Forget Me Not

by Lyss2011

Summary

Arthur peeks out from behind his hand and squints in the semi-dark room. That’s not—

“Where’s Merlin? I told that idiot not to drink so much last night, did he bribe you to attend me this morning so he could sleep later?”

"Who- who is Merlin?"

Written for the prompt: arthur wakes up one day and merlin's gone. vanished without a trace. no one else remembers him; it's as if he never existed outside arthur's mind.
"Time to get up sire."

Arthur barely registers the words, still hungover from the feast last night. Something’s different, but he can’t focus long enough to figure it out.

"Whaddu say Merlin?" he grumbles, sitting up gingerly with a hand over his eyes—he knows that any second now Merlin’s going to open the drapes just enough to blind him.

“It’s time to get up, sire. I have your breakfast here, and you have training with the knights soon.”

Arthur peeks out from behind his hand and squints in the semi-dark room. That’s not—

“Where’s Merlin? I told that idiot not to drink so much last night, did he bribe you to attend me this morning so he could sleep later?” He reluctantly gets up, still speaking. “Don’t worry, George, I know it’s not your fault, but I’m going to make him muck out all the knights’ horses’ stalls today to make up for it.” He pauses as George slips his tunic over his head. “Did you happen to bring any of the hangover draught from Gaius?”

George doesn’t respond right away, presumably thinking about whether or not he brought the draft with him. “I-I’m sorry sire, I will retrieve it for you while you are at training.”

“No need, George. I’m sure Merlin will be happy to bring it for me when he finally wakes.”

“Sire?”

Arthur sighs. Mornings with Merlin were never this draining; there must be a worse punishment he can think of for subjecting him to George of all people this morning.

“Who- who is Merlin?”

Arthur spins out of George’s hands where the servant had been (clumsily) putting on his armor.

“What.”

George is trembling under Arthur’s glare, something Merlin never did. “I- I don’t recall you mentioning him before, my Lord.”

“Merlin? My manservant? Approximately my height, thin as a stick, always tripping over himself, shaggy black hair and deep blue eyes?”

Arthur can feel his breath come faster and faster and he can’t stop it because—George is looking at him completely without recognition. In fact, there seems to be fear in the servant’s eyes, but he can’t focus on that right now because the blood is draining from his body and there is a deep ache in his chest. He staggers, clutches at his armor, trying to find the weapon, the blood that is surely
pooling under his feet. He knows what will happen next. He will faint from blood loss, his vision is already darkening—

“A-assassin,” he chokes out as the darkness closes in.

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“Merlin. Merlin, where—?” Arthur is restless in his bed despite the sleeping draught Gaius administered earlier.

Uther looks over at Gaius, questioning.

“I don’t know, Sire. He mentioned it when he awoke earlier.” Gaius runs a cool cloth over Arthur’s forehead. “He doesn’t have any physical illness that I can see.”

“Could it be,” Uther drops his voice although they are the only ones in the room. “Could it be an enchantment?”

“That is a definite possibility, Sire.” Gaius nods, “I will do some research. Does a merlin have any symbolic significance to your enemies?”

“I will look into it.” Uther stands to leave. “Take care of him.”

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Arthur blinks awake. There’s something wrong, and it only takes a moment to remember. George. Merlin. George is an assassin, or at the very least an accomplice. And he didn’t recognize Merlin by name or description, so he must have been an imposter. At least Merlin was asleep at the time and therefore not hurt as well.

He carefully moves his arms, flexes his muscles, preparing for the searing pain where the wound gaped. He examines his entire body and can’t find a single wound. Was it...poison?

He is about to get up when Gaius comes in, a small smile on his face upon seeing him awake. “Gaius! Is Merlin with you?”

Gaius’ face flickers with some unknown emotion, and his face slips into a professionally neutral mask. “I need to examine you, Sire. Please lay back down.”

Arthur does, asking Gaius about the assassin and whether he determined if there was poison used.

Gaius freezes, and replies a moment too late: “It passed through your system, Sire. It wasn’t a fatal dose.”

“And did my father have George arrested?”

Another significant pause, though Arthur can’t determine what it means. “He is to have a trial later today. You will not attend; we do not wish him to have another attempt.” Gaius goes back to looking Arthur over, and Arthur accepts it in silence until he remembers that he still hasn’t seen Merlin today.

“It’s strange without Merlin here.”

Gaius’ gaze is piercing as he looks at Arthur. “Why do you say that, Sire?”

“Well- it’s just, quieter, I guess,” he stutters, not sure how to describe the hollowness he feels in his
manservant’s absence. “He’s normally talking nonsense about noble prats and such. Is he ill as well, or just running some errands?”

Gaius’ response is quiet. “I’m not sure. You will be fine, but I’m putting you on bed rest for the rest of the day. I know you hate it, but it’s necessary for you to make a full recovery.”

He sighs. “I understand Gaius. Thank you. Please send Merlin up whenever you can spare him. He’ll entertain me.”

Gaius bows his response.

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“Gaius.”

“Uther.”

“How fares my son?”

“I’m afraid it is as we feared. The boy mentioned ‘merlin’ again, as someone who prattles on and entertains him. He also believes this ‘merlin’ runs errands for me. And erm, he believes George is an assassin who poisoned him.”

Uther’s grip on his goblet tightens. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him the poison wasn’t fatal, and that George was in trial. I avoided saying anything about this ‘merlin’ for fear he would react poorly.”

“Very well.” Uther turns to a guard. “Bring George in.”

The servant is still very pale, but he is no longer shaking. “Your Highness. Gaius.”

“George. Did you have any particular conversation with the prince this morning that you can remember?”

“He didn’t remember me, Sire. Well, he knew my name, but he believed hismanservant was a man named Merlin. And then he fainted when I said I didn’t know who that was. He- he called me an assassin.” The manservant’s voice is thick with tears at this pronouncement.

Uther clears his throat, his eyes darting around the room. “Yes, it seems that he still believes that. Gaius did not find any signs of harm on Prince Arthur, but for his sake and yours, you are hereby banished from Camelot until he recovers. Otherwise he may,” he cleared his throat again. “He may kill you himself, under this false belief. You will have twenty gold pieces in payment, and a letter of recommendation. You have until tomorrow at midday to leave. You will speak of this to no one. Do you understand?”

George is openly crying now. “I. I understand. My duty and love will always be for Camelot and my king. If-f-f I send word, to Gaius or the steward, would I be able to resume my duties once the prince is recovered?”

“That would be acceptable. You have been a faithful servant for Arthur. I’m sure he would appreciate your return once he…comes to his senses. You are dismissed.”
Kudos, comments, and constructive criticism are always welcome :)

Chapter 2

Merlin doesn’t come to visit, but his knights do. They crowd in his room, talking and laughing and thanking him cheekily for cancelling training this morning. They distract him for a while: Leon brings up patrol schedules and yearly visits to the outlying villages, Percy offers to start a game of dice which the rest of them decide to watch, Gwaine subjects them all to stories of debauching ladies in the tavern, and it’s several hours before he realizes Merlin still hasn’t shown up.

He waits until there’s a lull in the conversation to say, “Have any of you seen Merlin? He hasn’t been in this morning. Did I do something stupid at the feast last night?” He searches his friends’ faces for answers and sees the same blankness that was on George’s face a few hours ago. Oh gods. Everyone’s been enchanted to kill me.

“Well you weren’t as stupid as Gwaine last night,” Percy offers into the thick silence. Percy never speaks first; this is proof enough that something is seriously wrong.

Just keep them talking, he tells himself. “What did he do this time?” He forces himself to smile in Percy’s direction.

