. She knows what it means to suffer from war. How are we going to win Arthur’s throne back? My magic is getting weaker and weaker each day. The barrier spells and the sunstone magic have made me vulnerable, I can feel my powers leaving me just like water leaks through a cracked chalice. I won’t be able to perform anything decent to get Arthur to the castle, and I’ll certainly not be able to protect him from one hundred soldiers. Merlin was sobbing when someone’s hand clutched his shoulder.

“I guess there are many other princes you’d gladly be squiring for right now?”

“Shut up, dollophead,” Merlin’s laughter was sad. “You know it. You’re my king now.”

Arthur, who sat down, seemed to have been struck by lightning when Merlin called him king.

“I will not kill my own people, Merlin, I promise,” Arthur grabbed Merlin by the neck and let their noses meet. Merlin had never been that close to Arthur’s eyes. “I swear to you, I will not kill people of Camelot.”

“Then how are we going to win Camelot back?”

“We’ve got to figure that out,” Arthur said confidently. “There must be a way. But first, we must wait for Owaine and Modron to return. What if the rumours are false, you know?”

Something tells me they are not.

“You’ve thought about tomorrow?” Arthur was wiping tears off Merlin’s cheeks. “Where will we...hm... have an encounter?”

“I’ll show you a beautiful place. Where I did magic freely for the first time,” Merlin murmured shyly, afraid that Hunith could be peering at them through the window.

Chapter End Notes

Chapters "Star-Guarded" and "Round Table" will be out tomorrow! And there's a lot of smut and NSFW content in the next chapter ;P

And, as promised, I shall announce the title of the sequel to this fic. It's called "The Guiding Star" and I'll start posting "The Guiding Star" chapters on January, 17 next year! <3

I think that I will create the new work here tomorrow or on Sunday, so that you can bookmark and subscribe for "The Guiding Star", and I'll post some little hints about what to expect in the second fic, but the plot will start to unravel on January, 17, which
is in two months <3

Even though there are still four chapters left for The Great Design (long-ass chapters, by the way), I'd love to thank you for reading my work and for leaving comments and kudos, it's been such a wild ride for me and I can't believe this piece which I've been planning to write for some time is finally here for you all to read <3
They spent the good part of the second day training. This time, the exercise came easier for Arthur, and during the second hour of practice the prince decided to try and wield his sword. His reactions and moves were not so quick when Merlin was throwing apples at him, and Arthur was trying to cut them in the air.

“You’re doing just fine,” Merlin tried to cheer him. “Normally, anybody would still be in bed, recovering from the arrows and…”

“I’m unlike anybody, Merlin. I can feel my strengths coming back faster when I feel the hilt of the sword in my hand,” Arthur raised the blade, pointing at the sky; Merlin was dazzled by the sunlight’s reflection. “Anyway, I’m starving. You think we better go and buy some pies? I believe your mother’s not very enthusiastic about me staying now.”

“Never mind,” Merlin voice suddenly lost all its cheerfulness. “It’s not about you, it’s about me. She is worried like bloody hell. She thinks I’m risking a great deal while being by your side. Thinks we’ll have to start a war to win your throne back, well, you’ve heard it.”

“She wants you safe, Merlin,” Arthur reasoned mollifyingly.

“Your father never wanted you safe,” Merlin said, something tautening in his face as he spoke of Uther in the past tense. “He sent you to kill the griffin and the Questing Beast, and to find the dragonlord and to check the fortress of Idirsholas!”

“He would’ve never sent me to Idirsholas, he thought it was a joke and he just wanted to put people’s mind at… Well, and remember, he locked me up when Sir Tristan came to life, and he locked me up when he thought I was planning to visit Morgause. However, I mean, Merlin, I’m the prince. My life belongs with my kingdom and her people because…”

“You life belongs with me!” Merlin snapped with unnecessarily accusatory flavor of his voice. “I didn’t mean that it belongs with me only, it’s not that, Arthur, I respect you and you’re free to decide and…”

“Oh am I? With my little jealous foolish protective star always spying on me?” Arthur dropped his
sword and ran to Merlin to pick him up.

Merlin gasped as he felt his legs float in the air, Arthur holding him tight.

“Arthur, for the love of it, put me back on the ground, I tell you!”

“I will certainly not.”

“Arthur, I told you I didn’t mean it! Your life belongs to nobody but you. It’s just that I meant that I would never send you to fight a Questing Beast, it’s bloody madness. Now put me down.”

“I said I won’t. Not unless you do me a favour,” Arthur’s mouth turned into a twisted lustful smile.

“A favour?”

“Yes. You must kiss me. And promise me that we shall go wherever we were planning to go today.”

Merlin touched the tip of the prince’s nose and let his index finger open the prince’s mouth; Arthur licked it slowly before swallowing it.

“You’re such a…”

He heard – in point of fact they both heard – a mild cough from behind the fence. Hunith was standing there with a basket piled with vegetables.

“I’ll go help you, mum,” Merlin shouted as Arthur put him down, trying to not bite his finger off in the process.

***

Merlin was jubilant when they were walking to the Ascetir ridge. He felt as though the night sky mirrored his happiness, as it was sparkling with stars, a white-blue-tangerine dance overhead. The chilly whistling wind was a relief after an overheated day, and Merlin loved how positively mystified Arthur looked.

Happiness, is it not? Maybe that’s what love is. I’ve got so many things to worry about, yet I can’t fear, I won’t fear, there’s no space for fear in my heart, because Arthur’s all I want tonight. Maybe he’s my real love. He is. He is more than that, he is a part of my dreams.

“Where exactly are you taking me?”

“To the ridge caves,” Merlin meant to be intriguing, however clumsily he looked and sounded.

“You want me to fuck you in the caves? What if we get so consumed by passion we won’t notice the wilddeorens and…”

“There are no wilddeoren in these caves,” Merlin punched Arthur in the shoulder easily. “If you’re trying to persuade me to smear Gaia berries again…”

“I am most certainly not,” Arthur embraced him by the shoulder. “Merlin, you know you’re having a bad influence on me, right?”

“How?”

“Two years with you, and I’ve redefined my views on magic and will reject my pre-arranged marriage to princess Elena.”
“So now you’re telling me you’re betrothed?” Merlin hissed blamefully. “After all the time we’ve been together?!”

“Merlin, I haven’t seen her for ages! I swear, I…”

“Come on, dollophead, do you really think I didn’t know that?!” Merlin laughed from actually making Arthur nervous. “I knew it.”

“Merlin, you little jealous thing, if you ever play a joke with me again, I swear, I… Oh Merlin, I can’t help it any longer,” the prince pulled him and shoved his hands under Merlin’s tunic. “Let’s do it here, I’ll pin you against the tree and…”

“We’re almost there,” Merlin ran away at once, with the familiar sight of the mouth cave in front of him. “Come on, I promise, it’s worth the wait.”

The mouth of the cave looked oddly cold and grim, not the most romantic place for an encounter, one would think, but Merlin knew it was a trick, a mask, a protection the caves needed to keep the miners and the curious people out of it. *There’s so much more underneath.*

“You just hold my hand,” he whispered to Arthur. “My left hand, I’ll have the fire in my right one, I think.”

The caves were nurturing the silence that had been dating centuries back, and once Arthur and Merlin crossed the invisible threshold, Merlin felt they left the ordinary world and entered one of the most sacred places ever revealed to his heart.

The silence was indeed heavy, as though it had soaked in the time itself. Their footsteps were echoing tenderly off the rocky wet walls, their breaths casting low soft sounds into the darkness, and once Merlin conjured a tiny fireheart in his right hand, he and Arthur could see the broad tunnel with stones and rocks overhead.

“You’re sure it’s safe, right?” Arthur had rarely displayed apprehensiveness, yet he seemed to certainly doubt that Merlin’s magic, however powerful, could protect them from the giant rocks falling onto their heads.

“These tunnels are the safest place in the wide world,” Merlin’s heartbeat was quickening when he was welcomed by the only happy place of his childhood, the place which seemed to recognize him and greet him with a deep boom only he could hear. The tunnel with black and brown walls led them to a crosspath place where Merlin turned left, inviting Arthur to follow him.

“Stay close to me, your majesty. It’s slippery somewhere. But I grew up in these tunnels.”

“What you mean? Grew up?”

“It was the only place where I felt free to practice magic. Well, it wasn’t practice in the beginning… I felt free to express it, to let it flow through me, you know, to feel it in my veins and in my heart. Nobody would watch me here, nobody would report it, nobody would burn my house because they’d seen me. These caves, they gave off an aura of security, of caring about me.”

“You’re talking as though they’re alive,” Arthur felt too perplexed.

“Well, maybe they are?”

“Merlin? What does that mean? They are alive? They can talk?”
“Arthur, not everything that’s alive can talk, right? Not always in the language which people can understand.”

With salty scents in the air, the darkness of which was only easily disturbed by the tiny fire in his hand, Merlin was glancing at the outcrops of dark rocks and stones admiringly. Arthur was following him with a little less agility than Merlin desired. The glimmering slimy walls didn’t seem to awe the prince.

“You just wait,” Merlin promised lovingly.

The passageways were curving to the left and to the right, crossing other tunnels and paths, and just when Arthur thought they were lost forever in what would be their silent grave, the passageway made another turn and Merlin pointed at a fissure in the cave wall, a fissure concealing some blue light.

“The bloody hell is that?” Arthur whispered in bewilderment.

“You’ll see.”

The fissure opened to be a shining tunnel that led to one of the most precious places Merlin had ever been to. Arthur and Merlin were standing on the edge of blue-watered small lake, in the middle of which was a big squared flat rock, unsubmerged in water. The shores were the reason the water was coloured blue: misty, hypnotizing uncarved crystals were scattered around the lake, each crystal as high as a grown-up man. They were emitting a booming blue glow which was reflected in the still water.

Arthur let go of his head and Merlin put out the fire in his hand, for there was no more need for it in the blue-lit cave.

“Merlin, that’s… that’s… Bloody hell, Merlin, how did you manage? When you were growing up?”

“I had this gift, I told you. I can see the path, the way. When I was a boy, I would come here. I would swim in the lake and then rest on the flat rock, and I would stare at the dark ceiling. I would do magic freely,” a lonely teardrop ran down Merlin’s cheek. He raised his hands up, and his eyes flashed.

The glowing crystals started shining brighter, and Merlin saw the tiny gems of blue light float in the air, up and up until they reached the high ceiling, where they froze and started spinning slowly, like small versions of the stars. Another flash of his eyes, and they were all coloured differently, in the various shades one could hardly expect to meet in the night sky: ruby-red, tangerine, grass-green, blueish and purple.

“They still remember me, I can tell,” Merlin said before turning around to face the silent, happy Arthur. “You know, I dared dream of many things, I dreamed that one day I’d go live somewhere where my gift would be appreciated, and people would not treat me like a dangerous beast, would not fear me for the force I was born with. I thought that dreaming beneath the little stars I had conjured would make these dreams come true, would make them star-guarded, sort of. But I never dared dream that one day I would visit this place again with somebody who would love me and somebody whom I would love. Yet here you are, right?”

“Merlin,” Arthur breathed out before cupping Merlin’s cheek and letting his thumb press on Merlin’s lips. “You really think you love me? After all the… even though I thought magic was evil? That all sorcery was corrupting?”
It doesn’t matter now. Now that you have seen what both, good and black sorcery can do, it’s up to you to make up your mind,” Merlin tried to wrap his lips around Arthur’s thumb, the lust making him lose any control over his desire. “Take your clothes off and swim with me, will you?”

Arthur didn’t have to be persuaded, and once both naked, with the sunstone and the moonstone pulsing on their chains, they made a descent into water, using a row of jagged niches that could serve like footholds. The lake was warm, it had always been, as though the crystals were heating it up constantly.

Arthur was at him immediately, his moves in the water sending splashes Merlin’s way. With the conjured colourful stars overhead, Merlin closed his eyes and let Arthur do whatever the prince wanted. Arthur opened his mouth trying to adjust the rhythm of his kiss to the waves they both have stirred. His mouth crushed against Merlin’s, lips salty from the water, and his tongue starting its way from the corner of Merlin’s mouth before opening him and darting out to lick Merlin’s lips.