The conversation is stilted, and he notices his knights sharing glances above his head but doesn’t ask. If he asks, he acknowledges that something is wrong. He has to be as diplomatic as possible. At least his dagger is still under his pillow just in case.

Luckily, they haven’t made an attempt on his life by the time Gaius walks in and removes them from his rooms.

“Gaius. You…know things about enchantments, right?”

“Yes. Arthur, I have to tell you. I think you’ve been enchanted.”

Somehow, even though it makes just as much sense as his knights and George being enchanted, he still reels from the blow. “Do you know what happened? And, how to stop it?”

Gaius’ eyes are kind as he quietly states, “I’m not sure yet Sire. Physically, you seem fine, but you…”

“I…” Arthur prompts.

“Merlin.” Gaius says simply. “Can you describe him to me? What he looks like and what his duties are?”

“Gaius… No. You wouldn’t forget Merlin, he was like a son to you! He told me you were a father to him, he’s been your apprentice for three years now, he, he, he—”

“Sire, calm—”

“He sleeps in your back room! Check for yourself, you’ll see!”

“Arthur, please—”

“He’s my manservant, he saved me from a thrown dagger in the middle of a feast, and drank
POISON for me, he almost died and you’re telling me you DON’T KNOW WHO HE IS?”

“ARTHUR!” Uther’s voice rings loud and commanding in the chamber, cutting into Arthur’s rising panic as Gaius’ kind voice could not.\textit{When did he come in?}

“Father.” He hates how broken his voice sounds. “I don’t suppose you remember assigning me a manservant after he pushed me out of the way of a flying dagger?”

Silence.

He tries a different tactic. “Or how I disobeyed you by riding out to get a morteus flower to save him when he drank poison for me?”

Nothing. His chest is tight, almost burning.

“How he spilled wine all down Morgana’s gown in his first week? I’m almost certain Gwen has that gown now, no one could get the stain out of it.”

He feels like crying. Or perhaps he already is.

“How he hates hunting but I take him along anyway, and he tries to shoo off the rabbits before I can shoot them?”

He can feel the tears running down his face now. And he knows neither Gaius nor his father would know about the hunting, but he feels like he has to remember, he can’t forget, it’s important. Merlin is important.

“He’s important. I can’t forget. Please, \textit{I have to remember.”}

Gaius pats him on the shoulder and hands him another sleeping draught. “We’ll talk again when you awaken. Sleep, my dear boy.” But that only makes him sob harder into his draught, because he once heard Gaius say those exact words to Merlin when he was ill.

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“I haven’t found any symbolic merlins among our captured correspondence, and I don’t recall any hawks from battles or treaties. Whoever is behind this is being very discreet.” The king is frustrated, not bothering to hide it in his private chambers with only Gaius as witness.

“I checked my back room for evidence of a sleeping boy and found only my store room as it’s always been.”

“What do we do, Gaius?”

“I’m afraid there’s not much we can do at the moment. Arthur seems to have his wits about him otherwise; I know he went over the patrols with Leon yesterday. You could ask that he keep it to himself, maybe gift him a merlin so the servants have something to answer to in case he asks where this ‘merlin’ boy is.”

“And…” Uther adds dangerously. Gaius barely resists rolling his eyes in response.

“And of course I will be searching for the answer to this enchantment. If we are lucky, it may be short-lived and Arthur will be released from its thrall soon.”

“And if I allow you to use magic to determine the type of enchantment?”
Gaius raises an infamous eyebrow. “It would certainly move the process along.”

“Then I will allow it.”

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It has been impressed upon Arthur that he will never speak of Merlin. It is a sign of the enchantment’s hold and he needs to appear strong and healthy for the nation.

Arthur agrees on the condition that he will not take another manservant. No one could replace Merlin.

The days have never felt so long.

In the lower town, he reminds himself that it’s not a breach of promise if he doesn’t mention Merlin’s name. He asks after a peasant boy, thin and pale, with shocking blue eyes and dark, luscious hair. He never knew how many skinny, dark haired, blue eyed peasants lived in Camelot until they’re brought to him, one by one. There’s always only ever been Merlin for him.

He hires an artist to draw Merlin for him, from a description. He receives a drawing with one peasant’s eyes, another’s mouth. Pieces of the boys he was shown that aren’t Merlin.

His relationship with his closest knights is stilted. They all know something is wrong, and he isn't quite sure they’re not enchanted to kill him. Morgana comforts him in her own way, but eventually he distances himself from her as well. She has Gwen, and it causes him too much pain to hear her talk about her maidservant the way he can’t talk about Merlin anymore, even in private.

A week after what has been dubbed ‘the incident,’ Gaius does sorcery on him under his father’s supervision. “This will tell us what the enchantment is, and then I will be able to determine the cure,” Gaius tells him.

Gaius mutters some words under his breath, and Arthur looks around, trying to see what’s happening. Will he have writing on his body? A sign on his forehead? An image of the device used to enchant him?

“Sit still,” his father grits out. Arthur wonders idly why his father even bothered to be here if he can’t stand magic. After all, there’s nothing he would be able to do if Gaius attacked Arthur. But Arthur doesn’t mention that now.

He wishes Merlin were here. His face at seeing the King of Camelot condone sorcery would be a sight to behold. He wouldn’t allow Arthur to mope about his enchantment. In fact, he’d probably make fun of Arthur for his enchantment. He can just imagine it- *They couldn’t have enchanted you to be less of a prat?*

His father’s warning growl of “Gaius…” brings him back to the present.

“What is it?” he asks.

“It didn’t work.”

“I beg your pardon, Sire. It did work. Arthur is not enchanted, at least not with anything malicious.”

Arthur wants to jump up and shout to the skies that he was right, Merlin is out there somewhere, and everyone else is wrong, but then he realizes, he’s the only one who can even remember
Merlin. It feels like he's being poisoned all over again.

“No.” His father’s wobbling voice, even as his face heats and his eyes are shooting daggers, is heartbreaking. “It can’t be. Try again, Gaius. Find another spell. I refuse to believe my son has gone mad.”

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He goes back to the artist in the lower town, begs him to teach his craft. He woke up this morning and for a moment, couldn’t recall Merlin’s good morning smile.

His drawings are terrible. He can draw a map, a battle plan, but not eyes with long, delicate lashes, not the shape of his friend’s face or even hair. He hates the drawings but he hides them away in a locked drawer in his room because when Merlin returns he’ll make fun of him, tease him for making his face into a map of Camelot, complete with labels of all the neighboring kingdoms. And he keeps trying, because once he gets it right, he’ll again wake up to a face he knows and lo—

Gaius continues to use sorcery on him, to determine what spell he's under, but nothing works. Eventually he stops trying, to the king’s dismay. Arthur is glad, it was too difficult to see his father's grief each time Gaius failed.

His father is still wary of him, and he is still wary of everyone else. It’s like he was dropped into another world where everything is the same except everything is different. It's exhausting, spending every waking hour pretending everything is fine, that he's not missing one of the most important people in his life. He's always been cautious about what he says in front of others, being the prince and all, but now he has to consciously censor everything he says lest he mention Merlin and watch everyone around him try and fail to look nonchalant about it.

He finds little things around Camelot to prove his sanity. He privately thinks maybe it is proving the opposite, but that doesn’t stop him. He’s not sure he can stop. A worn red neckerchief comes back in his laundry (which he puts away himself now, thankyouverymuch). He searches Gaius’ rooms and finds a pair of Merlin’s breeches in what is now the storage room. Gwen graciously allows him to take Morgana’s old wine-stained gown, even though he knows she had plans to make it into a new gown for herself. One night he hides the wine jug brought to his chambers because it has a dent on it. He’s not sure if Merlin dented this particular jug but he dropped them often enough it had to have been him, right? Right?

The days blur into weeks blur into months. He trains with the knights, goes on patrol, attends meetings and council with his father, and spends his free time drawing or writing down memories, stories of Merlin. Big things everyone in the castle would know, if they knew, and small things, private moments between the two of them. He keeps writing even as his memories are fuzzier and fuzzier, when he leaves blanks in his stories, because some things just aren’t adding up (how did they kill the afanc?).

The writing goes into his Merlin drawer, but his drawings, now deemed fair by both himself and his teacher, hang around his chambers. The newest version of ‘good morning smile’ is by his bed. The ‘you’re going to be a great king’ is next to his mirror (he’s particularly proud of the eyelashes in that one). The ‘cheeky I’m-being-impertinent smile’ is buried in a pile of maps on his desk. He distributes copies of ‘everyday Merlin’ to the taverns in the vain hope that someone will see him and recognize him as the prince’s manservant.

No one ever does.
Kudos, comments, and constructive criticism are always welcome :)}
Chapter Notes

Sorry this one's so short, the rest of the chapters are all longer!

It’s the height of irony that the action which gave him his position as Arthur’s manservant is the same as that which relieves him of it. The key difference is that this time, Merlin is not standing next to Arthur when the dagger flies through the air towards the oblivious prat. He is talking to Gwen and leaning against the wall within Arthur’s sight when it happens. There is no time to push him out of the way, so he uses his magic to stop the dagger.

He freezes, hands in front of him as if he’s still casting a spell, even though the dagger has clattered to the floor and the troupe of traitorous performers are bound and gagged at the other end of the hall. He doesn’t, he can’t, look at Arthur. Distantly he hears Uther yelling, but pays no attention to it, still numb with realization.

Somehow he makes it to the dungeons. He paces in his cell; he has to get his thoughts in order. He thinks for two hours, the faces of his friends flashing through his mind: Gaius, Gwen, Morgana, Arthur. ArthurArthurArthur. The only way to keep them all safe from association with him is for him to leave, for him to have never existed. There’s a simple memory spell he’s been practicing, he’ll have to extend that to the whole of Camelot, but he can do it.

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At home with his mother, he takes every opportunity to scry Arthur. He can’t slip into Camelot, because if any of the guards see him, the memory spell will break and they will remember. And what help will he be to Arthur then? But he needs to make sure the prince is still alive and well.

Arthur looks fine, no deathly illnesses or fatal wounds, but Merlin can’t help but to worry all the same. As time passes, the prince is isolating himself more and more. He also appears to be planning a battle, sitting at his desk with his brow furrowed at all hours drawing and redrawing some image he can’t quite make out. But training takes place as it always does, and the rest of Arthur's duties appear to be the same. Perhaps Arthur is just practicing his strategy, and Merlin is just paranoid.

It's not until he's been home for a few months that his heart truly breaks. He's been keeping himself afloat with the scried visions of Arthur sometimes twice an hour, knowing he was alright in Camelot, that he would be happy and continue on his path to being the greatest king of Albion. But one morning he sees his own face staring back at him as he scries Arthur in his bedchamber. It's a fairly accurate drawing of himself grinning, and Arthur is holding it up in front of him with an incredibly open expression of grief on his face.

Oh gods. He remembers.

The dragon warned him of this. He spoke in his typically cryptic way as Merlin came to a decision to make all of Camelot forget. 'The half cannot truly forget that which makes it whole,' he'd said. He should have listened. But, as Merlin ends the scry with tears streaming down his face, he takes
heart from what the dragon had said next:

'You know, young warlock. This is not the end. It is the beginning.'

Chapter End Notes

Kudos, comments, and constructive criticism are always welcome :)
Chapter 4

Morgana awakes, for once, peacefully. She takes a moment to bask in the feeling before pulling on a dressing robe and slipping off to Arthur’s room. The sun is just brightening the sky; Gwen won’t be up for another hour to wake her.

She slips into the darkened room and immediately opens the curtains.

“Arthur.” It’s almost comical how quickly he awakens at her voice.

“Wha-? ‘Gana? Wha’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” she declares brightly.

Arthur’s sleepy and wary expression darkens to one of annoyance. He pointedly looks out the window at the thin rays of sunlight, then back at her. “Then what am I doing awake at this hour?”

“We have some things to discuss, Arthur dear. Best put on some breeches before we begin.”

“How—?” he looks down at himself and blushes when he sees he’s just barely covered. “This is why I have a—” His breath catches painfully and she sees his hands forming fists in the sheets.

She knows what he was about to say, *this is why I have a manservant*, and for once she takes pity on him and directs his attention back to her. “Well hurry up then,” she instructs, staring straight at him with a lecherous grin on her face.

“Turn around you harpy! I’m not getting out of bed naked while you stare at me!” he says indignantly, back to his usual self just as she’d hoped. There’s a rustling of cloth, and then he asks, rather softly she thinks, “What did you want to talk about?”

“I…had a dream. It was,” and she can’t help the smile on her face, “It was the best dream I’ve had in ages.”

“Alright…” he draws out the word, glancing toward the window again, probably wondering why this was so important she had to wake him up before dawn. Arthur’s never been a very patient man in conversation; even less so in the mornings.

“Do you remember Ealdor? When we helped that woman named Hunith save her village?” Arthur looks pale when she looks up at him, fingers gripping the back of his chair tightly. “You and I were riding into the village again, but it was during a time of peace. Everyone welcomed us, and Arthur, you were so happy. And then we visited Hunith and talked late into the night at her table. And. There was a man there, too,” she adds cautiously.

“Wh-,” he breaks off to clear his throat. “What time of year was it?”

It’s not a question she’s prepared for. *What did he look like, did you catch his name, did he look healthy,* she expects. But maybe he already knows who she alluded to; she dares not say his name first. She casts back into her memory to answer him: “Not quite harvest time. I would say about this time of year.”
He nods, and his shoulders relax ever so slightly. “When would you like to leave?”

“Don’t you want to know how he reacted upon seeing you?”

“It was a dream, Morgana,” he says firmly. “And no I don’t. I—no. Shall we leave tomorrow? That should give us enough time to make up an excuse to my father.”

“I don’t see why we can’t leave in an hour,” she counters. “It’s not like we told Uther where we were going last time we visited Ealdor.”

“He’s going to kill me for this,” Arthur complains, but he’s smiling.

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It’s been a while since Merlin could bring himself to scry Arthur, and he regrets it when the first thing he sees is Arthur riding out of Camelot with only Morgana, no escort from the knights to protect them. Their horses are packed down for a journey of some length, and Morgana is wearing her trousers and chain mail. He has absolutely no idea how this came to be, but he resolves to scry every hour to make sure they’re alright, no matter what his mother says.

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“So. Want to tell me some more about him?”

“No.”

She rolls her eyes. “Not much to tell then? He was just a manservant after all.” She knows that’s false- she’d found the stacks of stories and drawings he packed in his saddlebags next to the bread and cheese when they stopped for lunch.

“A very incompetent one,” he says before he can help himself.

Ah.

“And you want to get him back? So he can, what, mess up your socks?”

“My socks are the least of his issues,” Arthur starts passionately. "He’s never learned how to properly attend me during feasts or even just dinners with you and my father. He still doesn’t understand the ways of the court, he rarely calls me by my title, he can barely even ride a horse, my breakfast is never on time, and, and, and he talks back to me! And sometimes he just, disappears! Not like- not like this, he’d just be gone for a day or two, but it was typically when I had something important or I was ill and he just abandoned me to get drunk in the tavern or something!”