Merlin sighed and breathed for air, but Arthur kept kissing him, not letting their lips pass, biting him carefully when Merlin tried to break away. Merlin’s legs were wrapped around Arthur’s thighs in the water, his hands clutching into the prince’s shoulders and the goose bumps all over his back and arms.

Still floating in the water, Arthur pinned Merlin’s wrists behind his back with one hand and grabbed Merlin by the hair to hold him the way he wanted, exposing Merlin’s neck for a series of long savoring kisses. Merlin moaned from the waves of pleasure, so ready and so eager to let Arthur’s cock in again.

“Let’s get onto the rock,” Arthur whispered feverishly. “Come on, I can’t bloody wait.”

He climbed the flat rock easily and helped Merlin out of the water, too. The stone beneath their feat was soft and warm. They were standing in the middle of the blue-watered lake with glowing crystals on the shores and beaming magic-conjured starts above their heads.

“Merlin, there’s a tradition in Camelot, you see, people have to kneel before their king.”

“Aren’t we formally in Essetir?”

“On your knees, I said,” Arthur pressed him down with a predatory smile. “Oh, Merlin, you know why I love it when you pleasure me with your mouth?”

“Because your cock fills my mouth perfectly, my lord?”

“Damn it, Merlin,” Arthur was rubbing his cock across Merlin’s face. “Where did you learn the naughty talking?”

“My lord shall listen more to what his knights speak of in the barracks. I’m innocent compared to most of them,” Merlin said, wide-eyed, letting his tongue meet the hotness of Arthur cock.

“Go for it already, don’t make me gag you. Oh Merlin, damn it, oh yes. Bloody yes. Good boy, Merlin. Now do it the way you like it. Merlin, you’re a tease, aren’t you?”

Merlin couldn’t care any less about what Arthur kept saying. He was on his knees, his hands were clenching Arthur’s tensed, shaking thighs, and he only cared about Arthur’s hard leaking cock resting on his tongue halfway in his mouth. Merlin didn’t want it to end quickly, and tried to play a bit longer, to let his tongue explore that pulsing hardness of Arthur that was for Merlin to pleasure. When he wrapped his lips around Arthur’s cock and started lowering them, letting Arthur fill his mouth slowly, he heard Arthur swear at the sight of his cock being swallowed so slowly by Merlin’s
lips, bruised from kisses. He loves to watch me so much. Always says I’m a sight.

“You’re so fond of my cock, aren’t you?” Arthur couldn’t suppress a demanding moan that escaped his mouth when Merlin tried to welcome Arthur’s cock into his throat. “So fond you can’t let it out of your mouth, right?”

Merlin’s fingers were grabbing at Arthur’s thighs as the warlock tried to demonstrate how fond he was of his king’s cock by making his lips fly over Arthur’s moistened hardness.

“That will do, Merlin. I said that will do,” Merlin felt Arthur grab him by the hair to literally pull the servant off his cock. “You’re such a thirsty little thing with no manners. I’ll have to teach you some, but later.”

Arthur dropped to his knees, pushing Merlin into his chest.

“On your back. I said I wanted to look you in the eyes this time.”

Merlin felt his shoulder blades touch the warm rock surface, and he saw the conjured stars high below the ceiling before Arthur’s middle finger slid into his mouth.

“Suck it,” Arthur commanded. “Make it slick.”

Merlin tried to cover Arthur’s finger with all the spit and Arthur’s precum, and when the prince pulled it out, Merlin felt Arthur covering him, his heated body with wet, glimmering skin landing all over his. Before Merlin could even think of wrapping his legs around Arthur so comfortably, he felt a finger slide in.

Arthur’s finger was breaching him little by little, pausing to let Merlin’s hole adjust to the new feeling.

“Such a tight little thing for me, ha?” Arthur whispered as he started pushing his finger in and out, his face flushing because of the look of helpless pleasure and lust on Merlin’s face.

“You can loosen me all the way you want, my lord,” Merlin said in a nearly sobbing voice. “Stretch me however my lord desires.”

Arthur spat on his ring finger and with the second finger, there was a slightly burning feeling for a while for Merlin, especially when Arthur really attempted to stretch him. Merlin sighed and tried to spread his own thighs further, welcoming Arthur to fuck him.

“You want it already, don’t you? Can’t wait for me to slide it in?” Arthur teased, admiring the sensations which clearly came from Merlin’s attempt to tighten his hole around Arthur’s fingers.

“Arthur, please…”

“In Camelot, good boys beg their king, Merlin.”

“Will my lord please?”

“Please what?”

“Will my lord please fuck me?”

Merlin yelped and arched when he felt Arthur’s thick cock parting him. However gentle the prince tried to be, he could barely hold himself from sliding all the way in, the only thing stopping him from rude intrusion was knowing that without oil, Merlin wouldn’t take it that easily. Still, he was pushing
in, filling Merlin in inch by inch tentatively. Merlin curled his legs over Arthur’s hips, raising his own hips to welcome Arthur more smoothly.

Arthur’s cock didn’t sink in completely when he stopped, and Merlin opened his eyes, gazing at Arthur’s proud face and his eyes, *wild-blue*. Merlin was breathing gaspingly, Arthur’s cock pulsing in his widened hole that was burning, making his own hardened self ache from pleasure.

“Arthur, I…”

Arthur silenced him by covering Merlin’s mouth with his hand, and his first thrust was slow, but enough to make the sound of their moans ring through the cave. Arthur then gripped him by the hips and let the other thrusts follow, more passionate and more rhythmic, sending waves of shudder across Merlin’s body and making the weird sensation of light pain, pressure and pleasure mount up inside him.

Merlin was sweating heavily as he felt Arthur’s tight grip on his hips; the prince was positioned so comfortably between Merlin’s hips his thrusts were easily growing stronger, and soon he started pounding his cock into Merlin. Merlin gave himself up to Arthur, he surrendered to that sensation that made him squirm and writhe in pleasure on the warm stone, and started producing the heady moans which made Arthur pound his cock into Merlin’s loosened hole even harder.

“You need me, Merlin?”

“Yes,” Merlin cried out as his eyes fell shut from Arthur nearly pulling out his cock before pushing it all the way in again.

“Say it.”

“I need you, Arthur.”

“You trust me, Merlin?”

“I do.”

“Say it.”

“I trust you.”

“With your life?”

“I trust you with my life.”

Arthur suddenly put his hands around Merlin’s neck and started choking him, something Merlin had never experienced with the prince before. Arthur squeezed him lightly though, surely not enough to hurt him, and Merlin, open-mouthed and panting, put his hands on Arthur’s muscular arms. In a moment, the prince hefted Merlin’s legs on his shoulders and sped his thrusts up, the change of angle making him shudder from the new sensation of letting his whole length move freely in Merlin’s hole. He released Merlin from the choke with a triumphant smile:

“Oh, Merlin, you’re so nice, so good for me…”

Merlin started stroking his own cock, and when it emerged, that sparking sensation from somewhere between his hole and his balls, he tried to tell Arthur, but couldn’t think of words in between his moans and just took his hand off his cock, letting the pleasure do the rest of the job as his cock kept twitching while it was shooting seed all over his belly.
Merlin yelped louder as Arthur kept moving inside him, rubbing against some weird spot, making Merlin moan sobbingly. It was when Merlin looked at the prince with his pleading eyes that Arthur pounded his cock deep inside Merlin and started shaking, his heat filling Merlin from inside.

Merlin snapped his head back to feel the warm stone, to shut his eyes and to see the blueish glow through his eyelids, and to hear the soothing whisper of the waves and Arthur’s heavy, but relaxed breathing somewhere next to him.

“What’s the matter?”

“What? Is it about choking?”

“No, it’s not, although it was strange,” Merlin giggled. “I really love you, dollophead. You asked me if I can really love you knowing you’ve done bad things to sorcerers. I really can.”

“Sometimes I think there must have been some warlock behind it all, you know,” Arthur’s voice was strangely thoughtful. “I can’t just believe that you arrived at the castle by accident. You’ve like landed in my hands because of some design, don’t you ever get this feeling?”

“I do, and I think I know who’s the warlock behind this plan.”


“It was obviously me, you idiot,” Merlin said, jumping into the pool and covering Arthur with a splashed wave.

Chapter End Notes

More chapters coming out today, I think that we may finish this fic <3
Merlin and Arthur must somehow explain to Hunith where the two of them had been all night.

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

Arthur had done Merlin two more times before they finally emerged out of the mouth of the cave, their wet bodies glossing silver beneath the moonlight. Merlin sensed the dawn was not far from them.

“I’m so hungry I could swallow a boar,” Arthur sounded desperate.

“I don’t think we get anything to eat before mum wakes up,” Merlin hoped it was not too disappointing. “Because we’ll surely wake her up if we enter the house in the middle of the night and start searching the bloody place for food.”

“If I am to ever wear a crown, I’ll buy your mother a small castle, she’ll become the lady of the land with countless supplies of chickens, so that we can come from time to time and stay.”

“I’m not sure she’d welcome us.”

“You think she saw?”

“Of course, she saw us, she saw you holding me in your arms and my finger in your mouth. What do you think she reckons we were doing?”

“Maybe she believes you were inspecting my mouth? You’re a physician’s apprentice, after all.”

“Arthur, you…” Merlin rolled his eyes, laughing lightly at the thought of himself presenting the most unconvincing explanation to his mum. We were just playing, see? I’m a physician’s apprentice and I was supposed to inspect his mouth.

Although the outlines of Ealdor were poorly visible in the murky nightworld, Merlin was sure the first bursts of summer sunshine were about to announce the dawn. The sky seemed deep-grey, but no longer black, and the starlight was fading overhead. It was as warm as on the previous day. So peaceful I can’t get used to it. I might have not been happy here before, but this time, it’s the place where I stopped using barrier spells out of fear.

“I command you to find some food for me. It’s the king’s order, Merlin, you heard it?” Arthur clutched his shoulder playfully. “You’re such a thirsty little thing, you’ve exhausted me completely.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Merlin still felt so full of Arthur and wondered whether he’d be able to walk
properly the following day. “My lord was too hungry, it seems.”

Arthur slapped him on the buttock.

“Your lord found it extremely pleasant, you know, to spill inside you and to fuck you then. You were so slick the second time I thought I’d never pull…”

“Who is there?!” the creaky voice came from somewhere behind the dark fence. “Declare yourselves!”

“Er, it’s just us,” Merlin’s heart was sent into gallop at the sound of a stranger’s voice, but when he caught the traces of cider in the air, he recognized old Matthew.

“Who’s us?”

“It’s me, Merlin, Hunith’s son. And it’s Rhonas, my friend,” Merlin hoped the darkness was enough to prevent old Matthew from recognizing Arthur.

“Where have you been, lads?”

“Hunting,” Arthur replied at once. “We were hunting a boar.”

“A boar? Haven’t heard of a boar in these lands for years! Were you lads lucky?”

“The boar was luckier,” Merlin said, pulling Arthur to the direction of Hunith’s house. “Mathew, we should go now, really, mum’s worried, I bet.”

“Alright, alright. Come around next time, fellas! Come have some cider anytime!”

“Boar hunting?” Merlin sighed, unimpressed. “Did it take long to make up?”

“And what would you have me say? Reading poetry in the ridge caves? At least I’ve come up with something decent, something that wouldn’t make us look like a pair of love-struck…”

“Fine, I get it,” Merlin smirked. “Now remember, we enter the house and go straight to that place where we sleep, and we try not to make any noise, right?”

“Will you be noisy if I grab you under the blanket?”

“Arthur, honestly, you’re such a spoiled prat sometimes.”

Merlin opened the door slowly, and stepped into the darkness of the shack. When Arthur stepped in, too, he closed the door, which surprisingly produced no creaky sounds at all.

“You’ve left no note, not a single line,” the voice hit him from the dark.

Their reaction was predictable: Merlin cried out, and even Arthur seemed to jump up a little, a shudder running through his body. Hunith’s dark silhouette was in the seated position on the bed. Merlin’s pulse quickened so hard he felt somebody was hammering him on the head.

“Mum!” he yelped. “You’ve scared me to death!”