“And you want him back,” she repeats dryly. “He had to have done something right, Arthur.”

“He saved my life.” He leaves the statement hanging for a while, but Morgana doesn’t break the silence, instead listening to the plodding of their horses’ hooves, the birds chirping, and the wind moving through the bushes and trees. He’ll talk when he’s ready. She’s planted the seed.

Soon enough, he speaks.

“A day after I met him, he pulled me out of the way of a thrown dagger at a feast. Father named him my manservant as a reward, although I think he later regretted it. He really was a terrible servant in the beginning. He’s- he was the only one who could make ‘Sire’ sound like an insult.”

She snorts. “I’ll bet you liked that.”

He smiles fondly and says, quiet, “I did.” He continues, “He was the bravest man I ever met, by
my side in almost every fight, even when it was a tournament; do you remember Valiant, with the
snakes on his shield? He warned me before I fought him that Sir Ewan had been attacked by a
snake at the same time as the tourney. Of course he couldn’t get me proof and made me look a fool
in front of the court, but in the end he was right. Venomous snakes came out of Valiant’s shield
while I was fighting him.

“And then there was the fight with the Afanc, I don’t think I could’ve killed it without him and his
knowledge of the beast.”

“Was that when you learned about his magic?”

“Sorry?” He pulls his horse up short in shock.

“His magic. When he helped kill it, is that when you found out?”

“Merlin doesn’t have magic!” Arthur’s outraged and incredulous, and she’s well aware that this is
the first time today he’s mentioned the servant’s name. She wonders if he noticed as well.

“It only makes sense that a magical beast would be able to be killed by magic.”

“Not this one.”

“Arthur, I saw him in my dream performing magic in front of us.”

“Then—maybe it’s a different man! What did he look like?” He’s clearly desperate now, after all
they’re a good part of the way to Ealdor and not likely to turn around even if the man she saw isn’t
Merlin.

“Just like the drawings you made—”

“Oh, good.” He relaxes and presses his horse forward again. “The drawings are hardly accurate. I
still can’t get the eyes to look as alive, or quite the right shape, and his cheekbones don’t come
through well at all. Maybe he has a less attractive brother who’s a sorcerer?”

She leaves the ‘attractive’ bit aside for the moment. “Arthur. Would it be so bad if he were a
sorcerer?”

“Yes!” His reply is so vehement that it takes her by surprise. She’d thought, given the dream, but
perhaps they aren’t ready yet. Still, she holds onto the image of Arthur hugging a sorcerer with a
wide smile on his face as she pulls herself together and blinks away her tears.

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Merlin scries the pair that afternoon and finds them still safe, but clearly not as happy and relaxed
as earlier. He carefully examines their clothes, but nothing suggests a physical altercation:
Morgana’s hair is a bit tousled, but her trousers are clean, and Arthur’s mail and sword are in the
same condition as before.

It must have been an argument then. Arthur’s face is red and he keeps huffing and opening his
mouth to say something to Morgana before closing it and looking away. Morgana typically keeps
her cool in arguments with everyone except Uther, but she’s biting her lip and there’s a crease in
between her brows that doesn’t disappear the whole time Merlin watches.

Chapter End Notes
Kudos, comments, and constructive criticism are always welcome :)

“Arthur will you calm down? It’s not like he’s in Camelot anymore. You can’t arrest him.” All she’s heard for the last few hours are mumbles of ‘That idiot!’ and ‘I can’t believe- that clotpole,’ and once a shouted, ‘Merlin!’ She’s sick of it, sick in general. She hadn’t realized just how much she was relying on Arthur’s sense of duty and justice to right the wrongs Uther had brought down upon Camelot until Arthur’s outburst tore the lifeline away from her.

“It’s not that. He lied to me.”

“What do you mean it’s not that? You- you don’t think magic is evil?” Hope bursts through her pain and she’s vaguely aware that her hands are shaking. She grips the reins tighter to steady them.

“Of course I don’t! I would think of all people you would support me on that. You’re known in the court for being lenient to sorcerers. And I helped the druid boy escape! I just can’t do anything about it now, or risk my father disinheriting me and appointing Agravaine or something.” He stares at her, but she suddenly can’t see him clearly, her eyes blurring with tears.

“I thought… I thought you were just blindly following your father,” she says thickly. “You have no idea how glad I am that you aren’t.”

“Er, well, I can’t exactly do anything while he still rules. But when I’m king, I plan on repealing the ban.”

“Oh.” She can’t think of anything else to say, relief still crashing down on her.

“I really. I’m… upset that he did magic in front of me and the knights so often, put himself in danger like that. I can see it all now, every time he used magic. I don’t know how I was so blind.”

She has to bite her lip hard to stop from saying ‘love makes us all blind.’

“And he lied to me,” he continues. “For all that time, he never felt like he could tell me. And he- how- why is he gone? Why does no one remember him except me? What happened? What happened, Morgana?”

“Gods,” she grits out before she can stop herself, “can’t you hold off your personal crisis until I finish mine? At least one of us should be alert in case of bandits.” She knows it's selfish to ask this of him now, but she's never claimed to be otherwise, especially with him.

He snorts and pulls himself together as she does the same. “You were having a crisis?”

“Yes. You see, I’m pretty sure I have magic. At least that’s what the druids told me, and I’m inclined to believe them. My dreams are visions, brought on by magic, which is why they come true so often. And I thought… but everything is alright now.” Despite the confidence in her words, she looks hesitantly at Arthur for confirmation.

His jaw clenches and he nods. “Yes. It’s alright Morgana. I’ll protect you. You and Merlin, if he wants to come back.”

She nods her thanks and blinks back the tears that had resurfaced at his reassurance. She’s been
teary too much of late, but she has a feeling she’ll be crying again before they return to Camelot.
“Well. Now that my crisis is out of the way, we can deal with yours. We have another half day’s ride tomorrow to think on it before we see him.”
“What do you think happened to him? Was he exiled from Camelot by my father and he didn’t want me to go after him? Something happened at that feast but I can’t remember much of anything from that night.”

“Could it have something to do with the magic? Perhaps Uther caught him or suspected him of sorcery?”

“Or he just, got sick of me. Maybe I wouldn’t let him quit or worked him too hard or hurt him once too often and he decided it would just be easier to disappear, so I couldn’t follow him.” Arthur’s hands fist around his reins.

She considers this as good a time as any to practice her Gaius eyebrow. “Explain.”

He glances over and she’s pretty sure she doesn’t imagine him cowering before the eyebrow. “Explain what? We weren’t exactly best mates, Morgana.” There’s a pause that suggests he may be rethinking that statement, but he doesn’t amend it. “We teasingly argued constantly, and at the end of it I always found extra chores for him to complete for me. In addition to being Gaius’ apprentice,” he adds as an afterthought.

“And the hurting him too much bit?”

“Ah.” He clears his throat and looks sheepish. “I may have used him for moving target practice for the knights. Often. With an actual target on his back! But, ehm, I also threw things at him when I was angry.”

“Arthur!” She doesn’t even remember this man, and she’s upset on his behalf. “Did I never tell you off for mistreating your manservant?”

“You didn’t know half of it. I’m sure you would’ve,” he answers with a quickly fading smile. “Gana, what are we going to do?”

He looks so lost she can barely stand to look at him. The arrogant prince is gone and there’s no amount of teasing that will bring him back. Just Merlin. She sits a bit taller in the saddle. She has to be strong for him. He's held it together for all these months when he's lost someone as dear to him as Gwen is to her. She pushes that thought into the back of her mind immediately. She’s done a good job not thinking about that parallel and what she would do in his shoes, and she aims to keep it that way.