“Merlin, how can you be so careless in the light of everything?” Hunith’s voice was free of tears, sobbing and sadness; she sounded empty-hearted and utterly disappointed.

Merlin waved his hand to light up all the candles in the shack. Hunith, covered in shawls, was sitting
on the edge of the bed, her prying eyes darting from Merlin to Arthur. Merlin thought it was the first time Arthur was about to be lectured by a commoner.

“I didn’t know what to think. You’ve left Dolly and were just gone, without telling me anything? What was I supposed to think?”

Arthur cleared his throat and tried to do the talking.

“Hunith, the blame is on me, your son…”

“Don’t you dare speak before letting me finish, Arthur Pendragon,” Hunith’s words seemed to physically slap him, making his eyes widen and his cheeks go pink. “You think I don’t know my own son? It’s Merlin who grew up here, not you. You don’t know these places the way he does, I can assure you. I know it was his idea, I’m sure it was, was it not, Merlin? Don’t you turn your eyes away from me when I’m talking!”

“Mum, I was just… it was my idea, and I…” Merlin glanced at Arthur, pleading for any verbal assistance. “We were…”

“So madly interested in each other that you forgot that there are other people who care about you, too?”

Merlin reminded himself to learn an enchantment that would permit him to vanish in a puff of smoke, because he would have gladly used that enchantment when his mother rose to her feet, hands on her hips and a storm of fury on her face. Madly interested in each other? Bloody hell, she knows.

“So where have the two of you been? And spare me the hunting tales, will you?”

Arthur, who seemed to have just opened his mouth to refer to their noble boar hunting experience, let out a weird gasp he tried to mask for coughing.

“I took Arthur to the ridge caves,” Merlin mumbled out. “To…er…show him around.”

Arthur looked like he wouldn’t mind using a vanishing enchantment, too.

“Merlin, I’m probably older than the two of you combined. I know why people disappear in the ridge caves until the dawn breaks.”

“We disappeared for different reasons, I can assure you,” Arthur tried to convince her in a poor attempt.

“As though I haven’t seen the two of you? I saw you yesterday, I have been watching the two of you ever since you came, I’m not blind! Merlin, not every groom looks at his bride the way Arthur looks at you!”

Merlin was melting away, not knowing what to say; something other than shame or fear seized his throat, Arthur was looking out the window as though he was considering breaking the glass and running away.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Merlin? That would’ve made it easier for me to understand!”

“Understand what?” Merlin winced.

“Your reckless behaviour, of course! I just didn’t understand why… why you wanted to stay with him even when most of his nobles have seemed to turn away. What good would that do to you?
Does it make any difference for the common people which of the nobles sits the throne in a castle most of the small folk would never even visit?"

“It makes a great difference!” Merlin snapped angrily. “Arthur will be a great king!”

“Every noble knows how to be a king, every one of them secretly hopes to win the throne one day,” Hunith shook her head in denial. “But now that I see that it’s much more than that. You love him, don’t you? You think you love him and that’s why you won’t leave his side, that’s it. You think he’s a worthy king because you love him, right?”

“I… it’s not because… Mum! Arthur’s loving and wise, and he cares about his people! He’ll never start a war to win his throne back because he doesn’t want his own people to suffer greatly!”

Silence fell across the flame-lit shack, and for the first time Hunith’s face seemed to soften.

“Merlin, I, too, once used to fall in love with a nobleman. He used to tell me he loved me, but he just disappeared one day, and the next thing I knew, there were knights looking for him, and it nearly cost me my life. See that your prince doesn’t keep secrets from you.”

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Merlin had to persuade Arthur to try and fall asleep.

“There’s nothing to be done about her now, really. I know her. She’s a burning wood now, and anyone who dares speak to her will burn his tongue. I hope that old Mathew doesn’t offer her cider.”

When they got under the blanket, dawn was breaking behind the window.

“Maybe we go back to the woods?” Arthur suggested wearily.

“Why?”

“Aren’t we sort of trespassing on your mother’s hospitality? Now that we know she’s not very fond of the idea of us… being together?”

“Arthur, for the love of it, why are you so… I’ll talk to her. I will. I promise. But her anger is anticipated. She certainly wanted me to one day settle down, become a good physician, marry a pretty girl and have a big family. That was her plan, I suppose, when she sent me to Gaius. And in two years’ time I appear on the threshold of her house to declare that I’m in love with the heir of Camelot, and what’s even more terrifying for her, the heir of Camelot seems to love me, too, and we’re about to start winning your throne back, which rarely happens bloodlessly, see?”

“A terrible son, aren’t you?” Arthur petted him on the back and started running fingers through Merlin’s hair.

“An unbearably spoiled child, I bet. Of course, she doesn’t think so. I know mum loves me, but what was she thinking in the first place when she was sending her sorcerer son to work in the kingdom where people earn death sentences for just being born with magic? It was impossible not to worry over me. I was always in danger in Camelot, all the time. Had anybody found out and reported to the knights or to the king, I’d be burnt. Am I now in a bigger danger? I’m not,” Merlin said, tears raining despite his attempts to harden his own voice. *That bloody sunstone can be the death of me, for all I know.*

“Nobody will burn you for magic, you heard me?” Arthur pulled him and wrapped his arms around Merlin so tightly Merlin could feel Arthur’s heartbeat with his own chest. “They’ll have to face me,
first.”

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The following three days had passed in a much friendlier mood than Merlin could’ve envisioned. He would usually wake up as early as Hunith, and help her with the field work. The villagers were happy to meet him and talk to him, although he would gladly hear less talking about Will.

The life in Ealdor seemed to have changed a lot since Arthur had taught them to stand for themselves in front of a great foe, to look in the eyes of the monster and be able to fight back. People felt safer, as though protected by Arthur’s mentoring, and the word had it that Ealdor could join Ascetir.

Old Mathew kept telling them that Cenred was a greedy bastard who’d never let a handful of his land be passed to Camelot, but people preferred to wave him off like a sick old drunkard.

Arthur would devote each day to his training, trying to regain the fighting agility that had once turned him into the greatest of Camelot warriors. The moonstone’s light was slowly fading, and Merlin, who had been counting days in his head, knew that he had about eighteen days left to stop the sunstone from killing him. In his dreams, he would hurry Owaine, Modron and Gwaine, and would fear for Gaius and Gwen.

Hunith didn’t seem angered any longer. She apologized to Arthur who apologized in return, and, having blushed, told her, all of a sudden, that there would be no other man or woman in the wide world to take better care after Merlin than Arthur Pendragon, and when Merlin heard it, he choked with his chamomile drink.

It seemed that Hunith could not just expect something extraordinary would not come of Merlin. His love for Arthur was hard for her to understand, and little did she like to think about having no granddaughters or grandsons, but she would be lying if she tried to say Merlin was not happy when close to Arthur. His happiness, after all, mattered to her as much as her son’s safety.
Owaine, Modron and Gwaine arrive at Ealdor at last. They bring all the intelligence they've gathered and Arthur must think of a strategy to win his throne back.

It happened on the verge of the fourth day after Merlin’s and Arthur’s encounter in the caves of the Ascetir ridge. Merlin opened his eyes because a part of him was awakened by the unnaturally strong apprehension of something bad and wicked encircling their shack. The Cailleach, he thought at once, rising to see the dim gray of the pre-dawn, clouded sky. And then he felt it, as his toes started trembling. Horses.

“Arthur, wake up, somebody’s coming,” Merlin shouted fearfully. “On a horseback! They might be after you!”

Hunith gasped and rose to feet at once, Arthur grabbed his sword and rushed to her, opening his arms protectively.

“Stay close,” he urged her. “Merlin where are you…”

Merlin gestured him to keep it silent, and opened the door. The wind raced past the threshold, a breath of cold morning air biting them on the feet.

Whoever was coming, they didn’t intend to keep it secret. The horses were galloping so loudly they could be heard from hundreds of yards away. Merlin closed the door.

“If they are after us,” he told Arthur. “You’re to not interrupt unless I tell you to. Protect my mother, please. I’ll try to take them down with magic, but if I fail, you do the job.”

Arthur nodded. He had seen what Merlin was capable of, and the thought of Merlin failing to take somebody down didn’t seem to make much sense to the prince.

Merlin opened the door again, to try and gather the sounds of the deceitfully calm morning.


“He’s said to be Hunith’s son,” an irritated sonorous voice seemed to slam the silence.

“Hunith? Hunith has no sons,” old Mathew let out a burp. “She lives alone, with a fat ugly father who farts from onion pies.”

“For the love of it, Gwaine, this toad is drunk as hell,” Merlin’s eyes widened as he recognized the
voice. “Leave him be.”

“What if we can borrow some cider from him?”

“You’ve borrowed enough cider already,” Owaine sounded tired. “Anyway, how do we find him? By knocking on every door in the bloody village? How do we even know they’ve made it?”

Merlin kicked the door open and ran outside.

“HERE!” he shouted. “Where the bloody hell have you been?!!”

They were just two houses away, their dark horses with buckling knees were exhausted by the journey and ready to fall dead asleep right on the road.

Modron’s untidy black hair were so filthy it seemed he had been sleeping in the mud for days. His face was horribly sullen, covered with bruises and scratches, and he seemed to have a problem with his knee. Gwaine was looking bemused, fit and full of vivid cheerfulness once his look landed on Merlin. Owaine’s face was pale, tired, but lit by a sense of relief when he heard Merlin calling them out.

“Where’s the prince?” was the first question that passed Modron’s lips as he was approaching Merlin.

“I’m here,” Arthur said, happily, from behind Merlin’s back. “Modron, you look like bloody hell!”

The next thing Merlin saw, Arthur dropped his sword on the ground and ran to hug Modron and to even pick him up in his arms. Gwaine, in the meantime, came closer to Merlin and petted him on the shoulder.

“They are the most wretched boys I’ve ever met,” he said, laughing. “Where have you met them?”

“Owaine!” Arthur let out a happy cry when he put Modron back to the ground; the boy looked struck by such an open, sincere and obvious expression of Arthur’s happiness. “Owaine, you’ve made it too!”

Their bodies slammed in a strong embrace that would have probably sent Merlin flying on the ground if Arthur ever attempted to hug him that hard.

“It’s good to have you back,” Merlin told Modron hesitantly, not sure how the boy was feeling about him after all the pain he probably had endured. Merlin stretched his arm out for a handshake, which Modron welcomed, although not very enthusiastically.

“You’ve kept the prince safe,” his tone suggested a minor shade of praise. “And you’ve healed him.

“And he saved us in the forests!” Owaine approached Merlin, smilingly. “Arthur, he’s a treasure, you knew that? Merlin, I knew you’d make it. Has the prince been mild to you when he learned?”

“Merlin, do they serve cider anywhere in this place?” Gwaine shouted, darting away to help the horses to Merlin’s house.

“Who is this?” Arthur frowned, following Gwaine with his intense gaze.

“Merlin?” a terrified, barefoot Hunith came out of the door. “Good goddess, keep it down, all of you, you’re gonna wake half the village! Merlin, who are all these people?”

***
They were about to destroy the already not very generous supplies of food left in Hunith’s house. Modron, Owaine and Gwaine looked as though they had been kept starving for days when Hunith suggested serving them breakfast.

“Mum, they’re actually Camelot’s knights,” Merlin tried to explain.

“Don’t drag me into this,” Gwaine made a wry face. “A knight? Thank you kindly.”

“That’s because you’d go breaking the Knight’s Code eight times a week,” Modron, the bruised and gloomy dark-haired boy clearly felt a bit misplaced in the dusty shack.

“Better than breaking your nose, ha?” Gwaine smiled challengingly.

“Stop it, will you?” Merlin barked at them loudly enough to surprise them all. “I’m trying to persuade mum we’ve got some decent guests here, and you’re not helpful!”

“Sorry, Merlin,” Gwaine drank the water greedily. “Hard to remember my manners with these two constantly around.”

“Have I met you before?” Arthur was eying Gwaine suspiciously.

“Aye, princess. In Gedney, when you used to travel by the name of Sir Rhonas or Sir Morron…”

“Gwaine, I bloody swear…” Owaine’s index figure was pointing at Gwaine.

“Language,” Merlin hissed. “Mind the bloody language, will ya? Mum, I swear, they’re actually decent guests, we’ll have breakfast in the garden so that we don’t bother you too much.”

Merlin felt so madly shameful about locking four angry, wild men under the roof of his mother’s house, who was, obviously, not ever remotely enthusiastic about the strangers seeing her in the nightgowns.

“You’re not bothering me at all,” Huntith was indeed, more surprised than bothered. “Besides, there’s nowhere to sit in the garden…”

“We’ll er… we’ll go to old Mathew, he asked us to come around just yesterday. He offered cider!”

“Who’s old Mathew?” Owaine frowned.

“The drunkard. You’ve asked him the way…”

“Merlin! Mathew is a respected old man, he meant to say,” his mother shook her head, hopelessly. “Fine. But take all the food, and don’t forget the apple pie. I’ve bought it yesterday, forgot to tell you…”

Old Mathew’s place was two houses away. Nothing could’ve been more different from Hunith’s dusty, but spacious house than old Mathew’s place with trembling walls. He didn’t have a neatly-kept garden, like Merlin’s mother did; in point of fact, trees seemed to be growing rather abruptly in his backyard, a few apple trees, a hazel and a short withering ash. Merlin didn’t expect a neat and too well-kept garden from somebody whose life seemed to revolve around cider day and night.

“Ah! Brave young men!” Mathew roared. “Merlin, you old treacherous dog, where you’ve been? Not a single visit since you came. Been a long time, ha? Old time, no smell, I say. Who are your companions?”

“Friends,” Merlin replied innocently, the slight twitch of Modron’s eyebrows not escaping his sight.
“Mathew, can we…er…spend some time at your place? In the garden, if we can…”

“Of course! But, I…er…there’s nothing to sit at…Except for there is!” he slapped himself on the forehead. “My old table where I dry ‘em apples, that will do, bloody right?”

“That will do,” Merlin nodded. “You mind if you join us a little later?”

“Not at all, not at all!” Mathew really didn’t seem to mind. “But you must taste this year’s cider, it’s bloody good!”

Gwaine helped Merlin to throw all the drying apples in three bags and dust the big round table, where Merlin put everything his mother found in his house: bread, the leftovers of apple pie, cottage cheese, some vegetables, and the chicken Merlin had hidden away from Arthur to save something for the two of them for breakfast.

The knights and Gwaine ate greedily and silently, all on their feet for old Mathew’s place was short of chairs. The climbing sun, fighting its way through the hazel leaves, painted the table surface in weird luminous patterns that were swaying as the wind would rustle through the tree. Arthur seemed too nervous to take a single bite. When old Mathew brought some cider, nobody objected.

“I think,” Arthur said, arranging his face into a grim expression, “I think it is a time for us to remember those we have lost. We must honor their passing. To Aglovale, Hegnest and Evaine!”

Everybody drank and for a long time, nobody dared to drop a single word.

“So?” Arthur asked demandingly, impatience flaring through him. “What have you learnt?”

“My lord,” Owaine began, and by the heavy sigh it was clear he was short of good news. “My lord, we…”

“Do we all have to call him my lord?” Gwaine asked dismissively.

“Shut up, will you?” Owaine said hastily, leaning on the table. “My lord, Camelot has elected a new king. It is indeed Ryence of House Gingawaine, the old bear, they call him.”

“Why him?” the news didn’t seem to affect Arthur, or the prince did everything to conceal his emotions.

“He was elected by the law of Camelot. People believe that you are dead. When the news about your death were reported to your father, he died. Everybody thought king Uther died from grief.”

“Thought?”

“Gaius and Gwen think he was poisoned, but they have no proof.”

“ Poisoned?!” Arthur repeated, infuriated. “ POISONED?! What sort of cowardice is that?!”

“The sort of cowardice to expect from a usurper. You have no cousins, my lord, and the new king had to be elected according to the law.”

Arthur’s fingers started knocking on the table’s surface. Gwaine, unbothered, continued eating the apple pie, pouring a bit too much cider into his mouth.

“And do you think that if I come to Camelot, healthy and alive, Ryence will step down and hand the throne to me?” Arthur’s suggested, a bit too hopefully. “To the rightful heir?”
Modron and Owaine exchanged thoroughly mistrustful looks.

“What is it?” Arthur’s eyes narrowed on Owaine. “Tell me!”

“My lord, the tomb with your body… We mean, with the impostor’s body, of course, this tomb was broken, and the guards were killed. Ryence managed to spread the disgusting rumour about you. It says… it says…”

“Word has it that you’ve risen from your grave, just like your uncle, Sire Tristan once has,” Modron spoke calmly and coldly about the insinuations against Arthur. “They say you’re a creature of magic, drawing your force from the wicked place of the Gedref labyrinth. They call you the Undead Prince now. People are scared, they say a lot of stupid things about you. The least offensive is something about you being a wraith. Others go as far as to say that your mother was a shewolf. It’s obviously not Ryence’s work, he couldn’t make people believe in it. But he knows how quickly the rumours spread and makes sure there’s blood and magic about them to make them spread faster. People in the castle of Camelot are still gasping out of fear whenever they hear somebody say dragon, and your father’s legacy was built upon blackening everything magical. So it’s no wonder that people who loved you so much turned away from you. Many of them saw your father defeat the undead Sir Tristan last year. Many of them saw the funerals of the guards. People have started to remember that, for instance, you haven’t been killed by the Questing Beast, even though no mortal had ever survived its poison, and that you rode to meet the sorceress Morgause, the one that later enchanted the whole castle and set the dragon free. Ryence held a special council where he declared that your undead body was again walking the kingdom, sowing destruction and murder, and he punished Lady Gedref for not destroying the labyrinth, renouncing her lordship rights.”

Arthur gulped, and reached for his cup with cider. Merlin was so angry he was about to start chuntering all the curses against Gingawaine under his breath. *He is no less a tyrant than Uther if he decided to pave his way to the crown with blood and lies.*

“I am sorry to hear about your mother, Owaine,” Arthur tried to speak humbly. “And what of Brechfa?”

“There’s no war there. We have been to several villages before the things went wrong,” Modron continued, and by the look of his face, it was clear that things had gone very wrong at some point. “There is an enemy’s host, maybe four hundred men or slightly more. But it doesn’t have a camp. The soldiers are separated, divided and wisely positioned in the most important villages and on all the roads that lead in and out of Brechfa. They are no Cenred’s men.”

“Whose men are they, then?”

“We are not sure, but there are a lot of southern sellswords among them.”

“Odin,” Arthur muttered. “He must be behind it. He can’t forgive me the death of his son. I’ll make sure he won’t live much longer. And what about Ryence? Where is he?”

“Leading the army your father had gathered in Howden, he is taking them to Brechfa. We believe that a lot of the foreign sellswords don’t know that they are actually a part of bigger plan, so maybe some of them will be left for Ryence to kill, but most of the host will safely move out, and tale will have it that they fled at the news of the mighty Ryence traveling to slay them. Ryence will return, victorious and adored by the small folk,” Modron said, his lips pursed.

“When did Ryence leave for Brechfa?”

“Two days ago.”
“So the castle of Camelot now is…”

“Watched carefully by his sister,” Modron guessed Arthur’s thought. “Most of the knights loyal to you have gone to Brechfa. The castle is mostly guarded by Ryence’s men. I think we must think of a strategy, my lord, and we must do so quickly.”

“Strategy?” Gwaine made a weird sound, something between sniffing and snorting and turned his gaze to Arthur. “That Ryence is the bloody king. He was elected by your father’s court. They chose him. He is at the head of an army, and his men are guarding your family’s castle. The small folk think you’re the undead beast that may walk and talk after being killed because you feast on some bloody labyrinth magic. They will bloody kill you yourselves if you are dead stupid to turn up at the castle. I propose a strategy: let’s all try and live a little longer.”

Merlin didn’t think there was anything bad about what Gwaine was saying. Everybody wants to live a little longer, he’s right. This Ryence seems to be really cunning. None of the knights dared to shout at Gwaine or ask him to stop talking. In point of fact, they looked as though it had just dawned upon them that Arthur was in the greatest of all troubles an heir of the throne could be facing. Gwaine, having felt that he had sounded a bit churlish, poured some more cider.

“Owaine?” Arthur asked. “What do you think? Do we have any options?”

Even if Owaine could think of some options, his face did not present a reassuring sight.

“First option is to capture the castle, my lord. We could somehow get beyond the walls and present you to the court. The question is: what are we to do about all the guards? Had the knights of Camelot remained in the castle, we could’ve persuaded them to join you, but with Ryence’s men on the watch… Not to mention that the allegiance of many of your court members is under question.”

“We can hide in the Lower Town and wait until my knights come back from Brechfa,” Arthur said with an expression of curiosity.

“If they come back, my lord,” Owaine said, raising his thin fair eyebrow which was enjoying the sunlight. “It may well be that Ryence decides to leave them in Brechfa for some time, under the pretext of helping him restore the order in the recently invaded territory.”

“And what if we go to Brechfa and I try to gather my knights there?” Arthur proposed.

Is he bloody mad? Going to Brechfa, where he had nearly died because of a thoroughly planned attack? He thinks I’m mining those sunstones and moonstones, doesn’t he?

“Your knights are not united in the army,” Modron said, making the last shades of hope evaporate fast from Arthur’s look. “I’m sure Ryence will make them go to different villages to make sure there are never too many Camelot’s knights in one place. And I’m sure there will be two Ryence’s men for each of your knights.”

“So you’re telling me I can’t capture the castle, because it’s full or Ryence’s men and traitorous court members who are unlikely to recognize me as king, and you tell me I can’t go to Brechfa and try and gather my men because we will be vastly outnumbered?” Arthur was shouting, indignantly, while Merlin was racking his brains to think what he could do. “The small folk fears me because they think I’m a wraith, an undead prince, and they might as well kill me, right? What else can I do?!”

“Ryence fears you will go to Daobeth.”

“Why would Arthur go to Daobeth?” a curious flush suffused Merlin’s pallid face.
“My father’s aunt is the Lady of Daobeth,” Arthur explained at once. “Her sons are mighty lords, their ancestors were tigernas, they are my blood and…”

You, Emrys, will make a mighty tigerna betray the blood, the Cailleach’s prophecy sprang out from the dark forest to flash across his memory.

“You can’t go there!” Merlin shouted, incandescent with fear of the Cailleach prophecy. “If Ryence suspects this move from you, you’d be acting according to his plan, you’d be walking into dire peril!”

“Then I have but one way,” Arthur said in a surprisingly tear-stained voice. “I’ve got to call the banners. I will invite anybody who recognizes me as rightful king come and bend the knee.”

Sunlight was storming through the hazel greenery, warming the surface of an old round table. Everybody was silent.

“Where will you be expecting them to arrive? Those who’d wish to bend the knee? At this place?” Gwaine asked with a jolt of dread.

“No. Since Lady Gedref was ripped off her lordship rights, the rightful heir to the castle of Gedref stands right at this table,” Arthur said, subjecting Owaine to a piercing stare of Gwaine.

“You own a whole bloody castle?”

“There’s no tale being told about you,” Arthur continued, fixing his eyes on Owaine, who went pale. “Nobody thinks you’re a wraith. People just think you died in the patrol. If you come to your mother’s castle, you’ll be met keenly, won’t you?”

“They love me, my lord. The small folk. They love us, the Gedrefs. My lord, you know that before your uncle, Sir Tristan, overthrew my grandpa, we used to wear the crowns of the Seaside Kingdom.”

Merlin looked darkly and meaningfully from one to the other.

“Arthur, you’ve promised you will not start a war. You said you wouldn’t make people of Camelot suffer.”

“And I mean to keep my word. If nobody turns up, if nobody wants to consider me their king, then I will abandon the throne.”

“And where will you go?” Merlin pressed the point; Owaine and Modron seemed to be shocked Merlin was allowed to address Arthur in such a vividly personal fashion.

“Somewhere with you. I don’t know.”