“We’re going to see Merlin, and we’re going to have a plan to get him to come back. Multiple plans, knowing you. Mostly involving talking to him.” She raises her eyebrow menacingly and he groans.

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“Muuuum!”

Hunith looks up from the bread she was kneading just in time to see her son burst through the door. She’s about to admonish him for practically knocking the door off its hinges when she sees his face.

“Merlin, what is it?” she asks quickly, wiping her hands off on her apron and moving towards him. His eyes- his whole body, really- show fear and terror and grief, and she hasn’t seen this
“Is it Arthur? What did you see?” She knows he’s been scrying the prince as often as possible, they’ve had enough arguments about it though they don’t discuss it anymore. She just didn’t see the point in looking after the prince from afar if Merlin would never be able to actually set foot in Camelot or even allow the prince to see him without risking execution. A part of her she’d tried desperately to suppress was angry too that he was spending so much time watching Arthur and not helping her ensure they had enough food to both survive the winter. She’d given up arguing months ago, however, upon waking one night to see him scrying the sleeping prince with tears and love in his eyes. She knows that given the chance to see Balinor again, even without being able to speak to or touch him, she’d do the same thing.

“He’s—oh gods, Mum,” he starts, eyes darting around their home. He picks up the broom from the corner and begins *sweeping* and well, that’s new. She’s seen his various coping mechanisms over the years but cleaning? It’s too good to be true.

“Merlin!” She tries to hide the confusion and worry in her eyes and just be a stern mother.

“He’s coming,” Merlin gasps out, and she reaches forwards to tug the broom out of his shaking hands.

“How long do we have? Do you have a plan? Go, sit. Tell me.”

“He’s. He and Morgana are on their way, I should’ve realized before but I didn’t think- but now it’s clear they’re coming here, we have,” he sighs and thinks. “Maybe four hours if we’re lucky. I. I’m not hiding,” he says, firm, but breaks the illusion of authority with a scratch to the back of his neck. “I, er, didn’t tell you, but I found out that he, um, remembers. Me. And possibly the, you know, *magic*.”

Oh gods. This boy will be the death of her.

Between fixing up her home to accommodate the prince and ward of Camelot and determining a plan with Merlin as to how they’ll handle their guests, she’s exhausted by the time she hears the horses coming and the knock on her door.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos, comments, and constructive criticism are always welcome :)
Chapter Notes

The chapter you've all been waiting for...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’s standing back from the door with the horses when Hunith answers the door. He hears Morgana tell her, “It’s been too long, Hunith. It’s good to see you again, I trust the village is still doing well since we were last here?” and he sees the surprise clear as day on Hunith’s face. He can read reactions just fine, however much Morgana insists that he’s hopeless at it. However, he did agree to let her determine which plan to follow based on Hunith’s reactions, so he lets his attention wander to the house they’re standing in front of. It’s been well kept up, although he can’t see inside right now. There’s a garden to the side, and what he can see of it appears to be full of plants. Good, at least they will have food for the winter if— if Merlin doesn’t come with them, or gods forbid, doesn’t remember them. He tries not to think about what Hunith’s surprised face says about the situation.

Morgana and Hunith are still talking, so he turns around to look at the village again to distract himself from his thoughts. He hadn’t really paid attention to it as they rode in, and he still can’t really focus on it, but he needs to be doing something other than staring at the door waiting for Merlin to appear. Or not. Oh gods. He almost wishes Morgana hadn’t wanted to go over the possibilities; he wasn’t this scared before. He defies anyone to tell him different.

He doesn’t think he’s been staring down the road for too long before Morgana’s hand appears in front of his face, waving back and forth. “What?” he asks brusquely.

She just sighs at him. “Hunith wishes to speak to you.”

“Oh! Of course. Here.” He hands her the reins and moves to talk to Merlin’s mother.

“My lord,” Hunith starts.

“Please, call me Arthur.”

“Arthur. I wanted to ask you personally what you’re doing here. Morgana told me some, but…you understand that I need to protect Merlin.”

“Of course. Well, the long and short of it is, I remember him. No one else in Camelot remembers him—” he clears his throat. It won’t do to be emotional now, when he’s so close. “No one else remembers him, which has led to some difficulties, as you might imagine. They thought I’d gone mad. Probably still do.” Gods, he hopes this smile is convincing.

“So after searching the city for months and not finding him, I was very surprised when Morgana told me she’d seen him in a dream, here. I can’t believe I didn’t think of it myself…” He thinks of all the time he could have had with Merlin if only he’d visited Ealdor sooner. If Merlin really was waiting for Arthur to rescue him or something he’d probably given up hope by now. But any of the other scenarios he’d gone over with Morgana on the way here were just as likely. Maybe he hadn’t failed Merlin yet. One could hope.
“Arthur?” It’s Morgana again, waving that infernal hand in front of his face. “Sorry, he’s not usually like this. He’s been a lot more introspective and,” the hand gestures towards him, “since,” the hand gesture changes to a circular motion, “and I haven’t been able to snap him out of it.”

Surely he hasn’t been that bad? Why didn’t she say anything about it?

“Everyone noticed, but Uther wouldn’t let anyone comment for fear of setting you off about Merlin.” Is he really that easily read? He’s always prided himself on being able to shut off his emotions and focus, but apparently that’s gone now too. He rubs a hand down his face absently and turns back to Hunith.

“I’m sorry for that, Hunith. Where was I?”

“The Lady Morgana saw him in a dream.”

“Please, Hunith, just Morgana.”

“Right,” he says, getting back on track. “So we set off almost immediately, and along the way discussed Merlin. I told her some stories of things we’d done together, and she told me about his magic.” Suddenly, he thinks he must be the idiot he’s always accusing Merlin of being. How could he not have realized exactly what Hunith was trying to ask? “I’m not—he’s safe from me. I’m upset that he lied to me about it but I don’t believe all magic is evil.” He tries to say the last part loud enough for Merlin to hear through the door.

Hunith nods and smiles at him as if she can tell exactly what he’s trying to do. It’s so similar to Merlin’s his heart clenches. He can’t wait until everything gets back to normal once Merlin is back. He stops himself. That should be if Merlin comes back. If he doesn’t, Arthur will just have to figure out how to live without him. It shouldn’t be hard, he reminds himself.

Hunith is speaking. “When you see Merlin, your memories will come back. Both of your memories. It seems that although Arthur remembers Merlin, he doesn’t remember Merlin’s last night in Camelot. I suggest you tie up your horses and come sit down at the table. I understand it can be a bit overwhelming at first, remembering. Particularly for Morgana, since you have more missing memories.”

They take care of their horses as quickly as possible with shaking hands, ready to see Merlin again. Morgana takes his hand and squeezes as they sit. “This is it,” she says excitedly. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

He smiles at her, thankful for her support though he’ll never say it out loud. “You’ve already met him, you’re just getting…reacquainted.”

“Well that’s a big word,” another voice says. “Are you sure you know what it means?” Arthur’s heart rises in his throat and a knot he didn’t know he had in his chest loosens.

“Merlin.”

He looks up to see his manservant—no, his friend’s face smiling nervously, eyes flitting between him and Morgana. It’s not the bad kind of nervous though, not like the night—oh. He remembers now. How Merlin saved his life again and his father ordered his execution for it. He remembers the sheer terror on Merlin’s face, how he wouldn’t even meet his eye. He remembers the anger of that night; anger at Merlin for never telling him, anger at his father for sentencing Merlin to the pyre for saving his life, anger at Morgana for not standing up for Merlin like she did for every other good sorcerer his father put to death.
Morgana is no longer holding his hand, which is good because he’s up out of his seat and hugging Merlin before he can stop himself. *I missed you,* he tries to convey through the hug. *I missed you so much. I’m glad you remember me.*

Chapter End Notes

Kudos, comments, and constructive criticism are always welcome :)
Morgana sees Arthur’s ecstatic, besotted expression a split second before she looks up. It’s a good thing she does, because she’s still thinking about it when her memories return. He looks as he did in her dream, when he was doing magic. Magic that he told her she didn’t have. She releases Arthur’s hand to form her own into fists. Why didn’t he help her? It would have been so easy, so simple for him to say, ‘yes you do have magic, and you’re not alone.’