Arthur’s and Merlin’s looks met over the round table, and Merlin had to hide his gaze in the rustling hazel overhead. Bloody hell. Castle of Gedref. I need to see Gaius before that. Otherwise the sunstone will kill me. It surely will. But I can’t take Arthur to Camelot with me, can I? I don’t even know whether Gaius has a solution. He was strongly advising against the sunstone and moonstone magic in the first place. He hoped I would never use them.

“My father’s in Camelot now,” Modron said in a lower voice. “They say he’s been drinking himself through grief. If I turn up at our family castle, people will cheer for me, too.”

“Bloody hell, does everybody at this table own a castle?!” Gwaine was now glaring in the direction
of Modron. “Mind giving me some?”

“I don’t own a castle,” Merlin waved with a weak smile.

“And where’s your castle, Modron?” Gwaine sighed.


“Nemeton? Are you mental, boys?” Gwaine looked around the table at Arthur, Modron, Owaine and Merlin who were all gaping back at him. “Cause I’ll tell y’all what this looks like. This looks like a fat-ass rebellion. Gedref and Nemeton. Gedref and Nemeton. Both used to belong with the Seaside Kingdom. That’s rebellion, I tell you. You think this Ryence will digest it easily?”

“He most certainly won’t. But what will he do? Lay a siege? It’s madness. If there are enough people in Gedref and Nemeton to recognize me as their king, if my father’s aunt joins me once she learns I’m calling banners in Gedref…”

“And why would people want you as king?”

Merlin’s question made Owaine mouth fall open in horror.

“Merlin?” Arthur, too, seemed to be taken aback.

“Why are you any better to them than Ryence? Outside the succession rules and the fact the Ryence attempted murder, why? What can you offer them, the common people? What can make them choose you over Ryence?” Merlin clarified, blushing crimson.

Arthur cast around wildly, as though looking for some means to prove he was better than Ryence.

“The trick-boy’s right,” Modron nodded, almost making Merlin give a cry of shock. “My lord, your name is getting blacker among the commoners each day. You must win their hearts back somehow.”

“Merlin? How do I win the commoners’ hearts back?”

“With cider,” Gwaine remarked.

“Gwaine!”

“By changing the trade rules somehow,” Merlin suggested the first thing he recalled from one of his conversations with Gaius. “There are a lot of smugglers in your kingdom. They are not bad people, surely not bandits. They call themselves free traders, Gaius told me. You must do something about the damn taxes so that these people…”

“The taxes helped my father protect this land,” Arthur snapped.

“The taxes were going into preparing for war with Essetir,” Merlin snapped back. “Gaius told me. Starting a war doesn’t sound like protecting, Arthur. Besides, maybe we can find other tax sources?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, you’re the king, you were supposed to be taught such things! Anyway, the kingdom can have more roads, and you must start teaching your commoners.”

“Teaching?!”

“Yes! Most of them can’t write and read, Arthur!”
“Because they are commoners?”

“No! Because they don’t have their own Geoffrey to teach them. We can start teaching them. And to hell with the first rule of the knight’s code. And obviously the druids.”

“What’s with the druids?” asked Modron, who had been watching Merlin with an unusually shrewd expression on his face.

“They are a large group of your people repressed within their own kingdom.”

“You want me to lift the ban on magic?” Arthur’s eyes widened.

“I was talking about letting the druids heal people, for their healing powers are beyond any physician’s skill. That would improve the life of many commoners, too. But since you started talking about magic…”

“If I dare propose to lift the magic ban while people think I’m a magical beast, Merlin, I…”

“You mustn’t do it now. But you’ve seen good magic, you must have made some conclusions, right?”

“Is that what you wanted all along?” Modron, who never ceased to surprise Merlin with the misguided nature of his beliefs on magic, sounded too dark.

“I will hear no more of this,” Arthur slammed his fist against the table, previewing the direction of the conversation. “So, lowering the trade duties can make the prices for some goods go down, alright. Building roads. Teaching commoners. Treating the druids justly.”

“You can cut the share of the harvest people must give away to their lords and ladies for using the lord’s and lady’s fields and for hunting in the lord’s and lady’s forests,” Owaine proposed, not too eagerly.

“I can. But that’s the commoners. I must somehow win the love of my court back, too. That’s why… I will need to go to Nemeth before Gedref,” Arthur announced after a pause.

What the bloody hell is Nemeth? It’s not in Camelot, right? Oh, this Ryence, this old lying twisting old bear, this vicious cold-hearted murderer, I’ll have him drowned if I…


“If I persuade King Rodor of Nemeth to write a letter to my court, where he’d say I’m not a beast or a wraith or whatever, if these letters bear his seal, then I’ll ruin Ryence’s confidence at once. Now I want to ask all of you a question,” Arthur paused and smiled musingly, opening his arms. “I stand before you, a self-proclaimed king who has no crown, without people to support me, without much gold, without love of my people who have been fooled by a usurper. Do you agree to help me? Do you understand how little chances I have to succeed?”

“I will make Gedref rise for you, my lord!” Owaine said loudly, as though insulted by Arthur’s question, by the fact that Arthur doubted that anybody at the round table could pull out of the deal. “Because you’re the true king of this land!”

“I will arrive at Nemeton and ask my court’s advice. My father is still the lord of Nemeton, and I can’t command the castle,” Modron said, looking revolted to remember his father was sort of imprisoned by Ryence. “But I promise that no harm will ever come to you at Nemeton. Your arrival will be met with a feast.”
“I’m not missing all the fun, if anybody’s asking me,” Gwaine replied, beaming.

But it seemed that there was just one person at the round table, whose answer Arthur was anticipating with the greatest hope and anxiety. What do I tell him? I need to fix the sunstone magic first. I’m of no good use dead. There must be something Gaius can tell me, or his books, or something. I can’t be asking Arthur to go to Camelot with me, I don’t know how long it will take for me to find the solution, I don’t know if there is a solution against the sunstone at all... And if it takes long, Modron’s right, Arthur’s name is going blacker every day, he needs to act quickly. And I can’t bloody tell him about the sunstone, because he’ll be fuming and he’ll be mad at me for betting my life for his. Arthur, oh Arthur, what will we do?

“Merlin?” Arthur sounded afraid.

“I need to go to the castle of Camelot first.”

“Merlin?” Arthur’s eyes widened in disbelief; Owaine and Modron seemed to be breathing gingerly, and Modron was fixing a stern look on Merlin.

“I must help you in every way possible. You will raise banners, but what if Ryence unleashes all his swords at you?”

“We’ll die fighting!” Owaine shouted gleefully.

“Which I can never let happen,” Merlin said.

“What’s in Camelot for you?” Arthur couldn’t take his eyes off Merlin.

“My things. My weapons.”

“Weapons?”

“There’s a staff of Avalon’s Sidhe, for instance. With the help of it, I can make lightning come down from the sky. I can make a lot of more defensive spells with it. I can’t wrap the whole castle of Gedref up in the barrier spell, see? I’ll need my books, some things from the vaults…”

“Is he mental? Lightnings?” Gwaine said, wearing a goofy smile.

“He’s a sorcerer,” Arthur explained. “A tough one, it seems.”


“Merlin, you know time is precious now,” Arthur was addressing Merlin only, ignoring Gwaine’s bewildered shouts.

“That’s why you’ll have to leave without me,” Merlin’s heart sank when he spoke what they both knew was inevitable. “You will travel south through Essetir lands. Nobody knows you are in Essetir. They are a lot safer for you, Arthur. You will reach the caves where Balinor used to hide, and you’ll cross the border with Camelot in Balor. The forests of Balor will lead you right to Nemeton. Then you will go see King Rodor of Nemeth. I will come right to the castle of Gedref.”

“You’d have to travel through the enemy-infested lands!” Arthur protested.

“I won’t,” Merlin said, smiling. “I will fly over it.”
Chapter Summary

A lost ward of the king, a girl whose importance must never be underestimated, Morgana wakes up in the Crystal Cave twenty-eight days after she and Morgause had nearly ensured Uther's downfall in the attack of the Medihr knights.

Chapter Notes

Morgana POV

Timeline guide: Morgana wakes up on the day when Gwaine and Modron talked to Gwen in the Tavern of the Rising Sun.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Death meant darkness; it was the end of everything, the end past which she couldn’t see. Not that she was sure that she could see. The afterlife’s murky world was made of the most fearsome, cruel and awful darkness – the one she could never hope to dispel the usual way when Gwen would come and wake her up.

She was murdered in the coldest fashion: when she realized death was coming after her, she was pushed into the arms of her murderer, to die not only in the physical, but in the mental torture. When the last dewdrops of life were soaked out of her, she sank into her worst nightmare: a breathless, motionless and never-ending night.

She thought – with irony – she could be falling to hell, to the very same hell she had once promised for Uther. But there was no hell and no Uther to meet her. In point of fact, the only thing she cherished in the oblivion were her memories – the only thing left to remind of her life, of the fact that she had been an aspiring, strong and kind young woman who perished from the betrayal of somebody she was foolish to consider a friend.

The poorest thing about her memories was that she couldn’t see them – only think them. The dull blackness of the void was so tiring and consuming she knew remembering her life was the only thing left to experience to her before enjoying the eternity.

What am I? A gust of thought? No. I have so many memories with me I’m too damn heavy for any wind. I’m still me. I remember myself. I remember I was riding a horse the day they told me father’s legion was put to sword. I remember I was hiding in the castle for two days after that, and when I decided to sneak out to drink some water, I was caught by that stupid fat kitchen maid. I should have hit her with the pot. I wanted to grab a sword and to ride away to the battlefield. I thought I could save him.

Her memories were the only thing that could somehow save her. She was afraid that the void would swallow them all, thought by thought, and there would be nothing to stop the void from swallowing
her, too, from making her the part of that eternal blackness. *I will not submit to this foolery until I can fight.*

And so she fought. She thought that by constructing the line of her memories, by going to all the directions her thoughts prompted her to, she would have something to provide her existence if the void were to last forever and even longer. And then she found it funny that when she tried to remember her very first memory, she felt lost.

*What is the first memory ever? My first memory? Can anybody remembere that? Oh yes, I do, I do, I do!*

She would have screamed from the power of her mental triumph, but she couldn’t – there was neither light nor sound in her private and personal hell. She remembered a girl walking to three women, a girl with fair hair. It was somewhere in the field, or near the forest, because the whole picture was in green. *Green, I can see green! Oh, Goddess I can see my own memories!* The women were no more than tall and neat silhouettes, faceless, shapeless and voiceless, but it seemed to her that they were standing with their arms open in a friendly manner, as if they were welcoming the girl.

*Why didn’t I feel happy about it? Why didn’t I trust them?*

The existence without time was unbearable, and she suddenly realized there was a way between sustaining and entertaining herself. Something above all such sordid matters as peering into her own early memories shrouded in mists of secret she couldn’t hope to dispel. *How do they all feel about me gone? Did Uther survive? Imagine he did. Did he organize a good funeral? Did he even bother to put me in a decent dress for my last public appearance? I think if I saw myself being buried and all those sniveling hypocrites trying to comfort Uther and to make him believe I cared about each and every one of them... I would vomit. Goddess, that mad monster must have burned half the kingdom while avenging Morgause, refusing, once again, to realize the problem’s right under his nose.*

*Merlin. Why? I thought he was a good lad. A bit spineless, of course, to let Arthur treat him like he’s the dirt of his boots and a savage villager that can’t hope to make a decent freeman one day. You can be a servant and still guard your dignity, like Gwen. Oh, poor Gwen, she’d be heartbroken. No, not Gwen, she already... I thought to throw myself off the Western Tower when I learned the news about her father. I thought she’d never be able to work with me again, knowing how much Uther pretended to care for me. Pretended, of course, because when I helped Alvarr escape, our dear king made himself perfectly clear. Whoever has done this, they have betrayed me, blah blah. They have betrayed the kingdom. Blah Blah. If I ever discover who it was, they will rue the day they were born. Blah Blah. Could Uther sound any more like Uther?*

*Alvarr’s only crime was to defy him, of course. Well, mayhaps Alvarr has fancied our dear king dead, but let’s face it: who hasn’t? Even before learning of my gift, I’d thought about killing him a time or two. Gwen wouldn’t mind Uther die a brutal death, I’m sure. And I think Gaius would have gladly swapped places with Uther when that Witchfinder, whatever his name was, meant to burn Gaius in front of all the castle. To think that Uther allowed himself to be fooled by a total pretender, an impostor... To think that this Witchfinder did a hell load of job during the Purge... Goddess, he must have killed so many innocent people. Well, I’m glad Merlin unmasked him.*

*Actually, Merlin was quite talented outside his job. When he became Arthur’s servant, I thought I’d not stand it any longer, for Arthur kept repeating how incapable and improper and insolent Merlin was all the time, as though he learned that text by heart. Why don’t you sack him, for the love of Camelot? If he is as bad as you describe him, get another one to do his job! Not a big deal. But they were clearly getting along a bit better all the year, ever since Uther married a troll. Goddess, to think that Uther’s second wife was a troll in a wedding dress.*
Anyway, Merlin. He managed to get along with Arthur somehow, something almost all of Arthur’s squires failed to do. And he helped me greatly, and he kept my secret well. Why did he kill me? Is it because he saw that the dead knight hadn’t harmed me? It is because he and Arthur had sniffed something about me and Morgause? Is it because I was the only one not under the charms in the castle?