She can feel her magic responding to her mood, and she forces herself to calm down. She can’t hurt Arthur’s…whatever Merlin is to him. Calming down to control her magic was the only real lesson she was able to learn from the druids before Arthur found her. Oh, but Merlin did tell her to go to the druids. It wasn’t as much as he could’ve done, but it was something.

She sees movement in her vision, and Arthur is hugging Merlin, and her mood changes incredibly fast, because she always thought the two of them were better friends than they let on, but this is special; Arthur hasn’t hugged her since he became a squire, and even then it was only on special occasions. Merlin did like hugging though, she can recall seeing him hug both Gwen and Gaius. Seeing the two of them together, her memories of Merlin and Arthur come flooding back, and the mood changes between each memory are giving her whiplash. There are the times she fought alongside them, the times she and Gwen saw them bickering in the hallway or in Arthur’s rooms, the time Merlin spilled wine down the front of her dress when he was first learning how to serve. And of course, the memories of Merlin in the banquet hall saving Arthur’s life.

The memories seem to be returning faster the longer she looks at Merlin, so while she lets them pass over her she observes Merlin. He’s stuck in Arthur’s arms; he clearly wasn’t expecting Arthur to go for a hug, but he looks far from trapped. He’s resting his head against Arthur’s with his eyes closed, but he opens them every so often to check on her. She tries to smile at him but the memory of Merlin standing up for Gwen and declaring himself a sorcerer just came to the forefront, and she’s not sure she manages the smile.

Scratch that, she’s sure she doesn’t manage the smile, because suddenly Arthur is letting go and Merlin is moving toward her with his hand stretched out. She grasps it to ground herself, but the memories fly by even faster. She’s barely aware of her surroundings now, completely immersed in memories and their corresponding emotions: wonder anxiety happiness anger helplessness contentment loneliness trust frustration surprise fear. When they finish, Arthur is holding her other hand and hovering worriedly. Merlin just looks sadly at her.

“I’m so sorry, Morgana.”

“For what, not telling me you had magic, or erasing my memory?”

He glances at Arthur before he looks down in shame. “Both. Everything. I could have helped you so much; I still can if you’ll let me.”

Belatedly she realizes her face is wet. She’s been crying. Stupid memories. She pulls her hands back to wipe at her face. “I would like that, Merlin. Thank you.”

He smiles at her, and then calls out, “Mum, you can come in now.”
“It makes a lot more sense why we came to help defend a small village outside of Camelot now,” she says as Hunith walks in.

“Oh,” Merlin says, looking sheepish as if he just realized how the memories would seem. He probably did. Well there’s one mystery solved at least. Merlin removed himself from the minds of Camelot’s inhabitants.

“Yes Merlin,” Arthur drawls. “If you really didn’t want us to find you, you probably should’ve erased our memories of your mother too.”

Merlin puts his face in his hands. “I didn’t really have a lot of time to come up with an escape plan. I’ll do better next time.”

“You-!” Arthur slaps a palm down on the table, suddenly furious. “You didn’t have an escape plan!? Merlin!” He gets up, breathing heavily, and paces in front of the fire before turning on his heel to face Merlin again. “A next time? There won’t be a next time, Merlin! We’re—we’re going to have to discuss this later. I need to cool down.” He walks out the front door and the rest of them are left staring blankly at the door and then each other.

Hunith is the first to move. “I’ll start putting dinner on the table. We can put off any unpleasant discussion until we’ve eaten, at least.” She fixes them both with a stern look that spells punishment for anyone who disobeys.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos, comments, and constructive criticism are always welcome :)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

No one has to retrieve Arthur for dinner, he comes in just when Merlin is setting down goblets and the wineskin Morgana retrieved from their saddlebags. Merlin isn’t surprised when Arthur walks right up to him, eyes still dangerous as if he’s facing an enemy instead of a friend.

He is surprised when Arthur goes in for another hug. This time he has the forethought to put his arms up, although he was expecting to protect his face from flying objects and not a head of soft blond hair. Arthur is shaking in his arms, so he gently rubs circles into Arthur’s back and avoids looking at either his mum or Morgana.

He lets the feeling of Arthur in his arms calm him. Arthur’s safe. No attacks, magical or otherwise, have hurt him. Just Merlin. I’m so sorry, Arthur, he says with his arms. I’m sorry I hurt you, he presses through his fingertips. You’re safe now, he vows through closed lips.

When Arthur pulls back, he moves to step away as well, but is stopped by Arthur’s hand on his chin. Bewildered, he looks back at Arthur who’s studying his face closely. Arthur’s own face is as weary as Merlin feels. He wishes for the hundredth time that he could have saved Arthur from this pain.

Arthur pushes Merlin’s head to face the fire, tilts it up and down. The only sound is the crackle of the fire. “What,” is the most intelligent thing he can think to say, and it’s not a question, but at the same time it’s so many questions.

Morgana answers helpfully. It would be so much easier if he could see her face, but Arthur still has a strong grip on his jaw and is staring at him intently. “While you were gone, Arthur took up a new hobby. Drawing,” she states delightedly. “Mostly your face. He’s probably trying to figure out what he misremembered.”

“Wait that was—?” He cuts himself off, remembering at the last second that they aren’t talking about anything serious now. Arthur doesn’t react, though, still focused so single-mindedly on his face in that way Arthur has.

There’s some rustling of fabric and parchment, and then his mum is saying, “Oh these are lovely,” and he can’t not look anymore. He reaches up and pulls Arthur’s hand from his chin.

Arthur asks him a question with his eyes, finally focusing on Merlin and not his face. “You drew me?” he asks softly, inclining his head towards the table where his mum’s voice came from.

“Oh. They’re nothing, really.” He looks down, blushing.

He raises an eyebrow, imitating Gaius. “Really.”

And in a flash, the shy look on Arthur’s face is gone. “Gods, is everyone going to give me the eyebrow today?”

He looks over at Morgana and grins. She grins back. “Yes!” they both say.

Arthur just rolls his eyes and gestures at the drawings that now cover the place settings. “Are you going to look at them or not?”
Merlin looks. “They’re beautiful,” he tells Arthur, tracing a finger over his jaw on the parchment. And they are. He hadn’t realized that Arthur was the artist, although he probably should have. It’s incredible, the amount of detail Arthur managed to include in a simple drawing of Merlin’s face. Each drawing is of a different expression, and his eyes—Merlin’s not sure he could do something half as talented with his magic. “They must have taken forever.”

“He had them all over his rooms,” Morgana states gleefully before Arthur can respond. “He had this one next to his bed.” She points to one of Merlin with a slight smile but pride in his eyes, and how did Arthur get the pride to shine in his eyes like that with pigment alone?

“No,” Arthur argues. “It was the ’good morning smile’ next to my bed.”

“You named them?” Morgana cackles, even more delighted than before. “Did you talk to them as you ate dinner in your rooms?”

“No,” Arthur says, gathering up the drawings and putting them into his saddlebags. “I wouldn’t be so careless as to get food on them.” He glares pointedly at Morgana.

The conversation over dinner is of magic, and although his mum looks tense at the continued use of the word ‘magic,’ he and Morgana and Arthur have a good time discussing the lighter points of magic.

“Be honest,” Arthur points at him. “How often did you use magic to do your chores?”

“Not all the time!” he protests. “I actually like polishing your armor.” He misses it, honestly. It’s a bit like shucking peas—mindless but important, allowing him to think about whatever magical problem he’s working on at the time.

Arthur’s eyes narrow at him. “But everything else?”

“Only because you give me more chores to complete than is humanly possible, you prat! And you expect me to light fires in the middle of the woods when it’s raining.”

“That’s because you’re the only one who can do it. So really it’s your own fault.” His face is too smug, and he’s probably gotten too big of a head while Merlin’s been gone, so he does what he couldn’t openly do before: magic.

“Hey!” Arthur splutters as his dinner floats towards Merlin.

“Ooh, you have to teach me that, Merlin. I’ll have to use it the next time you’re gone,” Morgana says, then freezes. It’s too late though; the lighthearted mood is gone.

“You talk,” his mum says to him. “I’ll clean up.”

He sighs. Really, this is the best this could’ve gone. Where to start? “To answer your earlier question, Arthur, I didn’t have an escape plan. At least not in that exact circumstance. If I escaped from the cells after your father condemned me at the feast in front of everyone, all my friends would be under suspicion for helping me escape. And then you and the knights would have to hunt me, hunt my mother. She wouldn’t know what had happened to me, and I couldn’t put any of you through that.”

“It was the best choice I could have made to ensure we were all safe. I just wish—” he turns to Arthur. “I wish you didn’t remember me.”

Whatever he’s about to say next leaves his head because Arthur’s face crumples.
“Oh, no, NO, Arthur! That’s not what I meant!” He looks around for support but both Morgana and his mum are staring at him in shock. “I meant then you wouldn’t have to be the only one to remember me. Except now you aren’t properly listening to me, are you cabbage-head?”

No response.

“Damn.”

He moves to kneel in front of Arthur, gently grabbing Arthur’s chin like Arthur had done to him earlier and turning Arthur’s face towards his. It’s a perfect mask now; even his eyes are vacant. “Hey clotpole. Listen to me. I just didn’t want you to be in pain because of me. It’s the whole reason I did any of this in the first place, to save you from the pain of choosing between your father and me.”

Still nothing. Short of kissing him, which he will not do right now, he doesn’t know how else to get his point across.

“Merlin,” his mum says gently. “I think you should sleep elsewhere tonight. Come back in the morning and we’ll sort this all out.”

He sighs, but he knows they both need space right now. He lets go of Arthur’s chin and kisses his hand instead. “You’d better be here when I get back tomorrow, dollophead.”

Chapter End Notes

......I'm sorry......I just wanted them to be happy but nooo Merlin just opened his mouth and stuck his foot in it and now Arthur is upset

Kudos, comments, and constructive criticism are always welcome :)}
Arthur is dying. It’s worse than the poison George gave him the morning after Merlin disappeared. There’s a dull ache all over where the memory of Merlin’s body pressed against his. The pain is radiating from not only his chest, but his chin, his hand. His arms ache to hold Merlin again, and he’s barely resisting the urge to hug himself to satisfy them. His throat is painfully swollen with unshed tears and his head is beginning to pound.

_Merlin wanted him to forget._

He just needs to last until Hunith and Morgana go to sleep. Then he can let it all out. It’s been a long day, they’re sure to fall asleep quickly.

If only he could bid them goodnight. If only he could speak.

It becomes abundantly clear within two minutes that he’s not going to last. Both women are still in the room, talking quietly, banking the fire and rolling out bedrolls for he and Morgana to sleep on.

Morgana squeezes his shoulder and murmurs a “good night, Arthur.” He braces himself for Hunith’s touch, knowing it will be much worse. She’s too much the mother he never had, and he knows he’ll fall apart under her hand. He doesn’t allow himself to think about the fact that she is _Merlin’s_ mother.

There is complete silence after Morgana goes- where did she go? She’s not on the bedroll. Maybe she’s sleeping next to Hunith’s pallet instead? He remembers that they had taken an extra bedroll for the return trip with Merlin.

_Merlin, who wanted him to forget._

He stands up and turns finally; deciding that breaking down while curled up on a bedroll is much more preferable than breaking down while sitting at a table.

The room is not empty. Hunith has been standing out of his line of sight, staring at the fire. He doesn’t imagine she wants him here either. The prince of another kingdom showing up unannounced and expecting hospitality in exchange for stealing her only son away.

And suddenly he can’t _stand it_. He turns back to the table and punches it. In the back of his mind, he’s happy he didn’t break it, but mostly he’s just _angry_ and _sad_ and a lot of other emotions he can’t name.

_Merlin wanted to forget him._

Hunith’s arms wrap around his shoulders and he turns into the embrace she offers him. He holds her tightly, buries his face in her neck as he did with Merlin earlier, and is relieved to find they smell nothing alike. She smells of bread and smoke, of the stew they just ate, and something else comforting and motherly and undefined.

And he lets himself loose in a way he hasn’t since the day Merlin left him. He’s sobbing into Hunith’s dress and somehow his throat hurts worse now, there’s a building pain behind his eyes and a noise in his ears and he _still can’t speak._
Merlin wanted to forget him.

“Shhhh tshh tshhh,” she whispers into his ear over the constant sound threatening to overwhelm him. “Let it all out. It’ll be alright, you’ll see.” She runs her fingers through his hair as her other hand rubs circles on his back. “It’ll be alright, love.”

When his tears slow down, he tries to clear his throat to speak. He ends up choking, and the annoying one-note song is cut off and doesn’t start again. He realizes suddenly that he was responsible for that awful noise.

“Sorry.” His voice is rough, his throat still thick and sore. “Thank you.”

She nods. “It does no good keeping your feelings bottled up like that, love.” One of her hands is still running through his hair comfortingly. “I had to teach Merlin that from a young age. The more your feelings build up inside, the worse the damage you can cause. It was particularly important for keeping his magic under control, but it’s important for everyone.” She stares at him until he nods in acknowledgement.

“Everyone’s emotions were running high today, and now we have to deal with the repercussions. Come, let us sit in front of the fire. We still have much to talk about.”

Like how Merlin wanted nothing to do with him.

They settle on the bedrolls, and Hunith begins to speak again. “When Merlin showed up a few months ago, he looked terrible. He was exhausted from casting a spell over an entire city and running all that night to leave Camelot before anyone awoke. I tried to lay him down on my pallet to sleep, but he insisted that he had to check on you. He pulled a crystal from his pack to scry you. Only once he’d seen you in a council meeting with your father did he let his head fall on the pillow. He slept for two days,” she says, staring at the fire with shining eyes. “And when he woke, the first thing he did was scry you again.

“I was so worried about him, Arthur. He spent so much time staring at you through that crystal he barely ate or slept. I had to hide it from him before he would finally listen to me.” She shudders slightly, staring into the fire. “I had forgotten how powerful he really is. He tore the house apart looking for it. Everything was pulled apart, down to the bones of the house. I told him if he wanted it back he’d have to promise me to limit his scrying and help me with the planting and daily chores.”

She doesn’t mean to scare him, he knows, but it’s another reminder that Merlin is powerful; so powerful he can remove all traces, all memories of himself from the land. Can fight any sorcerer they come across while looking like he’s doing nothing. Arthur’s never heard of someone so powerful in his life.

And Merlin wanted him to forget. Merlin could make him forget.

“Even still, he was spending at least an hour every day staring at you. I told him it was pointless, he’d never be able to see you again without you remembering and calling for his execution. If he saw you in magical trouble, he’d never reach you in time. We argued about it constantly.