Well, that was sheer stupid. Like, if it was of Morgause’s doing… If she thought somebody would not notice a wide-awake girl among a sleeping castle, she has to work on her wits. Then again, I don’t think she was expecting visitors. Put Uther’s head on a spike, that’s what she meant. And she nearly did it, but our brave Arthur…

Oh, Arthur, he was such a promising lad, but he’s really his father’s son. Well, he was and at times he wasn’t. He helped us get the druid boy smuggled out of the castle. Actually, now that I remember it all, he had disobeyed his father a lot of times these past two years. He went to those caves to bring a cure for a poisoned Merlin, right? And he rode to meet Morgause, even though Uther had prohibited him to step out of his chambers. And he stopped Gaius’s execution. And he wanted to escape Camelot with that Sophia girl, a lovesick fool. Oh, and he did join us in Ealdor after all. Turns out Arthur doesn’t take after Uther as much as it seems. Well it’s for his own good. Too many people wanted Uther dead.

I’m ironically dying to know if Morgause finished him off. Curiously enough, had Uther ever looked surprised when he learnt certain people want him dead? Because he seemed to sincerely believe in all the gibberish he spoke. They only wanted you dead, Uther, because you have persecuted their kind day after day, year after year, deaf and blind to the very needs of the people you professed to serve and protect. I really hope Alvarr is rising up against Uther if the king somehow defied Morgause. Had he succeeded, though...

Morgause will go mad when she learns of what Merlin did to me. She will leave a pool of blood of this boy, and not that I mind. Not that I mind at all. Well, I haven’t been completely honest with him, truth be told, but telling Arthur’s servant about my magic was not the sanest thing I’d ever done, right? Even though Merlin seemed to really understand and looked a lot braver than he sounded. He was the only one who did not attempt to make me believe I was going insane. He was sweet, actually. Arthur even tried to persuade me Merlin was in love with me, bringing me flowers and all that. Maybe Arthur was jealous? Merlin was a sweet lad, a good friend. A good friend indeed, until he chose to poison me. And what was that embrace for? To let me know how treacherously weak he was, unable to face the horror he’s done the way a real man would have faced?

Suddenly, the stars appeared out of darkness as though a clear night sky was blossoming right in front of her eyes. I’m going mad. No, I’m not, I’m already mad, I’ve been talking to myself for... Wait, are they really stars? No, but what are they? But they are the stars!

The tiny bubbles of light were curling up in the darkness that had seemed impenetrable moments ago, and she began to distinguish them with better clarity: pointy, sharp, hanging off the walls and…. Wait, what? Walls? What walls? And these are no stars, they are like teeth... Giant teeth or something? Yellow, blue and white.

Concentrating on the new picture took her more effort than she could possibly bear, but then she saw something that changed it all: a figure shrouded in hood, with white curls falling to her shoulders. Morgause.

“Sister!” Morgause exclaimed with a tone that suggested that she could hardly believe in what was happening. “Sister, I thought I’d failed you. I thought I’d lost you!”

Morgana’s eyes were lingering on her the high walls and strange objects that looked like giant teeth.
They are crystals. Crystals everywhere. Bloody crystals. She realized she could feel the wetness of water: her body was swimming in some pool. And she was breathing. And she could hear herself breathe. She tried to speak, but her lips twitched so painfully she let out a sigh of hurt.

“You’re too weak, sister, but you need not worry. We’re safe. And what’s most important, the Pendragons are no more.”

Chapter End Notes

I've been so keenly waiting for Morgana to return! And I'm so happy to announce Morgana will play a huge part in the sequel, and there will be Morgana POV in "The Guiding Star"! <3

I can't wait to see what path she and Morgause will choose, now that Uther is dead.
EPILOGUE: The Crown

Chapter Summary

Merlin crowns Arthur with the power of his magic ^^

Chapter Notes

Merlin POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why would you leave me now?”

Arthur managed to sound piteous, if that was what he wanted. His gaze alone was enough to make a terrible weight of guilt rest on Merlin’s shoulders. They returned to Hunith’s house once she had gone to the field work. The knights and Gwaine fell asleep almost at once, while Arthur and Merlin were walking around Hunith’s garden, with their shadows rippling over the grass behind them.

“I’m not leaving you, dollophead,” a wave of hot, loving feeling swept over Merlin’s body. “Don’t think that it’s easy for me. But the way I am now… I didn’t tell you, Arthur, I didn’t want to, but now… Arthur, I’m fading. Healing magic consumed a great deal of my magic powers, and I need to restore my magic strength, and the only way is to get all my magic things back. Remember when you told me that you felt the strengths refilling you when you were holding your sword? My staff is almost the same.”

If I somehow find a way to solve the sunstone magic puzzle without having one of us killed, I will celebrate this day with you and we’ll throw a feast the world has never seen. But if I tell you now that the moonstone is healing you because the sunstone is soaking life forces out of me, you will go to the castle of Camelot with me, I know you will, because I know you. And I can’t let this be. There’s nothing for you in the castle now, it’s infested with Ryence’s men and the court members who have betrayed you, and I’m so week I might be powerless when I arrive at the castle.

“You won’t be able to enter the castle without me,” Arthur insisted.

“Actually, I remember the secret tunnel we used to smuggle that druid boy out.”

“How are you going to open the… Oh, yes. I forgot. Magic. That’s how you will open it. So, you’re powerful enough to tear the bars, but…”

“Might not be powerful enough to protect the two of us if Ryence means to attack you. That’s why I agree with you, Arthur. Your plan is great. We won’t be fighting a war, will we? We’ll just call people to join you out of free will!”

“And if Ryence means to prevent people from joining me? If he plans to attack us in Gedref?”

“Then I will show him that it’s an awful idea. I mean to summon the mightiest defensive magic
people have ever seen, and I need myself at full force. Maybe I can save Gaius, too. I’m sure he’s not very enthusiastic about Ryence’s reign.”

Hunith’s garden was gleaming in the sunlight with the cloudless sky overhead, and the green lawn would ripple from time to time in a gentle breeze.

“Gaius knows about you, doesn’t he?” Arthur stopped dead and turned around. “He has known the whole time?”

“He has. I’ve used magic to save him when he fell off his bookshelves the day I walked in. It was Wednesday, I think.”

Arthur shook his head reproachfully.

“You’ve been risking your head since the day you arrived! Oh, Merlin… See, I just can’t stand a thought that somebody might harm you. I just can’t.”

“Trust me, the idea of you traveling unguarded is more terrifying. Then again, nobody’s looking for you in Essetir, right? And you’ll have Owaine and Modron with you, and I trust them if they say that they will never sell you to Ryence. So if you keep wearing this,” Merlin pointed at the moonstone and let his hand slide lower, slowly, trying to get under Arthur’s tunic, a move the prince didn’t seem to resist. “And if you stick to our plan, everything must be fine. I know that you’re not a child. You’ve fought in tourneys, and you’re one of the greatest warriors ever, and this time, unlike in Brechfa, nobody knows of your whereabouts. And the plan is easy.”

“We travel south until the caves where that dragonlord used to live. We cross the border and travel to Nemeton through the forests of Balor. From Nemeton I go to Nemeth to meet King Rodor. After Nemeth, I arrive at the castle of Gedref, where Owaine will be awaiting me. We call the banners.”

“How long will it take you?”

“Two weeks at longest.”

“We shall meet in the castle of Gedref in two weeks then, you got that? Two weeks is not such a long time.”

“You’re trying to be funny?” Arthur pinned Merlin to the thick ash tree and showered Merlin with a look that made shudders run through warlock’s body. Arthur leaned closer, letting his breath fall on Merlin’s lips. “Two weeks without you. Two bloody weeks. That will be ages. I can’t imagine being so far from you for so long.”

Merlin, captured in Arthur’s embrace, couldn’t move and inch and was melting under the prince’s gaze.

“I want you to swear to me, Merlin. Swear an oath.”

“Whatever my king desires,” Merlin said, trying to reach for Arthur’s teasing lips.

“Swear that you will return to me. Swear that you will come back to me, that we will meet in Gedref and you will remain by my side.”

“I solemnly swear,” Merlin whispered, letting Arthur seal the oath with a tender kiss, witnessed by the summer sky.

***
“What in the wide world is this place, and how haven’t we got lost on our way?” Gwaine whistled his admiration as he entered the blue-crystal pool in the ridge, followed by Arthur, Merlin, Owaine and Modron.

The knights looked terrified and bewildered at the same time. Modron, who had rarely shown any kind of affection or emotion, came to touch the glowing crystals.

“They are warm,” he muttered in disbelief.

“And the water’s blue!” Owaine said shyly, as though afraid he was speaking some gibberish.

“How have you discovered this place?” Gwaine asked curiously. “Been bringing girls here, ha?”

“I’ve known it since I was a child,” Merlin looked at the high ceiling, at the blue-glowing crystals and at the flat rock in the middle of the pool.

“What was the need to bring us here?”

“I just thought that you ought to witness it.”

“Witness what?”

“I want to crown Arthur Pendragon, the King of Camelot.”

Modron and Owaine were staring at Arthur, all looking too concerned to ask a question.

“You can’t crown him,” Modron protested calmly, trying to sound reasonable. “You’ve no power vested in you.”

“I think I’ve got quite some power vested in me,” Merlin said, jumping into the pool, letting the warm water swallow him before swimming to the rock and climbing it, to the place where Arthur had been so passionate just five days ago. “Will your majesty proceed?”

Arthur who seemed he himself had little idea about what to expect, jumped into the pool, although hesitatingly, and climbed the rock to stand close to Merlin; their clothes were soaked-through.

“Your majesty must kneel,” Merlin said, looking as though he was having much fun.

“Merlin, what are you up to? Crown is not a joke.”

“I know it’s not. That’s why we must crown you before we proceed to help you. And just like Modron said, we need someone with some power to do so.”

“And you think your little bottom qualifies for that?”

“Arthur, trust me, I know it means a great deal to you, but it means a lot to me, too.”


Merlin smiled, and before long, a long thin fire flame flew from his hand. For a moment, this fiery rope hang in the air, before Merlin’s eyes flashed and the dancing rope of fire landed on the shores of the lake, wrapping the pool in a ring of flames, the burst of red to clash the blue crystal glow. The knights and Gwaine stepped back, their mouths fell open as they saw Merlin and Arthur beyond the low wall of fire that seized the lake shores.

“Arthur Pendragon, will you swear to govern the Peoples of Camelot, all of them, according to their
respective laws and customs?”

Arthur’s inhale was so strong it echoed all over the cave.

“I swear,” he nodded with his eyes shut.

Merlin raised his hand again, and the water around the flat rock rose up slowly, arranging itself in giant water flowers that towered above Arthur, their petals sparkling.

“Will you swear, to all your power, cause not only Law and Justice, but also Mercy to be executed in all your judgments?”

“I solemnly swear so to do.”

“Then by the power of the sacred magic vested in me, I crown you, Arthur Pendragon, King of Camelot!”

The flower petals merged into a magic water crown that turned into ice and floated in air before it landed on Arthur’s head.

“Arise, Arthur, King of Camelot!” Merlin said, before Owaine, Modron and Gwaine shouted, though after an awkward pause, “LONG LIVE THE KING!”

…to be continued in “The Guiding Star”…

Chapter End Notes

Well, this is it for "The Great Design" <3

Oh, I can't believe it, really, I've enjoyed writing this fic so much and I can't wait to start the sequel. "The Guiding Star" info will be posted in the last chapter <3

Meanwhile, I want to express some special gratitude to the ao3 team for providing such a powerful, comfortable and cool platform for fic works. It's amazing! <3

Special thanks to @versaphile for providing stunning fannish resource of the map of Camelot. For those who want to understand the geography of this fic better, I recommend go check the map of Camelot @versaphile has created, she is a genius <3

To all the amazing fans of Merlin, thank you so much for reading this fic! Special thanks to @Ivory_Feather, @hotxhotguy, @samo2027, @abysslullaby, @korydzen88, @sunathetuna and my dear @ABC commenter <3

If any of you guys are good at drawing and visual stuff and can draw some scene from this fic, or inspired by this fic, I'd be so grateful! <3

you can send me your visual works here: abyssofdiamonds@gmail.com

I'd be also happy to receive your feedback, if you have something to say <3

And if any of you guys run some Merlin/Merthur themed blogs, I'd be grateful for
sharing a link to this fic! <3
Sequel and Afterword

Chapter Summary

Some details on the sequel to The Great Design and some thoughts about The Great Design

For all the information about the sequel and the status of progress, please go to

The Guiding Star (811 words) by DiamondAbyss
Chapters: 1/60
Fandom: Merlin (TV)
Rating: Explicit
Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Relationships: Merlin/Arthur Pendragon (Merlin), Gwen/Lancelot (Merlin), Gwaine/Gwen (Merlin), Alvarr/Morgana (Merlin)
Characters: Merlin (Merlin), Arthur Pendragon (Merlin), Morgana (Merlin), Gwen (Merlin), Gaius (Merlin), Morgause (Merlin), Leon (Merlin), Rodor (Merlin), Mithian (Merlin), Kilgharrah (Merlin), Fisher King (Merlin), King Ryence, Lady Yrien - Character, Young Rion - Character, Lord Cynric, Modron - Character, Owaine
Series: Part 2 of King, Prince and Priestess
Summary:

Summertime of Camelot is perfumed with love, conspiracy, vengeance, sorcery and war. The future of Albion can't hope to hang in balance when the usurper, King Ryence, sits the throne of Camelot. With Old Religion renegades to the north, fierce Uther's loyalists to the west, rebels of Nemeton and Gedref to the south, the remnants of the Druid Dynasty at court, and dangerous alliances within and beyond the trembling kingdom, it is up to Merlin and Arthur to bring Camelot to peace, even if it means to get separated. However, the sunstone and moonstone magic leaves less and less time for the prince and his warlock, and they must hurry.

Sequel to "The Great Design" fic

Re-reading routes:

If anybody decides to re-read this fic before The Guiding Star is out, I've thought of some obvious way that can make the experience a bit different. It is simply POV-reading.

Merlin POV in consecutive order:

1. 1. A Gift from Arthur
2. 2. Fears of Uther Pendragon
3. 4. His Rabbit's Foot
4. Rooms and Chambers
5. One Less Secret
6. Gwaine
7. The Betrayal
8. Into the Woods
9. Right and Wrong
10. Do Something
11. The Great Design
12. Back from Ascetir
13. The Western Tower
14. Poetry
15. The Great Purge
16. Summer Feast
17. His Little Star
18. Magic Reveal
19. Three promises
20. New Plan
21. An Open Book
22. Merlin and Arthur
23. Ealdor
24. Healing
25. Star-Guarded
26. Hunith Learns
27. The Round Table
28. EPILOGUE: The Crown

Gwen POV in consecutive order:

1. Old Wounds
2. Rooms and Chambers
3. Questions
4. Lord Gingawaine
5. Family Issues
6. Rion
7. Promises
8. The Secret Sharer
9. Gaius's Defense
10. Drawing of the Dark
11. Fair and Just
12. The Wicked Game
13. The Great Danger
14. Blindness
15. Showdown at the Tavern of the Rising Sun

Uther POV and Ryence POV in consecutive order:

1. King's Morning
As for the composition, I envisioned three parts in The Great Design structure.

*Part One was from Chapter 1 to Chapter 16.* I wanted Merlin to be the main character of the first part. I tried to paint his mental journey from being tormented by what his deal with Kilgharrah had brought to the Lower Town to finally making love to Arthur. Merlin had a heavy weight on his shoulders, Morgana's poisoning and people killed by dragonflames were constantly on his mind, and his mental balance got so shattered he let lose in the tavern in Gedney, where he sensed how terribly common people were intimidated by Uther's anti-magic ways. After the panic attack which happened when he thought Arthur had disappeared in the Ascetir forest forever, Merlin experienced such a wild adrenaline rush and, having defeated the troll, Merlin gained the courage to follow his heart in the matters with Arthur. The first part set some war background, when Gaius opened on the matters of Uther's concerns, when Uther held his council meeting, and when Rion arrived to notify Uther about the invasion of Cenred, but the war was a shadow, a ghost, something too clouded with uncertainties to interrupt the Merlin-Arthur line.

*Part Two was from Chapter 17 to Chapter 33.* Gwen got as much spotlight in Part Two as Merlin got in Part One. Gwen was very sad in the beginning of the first part, because the loss of Morgana meant a terrible continuation in the streak of her personal losses: her mother, her brother (who's missing), her father and now Lady Morgana. However, Gaius started taking more care after Gwen, and they established quite a trustful relationship in the first part, and Gaius even opened up about the Great Purge a little. Part Two started with the war getting a clearer, more tangible aura: there were noble refugees arriving at the castle of Camelot, fleeing the invaded territory of Brechfa. Gwen couldn't help but pay attention to the fact that the commoners were simply left in Brechfa, and nobody at court seemed to care a great deal for them. This, together with the awful scenes she overheard about the Gingawaine family, added to the sinister picture of the castle that had been shaping up in Gwen's head ever since she had learned that there had been days when Uther tolerated magic (the Purge was thus at least a hypocritical thing to do). Rion then manipulated her very wittily and cunningly, making her believe that he was unlike other nobles, that he would change the things if he ever were a lord of Brechfa. So when Merlin shared Morgana's secret with Gwen, she hit the bottom of her frustration with the castle life, shouted at Gaius, rather madly, and turned to the only man who seemed to be different: Young Rion. I'd like to stress that Gwen didn't think the poison was mortal: Rion made her believe the poison was only meant to weaken Uther's heart, so that he could die earlier and pass his throne to Arthur. Part Two ended with grievous news of Arthur's alleged and Uther's certain death, and Gwen realized that she had been exploited in the game of a far greater scale than she could imagine.
Part Three was from Chapter 34 to Chapter 53 (excluding Ch. 46 and Ch. 52). In Part Three, I intended to get back to Merlin-Arthur dynamics, because in Part Two the freshly-in-love prince and his servant were expectantly just hooking up all over the castle and took almost no part in the court life. The third part commenced with Arthur's patrol falling under attack, and Merlin revealing his magic in order to save the prince. Even though the first witnesses of Merlin's magic were knights (because Arthur had been knocked out), I wanted to pay some attention to Modron's and Owaine's reaction, which were very different. The third part also lays the foundation for a lot of magic things in the future plot, and this magic storyline, although currently a subplot and just beginning to shape up, will rival the throne-court line in the new material: the moonstone and sunstone magic and obviously the Cailleach, as well as the Druid Dynasty which Ryence mentioned. The reveal of Merlin's magic to Arthur, as I've mentioned in one of the notes, was the hardest thing to write. I wanted to both, commemorate the original emotional episode with reveal, but to turn the events into a happier tone because

- in my fic, Merlin and Arthur had known each other for less time and thus the sense of Arthur's betrayal from realization that Merlin had been hiding his magic is not as strong;
- Arthur had already found out about Morgana's magic and, although initially mad about it, came to understand Morgana could not be harmed for being a witch;
- Arthur and Merlin had fallen in love and it would be stupid to expect Arthur to try and cut Merlin's head off for saving his life with magic. He could've spanked him though ^^

Part Three also lays some foundation for the further progress of Arthur's character: he emerged rather vulnerable after the failed assassination, and he felt angry and sore when he learned the rumours about the death of his father, but because Merlin was close to him, was caring about him and was always radiating so much love for Arthur, and because Arthur learned that Merlin had magic, the prince's spirit was strong very soon, and it will be exciting to see if Arthur manages to stay lifted once they have to get separated with Merlin.

The sequel, *The Guidig Star*, will have a heavier focus on magic plot and magic issues (sunstone, moonstone, druids, the Cailleach), but the court games will remain strong, too.
Hello to everybody who still remembers this fic!

I just wanted to say that the sequel is now being published, and the story of Arthur and Merlin continues in "The Guiding Star"!

Feel free to read it:

**The Guiding Star** (262345 words) by **DiamondAbyss**

Chapters: 84/84
Fandom: **Merlin (TV)**
Rating: Explicit
Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Relationships: Merlin/Arthur Pendragon (Merlin), Gwen/Lancelot (Merlin), Gwaine/Gwen (Merlin), Alvarr/Morgana (Merlin)
Characters: Merlin (Merlin), Arthur Pendragon (Merlin), Morgana (Merlin), Gwen (Merlin), Gaius (Merlin), Morgause (Merlin), Leon (Merlin), Rodor (Merlin), Mithian (Merlin), Kilgharrah (Merlin), King Ryence, Lady Yrien - Character, Lord Cynric, Modron - Character, Owaine, Pliny, Bo, Vidor, Rion, Ruadan (Merlin), Finna (Merlin), Lochruc, Alvarr, Iseldir (Merlin)
Additional Tags: Merlin and Gwaine kick ass, Gwaine buys some ale, The innkeeper said it was a fine brew, Merlin has to fix a magic problem, Bonding, Sunstone and Moonstone magic, Druids are acting fishy, Of course they are because Uther is dead, Merlin worries about Arthur, Being apart for some time, Strange Dreams, Morgana is back, And she is ready to slay figuratively and literally, Enemies of the Old Religion Beware, Morgause saves Morgana from poison, Morgana is now a high priestess kinda, Initiation, Blood Magic, Isle of the Blessed Cult, Morgana is free, Camelot court intrigues are scathing, Romance, Arthur and Merlin In Love, Top Arthur, Bottom Merlin, Arthur Knows About Merlin's Magic, He found out in the previous part of the fic, Action/Adventure, Military, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Post-Season/Series 02, Plot, Explicit Sexual Content, POV Merlin, POV Morgana, POV Gwen, POV Arthur, POV King Ryence, POV Queen Andor (Prologue), Merthur - Freeform, Accidental Voyeurism, Merlin sees Gwaine naked, But that's because they share the room, Although Merlin is slightly curious, But He Is Loyal to His Prince, Merlin and Arthur miss each other like crazy, And work out some issues, Merlin and Arthur meet in the dreamworld, Kissing in the Dreamworld, Angst and fluff in the dreamworld, slow build is slow, Eventual Smut, Masturbation, Original Character Death(s), Supporting Character Death, Merlin Mounts The Dragon, Merlin the Dragonlord, Merlin saves Arthur for the 1000th time, Arthur and Merlin reunite at the castle of Gedref, Arthur lifts the ban on magic, Complete Series: Part 2 of **King, Prince and Priestess**

Summary:

Uther Pengdragon is dead. King Ryence may sit the throne, but his claim will never be secure, because Prince Arthur has survived the carefully planned assassination. With nothing but vengeance in his mind and love for Merlin in his heart, Arthur threatens to undo all the alliances which brought about Uther's downfall as the prince is heading south to raise the rebellion.

However, Arthur's not the only one to defy the new king. Fierce Uther's loyalists to the West of White Mountains, ruled by Uther's aunt, refuse to bend the knee in pursuit of their own goals.
Meanwhile the druids join their forces with Morgause and Morgana who, having recovered from being poisoned by Merlin, is willing to take part in building a free kingdom.