“But then one night I saw him scrying you, and I understood. He had the means to see you, and it was the only way to stave off the loneliness. And he…cares about you, Arthur. He wanted to protect you from the same pain he was feeling at your absence. I think part of him was comforted that you weren’t in the same situation he was. That he’d made the right decision.”
Merlin wanted him to forget. To protect him.

Arthur closes his eyes, emotional and physical exhaustion overtaking him.

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“I know what I Saw, Arthur,” Morgana is saying the next morning as Arthur grits his teeth. “He was right there next to you with a circlet on his head and he had the court eating out of his hand. And yesterday he—”

“Enough Morgana!” Arthur practically shouts before he realizes Merlin may be able to hear him from outside the thin walls. “It can’t happen! He’d never—” His throat closes up and he can’t finish his sentence. He wants it so badly, Merlin back in Camelot as his advisor, his lover, his consort. But he allowed himself to hope before, when Merlin disappeared. Well, more accurately, he didn’t realize he had hope before, but when Merlin said – what he’d said – he’d lost all hope and it had destroyed him. He couldn’t afford to be destroyed by his feelings. He was a prince, a knight, the future king of Camelot, and he needed to be levelheaded at all times.

“Oh, Arthur,” Morgana says, pitying.

He takes a deep breath to steady himself. “Don’t.”

He’s finally got himself back under control when Merlin dances in, a too-wide grin on his face that reminds Arthur of all the times Merlin came in with breakfast after being suspiciously gone the night before.

“So, you ready to listen to me, prat?”

“No.” It’s out of his mouth before he can stop it, but it’s the truth. He’s not ready to even see Merlin, let alone listen to whatever the other man is going to say because he feels bad for last night.

Merlin’s grin is gone in an instant and Arthur swears his eyes are wet before he starts blinking rapidly. “Oh,” he says. “Alright. I, uh. Should go see to the horses.” And he leaves.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos, comments, and constructive criticism are always welcome :)
“Arthur,” Hunith says, placing her hand on his shoulder some indeterminate time later. “I need some water from the well, can you go fetch some for me? Merlin’s barely strong enough and I’m sure you could fetch it much quicker than he can.”

“Of course, Hunith. Which direction is the well?”

“Oh, Merlin will show you,” she says casually, as if last night didn’t happen, as if he didn’t just turn away her son’s attempts to reconcile with him. “You’ll need him to help you carry all the water back anyway."

“Er, can’t Morgana help me—?”

“No, I need her here,” Hunith cuts him off. Morgana isn’t even trying to hide her grin. He narrows his eyes in suspicion, but he can’t dispute Hunith, not in her own home.

“Can I go hunting afterwards?” he asks. Morgana raises both eyebrows and he flushes with the realization that he, the crown prince of Camelot, just asked a common woman from another kingdom for permission to do something.

“He smiles. He can’t wait to tell Merlin his mother is the reason he has to go hunting with Arthur. But then he remembers that he doesn’t want to be around Merlin right now, and the triumphant taste in his mouth sours.

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“—so of course I had to go chasing after him with a shovel to make sure he didn’t steal anything again, but I don’t think I’m very frightening to a man his size.”

Merlin is sitting on a tree stump near the well while Arthur draws another bucket of water from the well. It seems like fairly easy work, no harder than carrying water up to Arthur’s rooms from the kitchens. But Merlin’s mindless prattle is nice, and Arthur’s not going to allow Merlin to think he is too weak to handle this, so he keeps going.

“And then Mum was all upset because it never would’ve happened in the first place if I hadn’t been scrying you so much, but I missed you and I hadn’t seen you in nearly three hours, which was a long time at that point, I mean I had to go from seeing you constantly, whenever I wanted, to only seeing you in my free time—”

“How do you think I felt?” He interrupts. “You were there all the time and then one morning everyone thinks I’ve gone crazy because I keep asking for this person no one else knew existed. And I couldn’t even talk about you or how much I missed you or what I finally realized you meant to me because you weren’t there and no one else remembered you.” He wants to pour the most recent bucket of water over Merlin to emphasize how angry he is about that, but refrains himself because he really can’t waste Ealdor’s water like that. “Not to mention the lies about your magic! This whole—I can’t believe you didn’t tell me first, I could’ve protected you that night instead of you erasing everyone’s memories!”
“I’m sorry!” Merlin shouts back, and Arthur has a fleeting thought for the gossip they were probably creating. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, I wanted to tell you all the time but I’m a coward and every time I thought about it I imagined you banishing me or sentencing me to the pyre and I couldn’t. And I never wanted to hurt you, Arthur, I was glad that you and everyone had forgotten me so you wouldn’t be hurting the way I was.”

“You still would’ve hurt me,” he replies quietly. "I wouldn’t have known what was wrong but I would have been hurt regardless. I’ve…come to depend on you, Merlin. And the least you could’ve done was leave me with someone other than George. Who tried to kill me, by the way.” He arches an eyebrow at Merlin.

“Hey, that part wasn’t my fault!” Arthur’s mouth twitches, and just like that they’re alright again.

“And the rest was your fault?” he asks as they pick up their buckets and begin walking back to Hunith’s.

“I didn’t know you would remember. Obviously. I should have, but I, er, didn’t listen when the dragon told me.”

“The dragon,” he says skeptically.

“Yes, the dragon your father is keeping prisoner beneath the castle,” Merlin replies, as if this is old castle gossip. “He’s always going on about how you and I share a destiny, to unite Albion and bring magic back to Camelot. So I really should’ve known that when he said ‘the half cannot forget that which makes it whole’ he meant you. But I don’t always listen—”

“You don’t say.”

“—because some of it’s just incomprehensible. And he told me to kill Morgana once. He thinks she’s going to be my downfall or something. But don’t worry, I’m not going to kill her!” A wave of water comes splashing out of Merlin’s bucket as he gestures to ensure Arthur he won’t kill his friend.

“You visited a dragon before you left but not me?”

Merlin rolls his eyes. “Out of everything I just said, that’s what you got out of it?”

“Well you just reassured me that you wouldn’t kill Morgana, so.” He shrugs. There’s really nothing else to say. Merlin’s not a murderer, but he chose to visit a dragon instead of Arthur.


“Merlin,” he says gently, bringing them to a halt in the middle of the road. “You’re like a magical knight. You only kill as necessary to keep Camelot safe, do you not?”

“No,” he says, surprising Arthur. “I kill as necessary to protect you.”

And finally, finally Arthur gets it. “For our destiny,” This explains everything. Merlin probably swore an oath to this dragon to keep Arthur safe just like the knights do—

“No. Because I love you.”

“You.” Love me. He finishes the sentence in his head because there are tears in his eyes and he
can’t go through this again, he has to be the stoic prince of Camelot, but he can’t let Merlin go either, not when he knows Merlin loves him too.

He pulls himself together when he sees Merlin start walking away, dropping his bucket sloppily on the ground and grabbing Merlin’s tunic to pull him into a kiss. Merlin is surprised and sloshes his bucket down both their fronts but the cool water just invigorates Arthur as he laughs into the kiss.

Merlin pulls back to put his bucket down and Arthur sees it’s full of small blue and gold flowers. “They’re the same colors as your eyes,” he tells Merlin, tucking one behind a beautiful ear and kissing the corner of his mouth softly. They have much more to discuss, but he knows everything will work out with Merlin by his side.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos, comments, and constructive criticism are always welcome :)

Thank you for reading!! I hope you liked it! <3
A big thank you to all the anons and non-anons on the kink meme who encouraged me and told me I was doing okay <3

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