With Gaius under arrest, Gwen is left alone in the castle of the new king where every wrong step may be her last. In the summertime perfumed with love, conspiracy, vengeance, sorcery and war, it is up to Merlin to make the future of Albion hang in balance. However, the sunstone and moonstone magic leaves less and less time for young warlock, and he must hurry.

Sequel to "The Great Design" fic
Great Houses of Camelot

Chapter Summary

For those who followed the court plot line about the clashes of the various family clans in Camelot after Uther's death, I've designed this little appendix where I tried to list all the great houses of Camelot with their living members (though sometimes the late members are also mentioned).

Great Houses of Camelot

1. House Gornemant

Caradol Gornemant, aged 60, and:

- his wife Galla Dindrane, aged 58. Galla Dindrane is the Lady of Denaria and sister of late Demeth Dindrane;
- his eldest son Nydd Gornemant, aged 40. Nydd Gornemant is married to Isylda, aged 36;
- his granddaughter Laima Gornemant, aged 17 (born to Nydd and Isylda);
- his middle son Arbay Gornemant, killed during the Great Dragon attack;
- his younger son Keres Gornemant, aged 29.

2. House Dindrane

Anna Dindrane, aged 51, widow of Demeth Dindrane, and:

- her son Tawton Dindrane, aged 31. Tawton is married to Myramel Somerset, aged 32;
- her granddaughter Ravenna Dindrane, aged 17 (born to Tawton and Myramel);
- her granddaughter Medinna Dindrane, aged 13 (born to Tawton and Myramel).

3. House Lamorak

Craig Lamorak, aged 54, the Councilor of Provision at Uther's High Court and:

- his wife Lothiya Lynesse, aged 51. Lothia Lynesse is sister of Aystra Ragnell;
- his son Trevelyan Lamorak, aged 35;
- his son's wife Igressa Elyan, aged 31; Igressa is niece of Anna Dindrane.
- his grandson Thomas Lamorak, aged 12;
- his granddaughter Umberta Lamorak, aged 14.

4. House Ragnell
Kerris Ragnell, aged 37, the Lord of Balor, and:

- his mother Aystra Ragnell, aged 52; Aystra Ragnell is sister to Lothiya Lynesse;
- his wife Gladia Ragnell, aged 36;
- his son Hengest Ragnell, slain in Prince's Arthur's patrol in the forest of Brechfa;
- his daughter Mariessa Ragnell, aged 16.

5. House *Somerset*

Thomas Somerset, aged 50, cousin of Dragonlord Thulin. Thomas Somerset vanished after the conspiracy to overthrow Uther shortly after the Great Purge was unmasked.

- his wife, Hamelia Accolon, aged 50, disappeared with him;
- his daughter, Myramel Somerset, aged 32, wife to Tawton Dindrane;
- his granddaughter Ravenna Dindrane, aged 15;
- his granddaughter Melinna Dindrane, aged 13.

6. House *Gorlois***

Morgause Gorlois, aged 28, the High Priestess of the Isle of the Blessed, and:

- her father Ector Gorlois, slain in the battle during one of the Gwynedd wars;
- her mother Vivienne Gorlois, died during the Great Purge;
- her sister Morgana Gorlois, aged 24, believed to be lost to the Dark Sorcery.

7. House *Pendragon*

Arthur Pendragon, aged 22, the rightful king of Camelot, believed to be slain in the patrol in the forest of Brechfa and also to have turned into a wraith, and:

- his father Uther Pendragon, poisoned by Guinevere and Rion Gingawaine;
- his mother Ygraine Du Bois, died giving birth to Arthur;
- his uncle Tristan Du Bois, killed by Uther Pendragon in a single combat;
- his uncle Agravaine Du Bois, missing since the Great Purge.

8. House *Gedref*

Ursula Gedref, aged 36, depraved of lordship over the Gedref, and:

- her husband, Ollwen, killed during the Cornelius Sigan attack;
- her son, Owaine, aged 18, believed to be slain in Prince Arthur's patrol in the forest of Brechfa.

9. House *Gaheris*

Vyda Gaheris, aged 64, the Lady of Daobeth and:
• her late husband Ulwich Gaheris, uncle of Uther Pendragon. Ulwich was the heir to the throne of Mountain Kingdom;
• her son Safir Gaheris, aged 47. Safir is married to Blasinia, aged 42;
• her grandson Eric Gaheris, aged 24 (born to Safir and Blasinia);
• her grandson Vidor Gaheris, aged 21 (born to Safir and Blasinia), the knight of Camelot;
• her son Nentres Gaheris, aged 42. Nentres is married to Enida, aged 38.
• her grandson Caridoc Gaheris, aged 21 (born to Nentres and Enida).

10. House Sagramore

Deos Sagramore, aged 39, the Councilor of Camelot of Uther's High Court and the Secretary of King Ryence, and:

• his father, Sullum Sagramore, aged 58. Sullum Sagramore is brother of Vyda Gaheris;
• his mother Loana Vortimer, aged 58;
• his wife Rollisa Sagramore, aged 40.
• his daughter Ewina Sagramore, aged 18.

11. House Vortimer

Bray Vortimer, aged 44, and:

• his father Guon Vortimer, aged 61. Guon Vortimer is brother of Loana Vortimer.

12. House Accolon

Sewyll Accolon, aged 46, Councilor of War at Uther's and King Ryence's High Court, and:

• his sister Hamelia Accolon, aged 50, disappeared after the Great Purge;
• his niece, Myramel Somerset, aged 32, wife to Tawton Dindrane.

13. House Leon

Sir Leon, aged 31, Commande of the Knights of Camelot at Uther's and King Ryence's High Court, and:

• his father Pelles Leon, aged 52; Pelles is brother of Talessia Gallada.
• his mother Melissa Leon, aged 50.

14. House Pellinore

Bors Pellinore, aged 37, the Lord of Nemeton, and

• his wife, Lorbenia Pellinore, aged 35;
• his son, Modron Pellinore, aged 16, believed to be slain in Prince Arthur’s patrol in Brechfa;
• his mother-in-law, Talessia Gallada, aged 55. Lady Gallada is sister to Pelles Leon.
• his father-in-law, Dolen Gallada, aged 54.

15. House Gingawaine

Ryence Gingawaine, aged 60, King of Camelot, and:
• his sister Yrien Gingawaine, aged 40, the Councilor of Camelot of King Ryence;
• his nephew Rion Gingawine***, aged 15.

16. House Blanchefleur

Enid Blanchefleur, aged 53, the Treasurer of Uther's High Court:
• his wife Matheya Blanchefleur, aged 49;
• his son Marcus Blanchefleur, aged 30. Marcus is married to Iseut, aged 28;
• his grandson Gorman Blanchefleur, aged 9 (born to Marcus and Iseut);
• his daughter Meliassa Blanchefleur, aged 27. Meliassa is married to Orien Pelles, aged 28;
• his granddaughter Olivia Pelles, aged 9 (born to Meliassa and Orien);
• his sister Lynsa Blanchefleur, aged 56.

17. House Meirchion

Segma Meirchion, aged 38, the Lady of Ascetir, and:
• her mother Isotta Meirchion, aged 68. Isotta is sister of Tuwal Blanchefleur, the late father of Enid Blanchefleur;
• her son Aglovale, slain in Prince Arthur’s patrol in Brechfa;
• her son Evaine, slain in Prince Arthur’s patrol in Brechfa.

18. House Cynric

Hector Cynric, aged 45, the Councilor of Trade at Uther's High Court and the Treasurer of King Ryence.

19. House Caelia

Leanora Caelia, aged 26, the Councilor of Trade of King Ryence and:
• her late husband Sir Randon Caelia, who was killed by bandits who stole the Crystal of Neahtid.

20. House Catigern

Glydos Catigern, aged 68, the Lord of Asgorath.
21. House Geraint

Astol Gerain, aged 44, Councilor of Provision of King Ryence.

22. House Lucan

Nuss Lucan, aged 58, the Lord of Landshire.

23. A recently established House Monmouth.

* House Somerset is not an actual House with a voting ring because Myramel Somerset joined House Dindrane when she married Tawton Dindrane.

** Since Morgana is lost, it is believed House Gorlois is no more.

*** Lady Yrien had had another son before Rion, but the boy ran away from the family when Yrien was forced to send him to Daobeth since Uther never recognized Yrien’s first-born as legitimate son.

Camelot territories and their Lords, Ladies and heirs

1. Territories which used to belong to the Mountain Kingdom before Uther's conquests, commonly referred to as "West", "The Westerners", "Western Lands", lands behind the White Mountains, etc.

- Asgorath, governed by Lord Glydos Catigern, aged 68. Lord Catigern is childless.
- Daobeth, governed by Lady Vyda Gaheris, aged 64. Her son Safir Gaheris, aged 47, is the heir of the territory.
- Denaria, governed by Lady Galla Dindrane, aged 58. Her son Nydd Gornemant, aged 40, is the heir of the territory.
- Landshire, governed by Lord Nuss Lucan, aged 58. Lord Lucan is childless.

2. Territories which used to belong to the Seaside Kingdom before Uther married Ygraine Du Bois:

- Gedref, not governed since the lordship of Lady Ursula Gedref was denounced.
- Nemeton, governed by Lord Bors Pellinore, aged 37. Nemeton has no heir because Modron Pellinore is believed to be slain in Prince Arthur's patrol.
- Balor, governed by Lord Kerris Ragnell, aged 37. His daughter Mariessa Ragnell, aged 16, is the heir of the territory.
3. Other territories:

- Ascetir, governed by Lady Segma Meirchion, aged 38. Ascetir has no heir because Segma's sons, Aglovale and Evaine were slain in Prince Arthur’s patrol in Brechfa.
- Brechfa, governed by Lady Yrien Gingawaine, aged 40. Her son Rion Gingawaine, aged 15, is the heir of the territory.
The Fire Striker

Chapter Summary

Special announcement of the publication of "The Fire Striker", the third installment from the series.

Hello to everybody who still remembers this fic!

I just wanted to say that the third work from the series is now being published, and the story of Arthur, Merlin, Gwen, Morgana and many more continues in "The Fire Striker"!

Feel free to read it:

**The Fire Striker** (15645 words) by **DiamondAbyss**

Chapters: 7/83
Fandom: **Merlin (TV)**
Rating: Explicit
Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Relationships: Merlin/Arthur Pendragon (Merlin), Gwaine/Gwen (Merlin), Gwen/Gwaine/Lancelot (Merlin), Gwaine/Morgana (Merlin)
Characters: Merlin (Merlin), Arthur Pendragon (Merlin), Gwen (Merlin), Gwaine (Merlin), Morgana (Merlin), Morgause (Merlin), Gaius (Merlin), Leon (Merlin), Lancelot (Merlin), Yrien, Rion, Lord Gloss, Lord Chefyl, Young Chefyl, Anna Dindrane, Tawton Dindrane, Safir Gaheris, Vyda Gaheris, Nentres Gaheris, Princess Mithian, King Rodor, King Godwyn, Princess Elena, King Sarrum, Owain, Modron - Character, Lord Bors Pellinore, Lord Sei, Lord Rysor, Lady Lludwig, Kilgharrah (Merlin)
Additional Tags: Camelot Civil War, Idiots in Love, two sides of the same coin
Series: Part 3 of **King, Prince and Priestess**
Summary:

Summer seems almost gone as the winds of war are biting Camelot, tearing the once-mighty land into pieces, large and small.

Morgana returns to the castle of Camelot, planning to use her forthcoming marriage to King Rion of House Gingawaine to lift the ban on magic, but she is failing to win the loyalty of the court and knights alike, and Gwen seems her only friend. Meanwhile, the army of the kingdom's western territories is marching on the castle of Camelot to avenge the death of Sir Vidor, threatening to put an end to House Gingawaine once and for all.

Arthur and Merlin have finally reunited at the castle of Gedref, where Arthur wears his crown, and they try to savor every bit of love after the Battle of the Merchant's Bay. However, their honeymoon will be a short one, for Arthur must soon make a tough choice. Will he pick a side in the civil war that threatens to undo Camelot, or will he rely on fire and blood to unite the whole realm under his reign?

Sequel to "The Great Design" and "The Guiding Star" fics

<3
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!